

Chaucer Criticism

To the Editor:

I was surprised at the tone of the beginning of Rodney Delasanta's article on "Penance and Poetry in the *Canterbury Tales*" (*PMLA*, 93 [1978], 240–47); it is not often that such "shadowboxing" appears in the pages of scholarly journals, although it does appear. It does not help matters any that our departing editor, William Schaefer, assented to Delasanta's use of jargon like "their kind of revisionist eccentricity" against colleagues Judson Allen and Olive Sayce; he goes so far as to state in his "Editor's Column" that Delasanta "shows how recent critics have been wrong . . ." (p. 179). Disagreement in the scholarly community is right and proper, but unequivocal statements on the part of journal editors concerning scholarly controversies, and such remarks on the part of authors concerning their colleagues, have their place in the editor's lounge, if they have any place at all, rather than in the pages of a prestigious journal.

As for Delasanta's criticisms of Allen, I would like to supply a few qualifications. First of all, the exegete whom Delasanta claims that Allen "dubiously interpreted" is Hugh of St. Cher, not Hugh of St. Victor, as reported in the article (p. 240). The difference in the times when these men lived, about a century, may not be so great as the difference in outlook between the Dominican compiler of standard reference material and the Victorine mystic with a distinctive, personal style of exegesis. Second, Herman the German is not a figment of someone's imagination (Peter Comestor rhymes just as amusingly when translated into English), nor is his name misspelled in Allen's article, as Delasanta seems to indicate by his use of "(sic)" (p. 240). I can think of no reason why the name of a quite prominent thirteenth-century translator should be subject to such a notation. Last, Delasanta's quotation from Chaucer's *Troilus*, used to try to establish that Chaucer believed in "climactic endings," is taken out of context (p. 241). In the poem, Pandarus has been beating around the bush with Criseyde to the extent that she says, "Lat be to me youre fremde manere speche, / And sey to me, youre nece, what you list" (ll.248–49; quotations are from Robinson's edition). After some further hemming and hawing, Pandarus says:

How so it be that som men hem delite
With subtyl art hire tales for to endite,
Yet for al that, in hire entencioun,
Hire tale is al for som conclusioun.

And sithen th'ende is every tales strengthe,
And this matere is so bihovely,
What sholde I peynte or drawn it on lengthe
To yow, that ben my friend so feythfully?

(ll.256–63)

Given the several references to rhetoric—"fremde manere speche," "subtyl art," "peynte or drawn it on lengthe"—it seems probable that Pandarus means that men usually have some purpose for speaking, though that purpose may be hidden in elegant speech. The meaning "purpose," or "issue," is well attested in both the *MED* and *OED* for both *conclusioun* and *ende*. Thus Delasanta's intended meaning, "climactic ending," might be present in the lines, but in context a different meaning, which undercuts the rhetorical sense "ending to a speech," probably takes precedence. It may be worth pointing out here that instead of building up to a grand climax, the Parson ends his tale with a concise five-line conclusion, out of 1,006 lines in the Robinson edition.

Delasanta's primary evidence in trying to refute Allen and Sayce is an appeal to the obvious:

. . . the penitential earnestness of the ending is *dignum et justum*. In less complicated times it may even have been obvious, at least in its dramatic compulsions. But to find irony where it deliberately has been excluded . . . requires one to abjure the obvious and embrace the arcane: to reduce one's argument to special pleading from outside texts that Chaucer may not even have known rather than to identify alleged ironies inside the Fragment or retroactive to previous tales. (p. 240)

Obvious to whom? To someone with Delasanta's critical presuppositions the Parson's Tale may indeed be an easy work to deal with. From his own reading of the Parson's Tale it is quite clear that Delasanta has a strong belief in the continuity of the Catholic church ("Even though the present-day Mass has been despoiled of much of its medieval iconography by Vatican II, we continue to hear the formulaic phrase . . ." [p. 243]), despite the pitfalls of the Reformation, the Counter-Reformation, and Vatican II. He also appears to have a strong sense of what Chaucer intended ("irony where it deliberately has been excluded"). His personal idea of the obvious, however, does not help those of us without his confidence in what he considers clear. The question of the Parson's putative affiliations with Wyclifism ("I smelle a Lollere in the wynd," Frag. II.1173) may cause some of us to doubt, not to mention the serious changes in the attitudes of the church brought about by the Reformation, the

Counter-Reformation, and Vatican II. Those of us not yet certain of Chaucer's grand design make up a goodly company. Therefore, I fail to see why it is not obvious to try to apply to Chaucer's works what medieval literary theory is presently available to us—and Allen is a leader in beginning to make such perceptions available—or to try to use what we can find out about medieval literary *topoi*—as Olive Sayce has done.

I do not wish to criticize Delasanta's reading of the Parson's Tale. He has a perfect right to it. I only wish that he, and the editor, would allow the same right to critics of different opinions, and especially to critics like Allen and Sayce, who are trying to place a difficult part of Chaucer's work into literary-historical perspective in order that all of us may be free to judge it better, agreeing or disagreeing as we please, in an atmosphere of scholarly cooperation.

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Mr. Delasanta replies:

Perhaps William Kretzschmar is justified in taking exception to the tone with which I open my article, even though I must confess that the "shadowboxing" to which he objects accurately reflects my annoyance at what seems to be a palpable misreading, or should I say parareading, of Fragment X by ironist critics. He is not the first, I must admit, who has taken issue with my tone. Another reader, in turning down a more recent submission of mine, alas, urged me to subdue my "rambunctuous" style. One day, with further genteel prodding, I may learn to sip, rather than quaff, the wine of scholarly disputation. Till then, je m'excuse.

But Kretzschmar is unjustified, I think, in extending my animadversions on this one reading of the Parson's Tale by Judson Allen to his entire work in medieval literary theory. (Anyone who has read *The Friar as Critic* knows it to be of considerable pioneering value.) I have no quarrel with those "who try to apply to Chaucer's works what medieval literary theory is presently available to us" but only with the results of that practical application when it ignores the dramatic compulsions of the text in order to make the exegetical or rhetorical theory fit. Curiously, it is I who am accused of having "critical presuppositions" when in fact I argue a posteriori from the evidence of dramatic situation (the penultimate moment before Canterbury) and symbolic

strategy (the cluster of eschatological images pointing to the end) that the Parson's Tale means what it says. Accordingly, I am at a loss to understand how my alleged attitudes of historical continuity about the modern Catholic church have anything to do with my argument that in *Chaucer's day* penitential practice was a *sine qua non* of pilgrimage, that examination of conscience was a *sine qua non* of the sacrament of penance, and that therefore the Parson's Tale supplied the precise dramatic preparation for the pilgrims' penitential descent from Harbledown to Canterbury. What the Reformation, Counter-Reformation, or Vatican II have to do with that judgment escapes me entirely.

Nor do I understand how Kretzschmar's reading of "th'ende is every tales strengthe," interpreted by him quite correctly to mean purpose or issue, need preclude the more evident meaning of terminus. Purpose or issue, what Aristotle has called final cause, is intimately related to terminus, without which they would be seen more *in potentia* than *in actu*. To a civilization whose entire existential purpose looked forward with trepidation to the denouement of historical time in the eschaton, end—meaning terminus—could not easily have been separated from end meaning purpose or issue. Dante certainly understood it to be thus by the "climatic ending" of the *Paradiso*. So did the mystery plays, whose endings were invariably the Last Judgment. Even a more secular work like the *Decameron* reveals Boccaccio's governing statement about love more purposefully on the Tenth (and last) Day ("wherein tales are told of those who have acted liberally or magnificently in love affairs") than, say, on the Seventh ("wherein tales are told of the tricks played by wives on their husbands"). The book of Revelations, I am confident, meant more to medieval man than the books of Ezra or Nehemiah. But the burden of proof in this dispute about "pride of place" is on Allen and not on me. I cannot think of a single medieval work structured according to Herman the German's reading of the *Poetics*. Nor has Allen come forward with a list.

A final word about Hugh of St. Cher, who obviously is not Hugh of St. Victor. How the Cher of my manuscript could have turned into the Victor of my typed copy cannot be explained, particularly since the mysterious transmogrification involved my slighting of a Dominican friar. Providence College, my employer, is among the few Dominican colleges in the United States. What a day, what a day, for an auto-da-fé!

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