

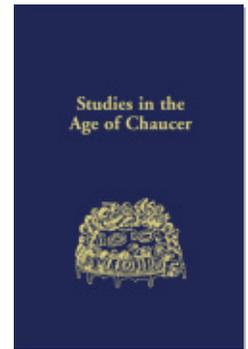


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Chaucer and the Politics of Discourse by Michaela Paasche
Grudin (review)

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kind of Lollard vernacular thinking. The so-called “derivatives” of the Wycliffite sermons, such as the series in Lambeth Palace Library 392 and CUL Additional 5338 (see 1: 106–10), may represent not so much derivatives (with all that implies of secondariness and inferiority) as independent vernacular productions, reworking Lollard material in different contexts and for nonacademic audiences. There is in fact a large category of Middle English works, including the set of eighteen sermons in BL Addit. 41321, Bodleian MS Rawlinson C.751 and John Rylands MS English 412, edited by Gloria Cigman,² that seem Lollard in attitude though not in every point of doctrine. The appearance of these current volumes signals the time for a reappraisal of the relationship of the vernacular “derivative” productions to the English cycle, and of the nature and trajectory of Lollard thinking in the fifteenth century.

Scholars will gratefully use this extremely reliable edition for the further study of what Nicholas Watson describes as “the tangled history of Lollard thought.”³ The impeccably high standard of scholarship and presentation makes this superb edition a monument of modern philology that will not be surpassed in the foreseeable future.

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MICHAELA PAASCHE GRUDIN. *Chaucer and the Politics of Discourse*.
Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996. Pp. ix, 200.
\$29.95.

Michaela Paasche Grudin’s engaging and intriguing book appears at a time when Bakhtinian theory is increasingly deployed by feminist, Marxist, and cultural studies critics in the academy. Such work is also becoming more nuanced and sophisticated; where Bakhtin was once cited mostly for the concepts of carnival and folk laughter familiar

² Gloria Cigman, ed., *Lollard Sermons*, Early English Text Society, vol. 294. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.)

³ Nicholas Watson, “Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel’s Constitutions of 1409,” *Speculum* 70 (1995): 822–64.

from the relatively late *Rabelais and His World*, critics now draw on discussions of stylistics, discourse, and genre developed throughout his career. Using a nominally Bakhtinian vocabulary, Grudin's book joins this trend, tracing "Chaucer's concern with discourse," "his perennial interest in talk, talkers, and dialogue" (p. 1), in the *Book of the Duchess*, *Parliament of Fowls*, *House of Fame* (chapter 2), *Troilus and Criseyde* (chapter 3), and several *Canterbury Tales* (chapters 4–9).

Grudin offers several important contexts for Chaucer's interest in the power and possibilities of speech. The first is the "still-oral culture of England," where "talk . . . could be expected to have almost instant practical significance, psychological, social, and political" (p. 2). Second, Chaucer's "almost intuitive yoking of language, character, and experience" (p. 2) parallels humanist debates by Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio about speech as a political instrument, an active demonstration of virtue and citizenship. Third, Chaucer possesses a "sense of the critical nature of discourse (and its political character)" that is "radical" and "dramatically timely" (p. 20) when, during Richard II's reign, "severe and arbitrary restrictions on the spoken word both in the city and in the court" (p. 20) were imposed. Its radicalism lies in Chaucer's willingness to give speech untrammelled scope: Grudin asks if "at a time when free speech was severely threatened, Chaucer found a way to sponsor it through the agency of dialogue, thus working with an instrument which is potentially subversive to all authority?" (p. 25).

The author's analysis is shaped by "[t]he dialogic mode—with its questions, disputes, pretensions, and misunderstandings" (p. 19). Grudin uses "dialogic" and "dialogical" throughout "to describe discourse as an interaction, whether actual or implied, between speaker and listener," citing Bakhtin's essay "Discourse in the Novel" (p. 19 and n. 37). Using the dialogic mode, Chaucer "repeatedly explores the ways in which speech refuses to be prescribed and contained" (p. 20). His unique contribution, surpassing the humanists, is his awareness that in the endless play of dialogic exchange, closure is "all but impossible," "only one feature of a whole poetic that is at bottom dialogic and social" (p. 181).

Grudin's methodology and the contexts outlined above all suggest tantalizing possibilities for understanding the place of speech in late medieval English cultures, and how writers like Chaucer might negotiate the political and social through their fictions of discourse. Yet these possibilities remain largely undeveloped; Grudin seems most comfortable with the notion of Chaucer as humanist, recalling the

trecento milieu most often. Fascinating observations about, for example, constructions of identity within a largely oral culture (p. 43), or how the Wife of Bath's *Prologue* "embod[ies] the struggles inherent in discourse, particularly . . . between the prevailing ideology and the forces that question it" (p. 100), are raised almost as throwaway comments. Asseverations of the "political reverberations" (p. 55) of texts are alluded to, without exploring what, precisely, these reverberations might be. Grudin seems to get boxed into thematic readings that report how characters in individual tales or poems address and answer each other, explicating "the integrity of speech and action" (p. 15), which sounds much like the familiar question of *entente*.

The real strengths of this study are Grudin's undeniably attentive and sensitively detailed readings, particularly of *The Knight's Tale*, *The Monk's Tale*, and *The Manciple's Tale*. Yet even these would have been enriched by a deeper and more sustained use of Bakhtin, of work outside medieval studies (such as *Feminism, Bakhtin, and the Dialogic*, ed. Dale M. Bauer and Susan Jaret McKinstry [Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1991]), and by medievalists Lars Engle, William McClellan, and Daniel Pinti. The brief mention of dialogism already noted (p. 19) is the first of only two occasions where Bakhtinian terminology is explored, even briefly. Relying on this single quotation from Bakhtin to define the operative construct of her study, Grudin's arguments about dialogism seem tentative and, I would suggest, narrower than Bakhtin himself intended. Bakhtin developed several terms to describe the ideological uses of language: human language is made up of a wide variety of registers, vocabularies, and discourses (*heteroglossia*); a text may present multiple subjectivities, including the author's (*polyphony*); *dialogism*, an important stylistic and social construct in "Discourse in the Novel," "implies genuine exchange of ideas between different people or different kinds of ideas."¹ Writing about discourse in the novel, Bakhtin also suggested the kind of analysis needed:

. . . in order to understand such dialogue, or even to become aware initially that a dialogue is going on at all, mere knowledge of the linguistic and stylistic profile of the languages involved will be insufficient: what is needed is a profound understanding of each language's socio-ideological meaning and an exact

¹ Thomas J. Farrell, "Introduction: Bakhtin, Liminality, and Medieval Literature," in *Bakhtin and Medieval Voices*, ed. Thomas J. Farrell (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995), pp. 1–14; quotation on p. 3. The brief summary of heteroglossia and polyphony draws on Farrell, pp. 2–3.

knowledge of the social distribution and ordering of all the other ideological voices of the era.²

There is certainly room in this compact study for such an examination. There are but 182 pages of text, not excluding the lengthy footnotes and copious quotations from Chaucer (in the mediated voice of the Riverside edition). Some chapters are inexplicably short and/or end abruptly: chapters 4 and 7 on the *Knighr's Tale* and *Monk's Tale* are barely thirteen and fourteen pages, respectively; a lengthy chapter on *Troilus* stops short while raising the political implications of credulity to refer the reader to an earlier chapter. Chapter 5 on the Wife of Bath's *Prologue* is largely descriptive, despite a provocative opening that analyzes punishments meted out to verbally unruly medieval women (pp. 97–99).

It is a book perhaps overcautious to acknowledge its intellectual debts; Grudin takes great pains to distinguish her ideas from those of previous critics, often employing substantial quotations to demonstrate her points. Primary sources are (nearly always) cited extensively in the original and in translation. Such tactics are laudable in their fairmindedness and scholarly meticulousness, but the voices of Chaucer and the critics become a distracting chorus threatening to drown out the author and her ideas. I would have liked to have heard much more—in her voice.

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BARBARA A. HANAWALT and DAVID WALLACE, eds. *Bodies and Disciplines: Intersections of Literature and History in Fifteenth-Century England*. Medieval Culture Series, vol. 9. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996. Pp. xii, 242. \$49.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

This book is essentially a proceedings volume from a 1993 conference at the University of Minnesota. That occasion brought together five literary scholars and five historians in the hope that the intersections of their shared discourse would lead to greater insight not just into the

² Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 259–422; quotation on p. 417.