

UC Riverside

UC Riverside Previously Published Works

Title

The Idea of medieval literature : new essays on Chaucer and medieval culture in honor of Donald R. Howard

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1865n60t>

Authors

Howard, DR

Zacher, CK

Publication Date

1992

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

The Literary Uses of the New History

JOHN M. GANIM

As early as *The Three Temptations*, Donald Howard's work revealed a continuing concern with the relation between literature and historiography. In this spirit, this essay explores the importance for Chaucer criticism, and for our idea of medieval literature in general, of the "new history," particularly the social history of popular culture, strongly influenced by anthropological and sociological theory of the late Middle Ages and the Early Renaissance. While the "New Historicism," in its literary application epitomized by the work of Stephen Greenblatt, owes much to the "New History," it is the prior interpretive model of the historians themselves that is my subject here. Its chief practitioners, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Natalie Davis, Carlo Ginzburg, and others, have worked directly in or in the wake of the *Annales* school, but they also reflect submerged connections to literary theory and narrative discourse, in contrast to the economic and geographic determinism of earlier *Annales* scholars.

The key works of these historians comprise an idiosyncratic and sometimes bizarre catalog of topics and cases. Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou* reconstructs the social life of an early fourteenth-century southern French village through the records of an inquisition conducted against a remnant of catharism. Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* also uses the records of a heresy trial, this time to reconstitute a tradition of popular beliefs underlying a sixteenth-century northern Italian miller's peculiar theology. Natalie Davis' remarkably original research in a series of books and articles has located apparently sensational events and documents—pardon letters for murderers, the disappearance and return of a sixteenth-century villager to his remarried wife, *charivari*, riots, transvestite revels—in the shifting matrix of early modern French history.¹ Besides this taste for spectacular topics, what these historians also share is a concern with the problematic of deducing ordinary and unofficial popular consciousness from officially mediated records, a concern that impels them as much towards interpretations and texts as towards the reconstruction of events.

There is a certain irony of method here, for these newer historians have

learned from literary criticism lessons that literary critics have moved far beyond, and, in moving beyond them, have implicitly or explicitly rejected. At the same time, literary criticism itself has turned to a constellation of disciplines, increasingly self-conscious about their methodology, in an effort to move beyond its own quandaries. Yet the model which informs all of these host disciplines turns out to be the very model of reading and interpretation that literary critics themselves have been seeking to revise. But before turning to these quandaries it might be worth the detour to trace the history of the New History.

I

In reaction to the emphasis on great men, politics, diplomacy and dramatic events typical of the traditional history entrenched in the French academic establishment, Marc Bloch and a group of other French historians founded the now famous journal *Annales*.² The history they proposed was one that took account of social structures, long range economic forces, even climate, population statistics and geography. Though Bloch's *Feudal Society* remains one of the standard works known to medievalists in all disciplines, the monument of the *Annales* school (by this time having become the establishment) is Fernand Braudel's astonishing *The Mediterranean*.³ Here period becomes a subtitle to the primacy of geography, and world-famous battles and personalities take second place to *la longue durée*, the historian's equivalent of geological time.

During the 1950s and 1960s, the chief historians associated with *Annales* became evangelists for new forms of quantification, and celebrated computerization and other forms of mathematical measurement as the primary means to establish the patterns of long-range history.⁴ While the fascination with quantification was at least partly the natural result of *Annales'* Napoleonic conquest of all possible forms of historical inquiry, the fetish for quantification must also have had a certain dual set of allegiances. On the one hand it was a way of rejecting the overwhelmingly philosophical and literary interpretative modes of the study of the humanities in France, on the other it was a way of subjecting all aspects of historical and social life to the analyses of the "human sciences." Where scientific models for the humanities in the U.S., for instance, have always been attempts at legitimization and acceptance, even this aspect of the *Annales* agenda had about it a revolutionary quality.

This quality acquired its ideology in the closer association between *Annales* and structuralism. By the late 1940s, *Annales* was associated with Section VI of the École Pratique des Hautes Études, directed first by Lucien Febvre and, after Febvre's death in 1956, by Braudel. Its purpose was to serve as an interdisciplinary center for new ideas in the social

scien-
what
Barth
discip
very
appea
ature,
reprin
Bar
acade
attack
cholo
place
autho
ahisto
nouve
infuri
Frenci
the at
ard's a
tional
foolish
recoil
certain
beyond
one of
Rabela
Publ
Sixteen
tory ir
moderi
atheism
attitud
and inv
France.
reflects
skeptical
and conceiv
permea
insepar
Febv
of all, f
underst

sciences, particularly a French sense of the human sciences, or perhaps, what science itself was. Lévi-Strauss was part of Section VI, and Roland Barthes was briefly editor. The promise of a methodology with which all disciplines could be mutually analyzed was profoundly attractive, even if very few articles that literary critics would recognize as "structuralist" appeared in *Annales*. Interestingly, Barthes' essay, "History or Literature," an attack on academic literary criticism as it stood then, and later reprinted in his *Sur Racine*,⁵ was published in *Annales*.

Barthes' essay represents an interesting problem, in that its attack on academic, positivist literary history comes very close to becoming an attack on historicism. Academic critics should openly assume the psychology of the authors they write about, said Barthes, or if they seek to place literature historically, they should do away with the study of the author entirely and examine the broader cultural milieu. This apparent ahistoricity is in fact what generated Picard's famous counterattack on the *nouvelle critique*, an attack which, coming from a famous Racine scholar infuriated at Barthes' handling of Racine, was meant to expose the new French criticism, but which had the opposite effect of bringing Barthes to the attention of the world intellectual community. Ironically, part of Picard's attack, suggesting that the secondary referentiality imputed to traditional academic discourse was truer of structuralist discourse, while a foolish rhetorical ploy, does not seem too far off the mark, if in fact the recoil did not do more damage to Picard. But if the essay represented a certain part of Barthes' development that he himself would soon move far beyond, it was perhaps because of his *Annales* chauvinism in defending one of the landmarks of the *Annales* school, Lucien Febvre's study of Rabelais.⁶

Published in 1942, Febvre's book, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century*, was one of the landmark expeditions of *Annales* history into literary and cultural matters. Febvre's argument is that the modernizing tendency to read Rabelais' humor and satire as evidence of atheism is a mistake. Rather than expressing a sacrilegious and ironic attitude towards the religion of his time, argues Febvre, Rabelais' wordplay and invective is consistent with the nature of belief in sixteenth-century France, which, far from exhibiting the beginnings of modern atheism, reflects the long tradition of learned satire, as well as the place of apparent skepticism in the belief system of the religion of the time. The philosophical and epistemological structures that would even allow atheism to be conceived of had not yet developed, and religious values themselves permeated so many variegated aspects of social and cultural life that it was inseparable from even the most wildly divergent positions.

Febvre, then, ends up with a doubly buttressed historicist position. First of all, he argues that we can only understand Rabelais' humor as it was understood in its time, that the wit and references operate differently then

than they do now. Second, he argues further for another level of historicism, that Rabelais can be explained entirely by reference to the mentality of his age, particularly as regards the matrix of religious and social ideas in sixteenth-century France. The result is a Rabelais both more serious and more official than the wildly irreverent Rabelais of modern reception.

Even this second level of historicization would be ordinary, if arguable, in a literary historian. What renders it distinct from positivist literary history is at least partly the utter consistency of historiographic agenda of *Annales* to literary study, so that, for instance, despite the astonishing range of allusion Febvre controls, very little is made of Rabelais' own life or intentions. Indeed, what distinguishes the study from similar studies in England and America in the 1930s through 1950s is the stress on the cultural origin of the work, a stress so thoroughgoing that it seems almost as if his culture, rather than Rabelais, had written the works. The structuralizing impulse which would be the engine of Section VI in the post-World War II period is predicted in a scholarly form apparently indebted to more traditional learning.

For the insistence of Febvre on the absolute historicity of Rabelais' work reveals a problem in the *Annales* school's conception of mentality, which, aside from the question of change, implies that the discourse of the past is the best discourse on the past. In a sense, positivism returns, if not in diplomatic or political history, then in cultural and literary history. *Annales* "literary history," such as it was, while it critiqued the notion of the author and the masterpiece as somehow magically singular, failed to develop a means to include the discourse of the past as part of the past to be analyzed, which in other sorts of history, using techniques such as demography and statistics and geography, it could.

On a superficial level, at least, the totalization of the *Annales* project seems similar to the "area studies" divisions of American academic life. To the degree that these programs interacted with the concerns of the *Annales* school, however, it would seem as if the relatively static conception of interdisciplinary work that area studies practiced was not what the French meant at all, and in general areas retained a pragmatic and generally political orientation even to its social studies, perhaps a mark of their similarity to World War II intelligence research terms, upon which they were modelled. The major example of area studies which predates the postwar period, however, is to the point: the energization of American medievalists in the early days of the Mediaeval Academy.⁷ Indeed, to this day American medievalists in most disciplines identify themselves first as medievalists and secondly as historians or critics. Interestingly, the historical contributions of medieval studies had tended towards "official" cultural investigations, in contradistinction to the fascination with the "unofficial" studies of *Annales*, and, again, political, diplomatic, theologi-

cal and philosophical studies have outnumbered social studies. To the degree that literary studies contributed to the project of medieval studies as a whole, it has tended to serve as evidence, ratification or reflection of the hegemony of theological and philosophical ideas, with the exception of the disputes of the 1950s and 1960s concerning patristic exegesis and the value of the New Criticism.

Although one can find some praise of Ernst Robert Curtius' *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*,⁸ with its tracing of traditional topics from antiquity to the Middle Ages, none of the *Annales* historians have taken much account of Exegetical criticism as practiced in the U.S., a criticism that presents in its own way *la longue durée*. D. W. Robertson occasionally cites Bloch's *Feudal Society*, especially to support his stress on hierarchy. For *A Preface to Chaucer* claims more than an interpretive key to Chaucer's work, it claims an understanding of how the medieval mind works, and it does so by arguing that people before about the seventeenth century actually had different thought processes than modern people do. Moreover, Robertson argues for a static and consistent tradition of Augustinian scriptural interpretation as the chief poetic hermeneutic from late Antiquity through the later Middle Ages. Despite Robertson's vituperative dismissal of modern criticism, the fact remains that his totalizing systematization of medieval interpretive practices bears certain similarities to structuralist and semiotic efforts, similarities obscured, and finally severed, by his historicist position and his oddly unhistorical idealization of hierarchical social values.

If in fact the earlier *Annales* program imagined by Barthes in *Sur Racine* achieved a coherent working out, it was by a circuitous route. The largely North American agenda of the New Historicism, with its house organ *Representations*, seems almost a self-consciously literary-cultural descendant of *Annales*. Its lack of an officially sponsored institute notwithstanding, however, *Representations* is marked by the thought of its spiritual godfather Foucault. One consequence of that descent is that the structures and the geological pace of *la longue durée* are translated into Foucault's philosophical and political vision, with its pessimistic awareness of the totalizing potential of power. But in fact *mentalité* history was subject to the same pressures that informed Foucault's themes, and already reveals an obsession with the drama of conflicts between hegemonic power and heterodox and idiosyncratic experience.

II

If a change occurs among historians close to *Annales*, manifesting itself in the late 1960s and early 1970s, perhaps in reaction to the events of those years in France, it is a shift in the conception of how to interpret historical

imp
amin
of th
fers
Pope
ence
fast
with
men
idec
his
li
ve
R.
ima
ian
exs
tra
ma
Ta
GI
an
inj
ve
Pr
th
C
C
ll
a
ll
f
l
l

data. In place of the stress on structures and impersonal forces, they began to write narrative histories that lay within a single lifetime; in place of large regions and entire continents, they focused on one village or one city. In place of objective, quantifiable data, they sought to recover the ways in which ordinary people imagined and dramatized their lives. While the demographic and economic data of 1950s *Annales* was the necessary backdrop, the emphasis was now on how individuals in society experienced historical change or lack of it. In place of counting, we have reading and interpretation. In place of numbers we have texts. History is now not a landscape, but a language. Interestingly, the turn towards *mentalité* is contemporary with a renewed interest in literature and language on the part of *Annales*, perhaps because by this time it was ensconced in the French research establishment as Section VI, and could recoup the heavily literary and philosophical bias of French intellectual tradition without caving in. Clearly the common impact of structuralist and post-structuralist thinking upon the "human sciences" had something to do with this, but in another way literary criticism and interpretation offered a solution to the problems that historians and other social scientists had run up against, even as literary criticism and theory itself was approaching a crisis under the same pressures.

One of the landmarks of *mentalité* history is Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou*. In the early fourteenth century, a stubborn pocket of Cathar heresy still apparently existed in the Pyrenées, long after the military suppression of the Cathar strongholds a century before. An inquisition took place under the direction of Jacques Fournier, Bishop of Pamiers (later Pope Benedict XII). Fournier undertook the task with characteristic thoroughness and zeal, cross-examining dozens of peasants from about 1318 to 1325, whose depositions were recorded (in translation) word for word. The result is an astonishingly detailed record of peasant and village life, thought, and habits. The attractiveness of this record for Le Roy Ladurie is obvious in its detailed evidence, about as unmediated as one could hope for, of peasant life. At the same time, it is the coincidence of the very ordinary, obsessively returned to by the peasants and diligently recorded by the scribes, and the highly unusual and marginal, a dangerous and endangering heresy, that attracts the *Annales* historian.

In one rather obvious respect, *Montaillou* fulfills perfectly the *Annales* agenda, looking backward and forward to a cultural continuum that seems to be impervious to the crises and catastrophes of political history, drawing in great detail the lives and days of an ordinary, even forgotten village and villagers, dramatically foregrounding the heterodox, the singular and suppressed as against the self-justifying record of official documentation. At the same time, it is precisely its mode of presentation, as a narrative (however structurally and topically organized), that both allows and renders problematic its allegiance to this agenda.

Le Roy Ladurie's villagers think and act in ways remarkably like modern French men and women. Le Roy Ladurie highlights this quandary by frequently pointing to differences that seem not to be as distant as one would expect. Even his officials are colored by the tone of post-Napoleonic bureaucratic behavior. Part of the reason for this is the nearly novelistic genre he is seeking to write. In seeking to capture the *mentalité* of his subjects, Le Roy Ladurie comes very close to translating both language and context. His pose, then, is replete with the problems of the anthropologist as well as the historian. (I leave aside the possibility that, consciously or not, *Montaillou* is an allegory, both of the relation of the *midi* to the center, and of resistance against the pressures of collaboration, as per Vichy.) Of course, the anthropologist's task is in some fashion to demystify the urge of the common reader to regard the Other as exotic, and what marks a number of the great anthropological studies is the way in which the Other is represented as utterly mundane.

Anthropology always has had a privileged position within the methodological arsenal of *Annales*, even if only as a metaphor. Marc Bloch's *Feudal Society* reads as much like social anthropology as history. With the increasing prestige of Lévi-Strauss' structural anthropology, the integrated language of anthropology and structuralism began to pepper historical and literary studies. Nevertheless, the search for significance in the structuralist model remains one committed to an objective uncovering of disguised relationships by the investigator. By the late 1960s, however, anthropology was beset by its own crises, ethical, political, methodological. One of the most widely influential movements within the discipline, and one which would influence studies outside it, was the attempt to "read" cultures as one would a text, to understand those cultures on their own terms, in their own context. Clifford Geertz's remarkable essay, "Thick Description," was perhaps the most widely circulated of these rethinkings outside of the discipline, and Geertz's impact on the new historians of popular culture was marked.⁹

Interestingly, however, Geertz's model of reading was close to the model of reading implicit in the New Criticism or perhaps one of its offshoots, such as the concern with reading and performance that one finds in the work of Richard Poirier.¹⁰ or the newly lyrical models of reading one finds in Roland Barthes, who no longer espoused the structural-historical context he asked for in "History or Literature." Geertz was concerned with inventing ways of deducing meanings within the context of a culture, and suggesting the complexities of how those meanings were generated, sometimes through the stated and sometimes through the unstated. This effort was especially compelling to historians who now were concerned with reconstructing and interpreting the experience of people within the great movements of climate and economy that *Annales* had charted.

But the circle of history meeting anthropology meeting literary history

im
am
of
fer
Po
em
fas
wi
mi
di
hi
ve
R
in
ha
es
ti
fr
Z
C
a
h
v
I
i
i

occurs in a book partly about ironic circles, Mikhael Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* (1968), which, along with his other writings, has had considerable impact on the thinking of historians and anthropologists as well as literary critics.¹¹ For the center of Bakhtin's argument is a profound engagement with Febvre's *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century*, which was the centerpiece of *Annales* literary study. Bakhtin himself, particularly with his semiotic credentials, begins to affect the generation of historians who come of intellectual age in the full power of *Annales*.

It is precisely this official, serious and historicized Rabelais that Bakhtin takes aim at in his now influential book. In place of a serious Rabelais, he argues for the profundity of laughter. In place of an officially sanctioned text, he points to unofficial and subversive languages. In place of a text that speaks to a learned audience, he offers us a work imbued with, even inseparable from, popular culture. More significantly, however, his model of culture allows for conflict in a way that Febvre's does not, and in so doing politicizes rather than historicizes Rabelais' culture. For Bakhtin, *mentalité* (though he does not use the term) is multivocal, and the various voices use language in significantly different ways. The temporary inversion of official values in the holiday celebrations of Carnival become, for Bakhtin, the expression of a popular culture which continually replicates and renews itself beneath the strictures of the ruling order.

I have said that Bakhtin politicizes rather than historicizes Rabelais' discourse, and I mean that in a specific way. For Bakhtin, the carnivalesque exists as a historical constant, always lying beneath the surface of official culture, rejuvenating itself by parody and self-parody, ready to break through to the surface whenever possible. Of course, Bakhtin defends his reading of Rabelais by reference to historicization, accusing Febvre of not acknowledging the popular festive sources in medieval culture of the learned traditions Febvre calls upon. But in fact, especially in light of his extension of many of the aspects he locates in Rabelais to other periods and other writers, it is clear that Bakhtin regards the carnivalesque as equivalent to a sort of partisan resistance for *la longue durée*.

III

The most familiar claims for historiography as literary, even the materials of historiography themselves, are found in the work of Hayden White.¹² The historians I am discussing here, however, while they may or may not cite White's work, use literary analysis as another tool of the historian, rather than concerning themselves with what White would

regar
trans
litera
time
chive
time)
histor

I w
By
bro
eler

For
White
Wayn
intera
other.
"fictic
same

Dav
ordina
larger

As a
earlier
with s
Her in
Franc

she su
to be c
roles,
gramm
impos
her or
More
popula
guides
Bakhti

Dav
pressic
hand t
literary
perhap
plays a

regard as the inescapably rhetorical and figurative ways in which history is transmitted. Natalie Davis, for instance, while most explicit about the literary (and anthropological) techniques she is borrowing, at the same time stresses the archival nature of her evidence. In *Fiction in the Archives* (an interesting title, both guarded and provocative at the same time), she details the ways in which literary criticism might be of aid to historians:

I want to let the "fictional" aspects of these documents be the center of analysis. By "fictional" I do not mean their feigned elements, but rather, using the broader sense of the root word *ingere*, their forming, shaping, and molding elements: the crafting of a narrative.¹³

For Davis, literary analysis is less the nearly deconstructive version that White calls upon than the rhetorically informed formalism of someone like Wayne Booth. Davis keeps a shrewd distance from the assumption that the interaction between history and text renders one on the same plane as the other, the assumption governing much literary New Historicism. The "fiction" of her pardon letters is to be tested against other versions of the same events, as well as against literary models or literary imitations.

Davis' recent work has been concerned in fact with the ways in which ordinary people structure their experience, and the ways in which the larger movements of economy and society are reflected in that experience. As a result, she has been concerned with narrative as a mode, while her earlier work, more influenced by anthropological models, was concerned with symbolic rather than narrative expressions of personal experience. Her important collection of essays, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, uncovers a spectacular array of dramatic symbolic activities, and she subtly dissects the historical forces at work in what may have seemed to be erratic popular protests. Records of riots, *charivari*, female symbolic roles, proverbs, carnivalesque celebration are revealed to contain a subtle grammar. While not explicitly structuralist in its interpretations, it is impossible to imagine Davis' work without the model of *Annales*, even if her original essays moved into local and *mentalité* history rather early. More striking is her fascination with the "carnivalesque" theatricality of popular culture, and its uses as historical evidence. For the latter, Davis' guides are not only anthropology and ethnography, but the work of Bakhtin.¹⁴

Davis offers her own research as a possible source for literary expressions of some of the same themes. Indeed, Davis extends a helping hand to literary critics as often as she borrows from them. She writes "to literary specialists I may have offered a new source for comedy, and perhaps for tragedy, too. C. L. Barber has talked of some of Shakespeare's plays as saturnalia: is Hamlet perhaps a *charivari* of the young against a

Rabelais
has had
ogists as
profound
Sixteenth
Bakhtin
ffect the
power of

lais that
a serious
officially
In place
imbued
however,
not, and
ture. For
l, and the
emporary
become,
ally repli-

Rabelais'
arnivales-
urface of
ready to
khtin de-
accusing
medieval
especially
abelais to
gards the
la longue

the mate-
f. Hayden
ey may or
ool of the
ite would

im
am
of
fer
Po
en
fa
w
m
id
hi
w
R
h
h
c
t
t
t
t
t

grotesque and unseemly remarriage, a *charivari* where the effigy of the dead spouse returns, the vicious action is replayed?¹⁵

Inversely, however, these historians are wary of using literary works as sources precisely because of the problems of mediation that cause literary critics to be wary about too simple relations between literary texts and history. This quandary is even more specific in the case of popular discourses, where a Rabelais, while he might be using the language and images of popular culture, certainly cannot be said to be part of the silent world that these historians seek to make speak.

Bakhtin's highlighting of the circle of popular and elite culture also informs a widely influential exercise in the New History, Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*. Ginzburg, interested in the survival of popular religious beliefs, also turns to the records of a heresy trial, this time in Friuli, in Northern Italy. The trial was of a miller, Domenico Scandella, called Menocchio, who refused to stop promulgating his home-grown theory that the world was created spontaneously, through putrefaction, like a cheese. Though Northern Italy was nearly as fertile a field for heterodox beliefs as Southern France, Menocchio seemed to have no direct connection with organized heresies. Nor, though he read and incorporated fragments of his reading into his cosmogony (such as Mandeville), was his peculiar theology a mere pastiche of misunderstood orthodox cultural ideas that trickled down.

Ginzburg argues that the construction of Menocchio's ideas represents an expression of popular ideology, which translates the metaphysical idealism of official, theological teaching into the specifically material experience of peasant life. Moreover, this construction is "not neutral" but is evidence of a submerged cultural and social conflict between official ideology and power, on the one hand, and a largely orally-transmitted unofficial culture on the other. Ginzburg's stress on conflict and strategy distinguishes his position from other approaches. He rejects Mandrou's interpretation of popular literature as an escapist fantasy that obscured actual social relations. (Mandrou assembled popular subliterate writings as a way of reconstructing *mentalité*.) Ginzburg also critiques the late Foucault, who seems to suggest that the powerless can only be described in terms of their oppression, or not described at all. Interestingly, Ginzburg is also hostile to a view of popular culture that would see a "popular religion based on Christ's humanity and poverty, the natural and the supernatural . . . endurance of injustice and revolt against oppression . . . harmoniously fused."¹⁶

For all his debt to Bakhtin, however, Ginzburg is also critical of Bakhtin's stress on Rabelais as a filter for popular culture. However textual their methods, these historians of popular culture see themselves as moving one step beyond Bakhtin, who uses Rabelais as evidence of the

survival of popular culture and also ascribes the power of Rabelais' writing to its contact with that culture. That is, the mediation of the literary text necessarily translates, if it does not in fact appropriate, the discourse of popular culture. I believe that this process is especially central to writers like Chaucer and Boccaccio, poised at the age of print, conflating oral and written languages, rural and urban contexts, alternately fusing and separating popular and elite levels of culture and even marking them as such by virtue of describing them. The model these historians offer is of conflicting discourses within the same text, sometimes with very different political valences.

IV

As an example, what would happen if we took the "Marriage Group" (even the title is redolent of early twentieth-century Ibsenism) and recast it as a version of *charivari*? That is, we could take Davis' suggestion that her research provides a source and consider Chaucer's "marriage tales," particularly the comic ones, as displaced "charivari." The classic form of *charivari* is a village ritual in which the young, usually unmarried bachelors haze the partners of a marriage that somehow disturbs either the values or the sexual ecology of the community. It could also be called upon to mock husbands too famously under the thumb of their wives. Its characteristic form was the hanging of a mock effigy, an incessant "rough music" played upon pots and pans outside the bedroom window, or the pageant-like representation of the virago-like wife, usually in a cross-dressed parodic form of one of the revelers.

Immediately two contradictory pressures are exerted on our conception of the literary problem of the Marriage Group, typical of the bifurcated implications of *Annales* school themes. On the one hand the theme of marriage is apparently placed in the context of a more typically premodern cultural setting, and the sometimes outrageous raillery of the Miller, the Wife of Bath, The Merchant's Tale and The Reeve's Tale acquire a local habitation and a name. Moreover, the terms of the debate, the civil discourse of progressive early twentieth-century America, are recast as the ritualized, almost theatricalized struggles of village life. On the other hand, we find ourselves in a historical quandary. Evidence of medieval *charivari* is rare, with one questionable piece of evidence from the fourteenth century. While there is no reason to suppose that the custom is not older than the records themselves, a certain wariness is in order. More misleading, I think, would be to posit the ritual as a cultural constant, expressing a consistent set of values from the *Roman de Fauvel* to "shivaree" celebrations in modern-day Oklahoma. If any historical study pro-

vides a bridge from *Annales* structuralism to the highly contextualized studies of Davis and Ginzburg, it is E. P. Thompson's important 1972 rejoinder to Lévi-Strauss, in which he argues that the brilliant ahistoricized interpretation Lévi-Strauss offers—that Brazilian Indian rituals with their clangerous noise were analogous to the "rough music" and *charivari* in that both protest against a world out of joint—robs the specific culture of its indigenous meanings.¹⁷ The question then is what specific function *charivari*-like activity has in Chaucer, and what the place of its recall in an urban and sophisticated poet means. The answers to these questions touch upon some issues that have superseded the marriage group as the center of Chaucer criticism, specifically the relation between gender and power in Chaucer.

In his fabliau tales, Chaucer does more than adapt the fabliau form. Instead, he grounds it in a local community (a specific village, family and neighbors) and surrounds his plots with values shared both by the characters and by individual characters. (This is less true of *The Manciple's Tale*, which has certain fabliau-like characteristics, of *The Shipman's Tale*, which is closer to classic fabliau schematics, and of *The Cook's Tale*, which is unfinished.) Unlike the world of the French fabliaux, whose unreality in terms of the consequences of action link them to romance as a genre, Chaucer's fabliau tales sometimes rather cruelly encourage identification and sympathy with the characters who are sometimes most harshly treated. The festive action of these tales, then, is more than schematic, but has become part of a cycle within the social world they depict. We find ourselves worrying about what will happen when the tale is over, which is not what the fabliaux normally encourage. Moreover, the female characters in Chaucerian fabliaux are somewhat different than either the silly or impossibly worldly or conniving characters of French fabliaux. Instead, they exhibit a remarkable reticence about motive, so that pleasure, revenge or escape are all equally plausible but never articulated motivations. By allowing the female characters of his fabliau tales a certain inscrutability, Chaucer also allows them a certain freedom. These ambiguities are achieved not only by literary expansion, but by constructing a contrast between setting and ritual that resembles *charivari* activities. Festive structure allows Chaucer a more specific and social perspective regarding the representation of human action, rather than the more mythic or archetypal effect we would expect.

The *Wife of Bath*, herself referred to by Davis, is another obvious example. For Davis, she represents the carnival image of the "Woman on Top," who, as a fixture of popular festivity, sometimes is presented as only a comic figure symbolizing a social order out of joint, but who in other representations, particularly literary ones, could be assigned more positive, or at least ambiguous meanings. We are faced with conflicting

mode
able
is he
on to
social
festiv

Th
of is
anal
the f
fanta
spec
fanta
gram
mod
of a
the
expr
cons

It
femi
fema
atric
tion
acco
all.

So
W
pr
fe
th
in
in
th

The
No
as a
the
per
wh
nor
pra

models for the Wife of Bath. One, literate and admonitory, is her undeniable source in *The Romance of the Rose*, the "duenna." Another, however, is her startling analogy in the world of popular theatricality, the "woman on top," the celebratory and satiric image of the woman at the top of the social order, inverting the usual hierarchy so frequently found in carnival festivities and in such celebrations as the Feast of Fools.

The only extended discussion of Chaucer and *charivari* that I am aware of is in Edith Kern's *The Absolute Comic*, in which she argues for an analogy between Davis' description of *charivari* and the action of some of the fabliau tales and the Wife's Prologue.¹⁸ For Kern, the value of the fantasy triumph of "Women on Top" (the title of Davis' chapter) is as a species of the mode she calls the "Absolute Comic," a strain in literary fantasy akin to Bakhtin's "carnavalesque." Kern's effort is to deduce a grammar of the comic, which then takes its place as a generic, thematic or modal constant. Molière, Chaucer, and Rabelais, become prime examples of a mode that stretches as far back as Aristophanes and as far forward as the present century. While attuned to the historical pressures upon the expression of the Absolute Comic, Kern is more interested in it as a constituent of all creative literature.

It is difficult to interpret the Wife as totally satiric, a bundle of anti-feminist clichés, or as totally celebratory, as an exuberant portrait of female protest. This ambiguity is precisely the ambiguity of popular theatrics such as the *charivari*, or the monstrous women of carnival celebrations. These monstrous women represent a second problem, since by all accounts the women in these festivals (until quite late) were not women at all. As Davis observes:

Sexual inversion in popular festivity differs from that in literature in two ways. Whereas the purely ritual and/or magical element in sexual inversion was present in literature to small degree, it assumed more importance in popular festivities, along with the carnivalesque functions of mocking and unmasking the truth. Whereas sexual inversion in literary and pictorial play more often involved the female taking on the male role or dressing as a man, the festive inversion more often involved the male taking on the role or garb of the woman, that is, the unruly woman.¹⁹

The nearest festive, nonliterary analogy to the Wife of Bath (except for Noah's Wife in the mystery plays) is not a woman at all, but a man dressed as a woman, saying the things he could not say as a man. As outrageous as the suggestion may be, the Wife of Bath is analogous to the festive performance of a man pretending to be a woman, a transvestite travesty, who is, nevertheless, allowed to express certain truths disallowed to normative characters. While the distinction between literary and festival practice is obviously central, and accounts for the rebellious tone of

odm
am
of th
fers
Pope
ence
fasti
with
mer
idec
his
I
vel
R.
im
lan
ex
tra
mi
To
GI
ar
in
v
P
it
C
C
I
I
I
I

zed
972
iant
rit-
and
cific
cific
f its
nese
iage
veen

orm.
and
arac-
Tale,
which
ch is
ty in
enre.
ation
rshly
but
find
ich is
arac-
lly or
stead,
e. re-
tions.
in in-
bigu-
ting a
vities.
ective
ythic

vious
an on
s only
other
more
lecting

popular celebration in contrast to its more muted representation of similar themes in literature, Chaucer, I believe, incorporated images of theatrical and festive practices with some regularity.

That the Wife of Bath is an example of transvestite poetics is of course much less shocking than it might seem. Indeed, in its original presentation when Chaucer read it aloud, its very ventriloquism acquired a comic, festive quality. Part of its comedy must have been in self-accusations by the poet as well as in its social criticism. This is not to say that the Wife of Bath is really a man. Rather, the analogy to popular theatricality accounts in some fashion for the ways in which the Wife can alternate between her function as a character with experience, a past, desires and disappointments on the one hand, and a catalogue of antifeminist clichés on the other. Moreover, as a poetic problem, one which he was obviously sensitive to judging from the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*, Chaucer had to pretend in some fashion to be able to describe how a woman thought and talked and acted (a very different task from the reportage of the General Prologue or the relative silence concerning the inner life of May in *The Merchant's Tale* or *Alisoun* in *The Miller's Tale*). The extended narration of the Wife's Prologue, missing from the Second Nun's or the Prioress's, pretends towards an experience the poet (by definition) does not have, and which he portrays elsewhere, in the consciousness of *Criseyde*, as paradoxically both comprehensible and enigmatic. The incorporation of popular theatricality as a model allows Chaucer to negotiate his dangerous extremes, social satire and subjective experience, autonomous characterization and authorial performance, resignation and revolt.

A third example is the form of the General Prologue, which we have interpreted largely in terms of Chaucer's use of previous literary convention, or contemporary social thought. But what happens if we think of the form of the General Prologue as akin to the ridings, processions and entries that march through late medieval and early modern cities with so much regularity? While to think of the General Prologue as a "medieval pageant" is a Victorian conception, in a quite specific way its riders and sometimes sober, sometimes exuberant characters literally resemble an urban procession as much as a pilgrimage.

But the urban procession has a long history, from the end of the Middle Ages through the eighteenth century, and some of its features exhibit astonishing longevity in the face of this considerable historical range. In an essay entitled "A Bourgeois Puts His World In Order: The City as a Text," the historian Robert Darnton analyses a description of Montpellier by an eighteenth-century citizen.²⁰ That title is for our purposes a loaded one, because the very term "bourgeois" has virtually fallen out of Chaucerian circulation under the pressure of questions about the social provenance of

Chaucer's sources and the explanatory force of a perpetually rising middle class. It is also a loaded title because Darnton's documents all date from the eighteenth century. Moreover, the very attempt to locate particular mode of perception as evidenced in historical data and historical documents is itself a problematic undertaking.

Some four hundred years after Chaucer, Darnton's informant reveals a mentality Chaucer may have satirized in a range of portraits such as that of the Man of Law or the Franklin. At the same time, he also reveals a way of organizing things that Chaucer may well have shared, and that reveals not so much an eighteenth-century perspective as a nostalgia for the more clearly demarcated world of an earlier economy and society. His complaints and praise for the city may be evidence of an urban bourgeois perspective similar to the one which Chaucer projects in the General Prologue. As Darnton indicates, the description of the city begins with a description of a procession, one which, however, wildly misstates the relative importance of certain social groups. His text moves from there to a description of the place of estates, and here too the result is a rather savage complaint against the contemporary blurring of social positions. Only when he describes everyday life in the city is he able to accurately capture any consonance between symbolic and actual forms of behavior. But for Darnton's informant, paradoxically, the symbolic is the actual.

Darnton's "bourgeois" describes his procession in ways that still ascribe to traditional organizational forms that we would identify as "medieval," and that in fact tell us something about the organization of processions for some time before. As with most processions, it begins with an armed honor guard. Chaucer begins his "procession" with the Knight, who, we suppose, is in first position by virtue of his nobility. But a slightly different light is shed upon his status if we think of him as akin to an honor guard, symbolically clearing the way and protecting the retinue. We meet the Prioress and the Monk and the Friar taken together in the sequence befitting the regular clergy. But what determines the order of their presentation? The evidence of urban processions suggests that the sequence within such groups depends upon the antiquity of their orders. While we can't tell much about this tradition from Chaucer's text, it does suggest a possible principle behind the grouping. Furthermore, the Merchant and the Man of Law are normally thought to represent the "middle class" or merely gentle pilgrims, not ordinarily explained by medieval political theory. But in processions, and in the descriptions of cities such as Darnton's document provides, the holders of civil office follow the holders of clerical office, so as to establish a connection between the two. My point is that the General Prologue is part of a tradition of urban processional form that exists through the eighteenth century.

More generally, however, the organization of the General Prologue is an

imp
am
of
fers
Pop
enc
fast
will
mei
ide
his
l
vel
R
im
lar
ex
tr
m
Z
G
a
li
v
f
l
(
(

imilar
atrical

course
itation
comic,
ons by
Wife of
counts
een her
ppoint-
on the
ly sen-
Women,
how a
om the
ing the
's Tale).
Second
oet (by
he cond
nd enig-
l allows
bjective
nce, res-

we have
ary con-
think of
ions and
s with so
medieval
iders and
emble an

ne Middle
s exhibit
nge. In an
s a Text,"
lier by an
aded one,
haucerian
enance of

expression of a politics, and the ensuing discussions between estates suggest something more than a traditional dissatisfaction with the way things are. Instead, what we observe as the politics of the *Canterbury Tales* is something closer to a bourgeois conception of society as consisting of many levels of various interest groups, theoretically, but not actually, in pursuit of some common goal. If you reduce that vision to a moral, you do get a profoundly traditional complaint comprised of both nostalgia and utopia. But the technique of analysis overwhelms the complaint. This result is very different from the largely clerical and entirely theoretical conception of society as composed of three distinct estates. It pays lip service to this organicist conception, but itself is far more structural in its point of view. On a level of expressed doctrine, Langland and Chaucer and Gower prefer to see things in terms of traditional estates and decry the competition and grappling for attention of so many different parvenu groups. Indeed, while they accord great respect to tradition, they actually share an early modern urban point of view, aware of a considerable array and shading of various positions.

This of course complicates the sort of distinctions we would like to make between "popular" and "elite" culture or between "official" and "unofficial" positions. Moreover, it tends to undercut both extremely modern conflict models, and extremely traditional hierarchical models. I wouldn't suggest throwing out either of these models on the say so of our poets. For in fact their stress on ranks and distinctions and interest groups represents not a satirical vision or an example of false consciousness. Rather, by considering the organization of the General Prologue as an expression of a very long tradition in urban culture, we can see how Chaucer allows us to locate ways in which *mentalité* can also be defined as ideology.

V

The examples I have cited as possible specific analogues to Chaucerian forms and characters is one obvious use of the New History. But I would argue that it should not be its primary use. In fact, I have purposely bracketed off from my discussion important medieval historians of *mentalité*, such as Jacques Le Goff, precisely to center on method rather than empirical examples. Instead, we might more usefully consider the ways in which the historiography of these studies provide models of cultural assimilation and resistance. For they combine the *Annales* perspective of *la longue durée* with an interest in the specific and the unique, with the inventiveness and improvisational qualities of historical performance. They take the explicit intentions of historical participants as important

data, but are not reluctant to subject those intentions to interpretive methods borrowed from current cultural theory. Ritual and myth, narrative self-presentation, rhetoric and performance, these are concepts which literary criticism has grown wary of or weary of, but which now return enlivened by their use in another discipline entirely. That enlivenment comes from a keen sense of cultural politics, of what the social implications are of certain forms and certain performances. These studies suggest that the languages of the past are not inescapably bound by their own limits.

More specifically, these studies provide a model of daring periodization. In place of a Chaucer, say, totally placed in the late fourteenth century, we might think of literary works as sites for long-range cultural forms and perspectives, some of which may stretch far back to classical antiquity, and others of which may in fact be incipient in the works we are discussing. The consequence of such a model is that we would not necessarily explain a work as coherently medieval, as Renaissance, or later in its point of view, but as expressing a possibly conflicting arena of values, in which the literary text in a historical moment becomes a site for cultural events, some of which are evident as powerful traces, and others of which may just be forming themselves in new combinations and reactions.

Notes

1. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou: The Promised Land of Error*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Braziller, 1978); Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1980); Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 1975); Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1983); Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford: Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 1987).
2. See Traian Stoianovich, *French Historical Method: The Annales Paradigm* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1976), and Georg G. Iggers, *New Directions in European Historiography* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1975).
3. Bloch, *Feudal Society*, trans. L. A. Manyon (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961); Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Phillip II*, trans. Sian Reynolds, 2 vols. (New York: Harper, 1972-74).
4. See Le Roy Ladurie, *The Territory of the Historian*, trans. Ben and Sian Reynolds (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979), and François Furet, *In the Workshop of History*, trans. Jonathan Mandelbaum (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1984).
5. Barthes, *On Racine*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964).
6. Febvre, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: The Religion of Rebelais*, trans. Beatrice Gottlieb (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982).
7. See Lee Patterson, *Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of*

import
amines
of the
fers a
Pope's
ence c
faste
with l
ment:
ideol
his v
In
vete
R. V
imag
ian l
exam
tra
ma
Tal
Gl
am
inf
ve
Pa
th
C
C
ll
a
l
l

Medieval Literature (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1987).

8. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Pantheon, 1953).

9. Geertz, "Thick Description," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

10. Poirier, *The Performing Self: Compositions and Decompositions in the Languages of Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971).

11. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswalsky (Boston: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1968).

12. See White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1978), and *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1987).

13. Davis, *Fiction in the Archives*, p. 3.

14. Henry Abelove, et al., *Visions of History* (New York: Pantheon, 1983), p. 110.

15. Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, p. 123.

16. Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*, p. xvi.

17. Thompson, "'Rough Music': le charivari anglais," *Annales* 27 (1972): 285-312. Thompson replies to Lévi-Strauss' *The Raw and the Cooked*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (New York: Harper, 1969).

18. Kern, *The Absolute Comic* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1980).

19. Davis, *Society and Culture*, p. 136.

20. Darnton, "A Bourgeois Puts His World In Order," *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Vintage, 1985), pp. 107-43.