

the poem's beginning is never either hopeful or new but is, instead, "always seen as a 'false start,'" he eliminates the discrepancy between the new self and the old, between the self who possesses scriptural knowledge and the one who does not. It may indeed be true that the speaker's new beginning is not, finally, new at all, that it is modeled after the story of the Prodigal Son. But the speaker who says "No more!" is not aware of that: he thinks he is starting a new life, not recapitulating an old one. The drama and the pathos of this poem are products of the discrepancy the speaker feels between his limited vision and the larger vision—sacramental and biblical—that finally surrounds and claims him.

Leigh suggests that I need "a more elaborate theological mode of interpreting," but while it is certainly true that my reading needs more Scripture, I think Leigh's mode of interpreting is the one that lacks complexity. It assumes without reservation that poetic texts and biblical texts are virtually interchangeable, or that relations between them are necessarily harmonious. It assumes, therefore, that the way to interpret Christian poems is to find their biblical sources. It assumes that those sources are in some way present in the text itself. And it assumes that the uncovering of one story (Mary Magdalene's) beneath another (Herbert's) is an unproblematic act. These assumptions—and not the modest suggestion that the poem alludes to a particular set of biblical narratives—determine Leigh's reading of "The Collar." I think they are assumptions in need of examination.

"Scriptural consciousness" and an "analogical imagination" are surely necessary to a reading of Herbert, but neither should be used uncritically. If the story of the Prodigal Son stands behind "The Collar," we need to think about what standing *behind* means. If more than one story is alluded to, we need to think about the significance of being represented by several accounts. If biblical stories determine the outcome of personal stories in progress, we need to explore the implications of that fact for poetic speakers. And if the meanings (or stories) a poem calls up are not openly delineated, then we need to consider what it means to have persons represented by stories that are not fully present. I do not reject either scriptural consciousness or the analogical imagination, but I do think that in "The Collar" they ask me to know things I cannot see and to rely on things about which others do not plainly speak. That is why I call the present "vulnerable"—because in its representation becomes indirect: the man who thought he was writing his own tale learns instead that his tale is written elsewhere, that it is really more than one tale (the

Prodigal Son's, Jesus', Mary's), and that its meanings are beyond his control.

Leigh is amazed by the complex machinery I use to understand what is, he claims, "such a simple poem." Surely the history of Herbert criticism—including the short history of our disagreement in these pages—suggests that there is nothing simple about "The Collar." Nor will the poem's difficulties be neutralized by the discovery that everything is already there in Scripture. After all, Scripture itself requires interpretation, and the particular nature of the Bible's analogical relation to poetic texts cannot "simply" be asserted: it must be analyzed and described.

BARBARA LEAH HARMAN
Wellesley College

Chaucer's Art

To the Editor:

Evan Carton's article "Complicity and Responsibility in Pandarus' Bed and Chaucer's Art" (*PMLA*, 94 [1979], 47–61) is, in my opinion, one of the very few good representatives we have seen of what has been *PMLA*'s "new" editorial policy and what is about to become its "old" one. Carton's admirable contribution, solidly based on specific texts, raises issues of concern to all of us and particularly to medievalists, for whom the relation among author, narrator, and audience is so much harder to grasp than it is for modernists. Carton's convincing demonstration of "complicity," not only among author, narrator, and audience but also between these three and the characters, bears out the depth and subtleties of medieval literature.

To dwell for a moment, though, on the question of Chaucer's "medievalness," I wonder to what extent, in fact, "Chaucer's claim for experience . . . challenges both the authority of authorities and the responsibility-exempt status of those who obey them" (p. 47).

When the Wife of Bath rips the three leaves from her fifth husband's offending antifeminist book, is it indeed certain that "her retaliation strikes at some deep-seated cultural values" (p. 47)? Even given her "famous claim for the significance of worldly experience" (p. 47; *WBP*, ll. 1–3), does she really question the very concept of authority—or merely its misuse? In her prologue, she discourses at length on the biblical attitude toward virginity and marriage, citing Christ, Solomon, Abraham, Jacob, Paul, and Mark—some more than once—to support her own point of view. She herself becomes an authority to the Pardoner, who at least claims to put off his

marriage on her account and leads her on by asking, “Telle forth youre tale . . . / And teche us yonge men of your praktike” (WBP, II. 186–87). Thus encouraged, the good Wife musters her dialectic skills to repeat her refutation of the arguments that her three older husbands were wont to use. And in her story, which starts out invoking not everyday experience but “th’olde dayes of the Kyng Arthur” (WBT, I. 857), the happy conclusion is permitted only by the knight’s acceptance of his aged wife’s authorities: Christ, Dante Alighieri, Valerius Maximus, Boethius, Seneca, and Juvenal. Like her, the other pilgrims and indeed Chaucer and most of his other fictional characters are also liberal in their use of such *auctors*.

The Middle Ages knew well that any authority, event, or symbol can, in Augustine’s words, be taken “for good or for evil.” The individual must choose between conflicting authorities. Abelard’s *Sic et non* and the whole science of dialectic show that one must not blindly accept the first or the superficially most attractive authority. Dante condemned many a sinner to his Inferno for so doing, like the unfortunate Guido da Montefeltro, who listened more to the Pope’s pleas than to his own conscience (*Inf.* xxvii).

One may then question whether the *Canterbury Tales* is really, in Carton’s interesting phrase, a “self-authorized work” (p. 48), which I take to mean having no genuine outside “authority” (the nonexistent “Lollius” being a false one). We must not forget that almost all the tales derive from known sources and *Troilus* from Boccaccio. Like any medieval author or dialectician, Chaucer is rearranging and reinterpreting his authorities and sources to suit his own style and points of view. And far from claiming “self-authority,” Chaucer tends to shift authority onto others, including the reader—as Carton brings out so well in discussing the “disclaiming of responsibility.”

One can carry this point a step further by asking whether *Troilus* and *Criseyde* themselves are “self-authorized.” I think Carton would say no, since they frequently rely on Pandarus and defer to him as if to excuse their own actions (even though he himself does not initiate action but merely interprets and strengthens impulses already within the lovers).

Authority, in the sense of models for action, will always dominate human intercourse. What remains so typically medieval in Chaucer is the articulation of these models under the names of biblical, classical, and medieval writings and authors. To find even the illusion of “self-authorization” in literature (or, I imagine, in philosophy), we must, I think, await the Renaissance. And I am sure it is not Car-

ton’s intention that an unplanned complicity of himself as author and MLA members as readers should arise to deny Chaucer and his characters their rightful place in that age of *auctors* which is the Middle Ages.

NATHANIEL B. SMITH
Boston University

Mr. Carton replies:

Nathaniel Smith’s suggested correlation between Chaucer’s “medievalness” and his use of authority is apt, and although I did not intend, and would not attempt, to wrench Chaucer out of the Middle Ages, I believe Smith and I differ somewhat on both issues. Where Smith would demonstrate Chaucer’s rootedness in medieval intellectual and literary tradition by citing his characters’ liberal use of *auctours*, I would contend that Chaucer’s grasp of the cultural centrality of authorization in the abstract, his brilliant and penetrating manipulations of authorities, and his self-conscious play on the convention of authority citing at once establish him as the consummate medieval poet, free him from certain traditional limitations, and render his work so important to the development of English literature.

Authority connotes dominion, jurisdiction, influence. Legitimated by general acceptance, it remains a force to which one submits; the social relation that it informs is a graded one that involves a legislator and a subordinate receiver. Chaucer sees this relation as a dynamic and a reversible one. He recognizes and explores the ways in which authority may be generated and wielded through language, the ways in which ordinary speakers and storytellers may assume authority, be granted it, or lose it. And he insists that such transactions constitute experience in the world. (In contradistinction to the *Canterbury Tales*, the exaggerated authority that Boccaccio’s storytellers grant one another in the *Decameron* is one of the fruits of their enterprise’s *unreality*, of its idyllic, diversionary, and practically impotent character in respect to the plague that dominates their actual experience.) The comic virtuosity with which the Wife of Bath maneuvers classical and biblical *auctours* into positions that underwrite her desires and dreams betrays authority’s boundless manipulability. In the *Troilus*, the convention of locating responsibility in external authorities paradoxically enables Pandarus, Criseyde, and the narrator to take bold personal initiatives by providing them with screens and alibis (“I dide al that the leste”). Smith’s comments that the Wife “herself becomes an authority to the Pardoner” and