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Chaucer, Authorship, and the MLA

I want to start by saying that I believe in the author, not only in a pragmatic sense as a useful category of analysis, but also in a more broadly humanistic sense, as a notion intimately connected to who and what we are as creatures on earth.

Before addressing authorship *per se* I would like to speak directly about the MLA's proposal to consolidate medieval fields and thereby eliminate some of our divisions.

In 2004, I heard a talk at Cornell by a medieval historian from Boston University, Richard Landes, titled "Demotic Christianity and the Economic Expansion of Europe: 11-13th Centuries." This talk has stayed with me ever since, and I was delighted to find that he has posted a version of it on academia.edu. Landes describes how what he calls "prime divider societies" (which are societies based on a fundamental distinction between rulers and the ruled) inhabit a world "whose imagination is dominated by 'the image of the limited good'." In the world of the limited good, zero-sum relations are the name of the game:

> Your good fortune takes from me (*if you win, I lose*), in order to prevail, I must take from you (*I can only win if you lose*)… Envy, along with its corollaries – *Schadenfreude*, crabs in the basket, disdain – play a prominent role in social relations. One makes oneself bigger by making others look smaller.[1]

Keeping Landes' definition of the "limited good" in mind, let me read the original email proposing the change:

> Given the disproportionate number of divisions in English in relation to other fields like African and East Asian, would you consider consolidating with Old English Language and Literature and with Middle English Language and Literature, Excluding Chaucer? What would such a division be called? Old and Middle English? Early English? Should Chaucer studies continue to be a separate division?

The MLA clearly defined the issue from the very start as a zero-sum question: we have a "disproportionate number of divisions"; others do not. *We are winning; they are losing.* Therefore, in order to rectify this problem, Old English and Middle English must give up some of their divisions so they can be given to African and East Asian. *They will then be winning; we will*

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[1]Richard Landes, "Demotic Religiosity, Monotheism and the Last Judgment," posted on Academia.edu, 3.

then be losing. I think the obvious question to ask the MLA is: why must the problem be understood in this way? Why was Medieval set over and against African/East Asian? Why can't we understand the MLA in terms of what Landes calls "positive-sum ethics," or win-win interactions? I fail to see what resources are in such short supply that we must fight over them. If we want to expand, why do we have to subtract? Have more sessions at the MLA; have more attendees; have a larger Delegate Assembly; occupy more hotel rooms; produce more writing, more scholarship, more thinking. Aren't these all good things? Why does it require getting rid of medievalists? If there are enough attendees at a given MLA to fully populate the medieval or African or East Asian sessions, there seems to me to be ample evidence that those sessions belong in the conference.

Thinking about zero-sum relations led me to see Foucault's "What Is an Author?" – which I inevitably reread in preparation for this roundtable – in a new light. I began to wonder if both authorship itself and debates about authorship might be understood in terms of winning and losing, which imply a strongly oppositional relationship between self and other--*I win, you lose.* The idea that authorship is about winning is a familiar one. In its simplest form, the author wins because when she is speaking, everyone else must be silent. Authors control the words on the page; readers consume the words on the page. Going back to Landes' concept of a "prime divider" society for a moment, across the centuries, author-reader is one of those primary divisions that separates the haves from the have-nots, elites from commons. In our own profession, we base job security on the publication of a book--on crossing the line between readers and authors.

I have just sketched a rather miserable picture of authorship. But look what happens when we examine Foucault's critique, which purports to be offering an alternative. At the end of "What Is an Author?", having thoroughly rejected the author-as-subject, he plays with zero-sum logic in a curious turn:

> Is it not possible to reexamine, as a legitimate extension of this kind of analysis, the **privileges** of the subject? Clearly, in undertaking an internal and architectonic analysis of a work (whether it be a literary text, philosophical system, or scientific work), and in delimiting psychological and biographical references , **suspicions** arise concerning the absolute nature and creative role of the subject. But the subject should not be entirely **abandoned**. It should be reconsidered, not to restore the theme of an originating subject, but to **seize** its functions, its intervention in discourse, and its system of dependencies. ...In short, the subject must be **stripped** of its creative role and analyzed as a complex and variable function of discourse.[2]

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[2] Foucault, Michel, "What Is an Author?" in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, ed. Donald Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 113-38, 137.

It would be fair neither to Foucault nor to all of you to parse this paragraph in the few minutes we have available. But we do have time to observe two things of interest happening in it. First, its rhetoric is distinctive. It is melodramatic, for one thing; we start with "privilege," but before we know it, "suspicion" has arisen; "abandonment" rears its ugly head; the subject's functions are "seized"; and finally, the wave of melodrama crests, the debasement is complete, the subject is "stripped of its creative role." Now, normally this kind of rhetoric is designed to generate sympathy for the subject. But Foucault is not creating sympathy. He is creating a zero-sum discursive environment in which the author-as-subject is the loser *on all levels*--analytic, philosophical, and especially affective. I have time for only one example of how he accomplishes this sleight of hand, this transformation of the subject from winner into loser. The first sentence of the passage reads: "Is it not possible to reexamine, as a legitimate extension of this kind of analysis, the **privileges** of the subject?"

As a question, this sentence seems to invite the reader to participate in Foucault's process of thought as an equal. No author-reader divide here. Further, the sentence sets up two crucial words in opposition: "legitimate" and "privileges." Note what lies on either side of the opposition. It is the current analysis, being undertaken by Foucault (and his friend and equal, the reader) that is "legitimate." But it is the author-subject who is "privileged." And herein lies the kernel of the critique--the same critique I outlined so crudely a few minutes ago. Privilege means that the author-subject speaks and the other is silent; *I win, you lose.* Foucault's question delegitimizes this model both formally--by reaching out to the reader as an equal and seeming to say "*let's win together*"--and rhetorically, by labeling the model "privilege " and opposing it to legitimacy.

The problem that is staring us in the face, though, through all of these careful rhetorical machinations,is that however melodramatically Foucault banishes the author-subject, however analytically airtight is his argument for the author-function, "What Is an Author?" is saturated from start to finish with the authorial presence of Foucault himself. Foucault speaks; we listen. And this is in general a problem with all of the writers that he cites who are "erasing the author"; even as their hands are doing the erasing, their feet are busily leaving authorial footprints that are utterly distinctive and unmistakable.

What does this then tell us about the need for a Chaucer division? Or, put more abstractly, the need to retain authors qua authors? For one thing, authors are necessary because they are dangerous. Zero-sum thinking is so much the essence of a certain kind of authorship --I speak, you are silent, I win, you lose--that even challenges to the author participate in it, as we have seen in the case of Foucault. An alertness to zero-sum logic is always a good thing; rereading the email from the MLA and its rhetoric of the limited good, I was surprised by its not quite covert manipulation. I shouldn't have been. As medievalists, we have a particular perspective on authors and authorship--one might say a prior perspective, in that much of what Foucault was rejecting was just beginning to be built during our period. That is why the zero-sum logic of the MLA email is so deeply wrong. If there are, for example, emergent literatures in English in

the 20th century across the globe, then surely it is to everyone's benefit to share the work of medievalists working on a similar moment of emergence six or seven centuries ago. That is positive sum thinking, and it extends even into the rhetoric of authorship itself. One example will suffice--Julian of Norwich's famous "*al shal be wele, and al shall be wele, and all manner thing shal be wele."[3]* This rhetoric is not the rhetoric of winners and losers. But neither is Julian a mere author-function. Six hundred years ago she imagined a counter-discourse to the zero-sum authorial model against which the MLA and Foucault are both reacting. If we can no longer recognize that the past is a complex and rich source of such counter-discourses, then we might as well give up the intellectual enterprise altogether; in just a few years, it will certainly give us up on the same grounds. I will end by turning back to Chaucer, just long enough to wish I had time to justify Chaucerian exceptionalism, and long enough to say that yes, I do believe in it as critical to medieval and English literary history.

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[3] *The Shewings of Julian of Norwich*, ed. Georgina R. Crampton (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994), chapter 27, lines 956-57.