

[The winning essay of the NCS Chaucer contest, 2000, written by Robert Meyer-Lee, a graduate student at Yale. The question to be answered: “Why, after 600 years, are we still studying the works of Chaucer?”]

“The Allure of the Phantom Popet”

This were a popet in an arm t’embrace  
For any womman, small and fair of face.

This couplet, spoken by the redoubtable host of the Canterbury Tales about the poet’s own pilgrim alter-ego, is, in the fullest sense of the word, charming. Endearingly elusive, it captures in its thematic play and formal *sprezzatura* the essential reason why, after 600 years, we are still so interested in—and so mystified by—Chaucer’s poetry. The lines are at once self-deprecating, self-aggrandizing, and self-effacing. Apparently submitting himself to the mockery of the host, the poet is in fact ostentatiously making his own person the topic of his verse—only to leave us with both a remarkably concrete image and an utter befuddlement as to what the image ultimately suggests. Does he intend it to be a faithful self-depiction, or merely another example of the host’s crude and sometimes cruel jocular humor? Is his affection a reinforcement of gender stereotypes, or, by placing both himself and woman in opposition to the voice of the host, an ironized subversion of these stereotypes?

These and countless other questions exist, however, only in the readerly aftermath of the couplet. Initially, we seem to gain such an intimacy with the author that we, too, wish to embrace him. Only upon reflection may we feel completely hoodwinked into this desire. Once again we have been nudged into mistaking fiction for presence, and, despairing of discovering the latter, we interrogate the former. We unearth dramatic complexity. We notice that underneath the apparently natural, colloquial speech of these lines is a virtually flawless iambic pentameter. And yet, finally, what we most relish is the initial trickery, and behind this we imagine once more an authorial presence—precisely that ‘elvysh’ personality that forms the other half of the host’s characterization of the narrator. Like the prodigal son, we return, wiser and wizened, to the scene of our former interpretive innocence.

I may be accused in this appreciation of focusing too narrowly on the immanent qualities of Chaucer’s verse, failing to call attention, for example, to the immense cultural importance of his work as revealed by not only the texts themselves but also by the institutions that perpetuate their canonicity. Certainly, we continue to study Chaucer’s works because we believe we may understand better the anglophone cultures which they both represent and have helped to produce, and—just as certainly if more cynically—because we have already invested so much in this study. Yet I believe that the fundamental reason we remain drawn to Chaucer is the magnetic sense of authorial presence that lurks around the corners of the verse. Over and over this presence reveals itself to be an illusion, yet we cannot make it go away, and the more we pursue it the more it eludes our grasp.