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God-Denying Fools and the Medieval 'Religion of Love'

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

The Presidential Address God-Denying Fools and the Medieval 'Religion of Love' V. A. Kolve University of California, Los Angeles At the 1994 meeting of the Society, hosted by Trinity College, Dublin, Jill Mann delivered her Presidential Address under the provocative title "Chaucer and Atheism"-the atheism in question being, of course, not Chaucer's but her own. "I am uncomfortable," she said, "with the implicit notion that we in the twentieth century can somehow free ourselves from our own historic moment and read texts in their own terms in a way that earlier centuries could not manage." Marxism, Lacanian psychology, deconstructionism, feminism, all engage critically with the medieval text and the culture that produced it. But with respect to religious faith, historicism reigns. Medieval Christianity is a given, to be thought about only from within, and those of us who do not share its beliefs-whether atheist, agnostic, Asian or Jew-mostly suppress that fact. "It is as if religion, unlike feminism, is not an issue"-as if, on a global scale, religious faith

had no continuing relevance, no (often appalling) political consequence. We settle for the pleasure of thinking in terms other than our own—a real pleasure, not to be disdained—only occasionally wondering at just what it is we are doing. "Sometimes," Jill Mann said, "I frighten myself with the power of my Christian apologetics."¹ Jill Mann, "Chaucer and Atheism," SAC 17 (1995): 11, 14. Seen in the global context, "feminism looks like a parochial concern. It is not gender but religion that is at the center of the present-day conflicts in Ireland, Yugoslavia, Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt, Algeria. Religion, that is, matters, and it matters because it has a political function. And it is because it matters that we should be prepared to evaluate and debate it, rather than treating it as something too personal or too sacred to be discussed" (p. 14).³

STUDIES IN THE AGE OF CHAUCER I suspect many in her audience might confess the same, sharing her concern that we do so as an act of secular bad faith, misleading to our students and troubling to ourselves. Casting a skeptical eye on our habit of thinking chiefly "from within" the religious assumptions of the original culture, she offered some striking examples of how a non-believer openly in dialogue with a Christian text might enrich its historical as well as contemporary significance. Charles Muscatine, himself a former President of this society, just two years earlier in an essay entitled "Chaucer's religion and the Chaucer religion," offered an equally pointed critique of "the religious, almost puritanical Chaucer who emerges powerfully and suddenly at mid-century and is with us still," an idea of Chaucer that seems to him essentially new in the Chaucer tradition. Like Jill Mann, he finds this religious Chaucer "peculiarly difficult to connect to late twentieth-century sensibility"—by which I take him to mean, hard to relate to the way we actually live, the things we actually believe in.² Whether or not a "religious" Chaucer emerges legitimately from the Chaucer texts is too large a question to pursue here. (I feel both honored and chagrined to be named among its chief proponents.) But like Professors Muscatine and Mann and perhaps no small number of you, I sometimes wonder at the fact that so much of my professional life, in the classroom, the library, and at the word-processor, should be spent attempting to recover the intellectual and emotional force of religious beliefs I do not share. In this lecture, I want to take this "emerging topic of presidential discourse" a step or two further, not only to correct an imbalance in my own critical practice, but to introduce to you a figure generally assumed never to have existed at all—the medieval non-believer—and to say a few words on his behalf. I cannot, it is true, produce an atheist who would have been recognizable to the Age of Enlightenment—an age when the universe became entirely rational and God an unnecessary hypothesis. But I can bring forward someone at

² Muscatine, "Chaucer's religion..."

The Presidential Address

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¹ Jill Mann, "Chaucer and Atheism," *SAC* 17 (1995): 11, 14. Seen in the global context, "feminism looks like a parochial concern. It is not gender but religion that is at the center of the present-day conflicts in Ireland, Yugoslavia, Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt, Algeria. Religion, that is, *matters*, and it matters because it has a political function. And it is because it matters that we should be prepared to evaluate and debate it, rather than treating it as something too personal or too sacred to be discussed" (p. 14).





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