

not both reply and hope were “based on a set of misunderstandings and ambiguities” (Shattuck, *Innocent Eye* 30), attendance at the congress surely was not. If anyone was used, one may legitimately wonder who. Reviewing a book that takes a line on postwar French intellectuals analogous to that expressed in the sentences Shattuck cites, John Weightman stresses the difference between cold war (“pro-Communist”) extremism and “the convivial left-wingism of the Front Populaire” (“Fatal Attraction,” *New York Review of Books* 11 Feb. 1993: 9). In Gorky’s view, the Popular Front was the user. Anyone reading the speeches will be assured, pace Shattuck, that it was (European) literature, not the Soviet Union, that was believed to embody “the true revolutionary spirit.”

The papers presented at the congress are not generally available in English, as far as I know. E. M. Forster’s was printed in *Abinger Harvest*. Gide’s and J.-R. Bloch’s, together with a report on the congress by Christina Stead and translated extracts from other speeches, are in *Left Review* 11 (Aug. 1935). In French, the speeches are scattered through issues of *Commune, Europe, Les humbles, Marianne*, and *Monde* of late June, July, and August 1935. Wolfgang Klein has gathered them in German in *Paris 1935: Erster Internationaler Schriftstellerkongress zur Verteidigung der Kultur. Reden und Dokumente* (Berlin, 1982).

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Closure in the *Canterbury Tales*

To the Editor:

Contrary to Michaela Paasche Grudin’s argument in “Discourse and the Problem of Closure in the *Canterbury Tales*” (107 [1992]: 1157–67), the closure in some of Chaucer’s tales may cease to seem ambiguous once it is related to the targeted audience.

Feminist criticism has made audiences aware that a male gender bias informs much (most?) Western fiction. The *Canterbury Tales*, however, has been viewed as free of gender bias. Critics such as Donald Howard and, later, Priscilla Martin (*Chaucer’s Women*, U of Iowa P, 1990, 224) suppose that Chaucer was androgynous in his thinking and able to present a fictional world in which the sexes are treated equally. Evidence in the *Canterbury Tales*, at least, argues against such a liberal Chaucer.

In this work, Chaucer demonstrates a male gender

bias through the frame of reference as well as in the subject matter. The erudition in the *Tales* far exceeds the body of knowledge available to medieval women, even to educated women of Chaucer’s day, while many of the subjects—with their generally worldly and often obscene tone—contrast sharply with the saints’ legends that were conventionally recommended as the proper reading matter for medieval women. Undoubtedly, women knew the *Tales*, either through reading it or hearing it recited, but the *work* gives every indication that Chaucer wrote not for the entertainment or edification of women but for a masculine audience. Of course, among the “sondry folk” that compose the group of pilgrims are women—specifically, the Nun, the Prioress, and the Wife of Bath—as well as men, giving the impression that closure could devolve to either gender or to both.

But Grudin’s assumption that the pilgrims constitute a group of auditors with whom the external audience can identify fails to consider that the pilgrims are part of the fictional structure that results in closure. True, the stories that the pilgrims tell find closure centered on the response of the other pilgrims. But the tales that the narrator tells are distinct from the pilgrims’ tales. The narrator’s tales are composed of the material from the General Prologue, together with the individual tales and all that relates to them, including the response of the internal audience. This complete body of material is the stuff that the external audience deals with in finding structural closure. The Merchant’s Tale provides a case in point.

The description of the Merchant in the General Prologue paints him as a paradoxical figure. In his own prologue, the Merchant talks about his marital woes, after which he tells a tale that, on the surface, pictures an adulterous woman triumphant over her elderly, repulsive husband. The tale seems to highlight the Merchant’s own unhappiness in marriage. But this ending is ambiguous because it gives the impression that the Merchant’s selfish, duplicitous knight is satisfied with the outcome, even though he failed to achieve all his stated aims.

An astute audience, on reexamining the clues that lead to this ambiguous ending, discovers that January more than likely molded his young wife as he implied he would do and that her betrayal of him thereby becomes the means by which he actually attains every one of his goals. Instead of a supposedly ambiguous closure, complete structural closure occurs. The “paradoxical” Merchant demonstrates through his tale of a duplicitous knight that he is duplicitous himself and that he is most probably not the henpecked husband that he pretends to be.

The poem thus satisfies the male audience by presenting the husband as triumphant; by extension, this view endorses the values of the patriarchal society. Closure can be recognized by any member of the audience, male or female, but it is centered on the male point of view, as the masculine-oriented reading reveals that to have a happy marriage a man need only ensure that his wife finds happiness, no matter how unorthodox the manner in which her happiness is achieved. The illusion of ambiguous closure arises from the temporary misconception that patriarchal values are being subverted. The humor of the tale emerges from the clash between this misconception and the final realization that the status quo is maintained.

Structural closure exists in the individual tales. One must reach beyond the expected, play Chaucer's game, to discover the surprise that the poet has in store.

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Reply:

Phyllis N. Braxton's letter is less a critique of my views than an effort to state her own. As such, it should be judged on its own merits.

MICHAELA PAASCHE GRUDIN
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History and the Novel of Development

To the Editor:

I read Susan Fraiman's "*The Mill on the Floss*, the Critics, and the *Bildungsroman*" with considerable dismay (108 [1993]: 136–50). I have no quarrel with the idea that, among other things, George Eliot intended in *The Mill on the Floss* to "call" the *Bildungsroman* "into question" (138), but Fraiman's comments both on the form and on the critics, most especially Jerome Buckley, seem to me to misapprehend the nature of history and of criticism. To begin with, Fraiman appears to suffer from a serious confusion between the making and the writing of history. I grant the line between them is not as clear as one would like it to be, but there is a substantive difference. It was not Buckley, as Fraiman claims (144), who was responsible for constructing the genre of the *Bildungsroman* as a narrative that centered almost invariably on men. It is a purely historical fact that

this is the narrative as it was written. I agree it is regrettable that women were not in the past able to engage in those actions novelists of *Bildungsromane* liked or needed to write about, and I certainly hope the future will correct this gross injustice. Nevertheless, things were what they were, and it does not do for critics to pretend that they were otherwise.

Given this historical fact, it is no wonder that women novelists writing about women characters often felt the need to call the very genre into question, although they also adapted the genre to serve their ends in other ways, and it is a narrow view of the form not to allow for this critical subcategory. Fraiman does not mention that Eliot employed the genre above all, especially in *The Mill on the Floss*, in which Maggie is a perfect instantiation of the paradigm, as a study of moral *Bildung*. (We do, of course, have to remember that for most in the nineteenth century "moral" was a normative term.) But this calling of the genre into question is important. Novels, however, concerned with doing so are not logically *Bildungsromane*. They are *Bildungsromane* manqué, and they were written not only by women and about women in the century. Many novelists in fact invoked the form of the *Bildungsroman*—*Barry Lyndon*, *Desperate Remedies*, and *Phineas Finn* come quickly to mind as works in dialogue with that form—as well as many other genres, using them as conceptual frames from which, for one reason or another, the lives of their characters diverged. Fascinating studies indeed might be written on the subject of the *Bildungsroman* manqué, and Fraiman's book, announced in the journal as forthcoming, might perhaps be one of these. But the *Bildungsroman* manqué is not the subject of Buckley's study, and, unless we want to be in the business of assigning topics on which critics must write, I think it best perhaps to let everyone do what he or she wishes.

Finally, I am disturbed by Fraiman's dogmatism in areas that are, at the least, susceptible of many points of view. One example will have to serve. In yet another kind of confusion, between the prescriptive and the descriptive, Fraiman objects again to Buckley's description of the *Bildungsroman* as a genre in which a "special child" is "set off from an inimical environment" (138). He should have discussed, she states in her ending, "the inescapable relatedness of circumstances and subjectivities" (147). But, quite apart from the fact that most of the authors of *Bildungsromane* did, as Buckley rightly demonstrates in his *Season of Youth*, believe that the individual soul could break free of the limitations that bound it to its time and place, why does Fraiman think she has the right to require everyone to share her latter-day Marxist premises—