Figura, Persona, Vox: Prosopopoeia in the Middle Ages

In this class, we’ll consider fictional persons, tropes of anthropomorphism and vivification, and personificational allegory in the theory and practice of medieval imaginative writing. In addition, we’ll place these instances of prosopopoeia within ongoing scholarly conversations about lyric voice, literary character, affect, the ontology of fiction, and the relation of speech to writing. The project of the course responds to historical shortsightedness in our conceptual tools for studying personification (broadly understood). The dependence of “character” on the realist novel has produced blind-spots; focus on the Romantic lyric has narrowed rhetorical analysis of prosopopoeia. Within the literary history of medieval writing, debates about allegory have overshadowed more heterogeneous practices of literary persona-making in the period. We face the challenge of pursuing our project on three fronts: recent and contemporary literary theory, the Latin Middle Ages, and Middle English poetry. The course aims to be a laboratory of sorts, developing new ways to understand the medieval figuration of animate, agential, sentient, speaking, or otherwise embodied figures.

Texts
Required
Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermons on the Song of Songs vol. 1, trans. Kilian Walsh (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1971)

Suggested

A few texts that we really ought to be reading but don’t have time to (listed in descending order of the alarmingness of their omission): Guillaume de Lorris’ and Jean de Meun’s Romance of the Rose, Dante’s Divine Comedy, Plato’s Timaeus, and Bernard Silvestris’ Cosmographia.
Assignments
20% Engaged participation
20% Short paper #1 (due by email Sunday, January 25)
20% Short paper #2 (due by email Sunday, February 22)
40% Final paper (due by email Thursday, March 19; abstract due by email Sunday March 1)

Engaged participation: Attendance and informed participation in discussions is expected. The assigned texts will demand a variety of reading speeds. Some days we’ll have hundreds of pages of literary criticism; for other meetings, just a couple of hundred lines of poetry. Developing different reading practices, to manage and produce different kinds of understanding, is one of the skills the class aims to develop.

Try to contribute aloud to class discussion at least once per class.

I prefer that you not use laptops in class, but I leave it to your discretion. In any case, please bring your full and vibrant attention to our discussion.

I am committed to making our class a safe space, one where we all feel welcome to speak, respond, and share ideas. I’ve found this essential to cultivating collective practices of experimentation, risk, play, and invention.

Participation also entails a number of reading responses (250-500 words), to be turned in by email no later than 6 am on the day of class. I will start the email thread, with a number of questions (although you are welcome to write on any aspect of the readings); to turn in your response, REPLY ALL to the thread. You can read one another’s responses, or not, as you like. I’ve found email less cumbersome than Chalk postings & blog postings, but if someone has another idea, let me know!!

Short paper 1: Literary-critical conversation (5-7 double-spaced pages) This assignment has two parts. The first part is descriptive and analytical: give an account of what concepts or questions are at stake in the cluster of literary-theoretical texts you choose to read. (Some of the readings are more closely related than others; all are deeply, densely thoughtful and all have something to say to one or more themes of the course.) The second part is more creative and speculative: bring one or more of the essays together with either Chaucer’s “Physician’s Tale” or Lydgate’s “Dance of Death,” to suggest a new direction for interpreting the literary work, or suggest an adjustment to the theory in response to the literature. (I will pass out slightly more detailed instructions closer to the due-date.)

CHOOSE ONE CLUSTER:

Literary characters: Alex Woloch, “Prologue” and “Introduction” to The One vs. The Many; Aaron Kunin, “Characters Lounge”; Candace Vogler, “The Moral of the Story”


Lyric Prosopoeia: Paul de Man, “Hypogram and Inscription”; Michael Riffaterre, “Prosopopoeia”
Short paper 2: Theory and phenomenology of personification (5-7 double-spaced pages)
Overarching theories of literary phenomena like personification and character, despite their claims to generality, tend to take shape in relation to the particular examples used to illustrate and support them. (This is one of the reasons why I’d claim that medieval literature, being often neglected by theorists, has the potential to spark new concepts.) For the purposes of this paper, let’s embrace the bombast of exploding the particular into the general. So: do a reading of (some part of) either Chaucer’s House of Fame or Langland’s Piers Plowman in support of ambitious (sweeping! grand!) answers to such questions as “What is prosopopoeia? What is it for? How does it work?” (I will pass out slightly more detailed instructions closer to the due-date.)

Final paper: This should be modeled on a typical twenty-minute conference paper; that is, it should be between eight and ten double-spaced pages, written for oral delivery. The topic is up to you, though I expect it to have something to do with the theoretical, literary-historical, or interpretive questions raised over the course of the quarter. You will turn in an abstract in advance. PhD students may choose to write a longer seminar paper (25+ pages), as per program requirements.

SCHEDULE
1/6 Introduction

1/8 Person-making & unmaking I
Geoffrey Chaucer, Physician’s Tale and Introduction to the Pardoner’s Tale
+ source text: Roman de la Rose lines 5589-5658

1/13 Theoretical Introduction

1/15 Foundations of medieval personification allegory
Nota bene: Syllabus very much subject to change!

Boethius, from *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. Victor Watts, revised ed. (New York: Penguin, 1999): Books I, II, and IV. [If you have a chance, read the whole thing; it’s a work central to medieval culture.]

1/20

**Person-making & unmaking II**  
[posted reading response]  
John Lydgate, “Dance of Death”  
+ essays by Amy Appleford, Seeta Chaganti, and R.D. Perry  
Paul de Man, “Autobiography as Defacement”

1/22

**Affect**  
House of Fame (Bk 1)  
selections on Dido from *Virgil Aeneid*, *Ovid Heroides*, *Augustine Confessions*, *Dante Inferno*

**Short paper 1** is due to me by email Sunday, January 25.**

1/27

**Speech and Writing**  
House of Fame (Bk 2)  
selection from Derrida, *Voice and Phenomena*  
Brian Rotman, “The Alphabetic Body”

1/29

**Literature**  
[posted reading response]  
House of Fame (Bk 3)

2/3

**The singular work....**  
William Langland, *Piers Plowman A Text*

2/5

*Piers Plowman A Text*  
+ selected literary-critical essays

2/10

*Piers Plowman A Text*  
[posted reading response]  
+ selected literary-critical essays

2/12

**Incarnation and Personification**  
Song of Songs (trans. from Vulgate)  
Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on the Song of Songs* 1-8  
chapters on their historical background

2/17

*Sermons on the Song of Songs* 9-24  
[posted reading response]  
Jean Leclerq, Introduction to Vol. 2

2/19

*Sermons on the Song of Songs* 25-28 + 31, 33, 40, 41

**Short paper 2** is due to me by email on Sunday, February 22.**

2/24

**Reproduction and Personification**  
*Plaint of Nature*
Nota bene: Syllabus very much subject to change!

2/26  
*Plaint of Nature*  
+ selected literary-critical essays

**Abstract for final paper** is due to me by email on Sunday, March 1.

3/3  
*Agents*  
Chaucer, “Knight’s Tale,” parts 1-3

3/5  
*Fiction, figure, ontology, & force*  
[posted reading response]
Knight’s Tale, part 4  
+ Boccaccio, *Genealogia Deorum Gentilium*  
+ Augustine, selection from *The City of God*  
+ Jean Seznec, *Survival of the Pagan Gods*

3/10  
*The “dramatic hypothesis”*  
Chaucer, General Prologue & Miller’s Prologue  
+ literary criticism on the “dramatic hypothesis” (Lawton, Spearing)

**Final paper** is due to me by email on Thursday, March 19.