

# Geoffrey Chaucer

## 1340?-1400

English poet, prose writer, and translator.

### INTRODUCTION

Widely regarded as the “father of English poetry,” Geoffrey Chaucer is the foremost representative of Middle English literature. His *Canterbury Tales* is one of the most highly esteemed works in the English language, and its “General Prologue” has been acclaimed by critics as “the most perfect poem in the English language.” Notable among his other works are the *Book of the Duchess*, *Parlement of Foules*, *House of Fame*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, and *Legend of Good Women*. Familiar with French, English, Italian, and Latin literature, Chaucer was able to meld characteristics of each in a unique body of work that affirmed the ascent of English as a literary language. Chaucer’s works, which reflect his consummate mastery of various literary genres, styles, and techniques, as well as his erudition, wit, and insight, are regarded as classics of European literature.

### Biographical Information

Born into a family of London-based vintners sometime in the early 1340s, Chaucer had a long and distinguished career as a civil servant, serving three successive kings—Edward III, Richard II, and Henry IV. As a member of court, he traveled to Spain in 1366 on what would be the first of a series of diplomatic missions to the continent over the next decade. In 1368 the death of Blanche, the first wife of John of Gaunt—Edward III’s fourth son and the poet’s courtly patron—occasioned Chaucer’s composition of the *Book of the Duchess*, which was in circulation by the time he went to France in 1370. He traveled to Italy in 1372 and 1373, visiting Genoa and Florence, and upon his return to England was appointed a customs official for the Port of London, a post he would hold until 1386. Chaucer’s career as a civil servant frequently took him to continental Europe over the course of the next decade, but by 1385 he was living in Kent, where he was appointed a justice of the peace. The following year he became a member of Parliament. The next few years were difficult ones for Chaucer. Linked to the royal family, he suffered as the aristocracy began to seize power in England. His fortunes rose again, however, with the return of John of Gaunt from the continent and Richard II’s regained control of the government from the upstart barons. Chaucer was appointed a clerk of the king’s works, but was removed from this office in 1391. The next few years were dismal for him. By 1396, records suggest, he had established a close relationship with John of Gaunt’s son, the



Earl of Derby, who as King Henry IV later confirmed Chaucer’s grants from Richard II and added an additional annuity in 1399. In December of that year, Chaucer leased a house in the garden of Westminster Abbey, where he lived for the remainder of his life. When Geoffrey Chaucer died on 25 October 1400, he was accorded the honor of burial in the Abbey (then traditionally reserved for royalty) and his tomb became the nucleus of what is now known as Poets’ Corner.

### Major Works

Inspired in large part by French court poetry, Chaucer’s first major work, the *Book of the Duchess*, was written to soothe the grief of John of Gaunt after his wife’s death in 1368. At the opening of the poem the narrator succumbs to sleep as he reads the story of Seyes and Alcyone. In a dream he meets a mourning Black Knight. The narrator then inquires about the Knight’s anguish, and the Knight, as he relates his stornion of the work holds that Chaucer surpasses his French models in the *Book of the Duchess* by transforming the insincere courtly language and sentimental romance imagery of dying for love into a poignant

reality. *House of Fame* and *Parlement of Foules* are thought to comment upon efforts to arrange a suitable marriage for the young Richard II. A dream-vision, *House of Fame* appears to be an examination of the function of poets, the nature of poetry, and the unreliability of fame. *Parlement of Foules* also takes the form of a dream-vision, and betrays the influence of Italian Renaissance literature. The work is generally seen as an allegorical disputation on love.

*Troilus and Criseyde*, an adaptation of Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato* (c. 1338) was long considered by some critics to be Chaucer's finest poetic achievement. A tale of thwarted love set against the backdrop of the Trojan War, the work is thought to possess a symmetry, decorum, and metaphorical quality lacking in Boccaccio's story. Likewise, Chaucer's adaptation adds depth and changes the depiction of the main characters. His Criseyde is more refined, elegant and sympathetically portrayed than her capricious predecessor; she is not degraded after deciding to accept the political betrothal to the Greek warrior Diomedes rather than marry Troilus. Troilus himself is reduced to an impotent passivity, although he formulates many of the primary concerns of the story. Critics note these as tensions between erotic and intellectual spheres, interpreting the poem in one of three general ways: as a psychological novel, the first in English; as the epitome of courtly love romances; or, as a religious and philosophical allegory. The last of Chaucer's dream-vision poems, *Legend of Good Women* relates the traditional stories of such faithful women as Dido, Cleopatra, and Lucrece. Considered somewhat dull and perfunctory by some, the unfinished *Legend* is valued by critics largely for its structure as a collection of interconnected stories that prefigures the form of Chaucer's masterpiece, the *Canterbury Tales*.

Begun sometime around 1386, the *Canterbury Tales* features a series of stories told by a group of travelers on a pilgrimage to the shrine of Thomas à Becket in Canterbury, and is said to reflect the diversity of fourteenth-century English life. The pilgrims depict the full range of medieval society, and the tales they relate span the literary spectrum of the period. The *Canterbury Tales* begins with a "General Prologue," introducing the pilgrims with short, vivid sketches—beginning with a knight and his entourage, followed by several ecclesiastics and representatives of the lower classes. The stories told are generally indicative of class and personality, with certain exceptions, often for ironic effect as scholars note. The social variety of the pilgrims is highlighted by the diversity of the tales and their themes: courtly romance, racy *fabliau*, allegory, sermon, beast fable, saint's life, and, at times, a mixture of these genres. In part due to the intricacy and proposed length of the work, critics believe that Chaucer's final plan for his *Canterbury Tales* was never realized; he either died before he could place the sections he envisioned in the proper sequence or stopped work on it all together. Nevertheless, the work contains what many readers feel is a realistic depiction of Chaucer's world that points to the vast and diverse knowledge of the poet and conjures the complexity of the fourteenth-century European mind.

### Critical Reception

Chaucer's genius was recognized in his own time and his works have since attracted a vast body of criticism. Praised by French and English contemporaries alike for his technical skill, he was revered as a master poet and lauded for his contributions to the English language. The outstanding English poet before Shakespeare, Geoffrey Chaucer brought Middle English to its full efflorescence. The originality of his language and style, the vivacity of his humor, the civility of his poetic demeanor, and the depth of his knowledge are continually cited as reasons for the permanence of his works. His poems continue to draw the interest of readers and critics centuries after his death and remain among the most acclaimed works throughout the English-speaking world.

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### PRINCIPAL WORKS

#### Poetry

- Book of the Duchess* c. 1368-1369
- Anelida and Arcite* c. 1373-1374
- Canterbury Tales* c. 1375-1400
- House of Fame* c. 1378-1381
- Parlement of Foules* c. 1378-1381
- Troilus and Criseyde* c. 1382-1386
- Legend of Good Women* c. 1386
- Chaucer's Poetry: An Anthology for the Modern Reader*  
[edited by E. Talbot Donaldson] 1975

#### Other Major Works

- Roman de la Rose* [translator; *The Romance of the Rose*] (poetry) c. 1360
- Boecius de consolacione* [translator; *Consolation of Philosophy*] (prose) c. 1380
- Treatise on the Astrolabe* (prose) c. 1391
- Equatorie of the Planetis* (prose) c. 1391
- The Complete Poetry and Prose of Geoffrey Chaucer*  
[edited by John H. Fisher; revised edition, 1989] (poetry and prose) 1977
- A Variorum Edition of the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*  
[edited by Paul G. Ruggiers] (poetry and prose) 1979
- The Riverside Chaucer* [edited by Larry D. Benson] (poetry and prose) 1987

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### CRITICISM

#### William Blake (essay date 1809)

SOURCE: "A Descriptive Catalogue," in *Blake: Complete Writings*, edited by Geoffrey Keynes, Oxford University Press, 1966, pp. 563-85.

[Blake is perhaps the most esteemed English poet and artist of the Romantic period. In the following excerpt from his 1809 "Descriptive Catalogue" of his paintings and drawings, he describes Chaucer's *Canterbury pilgrims* as examples of "universal human life."]

The characters of Chaucer's Pilgrims are the characters which compose all ages and nations: as one age falls, another rises, different to mortal sight, but to immortals only the same; for we see the same characters repeated again and again, in animals, vegetables, minerals, and in men; nothing new occurs in identical existence; Accident ever varies, Substance can never suffer change nor decay.

Of Chaucer's characters, as described in his *Canterbury Tales*, some of the names or titles are altered by time, but the characters themselves for ever remain unaltered, and consequently they are the physiognomies or lineaments of universal human life, beyond which Nature never steps. Names alter, things never alter. I have known multitudes of those who would have been monks in the age of monkery, who in this deistical age are deists. As Newton numbered the stars, and as Linneus numbered the plants, so Chaucer numbered the classes of men.

The Knight and Squire with the Squire's Yeoman lead the procession, as Chaucer has also placed them first in his prologue. The Knight is a true Hero, a good, great, and wise man; his whole length portrait on horseback, as written by Chaucer, cannot be surpassed. He has spent his life in the field; has ever been a conqueror, and is that species of character which in every age stands as the guardian of man against the oppressor. His son is like him with the germ of perhaps greater perfection still, as he blends literature and the arts with his warlike studies. Their dress and their horses are of the first rate, without ostentation, and with all the true grandeur that unaffected simplicity when in high rank always displays. The Squire's Yeoman is also a great character, a man perfectly knowing in his s hand he bare a mighty bow.

Chaucer describes here a mighty man; one who is war is the worthy attendant on noble heroes.

The Prioress follows these with her female chaplain:

Another Nonne also with her had she,  
That was her Chaplaine, and Priests three.

This Lady is described also as of the first rank, rich and honoured. She has certain peculiarities and little delicate affectations, not unbecoming in her, being accompanied with what is truly grand and really polite; her person and face Chaucer has described with minuteness; it is very elegant, and was the beauty of our ancestors, till after Elizabeth's time, when voluptuousness and folly began to be accounted beautiful.

Her companion and her three priests were no doubt all perfectly delineated in those parts of Chaucer's work which are now lost; we ought to suppose them suitable attendants on rank and fashion.

The Monk follows these with the Friar. The Painter has also grouped with these the Pardoner and the Sompnour and the Manciple, and has here also introduced one of the rich citizens of London: Characters likely to ride in company, all being above the common rank in life or attendants on those who were so.

For the Monk is described by Chaucer, as a man of the first rank in society, noble, rich, and expensively attended; he is a leader of the age, with certain humorous accompaniments in his character, that do not degrade, but render him an object of dignified mirth, but also with other accompaniments not so respectable.

The Friar is a character also of a mixed kind:

A friar there was, a wanton and a merry.

but in his office he is said to be a "full solemn man": eloquent, amorous, witty, and satirical; young, handsome, and rich; he is a complete rogue, with constitutional gaiety enough to make him a master of all the pleasures of the world.

His neck was white as the flour de lis,  
Thereto strong he was as a champioun.

It is necessary here to speak of Chaucer's own character, that I may set certain mistaken critics right in their conception of the humour and fun that occurs on the journey. Chaucer is himself the great poetical observer of men, who in every age is born to record and eternize its acts. This he does as a master, as a father, and superior, who looks down on their little follies from the Emperor to the Miller; sometimes with severity, oftener with joke and sport.

Accordingly Chaucer has made his Monk a great tragedian, one who studied poetical art. So much so, that the generous Knight is, in the compassionate dictates of his soul, compelled to cry out:

"Ho," quoth the Knyght,— "good Sir, no more  
of this;  
"That ye have said is right ynough I wis;  
"And mokell more, for little heaviness  
"Is right enough for much folk, as I guesse.  
"I say, for me, it is a great disease,  
"Whereas men have been in wealth and ease,  
"To heare of their sudden fall, alas,  
"And the contrary is joy and solas"

The Monk's definition of tragedy in the proem to his tale is worth repeating:

"Tragedie is to tell a certain story,  
"As old books us maken memory,  
"Of hem that stood in great prosperity,  
"And be fallen out of high degree,  
"Into miserie, and ended wretchedly."

Though a man of luxury, pride and pleasure, he is a master of art and learning, though affecting to despise it. Those

who can think that the proud Huntsman and Noble House-keeper, Chaucer's Monk, is intended for a buffoon or burlesque character, know little of Chaucer.

For the Host who follows this group, and holds the center of the cavalcade, is a first rate character, and his jokes are no trifles; they are always, though uttered with audacity, and equally free with the Lord and the Peasant, they are always substantially and weightily expressive of knowledge and experience; Henry Baillie, the keeper of the greatest Inn of the greatest City; for such was the Tabarde Inn in Southwark, near London: our Host was also a leader of the age.

By way of illustration, I instance Shakespeare's Witches in Macbeth. Those who dress them for the stage, consider them as wretched old women, and not as Shakespeare intended, the Goddesses of Destiny; this shews how Chaucer has been misunderstood in his sublime work. Shakespeare's Fairies also are the rulers of the vegetable world, and so are Chaucer's; let them be so considered, and then the poet will be understood, and not else.

But I have omitted to speak of a very prominent character, the Pardoner, the Age's Knave, who always commands and domineers over the high and low vulgar. This man is sent in every age for a rod and scourge, and for a blight, for a trial of men, to divide the classes of men; he is in the most holy sanctuary, and he is suffered by Providence for wise ends, and has also his great use, and his grand leading destiny.

His companion, the Sompnour, is also a Devil of the first magnitude, grand, terrific, rich and honoured in the rank of which he holds the destiny. The uses to Society are perhaps equal of the Devil and of the Angel, their sublimity, who can dispute.

In daunger had he at his own gise,  
The young girls of his diocese,  
And he knew well their counsel, &c,

The principal figure in the next groupe is the Good Parson; an Apostle, a real Messenger of Heaven, sent in every age for its light and its warmth. This man is beloved and venerated by all, and neglected by all: He serves all, and is served by none; he is, according to Christ's definition, the greatest of his age. Yet he is a Poor Parson of a town. Read Chaucer's description of the Good Parson, and bow the head and the knee to him, who, in every age, sends us such a burning and a shining light. Search, O ye rich and powerful, for these men and obey their counsel, then shall the golden age return: But alas! you will not easily distinguish him from the Friar or the Pardoner; they, also, are "full solemn men," and their counsel you will continue to follow.

I have placed by his side the Sergeant at Lawe, who appears delighted to ride in his company, and between him and his brother, the Plowman; as I wish men of Law would always ride with them, and take their counsel, especially in all difficult points. Chaucer's Lawyer is a

character of great venerableness, a Judge, and a real master of the jurisprudence of his age.

The Doctor of Physic is in this groupe, and the Franklin, the voluptuous country gentleman, contrasted with the Physician, and on his other hand, with two Citizens of London. Chaucer's characters live age after age. Every age is a Canterbury Pilgrimage; we all pass on, each sustaining one or other of these characters; nor can a child be born, who is not one of these characters of Chaucer. The Doctor of Physic is described as the first of his profession; perfect, learned, completely Master and Doctor in his art. Thus the reader will observe, that Chaucer makes every one of his characters perfect in his kind; every one is an Antique Statue; the image of a class, and not of an imperfect individual.

This groupe also would furnish substantial matter, on which volumes might be written. The Franklin is one who keeps open table, who is the genius of eating and drinking, the Bacchus; as the Doctore Esculapius, the Host is the Silenus, the Squire is the Apollo, the Miller is the Hercules, &c. Chaucer's characters are a description of the eternal Principles that exist in all ages. The Franklin is voluptuousness itself, most nobly pourtrayed:

It snewed in his house of meat and drink.

The Plowman is simplicity itself, with wisdom and strength for its stamina. Chaucer has divided the ancient character of Hercules between his Miller and his Plowman. Benevolence is the plowman's great characteristic; he is thin with excessive labour, and not with old age, as some have supposed:

He would thresh, and thereto dike and delve  
For Christe's sake, for every poore wight,  
Withouten hire, if it lay in his might.

Visions of these eternal principles or characters of human life appear to poets, in all ages; the Grecian gods were the ancient Cherubim of Phoenicia; but the Greeks, and since them the Moderns, have neglected to subdue the gods of Priam. These gods are visions of the eternal attributes, or divine names, which, when erected into gods, become destructive to humanity. They ought to be the servants, and not the masters of man, or of society. They ought to be made to sacrifice to Man, and not man compelled to sacrifice to them; for when separated from man or humanity, who is Jesus the Saviour, the vine of eternity, they are thieves and rebels, they are destroyers.

The Plowman of Chaucer is Hercules in his supreme eternal state, divested of his spectrous shadow; which is the Miller, a terrible fellow, such as exists in all times and places for the trial of men, to astonish every neighbourhood with brutal strength and courage, to get rich and powerful to curb the pride of Man.

The Reeve and the Manciple are two characters of the most consummate worldly wisdom. The Shipman, or Sailor, is a similar genius of Ulyssean art; but with the highest courage superadded.

The Citizens and their Cook are each leaders of a class. Chaucer has been somehow made to number four citizens, which would make his whole company, himself included, thirty-one. But he says there was but nine and twenty in his company:

Full nine and twenty in a company.

The Webbe, or Weaver, and the Tapiser, or Tapestry Weaver, appear to me to be the same person; but this is only an opinion, for full nine and twenty may signify one more or less. But I dare say that Chaucer wrote "A Webbe Dyer," that is, a Cloth Dyer:

A Webbe Dyer, and a Tapiser.

The Merchant cannot be one of the Three Citizens, as his dress is different, and his character is more marked, whereas Chaucer says of his rich citizens:

All were yclothed in o liverie.

The characters of Women Chaucer has divided into two classes, the Lady Prioress and the Wife of Bath. Are not these leaders of the ages of men? The lady prioress, in some ages, predominates; and in some the wife of Bath, in whose character Chaucer has been equally minute and exact, because she is also a scourge and a blight. I shall say no more of her, nor expose what Chaucer has left hidden; let the young reader study what he has said of her: it is useful as a scarecrow. There are of such characters born too many for the peace of the world.

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I come at length to the Clerk of Oxenford. This character varies from that of Chaucer, as the contemplative philosopher varies from the poetical genius. There are always these two classes of learned sages, the poetical and the philosophical. The painter has put them side by side, as if the youthful clerk had put himself under the tuition of the mature poet. Let the Philosopher always be the servant and scholar of inspiration and all will be happy.

#### Ralph Waldo Emerson (lecture date 1835)

SOURCE: "English Literature," in *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson: 1833-1836, Vol. I*, edited by Stephen E. Whicher and Robert E. Spiller, Harvard University Press, 1959, pp. 205-88.

[Emerson, an influential literary figure and philosopher during the nineteenth century, founded the American Transcendental movement. In the following excerpt from a lecture delivered in 1835, he places Chaucer in the English literary tradition, praising him for his delightful and authentic literary portraits.]

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**George Lyman Kittredge** (essay date 1915)

SOURCE: "Troilus," in *Chaucer and His Poetry*, Harvard University Press, 1915, pp. 108-21.

[Kittredge is renowned as the editor of the *Complete Works of Shakespeare* (with Irving Ribner) and for his collections of *English and Scottish ballads* as well as for his studies of Chaucer, including *Observations on the Language of Chaucer's Troilus and Chaucer and His Poetry* from which the following excerpt is taken. In this passage, Kittredge summarizes the situation and action of *Troilus and Criseyde* and argues that it is a superlative love tragedy.]

Chaucer is known to everybody as the prince of story-tellers, as incomparably the greatest of our narrative poets. Indeed, if we disregard the epic, which stands in a class by itself, I do not see why we should hesitate to call him the greatest of all narrative poets whatsoever, making no reservation of era or of language. His fame began in his own lifetime, and was not confined, even then, to the limits of his native country. It has constantly increased, both in area and in brilliancy, and was never so widespread or so splendid as at the present day. Besides, he is a popular poet, and this popularity—more significant than mere reputation—has grown steadily with the gradual extension of the reading habit to all sorts and conditions of men.

To most readers, however, Chaucer means only the *Canterbury Tales*; and even so, it is with but half-a-dozen of the pilgrims that they are intimately acquainted. This is manifest destiny, which it would be ridiculous to deplore: "What wol nat be, mot nede be left." Nor should we lament what Sir Thomas Browne calls "the iniquity of oblivion"; for oblivion has treated Chaucer generously. She has exempted enough of the poet's achievement to bring him popularity, which the conditions of his own time could neither afford nor promise, and she has spared besides, for such of us as care to read it, that masterpiece of psychological fiction

In which ye may the double sorwes here,  
Of Troylus, in loving of Criseyde,  
And how that she forsook him er she deyde.

The *Troilus* is not merely, as William Rossetti styles it, the most beautiful long narrative poem in the English language: it is the first novel, in the modern sense, that ever was written in the world, and one of the best. Authorship is a strange art: it is nearest akin to magic, which deals with the incalculable. Chaucer sat down to compose a romance, as many a poet had done before him. The subject was to be love; the ethical and social system was

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to be that of chivalry; the source was the matter of Troy; the material was Italian and French and Latin. His readers were to be the knights and ladies of the court, to whom the fame of the hero as a lover and a warrior was already familiar. Psychology it was to contain, or what passed for psychology in the mediæval love-poets, the analysis of emotion in terms of Chrétien de Troyes and the *Roman de la Rose*. Yet the work was not, in Chaucer's intention, to be a romance precisely. He conceived it as what scholars then called a "tragedy,"—though with a somewhat peculiar modification of the standard term. Tragedies described the malice of Fortune when she casts down men of high estate and brings them to a miserable end. This was to be a tragedy of love, and the fall of the hero was to be from happy union with his lady to the woe and ruin of her unfaithfulness. And so Chaucer took his pen in hand, and drew his quire of paper to him, and wrote a prologue.

The magician has marked out his circle, and pronounced his spells, and summoned his spirits. He knows their names, and the formulas that will evoke them, and the task that he shall require them to perform. And lo! they come, and there are strange demons among them, and when the vision is finished and the enchanter lays down his wand, he finds on his desk—a romance, to be sure, which his pen has written; a tragedy, in the sense in which he knew the word; a love-tragedy, with a background of the matter of Troy, and thousands of lines from Boccaccio, with bits of Benoit and Guido delle Colonne, and a sonnet of Petrarch's, and a section out of Boethius, and a closing prayer to the Christian God. Everything is as he had planned it. But, when he reads it over, he finds that he has produced a new thing. Nothing like it was ever in the world before.

The *Troilus* is a long poem, extending to more than eight thousand verses, but the plot is so simple that it may be set forth in a dozen sentences.

Troilus, Priam's son, and second in valor to Hector only, is a scoffer at love and lovers. On a high holiday, as he strolls idly about the temple of Pallas, heart-free and glorying in his freedom, his eye falls upon Cressida, daughter of Calchas. Her father has fled to the Greeks, to escape the doom of Troy; but Cressida remains in the city. She is a widow, young, rich, and of surpassing beauty. Troilus falls madly in love, but fears to reveal his passion. Pandarus, Cressida's uncle and Troilus' friend, coaxes the secret from him, and helps him with all his might. Cressida yields, after long wooing, and the lovers see naught but happiness before them.

One day, however, during an exchange of prisoners, Calchas persuades the Greeks to offer Antenor for Cressida, whom he fears to leave in the city of destruction. To resist is impossible. The lovers are parted; but Cressida promises to return in ten days, feeling sure that she can cajole her aged father. Her woman's wiles are fruitless: she must remain in the Grecian camp, where Diomedes pays court to her assiduously. He wins her at length, though not without her bitter grief at the thought of her unfaithfulness. Troilus is slain by Achilles.

This is the barest outline, but it suffices to show the simplicity of the story. The interest lies in the details, which are told with much particularity, and in the characterization, which is complex and subtle in a high degree. Readers who look for rapid movement and quick succession of incident, are puzzled and thwarted by the deliberation, the leisureliness, of the *Troilus*. The conversations are too long for them; they find the soliloquies languid; the analysis of sentiment and emotion and passion fails to keep their minds awake. But the *Troilus* is not a tale for a spare hour: it is an elaborate psychological novel, instinct with humor, and pathos, and passion, and human nature. Condensation would spoil it. Once yield to its charm, and you wish that it might go on forever.

Fate dominates in the *Troilus*. The suspense consists not in waiting for the unexpected, but in looking forward with a kind of terror for the moment of predicted doom. The catastrophe is announced a ere to hear of "the double sorrow of Troilus in loving Cressida, and how she forsook him at the last." Neither Troilus nor Cressida suspects what is to come; but we know all about it from the beginning. There is no escape for anybody. We are looking on at a tragedy that we are powerless to check or to avert.

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[*Troilus and Criseyde*] . . . is an elaborate psychological novel, instinct with humor, and pathos, and passion and human nature.

—George Lyman Kittredge

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Chaucer himself conveys the impression of telling the tale under a kind of duress. Not, of course, that there is any literal compulsion. It is rather that he is entangled, somehow, in the subject, and that, since he has begun, he is in duty bound to finish his task.

Sin I have begonne,  
Myn auctor shal I folwen, if I conne.

There is no weariness, as in some of the tales in the *Legend of Good Women*. His interest in the matter is intense, and it never falters. But he feels the burden of the ruin that is to come. At times he even seems to struggle against the fate which has allotted him so sad a duty. He would change the tale if he could, but he must tell the truth, though it is almost more than he can bear. He would actually impugn the evidence if that were possible:—

For how Criseyde Troilus forsook—  
Or, at the leest, how that she was unkynde—  
Moot hennesforth be mater of my book,  
As writen folk thurgh which it is in minde.  
Allas that they shulde evere cause fynde  
To speke hire harm! and if they on hire lye,  
Ywis hemself sholde han the vilenye.

So mightily is he stirred by Cressida's grief that he would extenuate her guilt, or even excuse it altogether, for sheer pity. She has been punished enough; and, after all, she was only a weak woman, "tendre-herted, slyding of corage."

Ne me ne list this sely womman chyde  
 Ferther than the story wol devyse.  
 Hir name, allas! is publissed so wyde,  
 That for hir gilt it oughte y-now suffyse.  
 And if I mighte excuse hir any wyse,—  
 For she so sory was for hir untrouthe,—  
 I-wis, *I wolde excuse hir yet for routhe.*

This extraordinary outburst works powerfully upon our feelings. The case is hopeless. There is no excuse but destiny, and destiny, though irresistible, cannot be pleaded even in extenuation. Such is the law, and Chaucer bows to its everlasting antinomy, which, like *Œdipus* before him, he does not pretend to reconcile.

Everywhere in the poem we find this idea of a compelling destiny. It was Troilus' fate to love; he rode by Cressida's palace on "his happy day,"—

For which men say, may nought disturbed be  
 That shal betyden of necessite.

"Swich is love," so Cressida moralizes, "and eek myn aventure" [II. 742]. The oak topples over when it receives "the falling stroke." Troilus apostrophizes the *Parcæ*, who settled his life for him before he was born:—

"O fatal sustren, which, er any clooth  
 Me shapen was, my destine me sponne!"

"Pleasure comes and goes in love," says Pandarus, "as the chances fall in the dice." It was Fortune that cast Troilus down, "and on her wheel she set up Diomedé," but Fortune is only the "executrix of weirds," and the influences of the stars govern us mortals as the herdsman drives his cattle:—

But O Fortune, executrice of wierdes,  
 O influences of thise hevenes hye!  
 Soth is that, under God, ye ben our hierdes,  
 Though to us bestes been the causes wrye."

Most significant of all is the long meditation of Troilus on foreknowledge and freedom of the will in the Fourth Book. This is from Boethius, and Chaucer has been as much blamed for inserting it as Shakspeare for making Hector quote Aristotle. Doubtless the passage is inartistic and maladjusted; but it is certainly not, as some have called it, a digression. On the contrary, it is, in substance, as pertinent and opportune as any of Hamlet's soliloquies. The situation is well-imagined. Cressida is to be sent to the Grecian camp. Parliament has so decided, and resistance would be vain. Troilus, in despair, seeks the solitude of a temple, and prays to almighty and omniscient Jove either to help him or to let him die. Destiny, he feels, has overtaken him, for there seems to be no likelihood that Cressida, if once she joins her father, will ever

return to Troy. What can he do but pray? Perhaps Jove will work a miracle to save him. And as he meditates, in perplexity and distress, his mind travels the weary maze of fate and free will, and finds no issue, unless in the god's omnipotence.

All this, no doubt, is un-Trojan; but that is a futile objection. We have already accepted Troilus as a mediæval knight and a mediæval lover, and we cannot take umbrage at his praying like a man of the middle ages, or arguing with himself in the mediæval manner. In details, to be sure, the passage is open to criticism, and it is undoubtedly too long; but in substance it is dramatically appropriate, and it is highly significant as a piece of exposition. For Troilus finds no comfort in his meditation. Whatever clerks may say, the upshot of the matter is that "all that comth, comth by necessitee." Whatever is fore-known, must come to pass, and cannot be avoided.

"And thus the bifalling  
 Of things that ben wist biforn the tyde,  
 They mowe nat been eschewed on no syde."

The fate which darkens the loves of Troilus and Cressida is strangely intensified (in our apprehension of it) by the impending doom of Troy. This is no mere rhetorical analogue—no trick of symbolism. Their drama is an integral part of the great Trojan tragedy. They are caught in the wheels of that resistless mechanism which the gods have set in motion for the ruin of the Trojan race. This is a vital, determining fact in their history, as Chaucer understands it, and he leaves us in no doubt as to its intense significance. Calchas, we are told at the outset, deserted Priam because Apollo had revealed the doom of Troy:—

For wel wiste he, by sort, that Troye sholde,  
 Destroyed ben, ye, wolde whose nolde.

And again and again we are reminded, as the tale proceeds, of the inevitable outcome of the ten years' war. Troilus is smitten with love when he sees Cressida in the temple. It is the great festival of Palladion, a relic, Chaucer calls it, in Christian phrase, in which the Trojans put their trust above everything. They were celebrating "Palladion's feast," for they would not intermit their devout observances, although the Greeks had shut them in, "and their cite biseged al aboute." When Pandarus finds his friend plunged in a lover's grief, despairing of ever winning the least favor from the lady he has seen in the temple, the gibe that he casts at him, "—for the nonce, To anger him and arouse him from his stupor—is an accusation of cowardice:—'Fear, perhaps, has prompted you to pray and repent, as at the approach of death.'"

"God save hem that biseged our toun;  
 And so can leye our iolitee in presse,  
 And bringe our lusty folk to hevinesse!"

When Pandarus first reveals to Cressida the secret of Troilus' love, he approaches the subject carefully, so as not to startle her. "I could tell you something," he cries, "that would make you lay aside your mourning." "Now,



uncle dear," she answers, "tell it us, for love of God! Is the siege over, then? I am frightened to death of these Greeks."

"As ever thryve I," quod this Pandarus,  
 "Yet coude I telle a thing to do yow pleyel!"  
 "Now, uncle dere," quod she, "telle it us  
 For Goddes love! Is than thassege aweye?  
 I am of Grekes so ferd that I deyel!"

Cressida felt the first thrill in her heart when she saw Troilus riding through the street on his return from battle—his helm hewn to pieces, his shield pierced with Grecian arrows and cut and broken with the blows of swords and maces,—and the people were all shouting in triumph as he passed.

Always and everywhere we are oppressed by the coming doom of the city. This it is that prompts Calchas to beg the Greeks to give up their prisoner Antenor in exchange for Cressida. They need not hesitate, he argues; one Trojan captive more or less is nothing to them,—the whole city will soon be theirs. The time is near at hand.

"That fyr and flaumbe on al the toun shal sprede,  
 And thus shal Troye turne in asshen dede."

And, when Hector opposes the exchange, the Trojan people, in a riotous parliament, shout out their unanimous vote in its favor, and carry the day. Hector was right, though he did not know it for he was acting, not from policy or superior foresight, but from an honorable scruple: Cressida was not a prisoner, he contended; and Trojans did not use to sell women. And the people were fatally wrong. The "cloud of error" hid their best interests from their discernment; for it was the treason of Antenor that brought about the final catastrophe. It is, then, the impending doom of Troy that parts the lovers; and from this time forward, there is no separating their fate from the fate of the town.

When Cressida joins Calchas in the Grecian camp, she means to return in a few days. She has no doubt whatever that she can trick her father, and she has won Troilus over to her scheme. But she soon discovers that she has matched her woman's wit, not against her dotard father merely, but against the doom of Troy. No pretexts avail, not because Calchas suspects her plot, but because he knows that the city is destined to destruction. Nor does she dare to steal away by night, lest she fall into the hands of the savage soldiery. And finally, when Diomedes woos her, and gets a hearing, though little favor at first, his most powerful argument is the certain and speedy fate of Troy. He does not know that Cressida loves Troilus,—she tells him that she is heart-whole, but for her memory of her dead husband,—yet he cannot believe that so fair a lady has left no lover behind her, and he has seen her ever in sorrow. "Do not," he urges her, "spill a quarter of a tear for any Trojan; for, truly, it is not worth while. The folk of Troy are all in prison, as you may see for yourself, and not one of them shall come out alive for all the gold betwixen sun and sea!"

Thus, from first to last, the loves of Troilus and Cressida are bound up with the inexorable doom that hangs over the city. The fate of Troy is their fate. Their story begins in the temple of the Palladium; it is Calchas' foreknowledge and the people's infatuation that tear them asunder; it is the peril of the town that thwarts woman's wit, until Diomedes subdues the inconstant heart. The tragedy of character grows out of the tragedy of situation.

J. M. Manly (lecture date 1926)

SOURCE: "Chaucer and the Rhetoricians," in *Proceedings of the British Academy*, Oxford University Press, 1926, pp. 95-113.

[Manly was an esteemed professor of Medieval English known for his valuable contribution to Chaucer studies through his lectures and his eight-volume collection. The Text of the Canterbury Tales, Studied on the Basis of All Known Manuscripts. In the following excerpt from his published lectures, Manly describes the rhetorical styles of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, Book of the Duchess, Parlement of Foules, and other poems. He traces Chaucer's style to the lessons given in medieval rhetorical texts, suggesting that Chaucer was following set conventions in his poetry, which he later imaginatively expanded.]

. . . In investigating the sources of Chaucer's notions of literature and his conceptions of style, scholars have hitherto discussed only the writings of other authors which may have served as models for imitation. The possibility of his acquaintance with formal rhetorical theory and the precepts of rhetoricians has not been considered, notwithstanding the hint that might have been derived from the allusion to Gaufred de Vinsauf and the other passages on rhetoric scattered through his works. Even *a priori* there would seem to be a high probability that Chaucer was familiar with the rhetorical theories of his time, that he had studied the text-books and carefully weighed the doctrines. Whatever modern scholars may have said of the errors in his references and the shallowness of his classical learning—and there are few of his critics whose errors are less numerous than his—he was a man of scholarly tastes and of considerable erudition. His works bear witness to no small reading in astronomy and astrology, in alchemy, in medicine, and in philosophy and theology, as well as in the classical authors current in his day. The ancient tradition that he was educated, in part at any rate, in the law school of the Inner Temple has recently been shown to be possible, if not highly probable. The education given by the inns of court seems to have been remarkably liberal. What more likely than that the formal study of rhetoric not only was included in his academic curriculum, as one of the Seven Arts, but also occupied much of his thought and reflection in maturer years?

What, then, was medieval rhetoric? Who were its principal authorities in Chaucer's time? And what use did Chaucer make of methods and doctrines unmistakably due to the rhetoricians?

To the first two questions satisfactory answers can be readily given. Professor Edmond Faral has recently printed the chief rhetorical texts of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, with illuminating biographical and bibliographical notes and excellent summaries of the doctrines. To answer the third question fully would require a volume, but a provisional view of the matter can be obtained from a rapid survey of Chaucer's best-known work.

Fortunately for our inquiry, the Middle Ages knew only one rhetorical system and drew its precepts from few and well-known sources. Moreover, there was little development of the doctrines or variety in the mode of presentation. The principal sources of the doctrines were three: the two books of Cicero entitled *De Inventione*, the four books entitled *De Rhetorica, ad Herennium*, and the Epistle of Horace to Piso. Treatises based upon these were not uncommon in the earlier Middle Ages, but after the beginning of the thirteenth century the practical spirit of the time tended in the universities to substitute instruction in letter writing and the *artes dictaminis* for the more theoretical and supposedly less useful study of general rhetorical principles. It is perhaps for this reason that the treatises of Matthieu de Vendôme and Gaufred de Vinsauf, written early in the thirteenth century, retained their vogue in the time of Chaucer. These treatises are the *Ars Versificatoria* of Matthieu, and the *Documentum de Arte Versificandi* and the *Nova Poetria* of Gaufred. The first two are prose treatises, carefully defining and discussing all processes and terms and illustrating them by examples, in part drawn from earlier writers, such as Virgil, Horace, Ovid, Statius, and Sidonius, and in part composed by the rhetorician himself, either to show his skill or to pay off a grudge. For example, Matthieu is tireless in the composition of verses attacking the red-haired rival whom he calls Rufus; Gaufred, illustrating the beauties of *circumlocutio*, says it is of special value when we wish to praise or [defame] a person . . . .

The doctrine taught by these two authorities, the common medieval doctrine, falls logically and naturally into three main divisions or heads: (1) arrangement or organization; (2) amplification and abbreviation; (3) style and its ornaments.

Of arrangement they had little to say, and that little was purely formal and of small value. They treated mainly of methods of beginning and ending, distinguishing certain forms as natural and others as artificial. Artificial beginnings consisted either of those which plunge *in medias res* or set forth a final situation before narrating the events that led up to and produced it, or of those in which a *sententia* (that is, a generalization or a proverb) is elaborated as an introduction, or an *exemplum* (that is, a similar case) is briefly handled for the same purpose. It will be readily recognized that all these varieties of beginnings are in familiar use at the present day; and, curiously enough, in recent years writers for the popular magazines have shown a special fondness for beginning with an elaborately developed *sententia*.

We have not time to-day for a detailed examination of Chaucer's methods of beginning, but this is hardly neces-

sary. The moment one undertakes a survey of his poetry in the light of rhetorical theory, one is struck by the elaborate artifice of its beginnings and the closeness of their agreement with rhetorical formulae. This artificiality has long been recognized but has been mistakenly ascribed to the influence of the poems upon which he drew for his materials. His French sources, however, are hardly responsible for these elaborate beginnings; they furnish only the raw materials which Chaucer puts together in accordance with the instructions of his masters in rhetoric. The apparent simplicity with which the *Boke of the Duchesse* begins disappears under examination: the reader is led through several long and tortuous corridors—totalling one-third of the poem—before he arrives at the real subject, which in turn is developed with amazing artificiality. The long failure of the mourning knight to make clear the nature of his loss may be regarded as an expanded form of the rhetorical figure called *occupatio*.

The *Parlement of Foules* admirably illustrates the method of beginning with a *sententia*:

The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne.

This is expanded into two seven-line stanzas. Then comes, not the narrative itself, but a preliminary narrative, interspersed with various rhetorical devices, including generalizations, an apostrophe, and an outline of Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*, in all 119 lines, before the story proper begins.

This method is even more elaborately developed in the *Hous of Fame*. In fact the poet is within twenty lines of the end of Book I before he begins to tell his story. There are sixty-five lines on dreams, sixty-five more of invocation, and more than 350 telling in outline the entirely unnecessary story of Dido and Aeneas.

Even when the narrative begins in a natural manner, as in *Anelida and Arcite*, the poem is given an artificial character by prefixing an invocation or by some other rhetorical device. The beginning of the *Legend of Goode Women* combines the methods of *sententia* and *exemplum*: our belief in the joys and pains of heaven and hell, says the poet, is based, not upon experience, but upon the acceptance of the sayings of 'these olde wise'; in like manner we must accept the testimony of books—those treasuries of wisdom—about the existence of good women, though we have never known them. A few of the separate legends begin inartificially, but it was not until late in his career that Chaucer developed the method of beginning used with such masterly skill in the tales of Miller, Reeve, Summoner, and Pardoner.

Methods of ending are treated by the rhetoricians even more summarily than beginnings, the preferred forms being the employment of a proverb or general idea, an *exemplum*, or a brief summary. Chaucer is fond of some sort of explicit application of his stories. In the "Reeve's Tale" this takes the form of a proverb:

And therefore this proverbe is seyð ful sooth  
 Him thar nat wene wel that yvele dooth:  
 "A gylour shal hymself bigyled be."

And the "Manciple's Tale" ends in a stream of proverbs and proverbial sayings. But the more common form of application is a generalization or an exclamatory comment. Very common also is the ending summarizing the situation at the end of the tale. On the other hand, notwithstanding Chaucer's fondness for *exempla*, the *exemplum*-ending is very rare; perhaps the only instance, and that a doubtful one, is in the "Friar's Tale":

Herketh this word, beth war, as in this cas:  
 "The leoun sit in his awayt alway  
 To sle the innocent, if that he may"

Peculiar to Chaucer are the references to other writers for further information—as in several of the legends—and the triple *demande d'amours* with which the "Franklin's Tale" ends.

The technical means of passing from the beginning to the body of the work—*prosecutio*, as it is called—are treated with much formality by Gaufred, though he remarks with great good sense that the prime requisite is to get on with the subject: *In ipsa continuatione, primum est continuare.*

In Chaucer, after a rhetorical beginning, the transition to the narrative itself is usually clearly and formally indicated; so, for example, in *Troilus and Criseyde*:

For now wol I gon streight to my matere.

The amount of attention devoted by the rhetoricians to the second main division, that of amplification, is to the modern reader surprising, but it results quite naturally from the purely mechanical character of the art of rhetoric as conceived by them. To them the problems of composition were not problems of the creative imagination but problems of 'fine writing'—*l'art de bien dire*. They had no conception of psychological processes or laws. The questions they raised were not questions of methods by which the writer might most perfectly develop his conception or of the means by which he might convey it to his audience. The elaborate system of technical devices was discussed only with reference to the form and structure of each device, never with reference to its emotional or aesthetic effects. As the rhetoricians conceived the matter, if a writer had something new to say, rhetoric was unnecessary; the novelty of the material relieved him of any concern for its form. But alas! this situation seldom arose. Practically everything had already been said. All the tales had been told, all the songs had been sung, all the thoughts of the mind and feelings of the heart had been expressed. The modern writer, they held, could only tell a thrice-told tale, only echo familiar sentiments. His whole task was one of finding means and methods of making the old seem new. He might therefore well begin his task of composition by choosing some familiar but attractive text—some tale, or poem, or oration, or treatise—or by making a patchwork of pieces selected from many

sources. His problem would be that of renewing the expression and especially of making it more beautiful—*ornatio* is the common term.

Let no one scoff at this method as incapable of producing interesting and attractive writing. It has been practised very commonly by writers in all lands and epochs. It is recommended and taught in a widely used series of French text-books. It is the method recently revealed as pursued by that most charming of stylists, Anatole France, and is perhaps the only method by which he or Laurence Sterne could have produced such effects as they achieved.

Medieval rhetoricians assume that the writer, having chosen his subject, will find his material either too great or too small for his purpose. His problem will almost necessarily be one of amplification or abbreviation. The methods of amplifying and abbreviating are derived from the technique of style. They are therefore dealt with in their proper places when style and its ornaments are under discussion, but for the sake of clearness they are also expounded elaborately with special reference to their uses and values as means of amplification and abbreviation.

The principal means of amplification are six—some writers say eight:

Description, though perhaps not the most important, may be named first, as receiving fullest attention from both Matthieu de Vendôme and Gaufred de Vinsauf. Elaborate patterns and formulas are given for describing persons, places, things, and seasons. If the description applies to externals, the features to be described are enumerated and the order in which they are to be taken up is strictly specified; if it concerns a character, the characteristics to be mentioned are listed, and those appropriate to each sex, age, social status, employment, temperament, and career are set forth in detail. Specimens are given to illustrate the doctrines. These descriptions are not, like those in Chaucer's later work, determined by the requirements of the situation in which they occur. Their use is purely conventional, for the purpose of amplifying the material, and their construction is purely mechanical. They are merely opportunities for the writer to display his rhetorical training. It is very enlightening to compare Chaucer's later descriptions—such, for example, as those of Alyson and Absalon in the "Miller's Tale"—with the early ones; for example, with that of the Duchess Blanche, which, with the exception of one or two possibly realistic touches, is nothing more than a free paraphrase of lines 563-597 of the *Nova Poetria*, composed by Gaufred de Vinsauf as a model for the description of a beautiful woman. The features described in the two passages are the same, they are taken up in the same order, and the same praise is given to each. The resemblance is still further heightened by the fact that, like Chaucer, Gaufred declines to guess at the beauties hidden by the robe—a trait hitherto regarded as characteristically Chaucerian.

There seems little doubt, indeed, that Chaucer's character sketches, widely as they later depart from the models offered by the rhetoricians, had their origins in them. An

American scholar has recently attempted to show that Chaucer derived them from the treatises on Vices and Virtues, with their descriptions of character types. The possibility of an influence from this source I will neither deny nor discuss, but the specimen sketches given by the rhetoricians seem entirely sufficient to account for Chaucer's interest in this type of description.

The next most important device was digression, of which two subdivisions were recognized: first, digression to another part of the same subject, anticipating a scene or an event which in regular course would come later; second, digression to another subject. Digression may obviously be made in many ways and may include many special rhetorical devices. Prominent among the special forms are the development of a *sententia* and the introduction of *exempla*, illustrating the matter in hand. These two devices are of the utmost importance for Chaucer in particular and for the Middle Ages in general. The temper of the Middle Ages being distinctly practical and its literary valuations being determined, not by the criteria of art, but by those of edification, *sententiae*, proverbs, and *exempla* were used with an ardour now difficult to appreciate. The use of *exempla* was strongly inculcated by the rhetoricians. Matthieu de Vendôme urges the writer to provide an abundance of *exempla*. . . .

But the precepts of the rhetoricians on this point had already been heeded by other writers, and in Chaucer's poems it is difficult to separate the direct influence of rhetorical theory from that of the practice of Guillaume de Machaut, whose first use of *exempla* was in his *Dit de l'Alerion* and whose later use of them gave them a vogue attested by the imitation of all hid by this astonishing fad as was any of the French imitators of Machaut. They are familiar from the series of twenty-one consecutive instances in the "Franklin's Tale" and the humorous accumulation of them in the controversy between the Cock and the Hen.

Third in importance among the devices of amplification may be placed apostrophe, with its rhetorical colours *exclamatio*, *conduplicatio*, *subiectio*, and *dubitatio*. It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of apostrophe in medieval literature. Addresses to persons living or dead, present or absent, to personified abstractions, and even to inanimate objects are to be found in almost every composition with any pretensions to style from the eleventh century onward; and a special form, the *Complainte*, developed into one of the most widely cultivated types of literature. Chaucer's use of apostrophe is so frequent that no examples need be cited. Almost every tale contains from one to a dozen examples of it. Among the colours, his favourites seem to be those known as *exclamatio*—simply a passionate outcry addressed to some person or thing present or absent—and *dubitatio*, that is, a feigned hesitation what to say, a rhetorical questioning as to which of two or more expressions is appropriate to the idea and situation. Like Wordsworth's—

O Cuckoo, shall I call thee Bird  
Or but a wandering Voice?

Fourth in order may come *prosopopeia* or *effictio*, the device which represents as speaking persons absent or dead, animals, abstractions, or inanimate objects. Widely used for purposes of amplification, this figure often furnished forth the whole of a piece of literature. Examples are numerous. A charming one contemporary with Chaucer is the *débat* in which Froissart represents his dog and horse as discussing their master and the journeys which he compels them to make with him. Chaucer uses it briefly many times, and elaborately in the principal scene of the *Parlement of Foules*.

Less important than the foregoing are the devices of *periphrasis* or *circumlocutio*, and its closely related *expositio*. *Circumlocutio* was highly regarded as one of the best means, both of amplifying discourse and of raising commonplace or low ideas to a high stylistic level. It is too familiar to require discussion, but Master Gaufred seems not to have distinguished clearly between a statement expanded for the mere sake of amplification and one which expresses some important detail or phase of an idea. For example, he calls the opening lines of Virgil's *Aeneid* *circumlocutio* and declares, 'This is nothing else than to say, I will describe Aeneas.' And, after quoting from Boethius three lines of the metre beginning,

O qui perpetua mundum ratione gubernas,

adds,

*Quod nihil aliud est quam, 'O Deus.'*

These remarks and the similar ones by Matthieu de Vendôme will doubtless recall Chaucer's sly comment in the "Franklin's Tale" on his own rhetorical description of the end of the day:

Til that the brighte sonne lost his hewe,  
For thozizonte hath reft the sonne his lyght,—  
This is as much to seye as it was nyght.

The colour *expositio* includes the repetition of the same idea in different words (one form of *interpretatio*) and also the elaboration of an idea by adding the reasons or authorities, pronouncing a generalization with or without reasons, discussing the contrary, introducing a similitude or an *exemplum*, and drawing a conclusion. Although these two figures are of minor importance, they nevertheless play a considerable part in the writings of Chaucer, as of most other medieval authors.

Other devices for amplification existed, but I will spare you even the enumeration of them.

Abbreviation is joined by the rhetoricians with amplification, but is obviously of much less practical interest. The medieval writer is, as a rule, not so much concerned to abbreviate as to amplify. Master Gaufred, however, instructs his readers that in treating a well-worn subject the best means of creating an appearance of novelty is to survey the whole subject and then run quickly over the parts that predecessors have dwelt upon and dwell upon

parts they have neglected. The principal means of abbreviation recommended are certain of the figures of words: asyndeton, reduction of predication, and the like. Chaucer's favourite methods are two:

(1) The use of absolute constructions—perhaps the most striking and beautiful example of this is the opening line of the second book of the *Troilus*:

Out of these blake wawes for to saile,  
O wind, o wind, the weder ginneth clere!

the second line furnishing an instance of the figure called *epizeusis*.

(2) The figure called *occupatio*, that is, the refusal to describe or narrate—a figure used with special frequency in "The Squire's Tale," as for example:

But for to telle yow al hir beaute  
It lyth nat in my tonge, nyn my konnyng

and

I wol not tellen of hir straunge sewes

or

I wol nat taryen yow, for it is pryme

or

Who koude tellen yow the forme of daunces  
So unkouthe, and so fresshe countenaunces?

.....

No man but Launcelot, and he is deed.

Into the vast and tangled jungle of the medieval treatment of Style and its Ornaments we cannot venture now. Its extent may be inferred from the fact that, notwithstanding the inclusion of very long specimens of apostrophe, prosopopeia, and description (328 lines in all) the portion of the *Nova Poetria* devoted to the important subjects of 'Art in General', 'Organization', and 'Amplification and Abbreviation' occupies only 674 lines, whereas that devoted to the 'Ornaments of Style' occupies 1125. The tangle is suggested by the fact that there are recognized, defined, and discussed thirty-five colours, or figures of words, twenty figures of thought, and ten varieties of tropes, with nine more sub-varieties. These figures fall into two very distinct classes: first, those in which human emotion and aesthetic feeling have always found utterance—metaphor, simile, exclamation, rhetorical question, and the like; and second, a vast mass of highly artificial and ingenious patterns of word and thought, such as using the same word at the end of a line as at the beginning, heaped-up rhymes, and alliteration.

Like other writers in all ages, Chaucer makes extensive use of the first class of figures; of the artificial patterns he

makes only a limited use, and that solely in highly rhetorical passages, like the "Monk's Tale," certain parts of the *Boke of the Duchesse*, and in the apostrophes, exclamations, and *sententiae* of other serious compositions. The humorous tales, for which the rhetoricians forbid the use of *colores*, are entirely free from special rhetorical devices, with the single and striking exception of the "Nun's Priest's Tale," a mock-heroic composition so full of rhetoric and so amusingly parodying the style of the "Monk's Tale," which immediately preceded it, as to invite the suggestion that the 'high style' and its parody were purposely juxtaposed. Is it possible that Chaucer's desire to carry out this amusing contrast explains the otherwise puzzling change of the Monk from the spectacular huntsman and hard rider of the "Prologue" to the bookish pedant of the hundred lamentable tragedies who greets our astonished ears when he is called upon for a tale?

As no one ever pays any attention to statistics and percentages, they rest the mind. This may therefore be a fitting time to introduce a few. If we list the *Canterbury Tales* according to the percentages of the larger rhetorical devices which they contain, they form an interesting descending series, ranging from nearly 100 per cent. to 0. Highest, as might be expected, stands the "Monk's Tale," with nearly 100 per cent. of rhetoric. Next comes the "Manciple's Tale" with 61 per cent.; then the tales of the "Nun's Priest" and the "Wife of Bath" with 50 per cent. The tales of the "Pardoner" and the "Knight" have 40 and 35 per cent. respectively; while those of the "Man of Law," the "Doctor," the "Prioress," the "Franklin," the "Second Nun," and the "Merchant" fall between 30 and 20 per cent. The half-told tale of the "Squire" stands alone with 16 per cent., and slightly below it come the tales of the "Clerk" and the "Canon's Yeoman," with 10 per cent. Quite in a class by themselves stand the tales of the "Reeve" and the "Shipman," with about 5 per cent. of rhetoric, and those of the "Miller," the "Friar," and the "Summoner," in which the rhetorical devices do not occupy more than 1 per cent. of the text.

Although some of these percentages are just what we should expect from the character of the tales and their probable dates, some are rather surprising. It is natural enough that the "Monk's Tale" should head the list, for it is professedly a collection of tragedies. But that some of Chaucer's freest and most delightful work should contain twice as much rhetoric as some of his least inspired compositions is a puzzle that demands investigation.

Let us begin by examining one of the least known and least interesting of the tales, that of the "Manciple." It is in fact so insignificant and so little read that I cannot even assume that all of you recall the plot. 'When Phebus lived here on earth, we are told, he had a fair young wife, whom he loved dearly, and a white Crow, whom he had taught to speak. But the wife was unfaithful and took a lover. This was observed by the Crow, who upon Phebus's return home told him. Phebus in sorrow and anger slew his wife, and then, repenting of his deed and disbelieving the charge brought against her, plucked the white feathers from the bird and doomed all crows to be black.'

We may note in the first place that the tale is not particularly appropriate to the Manciple or indeed to any other of the pilgrims, and that no effort is made to adapt it to him. It consists of 258 lines, of which 41 are devoted to describing Phebus, his wife, and the crow, and 50 to telling the incidents of the story. The remaining 167 lines—61 per cent. of the tale—are patches of rhetoric. Even this high percentage is perhaps too low, for the 25 lines of description devoted to Phebus are so conventional, so much in accordance with rhetorical formulas, that they might fairly be added to our estimate of the percentage of rhetoric. No effort was made by the author to conceive any of his characters as living beings or to visualize the action of the tale. The action, to be sure, seems in itself unpromising as the basis of a masterpiece of the story-teller's art, but so, if we consider them closely, are the basic narratives of the "Nun's Priest's Tale" and the tales of the "Miller," the "Reeve," and the "Friar." If Chaucer had been as well inspired when he wrote this tale as when he wrote his masterpieces, Phebus might have been as real to us as the Oxford Carpenter or the Miller of Trumpington, his wife as brilliant a bit of colour as the Carpenter's wife, and the Crow as interesting a bird as Chauncleer or Pertelote. But he developed the tale, not imaginatively, but rhetorically. Instead of attempting to realize his characters psychologically and conceive their actions and words as elements of a dramatic situation, he padded the tale with rhetoric. Thus he thrust into it and around it 32 lines of *sententiae*, 36 of *exempla*, 18 of *exclamatio*, 14 of *sermocinatio*, 3 of technical transition, 17 of *demonstratio*, and 63 of *applicatio*—all external and mechanical additions, clever enough as mere writing, but entirely devoid of life. If the tale had been written as a school exercise, to illustrate the manner in which rhetorical padding could be introduced into a narrative framework, the process of composition could not have been more mechanical or the results more distressing.

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**Chaucer's greatness arose from his growing recognition that for him at least the right way to amplify a story was not to expand it by rhetorical devices, but to conceive it in terms of the life which he had observed so closely. . . .**

—J. M. Manly

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But Chaucer was endowed with the temperament, not of the rhetorician, but of the artist; and in some way he arrived at the memorable discovery that the task of the artist is not to pad his tales with rhetoric, but to conceive all the events and characters in the forms and activities of life. For this he was well prepared by native endowment and by a habit of close observation which developed early and which redeems even his earliest poems from entire banality. Owing to the loss of so much of his prentice work and the uncertain chronology of what has been preserved, we cannot trace in detail the displacement of the

older rhetorical by the new psychological methods. But certain lines in the *Hous of Fame* indicate that when he was writing that poem he at least had formed an idea of the new methods, even though he may long have continued in some respects under the dominance of the old. The lines in question are in the proems of the second and third books:

O thought that wroot al that I mette,  
And in the tresorie it shette  
Of my brayn, now shal men se  
If any vertu in thee be;

and more specifically:

And if, Divyne Vertu, thou  
Wilt helpe me to shewe now  
That in myn hede y-marked is.

These passages, although the first is translated from Dante, seem to me to express Chaucer's growing conviction that narration and description, instead of being mere exercises in clever phrasing, depend upon the use of the visualizing imagination.

But in spite of this recognition of the true method, and in spite of his ability later in the "Nun's Priest's Tale" to parody the whole apparatus of medieval rhetoric, Chaucer did not free himself at once—and perhaps never entirely—of the idea that writing which pretended to seriousness and elevated thought was improved by the presence of apostrophes and *sententiae* and *exempla*, as he had been taught by the rhetoricians. Nor could it be expected that he should. The whole weight of the medieval conception of literature was against him—the conception, I mean, that literature, like history, is of value only in so far as it can be profitably applied to the conduct of human life, a conception which not only remained in full vigour through the Middle Ages and the period we are accustomed to call the Renaissance, but even now lies at the basis of much critical theory.

Chaucer's greatness arose from his growing recognition that for him at least the right way to amplify a story was not to expand it by rhetorical devices, but to conceive it in terms of the life which he had observed so closely, to imagine how each of the characters thought and felt, and to report how in this imaginative vision they looked and acted. And if he felt obliged, as apparently he still did, in writings of serious and lofty tone, to supply *sententiae*, proverbs, *exempla*, and other fruits of erudition, he came more and more to make only a dramatic use of these rhetorical elements, that is, to put them into the mouths of his *dramatis personae* and to use only such as might fittingly be uttered by them.

It is this dramatic use of rhetorical devices which we must learn to recognize in the later and more artistic poems, and which must be taken into account in our examination of the percentages of rhetoric in the separate tales of the Canterbury pilgrimage. The mere fact that the percentage in two such masterpieces of narrative art as

the tales of the "Nun's Priest" and the "Wife of Bath" is nearly twice as great as in the less successful tales of the "Man of Law" and the "Doctor" would be very misleading, if taken without further investigation. But the difference in manner of introduction and use appears immediately and is of fundamental significance. In the tales of the "Doctor" and the "Man of Law" the rhetoric is prevailing, indeed almost exclusively, used by the narrator; that is, it is not incorporated and used dramatically but stands apart from the tale. There is even a difference between the "Doctor's Tale" and that of the "Man of Law" in manner of handling. In the "Man of Law's Tale" the narrative is, for the most part, broken into comparatively brief sections and the rhetoric of the narrator is freely interspersed in the forms of *apostrophe*, *exclamatio*, *collatio*, *sententiae*, and *exempla*, with various digressions on astrology. In the "Doctor's Tale," on the other hand, the narrative comes in a solid block of 172 lines, preceded by 109 lines, all but 39 of which are purely rhetorical utterances of the narrator, and followed by 10 lines of rhetorical application. But both stories are, as artistic compositions, pretty crude and show no fusion of rhetorical elements. In the tales of the "Nun's Priest" and the "Wife of Bath" the situation is very different. In the "Nun's Priest's Tale," although the rhetoric is scattered through the narrative as in the "Man of Law's Tale," it is not the external comment of the narrator but the vitally dramatized utterance of speakers whose actions, and attitudes, and sentiments we accept as belonging to a world of poetic reality. In the "Wife of Bath's Tale" there are two main masses of rhetorical devices: one of them is the famous oration on 'gentillesse', poverty, and age uttered by the Fairy Wife to her humbled husband, the other is the long *exemplum* on woman's inability to keep a secret, uttered by the garrulous Wife of Bath herself. But in the latter instance no less than in the former the rhetoric is dramatic, is conformed to the character, and is motivated.

The tales of the "Prioress" and the "Second Nun" differ very slightly in percentage of rhetorical devices or in the placing of them. If we could isolate the tales—disconnect them from their narrators and the circumstances of their telling—we should probably agree that they show the same style of workmanship and may belong to the same period, a comparatively early one. But the difference between them in effect is very great. Why is this? Apart from the mere difference in appeal of the material of the two stories, is it not because in the one tale Chaucer has failed to visualize or to make his readers see the principal characters—Cecilia, Valerian, and Pope Urban remain to him and to us mere names—whereas both he and we have a vivid and charming picture of the little choir boy as he goes singing to his death? Is it not also because through some freak of chance the Second Nun herself is a mere name in the "Prologue" and is not mentioned at all in the pilgrimage, whereas both by the portrait in the "Prologue" and by the little episode of conversation with the Host the Prioress is endowed with lasting beauty and sympathetic appeal? Chaucer himself seems to have felt this. When the Prioress's tale is ended he tells us of its profound effect upon the whole party including himself; after the other tale he says, drily,

When toold was al the lif of Seint Cecile  
Er we had ridden fully fyve mile,

we were overtaken by two men.

The tales of the "Franklin" and the "Merchant" differ only slightly in percentage of rhetorical devices from those of the "Prioress" and the "Second Nun," but in the placing and handling of these devices, as well as in other respects, they seem to belong to a much later period of Chaucer's workmanship. The *dramatis personae* are vividly conceived and the action is clearly visualized. Both tales show, however, the persistence of the rhetorical habit and training. In the "Merchant's Tale" most of the rhetoric is introduced dramatically as forming the speeches of January and his advisers, but there is a long undramatic passage—inappropriate either to the Merchant or to the clerical narrator for whom the tale appears to have been originally composed. In the "Franklin's Tale" a fine story finely told is nearly spoiled by one hundred lines of rhetorical *exempla*. The fact that they are put into the mouth of Dorigen in her complaint against Fortune indicates that Chaucer was trying to motivate them dramatically. But what reader, modern or medieval, would not have been more powerfully and sympathetically affected if Chaucer, with the psychological insight displayed in *Troilus and Criseyde*, had caused his distressed and desperate heroine to express the real feelings appropriate to her character and situation?

It may be noted that the tales showing a low percentage of formal rhetorical devices are, with a single exception, humorous tales and all are tales which on other grounds are regarded as of late date. The exception is the "Clerk's Tale," a pretty close translation from Petrarch. The small amount of rhetoric added by Chaucer in making this translation from Petrarch is in curious contrast to the large amount added in translating the "Man of Law's Tale" from Trivet. Can it be that his rivalry with Gower in the latter case was responsible for the rhetoric?

The absence of rhetorical devices from the humorous tales may be due in part to the specific declaration of the rhetoricians that rhetorical ornament of all sorts should be strictly excluded from such tales. But surely Chaucer's growing power of artistry, his vast observation of life, and his newly devised method of imaginative reconstruction of the scenes; characters, and events of his stories gave him such a wealth of significant detail that there was no need and no space for the older methods of amplification. *Sententiae* are reduced to single lines, mostly proverbs; *exempla* to passing allusions; apostrophes and exclamations to the briefest of utterances. For it is not only in the humorous tales that his advanced method is seen in the "Tale" of the three roysters who sought Death, is as vividly imagined as the tales of the Miller and the Reeve, and the long passages of rhetoric, placed between the opening twenty lines, which so wonderfully create background and atmosphere, and the narrative itself, are thoroughly explained and justified by their function as part of the Pardoner's sermon.

The survey we have made of Chaucer's work, hasty as it has necessarily been, has, I think, shown that he began his career, not merely as a disciple and imitator of a thoroughly artificial school of writing, but as a conscious exploiter of the formal rhetoric taught by the professional rhetoricians, and that it was only gradually and as the result of much thought and experiment that he replaced the conventional methods of rhetorical elaboration by those processes of imaginative construction which give his best work so high a rank in English literature. To treat his poems as if they all belonged to the same stage of artistic development and represented the same ideals of art is to repeat the error so long perpetrated by students of Shakespeare.

**John Livingston Lowes (lecture date 1930)**

SOURCE: "The Art of Geoffrey Chaucer," in *Proceedings of the British Academy*, Oxford University Press, 1930, pp. 297-326.

[Lowes is noted for his essays and lectures on poetry and is the author of *Geoffrey Chaucer and the Development of His Genius*. In the following excerpt from one of his published lectures, Lowes provides cultural, biographical, and literary sources for Chaucer's works.]

My subject, as I have announced it, is a theme for a volume, but titles can seldom be brief and specific at once. I mean to limit myself to an attempt to answer—and that but in part—a single question: What, aside from genius, made the poet of the greater *Canterbury Tales*? How, in a word, did he master a technique at its height so consummate that it often seems not to be art at all, but the effortless play of nature? And by what various roads did he travel in passing from his earlier to his later themes? That twofold evolution, of technique and subject matter, is singularly rich in human as well as literary interest, and it is worth the effort to reconstruct, as far as possible, its processes.

One of the glories of English poetry has been the interpenetration in it of personal experience—call it for brevity life, if you will—and of books. Through the one, poetry acquires its stamp of individuality; through the other it is dipped in the quickening stream of tradition which has flowed through the work of all the poets from Homer and pre-Homeric days until now. The continuity of poetry, through its participation in that deep and perpetually broadening current, is a fact perhaps more important than the newness of the channels through which from time to time it flows. The greatest poetry is, indeed, steeped in the poet's own experience and coloured by the life of his times. But it also participates in a succession almost apostolic, in which there is an authentic if incorporeal laying on of hands:

Go, litel book . . .  
 . . . no making thou n'envye,  
 But subgit be to alle poesye;

And kis the steppes, wher-as thou seest pace  
 Virgile, Ovyde, Omer, Lucan, and Stace.

That is from the close of a masterpiece which is at once sheer Chaucer and an embodiment of the tradition of the elders from Homer through the Middle Ages to a contemporary fellow poet, Boccaccio; and I suspect that no one in the long and splendid line of English poets more strikingly exemplifies than Geoffrey Chaucer the characteristic interplay, in great verse, of life and books. For he was, on the one hand, a widely experienced, busy, and versatile man of affairs, and he was also one of the most omnivorous readers in that company of glorious literary cormorants who have enriched English letters. Had he been either without the other—had there been lacking either the immediate and manifold contacts with life, or the zest of a *helluo librorum*—he would doubtless still have been a poet. But in that case not one of the poems by which he is known could even remotely have been what it is. Let me, then, rehearse as necessary background, even at the risk of seeming for the moment to abandon poetry, a few of the familiar facts.

No other English poet, in the first place, has approached Chaucer in the breadth and variety of his immediate, personal experience of life. For no other English poet—to pack a lifetime into a list—was a page in a royal household and for years Yeoman or Esquire at Court; was captured while in military service, and then ransomed by the King; was sent to Flanders, France, and Italy on half a dozen delicate and important diplomatic missions, involving royal marriages, commercial treaties, and treaties of peace; was Controller of the Customs and Subsidy of wools, hides, and wool-fells, and also Controller of Petty Customs, in the port of London; was Justice of the Peace, and member of Parliament; Clerk of the King's Works, with exacting duties and wide powers, at Westminster Palace, the Tower of London, the Castle of Berkhamstead, and at seven of the royal manors, with their gardens, mill-ponds, and fences; Surveyor, again with large authority, of walls, ditches, gutters, sewers, bridges, causeways, et cetera, along the Thames between Greenwich and Woolwich; Clerk of the Works at Windsor; Sub-Forester, and later Forester, in control of the great royal forest domain of Petherton in Somerset; and in the intervals holder of important wardships, and associated in the management of great estates. And finally, not to omit the element of adventure, it may be doubted if there was ever another English poet who was twice robbed by highwaymen within three days. I have crammed into a catalogue, for the sake of their cumulative impact, the facts which everybody knows, but which we habitually contemplate piecemeal. And the active search still going on in the Records Office is bringing to light from time to time new items which further diversify the list. Had Chaucer never written a line of poetry, he would still have been known to his contemporaries as a trusted and capable public servant and a many-sided man of affairs.

What that rich experience meant for his art is for us the essential thing. But what it might have meant to it and by the grace of Heaven did not, it is neither irrelevant nor



uninstructive to observe. Chaucer's French contemporary, Eustache Deschamps, who sent him a famous poetical epistle and who will meet us later, also led an active and a semipublic life, and into his twelve hundred *balades*, his one hundred and seventy-one *rondeaux*, his eighteen *virelais*, his fifteen *lais*, which nobody ever reads any more except as documents, he poured on occasion the minute and personal details of his variegated career—dates and places meticulously noted; incidents of his campaigns in Flanders; the racy interchange of bilingual amenities with two Englishmen as he and Othon de Graunson (Chaucer's 'flour of hem that make in Fraunce') one day rode through Calais; the fleas at the inn that night; his personal ailments; his distaste for tripe and truffles. Now Chaucer had at his fingers' ends more such themes for verse than ever Deschamps dreamed. Read sometime, for its equally sinister possibilities, the inventory in the *Life Records* which Chaucer turned in when he resigned the Clerkship of the Works—pages on pages of rakes, ladles, crowbars, hurdles for scaffolds—one remembers how 'joly Absalon', the parish clerk, played Herod 'on a scaffold hye'—, andirons innumerable, a broken cable ('frangitur et devastatur'), images made in the likeness of kings, '100 round stones called engynstones', bottles, buckets, and (from the Tower of London of all places) a frying-pan. And there were also the sewers and the gutters and the ditches. What use Deschamps would have made of such opportunities does not admit of contemplation. But only once that I can recall in the whole wide range of his poetry does Chaucer give even a hint of his participation in affairs. It was in another and a different fashion that his extraordinarily varied experience played into the hands of his art. And if in what follows I may seem for a time to have wholly forgotten that art, I can only ask you to believe that I have not.

What that experience gave to Chaucer was, of course, first of all an opportunity almost unrivalled for wide and intimate knowledge of almost every sort of actor in the human comedy. We are apt to forget in thinking of him the remarkable range of his acquaintance with men and women in virtually every station, rank, and occupation of the diversified society in which he lived. He was a member of the household, first of a prince of the blood and then of a king, and through his marriage belonged to the circle of John of Gaunt and Henry of Derby. He counted among his acquaintances and friends great nobles and knights who had travelled far, and fought in all quarters of the known world. On his missions abroad he was associated with men of wide experience and influence in State affairs; met in France and Flanders statesmen versed in diplomacy; and matched his wits in Italy with Bernabò Visconti—'God of delyt, and scourge of Lumbardy', as he called him when the message reached him of his sudden end. The very first record that we have of him contains a reference to a visit of Prince Lionel and the Countess of Ulster, on whom he was then in attendance, to the Benedictine Nunnery of St. Leonards, at the Prioress's Stratford atte Bowe, and from then to the close of his life he had intimate knowledge in a score of ways—through members of his own family, connexions by marriage, and the infinite ramifications of the Church's influence upon affairs—

of ecclesiastics of every feather. With men of law he came, through various exigencies, into close relations, and there is reason to think that he may himself have been a member of Lincoln's Inn. He had business dealings for years with merchants and shipmen, and through his Clerkships of the Works and his Surveyorships, with masons and carpenters and hedgers and ditchers and unskilled labour of every sort. And how closely his relations with the tradesmen and the craftsmen of the guilds were bound up with his own political career, Professor Kuhl years ago made clear. Now and then one gets a glimpse of that rare and precious thing a concrete incident, as when one sees him (in that record which Miss Rickert turned up a year or so ago) going down from the Customs to Dartmouth about a Genoese tarit, the 'Saint Mary and Saint George'—its master one Johannes deNigris of Genoa—which had been driven ashore on the coast of Brittany, and which John Hawley, then Mayor of Dartmouth, was charged with robbing. And one of Hawley's ships was called the 'Maudelayne', and Chaucer had the trick of turning official business to good poetic account. There are still vast uncharted regions of the Public Records to explore, but Professor Manly's recent studies of them have given as never before—whether or not we grant this or that tentative conclusion—flesh and blood and sometimes local habitation to the sergeants of law, the merchants, franklins and shipmen, the millers and weavers, the archdeacons, canons, summoners, friars, pardoners, prioresses and nuns, whom Chaucer first knew for his day and then bequeathed to eternity.

But this wide range of his experience carries with it another consequence. We need constantly to remind ourselves of the degree to which in Chaucer's day communication had to be by word of mouth. And so the people whom he knew were also channels through which came to him news of his world—news not only of that 'little world' which to Shakespeare's John of Gaunt was England; not only, either, of that 'queasy world' (in Margaret Paston's vivid phrase) across the Channel; but also of that now looming, menacing, always mysterious world beyond, which was the Orient. And few men have ever been more strategically placed for its reception. That news of England or Wales or even Ireland should so reach him is too obvious to dwell on, fascinating as is the use he makes of it. How, for example, did he get to know of that 'Colle tregetour'—Colin the magician—whom he saw in his dream in the *House of Fame*?

Ther saugh I Colle tregetour  
Upon a table of sicamour  
Pleye an uncouth thing to telle;  
I saugh him carien a wind-melle  
Under a walsh-note shelle.

But Colle was actually no piquant figure in a dream. He was, as we now know, thanks to Professor Royster, a contemporary Englishman, and he later exhibited his tricks, 'par voie de nigromancie', at Orleans, precisely as the Clerk of Orleans in the "Franklin's Tale" produced his illusions, 'Swiche as thise subtile tregetoures playe'. And Chaucer's apposite choice of Orleans as the school of his

own magician is not without interest. How, too (to draw on the *House of Fame* again), did he get to know of Bret Glascurion and of Celtic wicker houses? Did that Welsh vintner of London tell him—Lewis Johan, who was at least a friend of Chaucer once removed; or did Sir Lewis Clifford or Sir John Clanvowe, both close friends of his, and both of whom held offices in Wales? Who can say! Chaucer's London was his own vast House of Rumour, only on a smaller scale.

But men, among them scores whom Chaucer knew, were constantly going out of England and coming back to it—going out for reasons of war, or trade, or chivalry, or religion, and coming back along the trade routes and the pilgrim roads and from their military exploits, with stories, and tidings, and even manuscripts, as well as with stuffs, or spices, or cockle-shells, or battered arms. And such knights as the stately figure of the Prologue were among the great intermediaries between Chaucer's England and the rest of the world. Europe was being menaced from three directions at once. We sometimes forget that Tamerlane's life just overlapped Chaucer's at each end, and that it was in the year in which Chaucer was appointed Justice of the Peace that the Great Turk boasted that he would make his horse eat oats on the high altar of St. Peter's. And Chaucer's Knight had fought in Europe, Asia, and Africa against the Moors, the Turks, the Tartars and the heathen of the North—in Turkey, Spain, Prussia, Lithuania (then a Tartar outpost) and Russia, and also with 'that valorous champion of impossible conquests', Pierre de Lusignan, King of Cyprus, at the taking of Alexandria, and at Lyeys and Satalye. And the knight was a composite portrait of men whom Chaucer personally knew. Of the witnesses (to give a single instance) who testified with Chaucer in the Scrope-Grosvenor case, Nicholas Sambraham, Esquire, had seen Sir Stephen Scrope at the taking of Alexandria, and in Hungary, Prussia, and Constantinople, and had seen Sir Henry Scrope in Spain, and, as he says, 'beyond the great sea in many places and in many chivalrous exploits.' Sir Richard Waldegrave had seen Sir William Scrope with the King of Cyprus at Satalye in Turkey; and Sir Henry de Ferrers and John de Rither, Esquire, had seen Sir Geoffrey Scrope in Prussia and Lithuania. And these half-dozen names we know through the accident of a dispute about the bearing of certain arms. There are more, but these are enough to show that the campaigns of Chaucer's Knight were the campaigns of Chaucer's acquaintances and friends. And they, like the Knight, had been associated with fellow knights of all the other nations which, with England, were making common cause against a common foe. And such stories as circulated about those Tables of Honour, like that at the head of which the Knight had often sat 'aboven alle naciouns in Pruce,' and tales of that gallant and meteoric figure, the King of Cyprus, whose death Chaucer bewailed 'in maner of Tragedie,' and of tournaments at Tramissene and sea-fights off the coasts of Africa and Asia Minor—such stories a score of Chaucer's friends could tell. For warfare was a more leisured business then than now—witness the Barbary expedition, of which Chaucer's friends Sir Lewis Clifford and Sir John Clanvowe were members, during which warlike expedition the gay and amorous *Cent Balades*

were composed. And finally—to come closer home—it was to a meeting in France, during a pause in the Hundred Years' War, between this same friend Sir Lewis Clifford and Eustache Deschamps, that there came to Chaucer the manuscript which suggested his best-known passage outside the *Canterbury Tales*; as it was through a later meeting between the same two men, during the negotiations for a truce, that Chaucer received another manuscript which gave him rich material for the most famous portrait in the *Tales* themselves.

Chivalry, too, played its curious part. Don Quixote, Professor Ker once observed with chapter and verse, would have been perfectly at home with the Knights and Squires of Chaucer's day, and would not have been thought extravagant in either principles or practice. And with that dictum no student of the period will disagree. And so young Squires who, like Machaut's and Chaucer's, bore them well in arms 'in hope to stonden in [hir] lady grace', were still being sent by their ladies to win further grace, 'in-to Walakye, To Pruyse and in-to Tartarye, To Alisaundre, ne in-to Turkye', and finally charged, for the crowning exploit, to 'Go hoodles to the drye see, And come hoom by the Carrenar'. And that last injunction is a singularly apposite case in point. For we now know, as Sir Aurel Stein's latest maps and photographs at last unmistakably show, that an actual Kara-nor, or Black Lake, lies a short stone's throw from Marco Polo's highway, in the heart of Central Asia, beyond the dry, salt-incrusted bed of an ancient inland sea. And through some merchant or other this bit of flotsam and jetsam had probably drifted back along the silk routes, perhaps through Lyeys, where the Knight had fought, along with who can tell what tales of Tartary, such as that which the Squire himself was to rehearse.

For merchants, with pilgrims and shipmen, were also recognized bearers of news, and as such Chaucer, on whose own testimony I am drawing, knew them well. 'Ye ben fadres of tydinges Andtales,' exclaims the Man of Law in his apostrophe to merchants; 'Tydings of sondry regnes' he goes on, and of 'the wondres that they mighte seen or here.' And it was a merchant, he declares, who years ago told him the very tale he tells—a story which begins in Syria and wanders by way of the Pillars of Hercules to England, and back by the strait to Italy. For England, like all of Europe, was full of tales—tales which through centuries had travelled by mysterious routes from Arabia and Hindostan and Burma and Tibet and Turkey and Siberia—narratives ageless and timeless, with no abiding place; rubbed smooth in their endless passings, like pebbles rounded by the waves, or Chinese carvings polished by uncounted generations, of hands. Nor was it only merchants along the trade routes who were their vehicles. Chaucer's House of Rumour 'Was ful of shipmen and pilgrymes, With scrippes bret-ful of lesinges, Entremedled with tydinges.' And pilgrims like that notable wayfarer the Wife of Bath, who had thrice been at Jerusalem, and 'had passed many a straunge stream,' were visiting 'ferne halwes, couthe in sondry londes,' and coming back, like the merchants, with multifarious information, false and true. It was along the pilgrim roads, as we now well

know, that the stories of Charlemagne and Roland and the twelve peers of France passed over the Alps into Italy. And pilgrims told their tales, and Chaucer was a marvellous listener. His Dartmouth shipman, too, whose own harbour was one of the English ports for ships from the Orient, knew 'alle the havenes, as they were, From Gootlond to the cape of Finistere, And every cryke in Britayne and in Spayne.' And Gothland, with the other havens at which he and his fellows touched, was connected through the Hanseatic trade with Novgorod, and Novgorod, like the ports in Asia Minor where Chaucer's friends had fought, had been for hundreds of years a terminus of those ancient Eastern trade-routes along which had travelled, with the merchants and the shipmen, tales like those which underlie the *fabliaux* and a dozen of the stories which the Canterbury pilgrims tell. And Chaucer sat at the receipt of custom in the port of London, 'at the quay called Woolwharf in the Tower Ward.' And the man who, between nightfall and bedtime, had spoken with every one of the nine and twenty pilgrims at the Tabard Inn was not the man to refrain from incidental conversation with the mariners whose lawful occasions brought them to his quay.

How this or that particular tale or bit of information came to Chaucer, it is far from my present purpose to inquire. He was at the centre of a rich and varied and shifting world, and in ways without number, of which these are bare suggestions, his personal and official experience lent material to his art. And there were also books.

The range of Chaucer's reading is as extraordinary as the scope of his activities. He read in three languages besides English—French, Latin, and Italian. French he probably both knew and spoke from his childhood. Latin with little doubt he learned at school. It has hitherto been assumed that he picked up Italian in Italy, during his first visit in 1372-3. It is possible, though not yet proven, that he may have known it earlier. But in either case, the bulk of his known reading, until the great Italians swam into his ken, was French, with a good deal of Latin besides. And French he never abandoned, and Latin he read copiously to the end. The French and Italian works which he knew may best for our purpose be considered later. His wide and diversified reading of Latin, however, is both typical of his varied interests and important for its contributions, and I shall rapidly summarize it here.

Of the classics he knew in the original Ovid, especially the *Metamorphoses* (his 'owne book', as he called it), and the *Heroides*. Virgil he knew, but apparently only the *Aeneid*; the *Thebaid* of Statius; Claudian; and either in Latin or French or both, the *Pharsalia*. Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis* he read in a copy of the commentary of Macrobius which he or somebody else had thumbed to pieces—'myn olde book to-torn,' as he refers to it. Horace he quotes half a dozen times, but I doubt whether he knew either Horace or Juvenal at first hand. Dante, or John of Salisbury, or the *florilegia* may well have been intermediaries. But for Virgil, Statius, and Lucan, and also for Ovid, he had two strings to his bow. For the Middle Ages seized upon the Latin epics and made them over into their own likeness as romances. . . .

His reading in the science of his day is in some respects, I am inclined to think, the most remarkable of all. His singularly broad yet minute knowledge of medieval medicine, in which he anticipated Burton, I have elsewhere had occasion to discuss. But far more than his acquaintance with 'the lovers maladye of Hereos' is in point. Fourteenth-century medicine, like its twentieth-century descendant, was half psychology, and in its emphasis on dreams as a means of diagnosis anticipated Freud. And Madame Pertelote's diagnosis, by means of his dream, of Chauntecleer's malady, as well as her inimitable discourse on dreams as symptoms, is scientifically accurate. So is her *materia medica*. The herbs which she prescribes—'Pekke hem up right as they growe, and ete hem in'—are the medically proper herbs. And the quintessential touch is her inclusion in Chauntecleer's dietary of 'wormes' for 'a day or two.' For worms—you may read a learned and matter-of-fact chapter on *Vermes terrena*e in the *Medica Materia* of Dioscorides—were among the recognized correctives. It is easy enough to slip into one's narrative as evidence of erudition an excerpt from some learned document. But such casual exactness, imbued with delicious humour to boot, is not something which one gets up overnight. In alchemy—witness the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale"—Chaucer was no less deeply grounded than in medicine. He had read enough in the alchemical treatises of Arnoldus de Villanova, for example, his 'Arnold of the Newe Toun,' to refer to one of Arnold's treatises a highly picturesque and abstruse dictum which he quotes, when he had actually read it in another. As for physics, one of the very best pieces of exposition, as exposition, which I know in English is the erudite Eagle's discourse in the House of Fame on the transmission of sound, and that again is founded on accepted authority. So is Chaucer's astrology, and in astronomy proper he could point with just pride to that Treatise on the Astrolabe which he wrote, with its charming Preface, for his 'litel son Lowis', using freely a Latin translation of the Arabian astronomer Messahala. These are the barest shreds and patches only. The scope and thoroughness of Chaucer's scientific reading would still be remarkable, had he read nothing else.

There, then, are the raw materials of his art—men and their doings, and books—God's plenty of each, in all conscience. And since he began with books (with which, to be sure, he never ended) it is much to the point to consider how he read. Did he have the books on our list, for example, in his own possession, and therefore ready at hand for pleasure or need? Without question a large, perhaps a very large proportion of them were his own. He declared, fairly late in his life—or rather, the God of Love asserted for him—that he had in his chest 'sixty bokes, olde and newe,' and there is no reason to doubt the statement. But that number may easily have represented three or four times sixty 'books,' in the sense in which we use the word. For book, as Chaucer employs the term, must be thought of in the light of medieval manuscripts, and a single manuscript was often a small library in itself. The 'boke' which Chaucer was reading when he fell asleep over the tale of Ceyx and Alcyone was an *omnium gatherum* of verse, and lives of queens and kings, and 'many othere thinges smale.' The 'book' (and again the word is the

same) which the Wife of Bath's fifth husband revelled in contained, she declared, *Valerius ad Rufinum*, Theophrastus, Jerome against Jovinian, Tertullian, the mysterious Crisippus, Trotula, the Epistles of Eloise, the Parables of Solomon, and the *Ars Amatoria*—'And alle these were bounden in o volume'. And one need only recall, among extant examples, the Auchinleck MS., with its more than forty separate pieces, or, for that matter, Harley 7333 among the manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer's library was a rich one for his day, and like his own clerk of Oxford who had 'at his beddes heed' his 'Twenty bokes, clad in blak or reed', and like that clerk of another kidney, 'hende Nicholas,' who likewise kept in his lodgings 'his Almageste, and bokes grete and smale . . . On shelves couched at his beddes heed', one may be fairly sure that Chaucer's sixty books were not far from his hand.

But is there any way of knowing, aside from these more or less material considerations, how he actually read? There are two subjects, and two only, on which Chaucer vouchsafes us personal information about himself—his love of books, and his imperviousness, real or assumed, to love. On those two topics he is, in William Wordsworth's phrase but with a difference, 'right voluble.' And two passages are especially in point. In one, that preternaturally intelligent bird, the Eagle of the *House of Fame*, gently chides him for his habits. He knows nothing now, says the Eagle, of what is going on about him; even 'of thy verray neyghebores That dwellen almost at thy dores, Thou herest neither that ne this.' And then follows, under cover of the Eagle's irresponsible loquacity, the most precious autobiographical touch that Chaucer left:

For whan thy labour doon al is,  
And hast y-maad thy rekeninges,  
In stede of reste and nove thinges,  
Thou gost hoom to thy hous anoon;  
And, also domb as any stoon,  
Thou sittest at another boke,  
Til fully daswed is thy lere,  
And livest thus as an hermyte,  
Although thyn abstinence is lyte.

That picture—the account books of the customs exchanged after hours for vastly different books (the Eagle's 'another' is pregnant), and Chaucer reading on, oblivious of all else, until his eyes dazzle in his head—that picture tells more than pages, not merely of the intimate relation in which his books stood to his business, but also of the absorbed intentness with which he read. And there is another passage which illuminates yet another quality of his reading. 'Not yore agon,' he writes in the *Parlement of Foules*,

. . . hit happed me for to beholde  
Upon a boke, was write with lettres olde;  
And ther-upon, a certeyn thing to lerne,  
The longe day ful faste I radde and yerne.

I do not know which is the more characteristic of Chaucer—the fact that he was reading with the definite purpose of learning a certain thing, or the fact that he was reading

fast and eagerly. The two belong together. You cannot divide his invincible zest from his incorrigibly inquiring spirit—that 'besy gost' of his, as he called it once, 'that thrusteth alwey newe.' And because he brought both to his books, his reading became a live and plastic thing for his art to seize on.

He was gifted, finally, with another quality of mind which is peculiarly bound up with his art. He possessed, in a word, like Virgil and Milton and Coleridge, a powerfully associative memory, which played, as he read, over the multitude of impressions from previous reading, with which his mind was stored. And the zest with which he read gave freshness to his recollections, and one can sometimes almost see the hovering associations precipitate themselves as he reads. A single phrase in Boccaccio (and I am speaking by the book) calls up the lines of a famous passage in Dante in which the same phrase occurs, and the result is a *tertium quid* of his own, enriched from the spoils of both. He finds in Boccaccio's *Filostrato*, as he works it over into his own Troilus, the lovely Virgilian simile of the lily cut by the plough and withering. But Dante, in a canto of the *Inferno*, the opening lines of which Chaucer elsewhere quotes, has a simile of falling, withering leaves. And again, through a common element, Boccaccio's lines recall the lines of Dante, and the falling leaves replace the fading lily in Chaucer's simile. And Boccaccio and Dante in turn had each in like fashion recalled his simile from Virgil. It would be easy to rehearse such instances by the score—instances, too, in which with his reminiscences of books are interwoven his recollections of experience. For that continuity of poetry of which I spoke consists in the perpetual enrichment, through just such incremental transformations, of the present through the past. And one of the happiest gifts of the gods to English poetry, at the strategic moment of its history, was that prehensile, amalgamating memory of Chaucer's which had for its playground the prodigious array of promiscuous writings which a moment ago I ruthlessly catalogued.

What now of his art in its larger relations? For everything that I have so far said has been said with that definitely in view. It is perilous, in the first place, to divide Chaucer's poetic biography mechanically into periods. There was nothing cataclysmic about his development. He was not a new creature, as Professor Kittredge once observed, when he came back to London from his first visit to Italy, nor does the poet of the *Canterbury Tales* startle us by a 'leap of buds into ripe flowers.' Rather—if I too may yield to an association—'Morn into noon did pass, noon into eve.' Transitions there were, of course, but they were gradual. French poetry yielded first place to Italian, and both to an absorption in human life, in which books and men were fused as in a crucible. But even after his momentous discovery of Boccaccio and Dante, the influence of French poetry went on, though its character changed—changed (to put it briefly) from the mood of Guillaume de Lorris and Machaut to the mood of Jean de Meun and Deschamps and the *fabliaux*. And *pari passu*, as his powers developed, there came a significant shift of values, and his reading of books played a lesser and his reading of

life a larger role in his art. But throughout his career, that art kept curiously even pace with his active life. It was dominantly French while he was in personal attendance on a court where French was still the more familiar language. His so-called Italian period, which was never Italian in the sense in which the earlier period had been French, coincided roughly with those activities—his missions and the customs—which brought him into various relations with Italy, Italians, and Italian letters. And when his broadening affairs afforded wider opportunities for observation, his art, keeping all that it had won from France and Italy, became at once English and universal.

Everybody knows that Chaucer began as a follower of the contemporary French school of poetry, and that the most powerful influence upon that school was the thirteenth-century *Roman de la Rose*. But the *Roman de la Rose* was influential in two entirely different ways. Guillaume de Lorris, who began it, was a dreamer of dreams and a poet of exquisite grace and charm. Jean de Meun, who continued it and multiplied its length by five, was a caustic and disillusioned satirist, trenchant, arrogant, and absolute master of a mordant pen. If Pope had taken it into his head to complete the *Faerie Queene*, or if Swift had been seized by the fancy of carrying on the *Vicar of Wakefield* in the mood of Gulliver's fierce misanthropy, we might have had an adequate parallel. And the fourteenth-century French poets, as a consequence of this strange duplex authorship, fall roughly into two schools—the sons of Guillaume de Lorris and the sons of Jean de Meun. But common to them all, and giving the framework to half their verse, was the allegorical love vision.

The contemporary Frenchmen whose influence on Chaucer was farthest reaching were three: Guillaume de Machaut, an elder contemporary; Jean Froissart, his coeval; and Eustache Deschamps, who was younger. . . .

For he found in his French models, and especially in Machaut, the framework of the vision, as that had come down, with growing elaboration on the way, from Guillaume de Lorris. And he used the machinery of the vision in the *Book of the Duchess*, the *House of Fame*, the *Parliament of Fowls*, and in the first version of the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*. It was the most popular and, in Machaut's expert hands, the most sophisticated device of his day, and Chaucer was then writing for a sophisticated audience. But the visions were allegorical love visions, and as such they were thick sown with artifices at which Chaucer balked. And the more thoroughly one is steeped in Chaucer, so that one sees in a measure with his eyes, the more readily one understands the impossibility of his acquiescence in the then current artificialities of the *genre*. The framework of the vision, to be sure, offered freedom in both choice and disposition of subject matter. But it was precisely in the character of the French subject matter, to judge from the cold shoulder which Chaucer turned to it, that one source of his disrelish lay. For it was obviously as barren of interest to Geoffrey Chaucer as interminable subtilizings about love—especially when nothing comes of them—have been and are to any normally constituted Anglo-Saxon. Moreover, the

visions are thickly peopled with personified abstractions. Esperance, Attemprance, Mesure, Douce Pensée, Plaisance, Desirs, Franchise, Pité, Loyauté, Espoirs, Raison, Suffisance, Patience, Paour—those are the denizens of less than half of Machaut's *Remede de Fortune*. Like Criseyde listening under trying circumstances to the 'wommanissh things' of her feminine callers, Chaucer must have 'felte almost [his] herte dye For wo, and wery of that companye.' Nor was it subject matter alone which he found alien. The phraseology, too, was remote alike from his tastes and his aptitudes. There is nothing I know which rivals in its tireless facility of recurrence the later vocabulary of courtly love. If one read long enough, one is obsessed by the uncanny feeling that the phraseology walks alone, without need of the poet's intervention, and carries the poet with it of its own momentum. Specific meaning disappears. Machaut's Peronne, in that amazing Goethe-and-Bettina correspondence, the *Voir-Dit*, is 'en douceur douce com coulombelle, En loyauté loyal com turturelle.' But the same columbine phrases slip from his pen, when, in *Prise d'Alexandrie*, he describes the Emperor Charles I of Luxembourg. He too, like Peronne, is 'humbles et piteus Plus que turtre ne colombele.' In that ineffably affected jargon discriminations vanish. 'Thought and affliction, passion, hell itself, [are turned] to favour and to prettiness.' And that was not Chaucer's way.

What he found, then, in the French vision poems, was a *frame*—a frame which possessed admirable potentialities, but which for him, to all intents and purposes, was empty. And Chaucer, who in his way was not unlike Nature herself, abhorred a vacuum. He proceeded, accordingly, to fill the frame, and incidentally to set one of the great traditions of English poetry. And into the vision framework, instead of consecrated phrases, wire-drawn subtleties, *ragionamente d'amore*, and the more fantastic elements of the courtly code, he poured the stores of that reading and observation on which we have dwelt so long. 'For out of olde felde'—and this was his discovery, as 'the longe day ful faste [he] radde and yerne'—

For out of olde felde, as man seith,  
Cometh al this newe corn fro yeer to yeer;  
And out of olde bokes, in good feith,  
Cometh al this newe science that men lere.

And into the old bottles Chaucer poured with lavish hand  
a new and heady wine.

What happened may best be seen by a glance at his first three vision poems. His earliest essay, the *Book of the Duchess*, was made before he went to Italy, when his reading was almost wholly French, and when Machaut in particular was at his finger tips. It is a vision poem, with all the paraphernalia of the *genre*, and it is also an elegy—an elegy on the death of the Duchess Blanche, the first wife of his patron, John of Gaunt. But into the conventional frame he fits, with tact and feeling, and with conspicuous skill in adapting them to his ends, materials drawn from what was then his reading—to wit, in this instance, from no less than eight of Machaut's poems and one (at least) of Froissart's. Save for scattered reminiscences of

the Bible, the *Roman de la Rose*, Boethius, and Benoit, there is little else. His instinct from the beginning was to enrich, and those were the stores which he then possessed. But his borrowings are interwoven with such art that for more than five hundred years nobody suspected that the poem was not all of a piece. And even when his appropriations are most unmistakable, they are still miraculously Chaucer and not Machaut. The little whelp that came creeping up, as if it knew him, to the Dreamer, and 'Hild doun his heed and joynded his eres, And leyde al smothe doun his heres'—that bewitching English puppy is Chaucer's metamorphosis of a fantastic lion, which Carpaccio would have revelled in, native to the bizarre landscape of the *Dit dou Lyon* of Machaut. And into his version of Machaut's catalogue of those remote regions to which the courtly lovers were dispatched to win their spurs, Chaucer has slipped that precious bit of hearsay about the Dry Sea and the Carrenar. The Book of the Duchess is not a masterpiece, but it is significant far beyond its intrinsic merit. For in it for the first time, with the still limited resources at his command, Chaucer loaded every rift with ore. And now the ore grew steadily richer.

For Chaucer went to Italy, and learned to read Boccaccio and Dante, and all the while that knowledge of books and men on which we have dwelt was broadening and deepening. The French influence waned as that of Italy waxed, but the shift of emphasis was gradual, and the vision poems still went on. And into the three that followed the Book of the Duchess poured those steadily growing stores. He begins the *House of Fame*—to follow what seems to me to be the true succession—a little dully, with a long résumé of the *Aeneid*, and an interlude from the *Metamorphoses*. And both the *Roman d'Eneas* and the *Ovide moralisé* were summoned, I feel certain, to his aid. Then all at once, into a desert recalled from Lucan sweeps an eagle which owed its sunlike brightness to the *Paradiso*, and the poem becomes vivid with new life. And the significant thing is not so much that the amazing eagle, throughout the flight through the air, shows himself equally at home in Ovid, and Boethius, and Theodulus, and Macrobius, and Dante's *Convito*, and can even recognize Chaucer's unspoken thoughts of Martianus Capella and Alanus, as that he is a new and unique creation—as much a person as his creator, and utterly unthinkable in any vision which Machaut and his fellows ever dreamed. And only the keenest observer of men, endowed with the rarest humour, could have conceived the inimitable conversation which goes on, as the little earth recedes to a speck and the signs of the zodiac are left behind; and the poet of the *Canterbury Tales* is already present in that immortal dialogue. Then, into the third book, ushered in, like the second, by an invocation drawn from Dante, pours a phantasmagoria which Rabelais might have envied, and which defies all summary—reminiscences of books treading on the heels of recollections of experience, in bewildering profusion. Within the compass of thirty-five lines—to take a relatively simple passage only—Chaucer's memory, as the verse flows on without a ripple, has flashed to Boethius, and the *Roman de la Rose*, and a line from the *Metamorphoses*, and some account or other which he had read in the romances of those whirling houses which were a pecu-

liarily captivating item in the romantic stock-in-trade, and Celtic wicker houses which he had either seen himself or heard of from his friends, and the noise of 'engynstones' remembered from his own campaign in France. Sketched as I am sketching it, the poem is a thing of shreds and patches. It is not so on the page. But I am putting asunder what Chaucer joined together, in order to give the barest inkling of the thronging recollections which, in his vision poems, his art curbed and concealed.

And now, in the *Parlement of Foules*, France slips gradually into the background and Italy assumes the major role. The cadre of the vision is still retained, but the familiar French couplet is discarded, and rime royal takes its place. In the last two books of the *House of Fame* Chaucer's crowding recollections are swept along as by a torrent; in the close-packed introductory sections of the *Parlement* there is a new serenity, and a sense of beauty which has been quickened and deepened alike. For the influence of Dante and Boccaccio upon Chaucer is to be sought not merely or even chiefly in his borrowings and imitations, but rather through the impregnation of his art with qualities which his earlier French masters never knew. And in the first half of the *Parlement* Chaucer's memory is busy with the Divine Comedy, and both his memory and his eyes with the *Teseide*. The Proem opens with a rendering, in a master's hand, of the first axiom of Hippocrates—

The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne,  
Th'assay so hard, so sharp the conquering.

It was a favourite with those elder medical authorities whom Chaucer read, and I suspect it came to him from them. Then, passing to the book which he had just been reading 'faste and yerne' all day long, he gives (I am sure for his own delight) a summary—compact and lucid and urbane—of the *Somnium Scipionis*. And night falls in the words with which Dante describes the first fall of evening in the *Inferno*. Then Chaucer's unrest before he sleeps recalls Boethius, and the thought of dreams brings back to mind the famous lines of Claudian, and because (as Chaucer shrewdly suggests) he has just been reading the dream of Scipio, Scipio himself becomes his guide. And the Proem ends with a flash of memory back to Jean de Meun.

F. N. Robinson (essay date 1933)

SOURCE: "The Legend of Good Women," in *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1957, pp. 480-82.

[F. N. Robinson is the editor of the widely used *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* noted for its extensive textual notes and introductions to Chaucer's works. In the following essay originally published in 1933, Robinson discusses the Legend of Good Women in relation to its sources and other works by Chaucer.]

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**W. H. Clawson** (essay date 1951)

SOURCE: "The Framework of the *Canterbury Tales*," in *University of Toronto Quarterly*, Vol. XX, No. 2, January, 1951, pp. 137-54.

[In the following excerpt, Clawson explains the functions of the framing narrative within the "General Prologue" and throughout the *Canterbury Tales* as a linking device.]

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**Charles A. Owen, Jr.** (essay date 1953)

SOURCE: "The Crucial Passages in Five of the *Canterbury Tales*: A Study in Irony and Symbol," in *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, Vol. LII, No. 3, July, 1953, pp. 294-311.

[Owen is renowned for the textual criticism in his works, *Discussions of the Canterbury Tales*, *Manuscripts of the Canterbury Tales and Pilgrimage* and *Storytelling in the Canterbury Tales*. In the following essay, Owen analyzes symbolic passages in the "Franklin's Tale," the "Merchant's Tale," the "Wife of Bath's Tale," the "Pardoner's Tale," and the "Nun's Priest's Tale" to show how they foreshadow and unify their plots.]

Chaucer's Art in the *Canterbury Tales* projects a complex world. To the dramatic pose of simplicity already adopted by Chaucer in many of his narrative poems is added the complication of a group of observed narrators. The intrinsic value of each of the tales is not its final one. Behind the artificial world created in the tale are the conscious purposes of the narrator and the self-revelation, involuntary and often unconscious, involved in all artistic effort. The simplest of the plots in the *Canterbury Tales* is that of the frame. It makes the same demand of each character involved, that he ride in the company of the others to Canterbury and back and participate in the creative activity of the tale-telling. Each character projects his tale, the limited vision it embodies, and his limiting personality into the world of the pilgrimage. The plot is

simple but dynamic. For each vision has the potentiality of bringing into new focus those that preceded and of influencing those that will follow. The possibilities are soon unlimited. They lead to a richness that defies final analysis but finds its most concentrated expression in passages that at once embody and expose the limited vision of created character and creating narrator. These passages foreshadow in the unwitting speech or opinion of a character the outcome of the plot and help to create symbolic values that give the narrative an added and unifying dimension. They are in a sense symbolic of the whole work: in the contrast between what *is* and what men see—of themselves and of others—lies Chaucer's deepest vein of comedy.

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. . . [I]n the contrast between what *is* and what men see—of themselves and of others—lies Chaucer's deepest vein of comedy.

—Charles A. Owen, Jr.

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Passages that foreshadow the outcome in the unwitting speech of a character are fairly numerous in the *Canterbury Tales*, but I have found only five that perform also a symbolic and unifying function. These five passages occur in five of the most important tales. It will be the purpose of this paper to analyze the five passages and to explore the multiple meanings, both within the tales and in the world of the pilgrimage, which they epitomize.

### I

One of the clearest of the symbolic passages is the speech in the "Franklin's Tale," where Dorigen softens her refusal to Aurelius and at the same time expresses her love for her husband:

But after that in pley thus seyde she:  
 "Aurelie," quod she, "by heighe God above,  
 Yet wolde I graunte you to been youre love,  
 Syn I yow se so pitously complayne,  
 Looke what day that endelong Britayne  
 Ye remoeve alle the rokkes, stoon by stoon,  
 That they ne lette ship ne boot to goon.  
 I seye, whan ye han maad the coost so clene  
 Of rokkes that there nys no stoon ysene,  
 Thanne wol I love yow best of any man,  
 Have heer my trouthe, in al that evere I kan."

This speech of Dorigen provides the final element necessary to the plot. The happy marriage, the temporary absence of Arveragus, the enduring love of Aurelius, have all been presented. The wife's rash promise is the catalytic element that sets the others to reacting.

But because of the view we have had of Dorigen's grief, in which the rocks played so menacing a part, the rash

promise is at the same time an expression of Dorigen's love for her husband. Her mention of the rocks tells us even more certainly than her refusal that she is entirely devoted to her husband. This speech introduces for the first time in the tale the contrast, extremely important later, between the appearance of things and the reality. On the surface the speech is an agreement under certain conditions to commit adultery. Beneath the surface it is an expression of conjugal loyalty.

In fact Dorigen has endeavored without realizing it to transform the symbolic meaning of the rocks. Up to this point they have represented to her the menace of natural forces to her husband's life. Hereafter their permanence is a guarantee of her enduring love for her husband. The rocks occur to her not only because her husband's life is in danger from them but because their immutability is like her love. She has seen beyond the menacing appearance of the rocks and has invoked the symbolic value of their endurance at the same time that she has finally accepted their reality.

The changed significance of the rocks is emphasized in several ways by Chaucer. Before her rash promise Dorigen questions on grounds of reason the purpose of the rocks in God's world and prays

"But wolde God that alle thise rokkes blake  
 Were sonken into helle for his sake!  
 Thise rokkes sleen myn herte for the feere."

After her promise to Aurelius it is his turn to pray for the removal of the rocks. Instead of Eterne God, he addresses Apollo, and asks him to persuade his sister Lucina to cause a two-year flood tide high enough to cover the rocks with five fathoms, or, if this is not feasible,

"Prey hire to synken every rok adoun  
 Into hir owene dirke regioun  
 Under the ground, ther Pluto dwelleth inne,  
 Or nevere mo shal I my lady wynne."

The parallelism of the prayers emphasizes the transformation of the symbol. The removal of the rocks is now the menace to the marriage. In both the prayers the desire to see the rocks removed is a sign of weakness, of unwillingness to accept the real world. Dorigen transcends her weakness when she accepts the permanence of the rocks. Aurelius transcends his weakness when he recognizes the quality of Dorigen's and Arveragus's love as superior to his own passion.

The rocks play an important part in the contrast between appearance and reality. There is never any question of doing away with the rocks: Aurelius's brother doesn't expect to achieve that when he proposes the trip to Orleans, nor can the magician do more than make them *seem* to vanish.

But thugh his magik, for a wyke or tweye,  
 It semed that alle the rokkes were aweye.

Aurelius responds at first to the appearance of things.

he knew that ther was noon obstacle,  
That voyded were thise rokkes everychon.

But gradually he finds that the obstacles are still there. He himself makes no demand of Dorigen but merely reminds her of her promise. And when he hears of Arveragus's "gentillesse" and sees Dorigen's distress, he gallantly releases her. The real obstacles, like the rocks, only seem to have vanished. They are the honor, the decency, the gentility of all the people involved, and the true love of Dorigen and Arveragus for one another.

Dorigen's rash promise also functions in the tale in a way not intended by the Franklin. In addition to its other meanings it is an expression of "gentillesse" in its superficial sense. Dorigen tempers her absolute refusal in a way that makes it sound courteous, though in her heart she knows of the removal of the rocks,

"It is agayns the proces of nature."

Even while accepting the natural order, she is shirking a part of her duty in the moral. That the rocks play so great a part in the thought and fate of this soft-hearted woman is a further irony. When faced at the end with the disappearance of the rocks and the necessity of keeping her promise, she will propose to herself suicide but allow her purpose to disintegrate as she calls to mind the sad fate of women who firmly carried out such a purpose. Arveragus alone displays a firmness to which the rocks have relevance. His temporary absence makes possible the rash promise and his decision at the crisis forces Aurelius to see the "obstacles" that have only seemed to vanish. The superficial gentility of Dorigen's promise foreshadows and contrasts with the gentility of the ending, and the tale becomes a criticism of some aspects of gentility, more subtle than the Host's in the prologue to the tale, and more justified.

The Franklin presents in his tale an ideal of marriage and of "gentillesse," and manages at the same time to compliment the Knight, the Squire, and the Clerk. But his story is, without his realizing it, a critique of "gentillesse," for it is Dorigen's courteous softening of her refusal that makes the exhibition of gentility at the end necessary. The rocks which suggest the enduring value of gentility also suggest the distinctions which the Franklin in his easy acceptance of the good things of life fails to make.

## II

The crucial passage in the "Merchant's Tale" comes in the middle of the epithalamion and sends echoes and reverberations through the two consultations and the marriage to a crowning climax in the garden scene at the end. The Merchant is showing us January's reasons for wanting to marry:

Mariage is a ful greet sacrement.  
He which that hath no wyf, I holde him shent;  
He lyveth helples and al desolat,—  
I speke of folk in seculer estaat.

And herke why, I sey nat this for noght,  
That womman is for mannes helpe ywroght.  
The hye God, whan he hadde Adam made,  
And saugh him al allone, bely-naked,  
God of his grete goodnesse seyde than,  
"Lat us now make an helpe unto this man  
Lyk to hymself"; and thanne he made him Eve.  
Heere may ye se, and heerby may ye preve,  
That wyf is mannes helpe, and his confort,  
His paradys terrestre, and his disport.  
So buxom and so vertuouus is she  
They moste nedes lyve in unitee.  
O flessch they been, and o flessch, as I gesse  
Hath but oon herte, in wele and in distresse.

The concept of marriage as an earthly paradise has come to January late but with the blinding light of revelation: it has taken complete possession of his mind. The cautious habits and the short-sighted shrewdness of old age will be called on to support rather than examine this new vision. As in his judicious exclusion of the clergy and his appeal to example, he will use the forms of wisdom but not its substance. Marriage will carry all before it because it promises to combine the self-indulgence he has practised all his life with two things that old age makes vital to him for the first time—help for his physical weakness and the salvation of his soul. His lust for pleasure and his desire for salvation combine in the first consultation scene to blind him to the danger inherent in taking a young wife. The only danger he can foresee by the time he has chosen the girl and called his friends together the second time is so much felicity in marriage as to ruin his chance of a blissful after-life.

Besides epitomizing the precise and willful blindness of his attitude toward marriage, the passage foreshadows many of the details of his fate. The helpfulness that he anticipates in a wife will serve May as excuse for being in Damian's arms in the pear tree, and it will take the form before his very eyes of a nakedness similar to Adam's, her smock upon her breast. But as he sees in Adam's story a proof of marital bliss, so he will see in the pear tree only what his wife wants him to, an example of her care for his welfare. The "unitee" and "o flessch" receive an ironical fulfillment in the blind old man's constant clutch on his buxom and perforce virtuous May, and an additional twist in the line from his invitation to the garden,

"No spot of thee ne knew I al my lyf,"

where the irony of the contrast between his ugly passion and the romantic imagery and sacred associations of the Song of Songs (which is Solomon's!) matches the irony of his being as unconscious of the physical spot he is even then touching as he will later be of the moral spot—adultery—when he is looking at it with miraculously unblinded eyes.

The controlling images in the poem, however, are the linked ones of the garden, the blindness, and the tree. They are linked for the first time in this passage. "Heere may ye se," says the Merchant for January. But you can see in the story of Adam and Eve that a wife is man's

earthly paradise, only if you are blind to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the forbidden fruit. As January is blind in the Garden of Eden, so is he blind in the paradise of his wife's arms:

"A man may do no synne with his wyf,  
Ne hurte hymselfen with his owene knyf."

Adam and Eve and the first sin link up in these fatuous lines with Damian,

Which carf biforn the knyght ful many a day

and the sin soon to be committed in January's private paradise. The garden that January builds is the consummation of his folly and the symbol of his marriage. Its beauty is May, and the stone wall with which it is "enclosed al aboute" is the jealous precautions of the blind January as well as the inescapable unpleasantness of his lovemaking. There is no stone of tyranny in May's nature, and in fact we find her pliancy which January expected to be like warm wax taking a ready impression from Damian's wooing. The silver key to the garden which is January's alone is his privilege as husband, but from the warm wax of May's nature a suitable replica is provided for Damian—his privilege as lover. The blindness is the physical counterpart of the ignorance of marriage and of women that January has shown all along. It prevents him to the end from seeing the tree in the garden and the knowledge of evil which it represents. And the regaining of his sight wipes out even the alertness to danger which accompanied the blindness.

The tree plays a further and more striking part in the tale. January fails to see it in the Garden of Eden, but brings it in as an image of his own virility in the first consultation with his friends:

"Though I be hoor, I fare as dooth a tree  
That blosmeth er that fruyt ywoxen bee  
And blosmy tree nys neither drye ne deed.  
I feele me nowhere hoor but on myn heed;  
Myn herte and alle my lymes been as grene  
As laurer thurgh the yeer is for to sene."

The image bears fruit in the final part of the story. In January's private paradise, his arms around the trunk of the pear tree, he serves his wife as stepping stone to the forbidden fruit of adultery. At the same time he becomes the symbol of his folly, cuckolded in the branches which spring from his head as horns.

The imagery of growth has structural significance. The story is essentially the growth of an idea to complete fulfillment. Starting in the mind of January, a germ with all that develops already implicit, it attains in each part of the story a new mode of actualization—first verbal expression in general terms; then the fixing of the dream to a specific woman; then the literal fulfillment. At each stage January's blindness to his own folly achieves some new fatuity linked to the imagery in which he first clothed his "vision." But the story does not stop with a single

literal fulfillment. Through Proserpina's vow it suggests repetition through the ages. And it creates in the literal world the symbolic fulfillment of the idea. The garden and the blindness, in January's mind from the beginning, are now fully materialized. No miracle can make him see the tree as horns growing from his head, nor make him see the adultery committed before his very eyes.

The Merchant has taken care to tell us that this tale is not autobiographical:

"of myn owene soore,  
For soory herte, I telle may namoore."

Moved by the ironical moral of the "Clerk's Tale," he will join the discussion opened by the Wyf of Bath and present directly a male view of marriage. The Wife and her theories are clearly in his mind for he commits the anachronism of having Justinus refer to her in the tale. His real intentions in telling the story are clear from two passages. In the prologue he says,

"We wedded men lyven in sorwe and care. . . .  
As for the moore part, I say nat alle."

And in the tale itself, speaking of Argus,

Yet was he blent, and, God woot, so been mo,  
That wenen wisly that it be nat so.  
Passe over is an ese, I sey namoore.

For the Merchant January is the type of that *rara avis*—the happily married man: Not all married men are miserable; some are blind.

The Merchant participates in the blindness of his creature January in not realizing the extent to which he is talking of his own sore in the tale. His imperceptiveness extends even to thinking that he can disguise the vulgarity of his tale in circumlocution. The circumlocutions in fact call attention to the vulgarity, just as January's blissful ignorance contrasts with but does not conceal the Merchant's disillusionment. The creator of January is evidently a converted idealist, and the bitterness of his cynicism is the measure of his former folly. He can be so penetrating in exposing January's reasons for marriage because he is really looking at his own from beyond the gulf of two shattering months of marital experience. The cynical egoist looks at the delusions of an idealistic egoist and cannot see that his bitterness betrays him.

### III

The "Wife of Bath's Tale" is ostensibly a two-part exposition of the Wife's thesis that marriages are happy only when the woman is the master. The crucial passage occurs when the "olde wyf" at the juncture of the two parts reiterates in stronger terms her demand that the knight marry her:

"Nay thanne," quod she, "I shrewe us bothe two!  
For thogh that I be foul, and oold, and poore,

I nolde for al the metal, ne for oore,  
That under erthe is grave, or lith above,  
But if thy wyf I were, and eek thy love."

The old woman's demand is not only the conclusion of the quest plot, the price the knight pays for his life, but it is also the point of departure for the husband's dilemma. The woman must first secure her man before she can offer him her alternatives. The Wife of Bath's story passes with this speech from its public to its private demonstration of the thesis. The world-wide scene of the quest dwindles to the marriage-bed of the dilemma. We pass from generally accepted theory to the practice of one woman in achieving first sovereignty then happiness in her marriage.

But the husband's dilemma and the Wife of Bath's thesis are merely the surface of the story. The old woman has already demanded that the knight marry her. In her reiteration she reveals her real desire. She wants not just a husband but a husband's love. The phrase "and eek thy love" brought here into conjunction with the woman's ugliness, age, and poverty suggests that the real dilemma in the second part of the story is the wife's rather than the husband's; it foreshadows the necessity for miracle at the end and reveals for the story a second and more valid theme, operating on the instinctive level beneath the Wife's and her heroine's theories—the quest for love.

On this level the tale as a whole progresses from rape to marriage to love with each of the three crises of the story presenting a common pattern. In each there is a problem, a theoretical solution, and a modification of theory in practice. At the beginning of the story the knight's crime of rape is to be punished by death until the ladies intervene and send him off in quest of crucial information about women. The second problem, what women most desire, is solved theoretically by the answer the knight gives the court. But it is clear from the "olde wyf's" demand that in practice one woman wants not sovereignty over husband and lover, but merely a husband and his love. The final problem is the obtaining of the husband's love, theoretically solved when he leaves the choice in his dilemma and thus the sovereignty to his wife. Actually the wife attains the knight's love by magically slipping between the horns of the dilemma and giving him exactly what he wants. The happy married life that results differs markedly from the blueprint of the Wife's thesis:

And she obeyed hym in every thyng  
That myghte doon hym plesance or likyng.

The Wife of Bath had good reason to tell the story she did. It provided what she considered a good demonstration of her theory. It gave her an opportunity of discussing a number of the questions close to her heart such as the true meaning of "gentillesse," and of parodying Arthurian romance with its unrealistic notions of life and love. It had the further appeal of an imaginative wish-fulfillment, for it presented an old woman who gained a young husband and magically changed herself into everything he

could desire in a wife. As a story of the quest for love it was the artistic counterpart of her life.

In its continuing contrast between theory and practice the tale repeats the unconscious revelation of the Wife's prologue. For her theory of marriage and her own practise have been worlds apart. In her first three marriages she did maintain her sovereignty, but the marriages were not happy. No doubt the Wife enjoyed the cowed submission she so cleverly exacted from her old dotards. But she is forced to admit,

And yet in bacon hadde I nevere delit.

The fourth husband with his paramour aroused her jealousy and, to her satisfaction, became jealous in his turn. The Wife of Bath took refuge in travel, and the marriage was little more than nominal. Only with the fifth, her clerk of Oxenford, did she find happiness. Jankyn she cannot name without a blessing. But in the fifth marriage the relationship of the first three was simply reversed. This time she was twice his age and forced to sign over her property before the ceremony. Like the old woman in her tale she had to win his love. At the same time, she would have us believe, she won the upper hand in the marriage. That the triumph, like that of the heroine in her tale, is nominal her own words confess:

After that day we hadden never debaat.  
God helpe me so, I was to him as kynde  
As any wyf from Denmark unto Ynde,  
And also trewe, and so was he to me.

We have further proof of the clerk's influence over her in the stress she puts on authorities in her discussions, on the clear memory she has for the stories in the book she made him burn, and in the strange distortion she makes of the Midas story in her tale. Jankyn left his mark on more than her "ribbes," more than her hearing.

The Wife of Bath enjoyed theory on one level and life on another. Her enjoyment of both was intense and convincing, so much so that most critics and readers have appreciated her gusto without noticing the contrast between her theory and practice in both prologue and tale.

#### IV

In the "Pardoner's Tale" the crucial passage occurs at the point where the revelers find the pile of gold under the tree:

No lenger thanne after Deeth they soughte.

On the primary level of the revelers' limited vision the wealth has driven all thought of their search for Death from their minds. They now think of the pleasures the gold will buy them and plan how to get it home safely. At the same time the statement foreshadows their end. They no longer seek Death because they have found him.

The single line marks a fundamental division in the tale. On the one hand is the drunken search for Death, marked

by an unwonted and a deluded altruism. They are sworn brothers. They will slay Death. Drink has given them a mission, stature, pride, contempt for others. The gold has both a sobering and a deflating effect. It brings them back to the real world from their illusions of brotherhood and of slaying Death. Yet their drunken intentions were closer to the final outcome than their sober planning and counter-planning to secure the treasure. The gold has brought them back to their narrow world. It both focuses and limits their vision. These two sections of the tale, as we shall see later, have a symbolic value for the Pardoner.

But first we must explore the complex set of meanings in the tale as a whole. What happens to the gold in the story happens to the story itself. Its value is determined by the human motives focused upon it. In itself it may be an effective warning against cupidity, showing how greed turns gold into death. But as a part of the sermon habitually delivered by the Pardoner to the "lewed peple" it is at the same time the instrument of the Pardoner's greed. And as a part of the confession made to the other pilgrims it is the expression of the Pardoner's vanity. The pilgrimage gives him the opportunity to display to an intelligent audience the full measure of his cleverness and cynicism. He hopes so to dazzle and shock them that they will fail to see the motive that drives him to the compensation of hypocrisy and greed.

The Pardoner's physical disability has isolated him from some of the normal satisfactions in life. In revenge he has rejected the professed morality of other people and uses it against them to attain the power and comfort that wealth brings. His income is thus a symbol of his victory over physical inadequacy and of his superiority over the normal and stupid louts who are his victims. But the victory is not one that he can fully reveal in his daily life. Here, before the pilgrims, stimulated by the intelligence of his audience and with neither the necessity nor the possibility of assuming his customary role, he can for once reveal the extent of his success, impress his companions with the amount of his income, and shock them with the cynicism that makes it all possible. He seeks at the same time to conceal the emptiness and isolation of his life by reference to the comforts and gaieties he enjoys:

"I wol have moneie, wolle, chese, and whete. . . .  
Nay, I wolfe the vyne,  
And have a joly wenche in every toun."

The task he has set himself in his confession is as wild and deluded as the drunken revelers' quest in the first part of the tale. Like the quest it has a wider range than his customary hypocrisy and is nearer the ultimate truth. But hypocrisy is his normal and sober world, and like the revelers' vision in the second part of the tale it is narrow and limited. The presumption of the pilgrim and the hypocrisy of the "noble ecclesiaste" both end in isolation. The Pardoner has also found death without recognizing it. His life is an exemplum of the futility of cynicism. And in the world of the pilgrimage, where we see the Pardoner but he cannot see himself, the crucial passage again functions.

## V

The crucial passage in the "Nun's Priest's Tale" is not so obviously a foreshadowing of the plot as in the other instances. It comes at the juncture between the discussion of dreams and the action of the near-fatal third of May. Chauntecleer is speaking:

"Now let us speke of myrthe, and stynte al this.  
Madame Pertelote, so have I blis,  
Of o thyng God hath sent me large grace;  
For whan I se the beautee of youre face,  
Ye been so scarlet reed aboute youre yen,  
It maketh al my drede for to dyen;  
For al so siker as *In principio*,  
*Mulier est hominis confusio*—  
Madame, the sentence of this Latyn is,  
'Womman is mannes joye and al his blis.'  
For whan I feele a-nyght your softe syde,  
Al be it that I may nat on yow ryde,  
For that oure perche is maad so narwe, allas!  
I am so ful of joye and of solas,  
That I diffye bothe sweven and dreem."

Here the ultimate victim employs the same technique in his deception of his wife as is later to be used by the fox on him—deceitful flattery. Behind the fair words of his translation, designed to smooth the ruffled feathers of Pertelote, whose laxatives have just been scorned, lurks the malicious dig of the Latin. The cock will later be "hoist with his own petard,"

As man that koude his traysoun nat espie  
So was he ravysshed with his flaterie

Furthermore the cock is delighted with the sound of his own voice. In the long discourse on dreams, of which this is the conclusion, he has displayed the smug assurance of the born raconteur. And it is a moot point here whether his wife's beauty or his own cleverly barbed praise of it most attracts him. The cock is indeed ready to believe that other people admire his voice.

This speech of Chauntecleer brings out the pedantry implicit from the beginning in his actions. He alone can witness and appreciate the victory he has won over his wife. The victory is a pedant's triumph and contrasts strikingly with the one the fox later wins over him, which calls forth a universal clamor.

The cock's vast learning has furthermore contributed to the easy fatalism he has fallen into as a result of his learned rebuttal on dreams. The original dream was clearly a warning dream. The beast in it, which with all his learning the cock can describe but cannot recognize as his natural enemy the fox,

"wolde han maad areest  
Upon my body, and wolde han had me deed"

But in the examples which he uses to refute his wife's skepticism people either fail to heed the warning or they

have no chance of evading the fate foretold in their dreams. The cock in effect wins the argument and forgets the dream that occasioned it. His pedantry has led him into a smug fatalism that contemplates his own coming "adversitee" as merely the concluding proof of the truth of dreams. No effort is called for—only the pursuit of what the soon-to-be-shipwrecked victim in one of the dreams called "my thynges" and the assumption of the courageous pose which Pertelote recommended and which his prowess makes ridiculous.

The cock, warned by dream and instinct against the fox and prepared by his own deft use of flattery against the technique the fox is to use, unwittingly gives himself a further warning, which he is either not learned enough or too pedantic to apply. Just as truly as the words of St. John's Gospel, woman is man's confusion, he tells his wife in Latin. But the words from the Gospel are *In principio*, in the beginning; and in the beginning Eve was Adam's confusion. So far is he from heeding the warning that the passage which contains it is full of the uxorious passion usually attributed to Adam. The cock's appreciation of his wife's charms diverts him from further thought of his own danger. Here in effect is another Adam, succumbing to the attractions of his wife when he should be using his reason. The Adam-and-Eve parallel, thus suggested for the cock-and-hen story, contributes to the mock heroics.

The passage is rich in other contributions to the mock heroic effect. It unites the language of exalted human passion with details of hen anatomy and barnyard architecture. The exalted language and the deflating details give the passage a quality that is typical of the whole poem. The courtly behavior and refined pretensions of Chauntecleer are constantly betrayed by the ludicrous activities and ignoble motives contingent upon chicken nature. The suggestion is clear: Objectively viewed, human pride and vanity are similarly betrayed. Only the simple life with frank acceptance of the necessities and limitations of the human lot, as exemplified by the widow and her menage, can have real dignity.

The contrast between Chauntecleer and his owner has a dramatic value in the Canterbury Tales. The Host in calling on the Prioress a little earlier addressed her in terms of the most exaggerated respect. Her Priest, however, he addresses with peremptory intimacy, making game of his poverty. When we remember the Prioress's pains

to countrefete cheere  
Of court, and to been estatlich of manere,  
And to ben holden digne of reverence,

we can glimpse a guarded purpose. The sexes of the characters in the tale are reversed, as is also the ownership, but the essential relationship between poverty and wealth, between simplicity and pretension is there. The drama is carried a step further when the Priest falls into overt criticism of women. This he does at the expense of the complexity of his tale. The advice of his wife is, as we have seen, a minor detail in the cock's decision. But it is a

theme that the Priest attacks with evident relish. He brings himself up sharp with the thought of whom he might be offending, then returns to the attack indirectly by referring his listeners to the "auctors," and finally tries to ascribe the whole thing to the cock:

"Thise ben the cokkes wordes, and nat myne;  
I kan noon harm of no womman divyne."

The inner conflict of the misogynist employed by a woman has come for a moment to the surface; then it is pushed back behind the artifice of the story, where it has been operating secretly all along. The Host's reaction to the story has thus a double irony. Not only has he failed to see the point, but he imagines the Priest, if he were only a layman, a prodigious treader of hens!

The pedantry, ridiculed in the portrait of Chauntecleer, is also attacked by the Nun's Priest in his criticism of the rhetoricians. The satire is most highly comic when Friday and Master Gaufred are brought in at the climax of the story, and Venus is reproached for not protecting her devotee on her day, when it was her influence that was partly responsible for Chauntecleer's plight. It is possible, however, to ridicule a thing and be guilty of it on occasion oneself. This trap the Nun's Priest falls into at least once when he gets himself involved in a discussion of free will and God's fore-knowledge—as a result of elaborating too far on a mock heroic color, VII 3230-50. Like Chauntecleer he is for a moment hoist with his own petard. And in struggling to get back to his tale, he suddenly finds himself involved in the criticism of women. Pedantry which leads to a criticism of women recalls the crucial passage and the cock's gibe, "*In principio, Mulier est hominis confusio.*" The Priest in fact makes the same charge:

Wommanes conseil broghte us first to wo,  
And made Adam fro Paradys to go,  
Ther as he was ful myrie and wel at ese.

Whatever the cause for the Priest's misogyny (it may well be a combination of intellectual contempt and involuntary attraction), there is no mistaking the animus with which he follows his hero's lead in attributing man's ills to woman. This blanket condemnation of women is a very different thing from his implied criticism of the Prioress's pretensions. In his better moments he knows, as his portrait of Chauntecleer indicates, the real significance of Adam and Eve for mankind. *Hominis confusio* is man's own frailty. That the Priest lashes out at women as his stupid cock had done measures the strength of his feelings. In a sense these *are* the cock's words, and the Priest's recognition of their unworthiness enables him to recover his composure and his story.

On the primary level then the "Nun's Priest's Tale" is a brilliant and complex exposure of vanity, self-esteem, and self-indulgence through the mock heroic treatment of a beast fable. On the secondary level, the Nun's Priest joins the discussions of the Pilgrims on poverty (Man of Law and Wife of Bath), women's advice (Merchant), rhetoric



(Host and Squire), and marriage. He is also presenting in the contrast between the widow and Chauntecleer a veiled comment on his position vis-à-vis the Prioress. Finally, on the level of involuntary revelation, he falls into the pedantry that he is ridiculing and uncovers for a moment in his confusion the feelings of a misogynist dependent on a woman. In this moment there is revealed a second conflict, the conflict between the artist, building with the materials of his art a world where his feelings achieve symbolic and universal expression, and the man, expressing his feelings directly.

## CONCLUSION

The symbols which Chaucer employed are unobtrusive; they fit in their contexts of sentimental romance or crude realism without "shake or bind." Nothing in the tale forces them to the symbolic level. Yet the consistency with which the rocks are developed in the "Franklin's Tale" gives the obvious charm of the story a focused integrity which can be felt even when not clearly analyzed. The linked images of garden, tree, and blindness of the "Merchant's Tale" add to the bitter unity of tone an underlying unity of action: the seed of January's folly grows from the fertile soil of his figurative blindness into the successive realizations of word, fixed purpose, and deed, until it attains full maturity in the garden, the blindness, and the tree-born fruit of adultery, with the head that conceived realistically behorned.

The focus and additional dimension which symbol and image provide in the tales are also attained by the contrast or ambiguity of the narrative elements involved. The intentional pattern of the "Wife of Bath's Tale" and the zest with which she tells it lose none of their literal value when we see the ambiguity of the elements she uses to prove her thesis. The nature of love and marriage resists the warping efforts of her dogged feminism and provides the counterpoint of a contrasting and more valid pattern. The quest for love which dominated her life dominates her tale. The greed in which the Pardoner has taken refuge creates the skillful weapon of his tale. With one edge he cynically dupes peasants; with the other he seeks to shock the pilgrims into a recognition of his importance. For the deluded vanity of the second purpose as well as the hypocrisy of the first, the two parts of his tale present analogies; at the very center the symbol of gold as unrecognized death reveals the futile emptiness of both efforts. The concealed purpose of the Nun's Priest finds urbane expression in the contrast between the simple dignity of the people and the ostentation of the chickens in his tale. But a momentary lapse into the pedantry he is mocking in Chauntecleer confuses him and he breaks through the artifice of beast fable to direct expression of his purpose. The artistic expression, where *hominis confusio* is man's own foolish presumption, forms an ironic background for the priest's lapse into an indiscriminate and direct anti-feminism.

Chaucer, unlike the Nun's Priest, never expresses his intention directly. Present himself on the pilgrimage and in the occasional asides to the audience, he pictures himself

as the simple reporter of experience, not responsible because unable to judge the questions of morals and propriety raised by the tales. Only in his own experience as narrator does the mask become penetrable, and then imaginary audience, who acquiesce in the Host's misunderstanding and crude estimate of "Sir Thopas" and get for their reward the prosy and long-winded idealism of the "Melibeus." There is implied in the episode, as in the Man of Law's wrong-headed praise while cudgeling his brains for a tale, a comment on the popular taste and on Chaucer's relation to his real audience. Chaucer did not expect to be understood fully by all his readers. Certain of his effects depend on a knowledge which few of them could have. Others, like the crucial passages that have just been analyzed, are the subtle elaborations by the artist of a design already present. They suggest a personal standard and private satisfaction in his art.

But the simplicity adopted as a mask in the tales is not entirely ironical. It is a token for the deeper simplicity that receives impressions freely and refuses to interpose the eager evaluations, artistic and moral, that prevent full recognition. This deeper simplicity reflects faithfully the paradoxes of personality, the contradictions of experience. It becomes through its forbearance a rare and delicate instrument for evaluation and judgment, and presents a total vision not to be fully appreciated from the mental and spiritual posture of the Host, nor from that of the *homme moyen du moyen âge* [average Medieval man] whom Chaucer could not only entertain but also see beyond.

## E. Talbot Donaldson (essay date 1954)

SOURCE: "Chaucer The Pilgrim," in *PMLA*, Vol. LXIX, No. 4, September, 1954, pp. 928-36.

[Donaldson is a scholar of Medieval and Old English Literature known for his translation of *Beowulf* for modern readers and his book, *Speaking of Chaucer*. In the following excerpt, Donaldson analyzes the persona of the fictional Chaucer, the narrator of the *Canterbury Tales*, and discusses the differences and similarities between this fictional protagonist and the poem's actual author.]

Verisimilitude in a work of fiction is not without its attendant dangers, the chief of which is that the responses it stimulates in the reader may be those appropriate not so much to an imaginative production as to an historical one or to a piece of reporting. History and reporting are, of course, honorable in themselves, but if we react to a poet as though he were an historian or a reporter, we do him somewhat less than justice. I am under the impression that many readers, too much influenced by Chaucer's brilliant verisimilitude, tend to regard his famous pilgrimage to Canterbury as significant not because it is a great fiction, but because it seems to be a remarkable record of a fourteenth-century pilgrimage. A remarkable record it may be, but if we treat it too narrowly as such there are going to be certain casualties among the elements that make up the fiction. Perhaps first among these elements

is the fictional reporter, Chaucer the pilgrim, and the role he plays in the Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* and in the links between them. I think it time that he was rescued from the comparatively dull record of history and put back into his poem. He is not really Chaucer the poet—nor, for that matter, is either the poet, or the poem's protagonist, that Geoffrey Chaucer frequently mentioned in contemporary historical records as a distinguished civil servant, but never as a poet. The fact that these are three separate entities does not, naturally, exclude the probability—or rather the certainty—that they bore a close resemblance to one another, and that, indeed, they frequently got together in the same body. But that does not excuse us from keeping them distinct from one another, difficult as their close resemblance makes our task.

The natural tendency to confuse one thing with its like is perhaps best represented by a school of Chaucerian criticism, now outmoded, that pictured a single Chaucer under the guise of a wide-eyed, jolly, rolypoly little man who, on fine Spring mornings, used to get up early, while the dew was still on the grass, and go look at daisies. A charming portrait, this, so charming, indeed, that it was sometimes able to maintain itself to the exclusion of any Chaucerian other side. It has every reason to be charming, since it was lifted almost *in toto* from the version Chaucer gives of himself in the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*, though I imagine it owes some of its popularity to a rough analogy with Wordsworth—a sort of *Legend of Good Poets*. It was this version of Chaucer that Kittredge, in a page of great importance to Chaucer criticism, demolished with his assertion that “a naïf Collector of Customs would be a paradoxical monster.” He might well have added that a naïve creator of old January would be even more monstrous.

Kittredge's pronouncement cleared the air, and most of us now accept the proposition that Chaucer was sophisticated as readily as we do the proposition that the whale is a mammal. But unhappily, now that we've got rid of the naïve fiction, it is easy to fall into the opposite sort of mistake. This is to envision, in the *Canterbury Tales*, a highly urbane, literal-historical Chaucer setting out from Southwark on a specific day of a specific year (we even argue somewhat acrimoniously about dates and routes), in company with a group of persons who existed in real life and whom Chaucer, his reporter's eye peeled for every idiosyncrasy, determined to get down on paper—down, that is, to the last wart—so that books might be written identifying them. Whenever this accurate reporter says something especially fatuous—which is not infrequently—it is either ascribed to an opinion peculiar to the Middle Ages (sometimes very peculiar), or else Chaucer's tongue is said to be in his cheek.

Now a Chaucer with tongue-in-cheek is a vast improvement over a simple-minded Chaucer when one is trying to define the whole man, but it must lead to a loss of critical perception, and in particular to a confused notion of Chaucerian irony, to see in the “Prologue” a reporter who is acutely aware of the significance of what he sees but who sometimes, for ironic emphasis, interprets the

evidence presented by his observation in a fashion directly contrary to what we expect. The proposition ought to be expressed in reverse: the reporter is, usually, acutely unaware of the significance of what he sees, no matter how sharply he sees it. He is, to be sure, permitted his lucid intervals, but in general he is the victim of the poet's pervasive—not merely sporadic—irony. And as such he is also the chief agent by which the poet achieves his wonderfully complex, ironic, comic, serious vision of a world which is but a devious and confused, infinitely various pilgrimage to a certain shrine. It is, as I hope to make clear, a good deal more than merely fitting that our guide on such a pilgrimage should be a man of such naïveté as the Chaucer who tells the tale of “Sir Thopas.” Let us accompany him a little distance.

It is often remarked that Chaucer really liked the Prioress very much, even though he satirized her gently—very gently. But this is an understatement: Chaucer the pilgrim may not be said merely to have liked the Prioress very much—he thought she was utterly charming. In the first twenty-odd lines of her portrait [quotations are from *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, edited by F. N. Robinson; texts and line numbers will be noted in parentheses] he employs, among other superlatives, the adverb *ful* seven times. Middle English uses *ful* where we use *very*, and if one translates the beginning of the portrait into a kind of basic English (which is what, in a way, it really is), one gets something like this: “There was also a Nun, a Prioress, who was very sincere and modest in the way she smiled; her biggest oath was only ‘By saint Loy’; and she was called Madame Eglantine. She sang the divine service very well, intoning it in her nose very prettily, and she spoke French very nicely and elegantly”—and so on, down to the last gasp of sentimental appreciation. Indeed, the Prioress may be said to have transformed the rhetoric into something not unlike that of a very bright kindergarten child's descriptive theme. In his reaction to the Prioress Chaucer the pilgrim resembles another—if less—simple-hearted enthusiast: the Host, whose summons to her to tell a tale must be one of the politest speeches in the language. Not “My lady prioresse, a tale now!” but, “as curteisly as it had been a mayde,”

My lady Prioress, by youre leve,  
So that I wiste I sholde yow nat greve,  
I wolde demen that ye tellen sholde  
A tale next, if so were that ye wolde.  
Now wol ye vouche sauf, my lady deere?

Where the Prioress reduced Chaucer to superlatives, she reduces the Host to subjunctives.

There is no need here to go deeply into the Prioress. Eileen Power's illustrations from contemporary episcopal records show with what extraordinary economy the portrait has been packed with abuses typical of fourteenth-century nuns. The abuses, to be sure, are mostly petty, but it is clear enough that the Prioress, while a perfect lady, is anything but a perfect nun; and attempts to whitewash her, of which there have been many, can only proceed from an innocence of heart equal to Chaucer the pilgrim's

and undoubtedly directly influenced by it. For he, of course, is quite swept away by her irrelevant *sensibilité*, and as a result misses much of the point of what he sees. No doubt he feels that he has come a long way, socially speaking, since his encounter with the Black Knight in the forest, and he knows, or thinks he knows, a little more of what it's all about: in this case it seems to be mostly about good manners, kindness to animals, and female charm. Thus it has been argued that Chaucer's appreciation for the Prioress as a sort of heroine of courtly romance *manquée* actually reflects the sophistication of the living Chaucer, an urbane man who cared little whether amiable nuns were good nuns. But it seems a curious form of sophistication that permits itself to babble superlatives; and indeed, if this is sophistication, it is the kind generally seen in the least experienced people—one that reflects a wide-eyed wonder at the glamor of the great world. It is just what one might expect of a bourgeois exposed to the splendors of high society, whose values, such as they are, he eagerly accepts. And that is precisely what Chaucer the pilgrim is, and what he does.

If the Prioress's appeal to him is through elegant femininity, the Monk's is through imposing virility. Of this formidable and important prelate the pilgrim does not say, with Placebo,

I woot wel that my lord kan moore than I:  
What that he seith, I holde it ferme and stable,

but he acts Placebo's part to perfection. He is as impressed with the Monk as the Monk is, and accepts him on his own terms and at face value, never sensing that those terms imply complete condemnation of Monk *qua* Monk. The Host is also impressed by the Monk's virility, but having no sense of Placebonian propriety (he is himself a most virile man) he makes indecent jokes about it. This, naturally, offends the pilgrim's sense of decorum: there is a note of deferential commiseration in his comment, "This worthy Monk took al in pacience." Inevitably when the Monk establishes hunting as the highest activity of which religious man is capable, "I seyde his opinion was good." As one of the pilgrim's spiritual heirs was later to say, Very like a whale; but not, of course, like a fish out of water.

Wholehearted approval for the values that important persons subscribe to is seen again in the portrait of the Friar. This amounts to a prolonged gratulation for the efficiency the deplorable Hubert shows in undermining the fabric of the Church by turning St. Francis' ideal inside out:

Ful swetely herde he confessioun,  
And plesaunt was his absolucioun.

For unto swich a worthy man as he  
Acorded nat, as by his facultee,  
To have with sike lazars aqueyntaunce.

It is sometimes said that Chaucer did not like the Friar. Whether Chaucer the man would have liked such a Friar

is, for our present purposes, irrelevant. But if the pilgrim does not unequivocally express his liking for him, it is only because in his humility he does not feel that, with important people, his own likes and dislikes are material: such importance is its own reward, and can gain no lustre from Geoffrey, who, when the Friar is attacked by the Summoner, is ready to show him the same sympathy he shows the Monk.

Once he has finished describing the really important people on the pilgrimage the pilgrim's tone changes, for he can now concern himself with the bourgeoisie, members of his own class for whom he does not have to show such profound respect. Indeed, he can even afford to be a little patronizing at times, and to have his little joke at the expense of the too-busy lawyer. But such indirect assertions of his own superiority do not prevent him from giving substance to the old cynicism that the only motive recognized by the middle class is the profit motive, for his interest and admiration for the bourgeois pilgrims is centered mainly in their material prosperity and their ability to increase it. He starts, properly enough, with the out-and-out money-grubber, the Merchant, and after turning aside for that *lulus naturae*, the non-profit-motivated Clerk, proceeds to the Lawyer, who, despite the pilgrim's little joke, is the best and best-paid ever; the Franklin, twenty-one admiring lines on appetite, so expensively catered to; the Gildsmen, cheered up the social ladder, "For catel hadde they ynogh and rente"; and the Physician, again the best and richest. In this series the portrait of the Clerk is generally held to be an ideal one, containing no irony; but while it is ideal, it seems to reflect the pilgrim's sense of values in his joke about the Clerk's failure to make money: is not this still typical of the half-patronizing, half-admiring *un*understanding that practical men of business display towards academics? But in any case the portrait is a fine companion-piece for those in which material prosperity is the main interest both of the characters described and of the describer.

Of course, this is not the sole interest of so gregarious—if shy—a person as Chaucer the pilgrim. Many of the characters have the additional advantage of being good companions, a faculty that receives a high valuation in the "Prologue." To be good company might, indeed, atone for certain serious defects of character. Thus the Shipman, whose callous cruelty is duly noted, seems fairly well redeemed in the assertion, "And certainly he was a good felawe." At this point an uneasy sensation that even tongue-in-cheek irony will not compensate for the lengths to which Chaucer is going in his approbation of this sinister seafarer sometimes causes editors to note that a *good felawe* means "a rascal." But I can find no evidence that it ever meant a rascal. Of course, all tritely approbative expressions enter easily into ironic connotation, but the phrase *means* a good companion, which is just what Chaucer means. And if, as he says of the Shipman, "Of nyce conscience took he no keep," Chaucer the pilgrim was doing the same with respect to him.

Nothing that has been said has been meant to imply that the pilgrim was unable to recognize, and deplore, a rascal

when he saw one. He could, provided the rascality was situated in a member of the lower classes and provided it was, in any case, somewhat wider than a barn door: Miller, Manciple, Reeve, Summoner, and Pardoner are all acknowledged to be rascals. But rascality generally has, after all, the laudable object of making money, which gives it a kind of validity, if not dignity. These portraits, while in them the pilgrim, prioress-like conscious of the finer aspects of life, does deplore such matters as the Miller's indelicacy of language, contain a note of ungrudging admiration for efficient thievery. It is perhaps fortunate for the pilgrim's reputation as a judge of men that he sees through the Pardoner, since it is the Pardoner's particular tragedy that, except in Church, every one can see through him at a glance; but in Church he remains to the pilgrim "a noble ecclesiaste." The equally repellent Summoner, a practicing bawd, is partially redeemed by his also being a good fellow, "a gentil harlot and a kynde," and by the fact that for a moderate bribe he will neglect to summon: the pilgrim apparently subscribes to the popular definition of the best policeman as the one who acts the least policely.

Therefore Chaucer is tolerant, and has his little joke about the Summoner's small Latin—a very small joke, though one of the most amusing aspects of the pilgrim's character is the pleasure he takes in his own jokes, however small. But the Summoner goes too far when he cynically suggests that purse is the Archdeacon's hell, causing Chaucer to respond with a fine show of righteous respect for the instruments of spiritual punishment. The only trouble is that his enthusiastic defense of them carries *him* too far, so that after having warned us that excommunication will indeed damn our souls—

But wel I woot he lyed right in dede:  
Of cursyng oghte ech gilty man him drede,  
For curs wol slee right as assoillyng savith—

he goes on to remind us that it will also cause considerable inconvenience to our bodies: "And also war hym of a *Significavit*." Since a *Significavit* is the writ accomplishing the imprisonment of the excommunicate, the line provides perhaps the neatest—and most misunderstood—Chaucerian anticlimax in the "Prologue."

I have avoided mentioning, hitherto, the pilgrim's reactions to the really good people on the journey—the Knight, the Parson, the Plowman. One might reasonably ask how his uncertain sense of values may be reconciled with the enthusiasm he shows for their rigorous integrity. The question could, of course, be shrugged off with a remark on the irrelevance to art of exact consistency, even to art distinguished by its verisimilitude. But I am not sure that there is any basic inconsistency. It is the nature of the pilgrim to admire all kinds of superlatives, and the fact that he often admires superlatives devoid of—or opposed to—genuine virtue does not inhibit his equal admiration for virtue incarnate. He is not, after all, a bad man; he is, to place him in his literary tradition, merely an average man, or mankind: *homo*, not very *sapiens* to be sure, but with the very best intentions, making his pilgrimage

through the world in search of what is good, and showing himself, too frequently, able to recognize the good only when it is spectacularly so. Spenser's Una glows with a kind of spontaneous incandescence, so that the Red Cross Knight, mankind in search of holiness, knows her as good; but he thinks that Duessa is good, too. Virtue concretely embodied in Una or the Parson presents no problems to the well-intentioned observer, but in a world consisting mostly of imperfections, accurate evaluations are difficult for a pilgrim who, like mankind, is naïve. The pilgrim's ready appreciation for the virtuous characters is perhaps the greatest tribute that could be paid to their virtue, and their spiritual simplicity is, I think, enhanced by the intellectual simplicity of the reporter.

The pilgrim belongs, of course, to a very old—and very new—tradition of the fallible first person singular. His most exact modern counterpart is perhaps Lemuel Gulliver who, in his search for the good, failed dismally to perceive the difference between the pursuit of reason and the pursuit of reasonable horses: one may be sure that the pilgrim would have whinnied with the best of them. In his own century he is related to Long Will of *Piers Plowman*, a more explicit seeker after the good, but just as unswerving in his inability correctly to evaluate what he sees. Another kinsman is the protagonist of the *Pearl*, mankind whose heart is set on a transitory good that has been lost—who, for very natural reasons, confuses earthly with spiritual values. Not entirely unrelated is the protagonist of Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, an old man seeking for an impossible earthly love that seems to him the only good. And in more subtle fashion there is the teller of Chaucer's story of *Troilus and Cressida*, who, while not a true protagonist, performs some of the same functions. For this unloved "servant of the servants of love" falls in love with Cressida so persuasively that almost every male reader of the poem imitates him, so that we all share the heartbreak of Troilus and sometimes, in the intensity of our heartbreak, fail to learn what Troilus did. Finally, of course, there is Dante of the *Divine Comedy*, the most exalted member of the family and perhaps the immediate original of these other first-person pilgrims.

Artistically the device of the *persona* has many functions, so integrated with one another that to try to sort them out produces both oversimplification and distortion. The most obvious, with which this paper has been dealing—distortedly, is to present a vision of the social world imposed on one of the moral world. Despite their verisimilitude most, if not all, of the characters described in the Prologue are taken directly from stock and recur again and again in medieval literature. Langland in his own Prologue and elsewhere depicts many of them: the hunting monk, the avaricious friar, the thieving miller, the hypocritical pardoner, the unjust stewards, even, in little, the all-too-human nun. But while Langland uses the device of the *persona* with considerable skill in the conduct of his allegory, he uses it hardly at all in portraying the inhabitants of the social world: these are described directly, with the poet's own voice. It was left to Chaucer to turn the ancient stock satirical characters into real people assembled for a pilgrimage, and to have them described, with all their

traditional faults upon them, by another pilgrim who records faithfully each fault without, for the most part, recognizing that it is a fault and frequently felicitating its possessor for possessing it. One result—though not the only result—is a moral realism much more significant than the literary realism which is a part of it and for which it is sometimes mistaken; this moral realism discloses a world in which humanity is prevented by its own myopia, the myopia of the describer, from seeing what the dazzlingly attractive externals of life really represent. In most of the analogues mentioned above the fallible first person receives, at the end of the book, the education he has needed: the pilgrim arrives somewhere. Chaucer never completed the *Canterbury Tales*, but in the Prologue to the “Parson’s Tale” he seems to have been doing, rather hastily, what his contemporaries had done: when, with the sun nine-and-twenty degrees from the horizon, the twenty-nine pilgrims come to a certain—unnamed—*thropes ende*, then the pilgrimage seems no longer to have Canterbury as its destination, but rather, I suspect, the Celestial City of which the Parson speaks.

If one insists that Chaucer was not a moralist but a comic writer (a distinction without a difference), then the device of the *persona* may be taken primarily as serving comedy. It has been said earlier that the several Chaucers must have inhabited one body, and in that sense the fictional first person is no fiction at all. In an oral tradition of literature the first person probably always shared the personality of his creator: thus Dante of the *Divine Comedy* was physically Dante the Florentine; the John Gower of the *Confessio* was also Chaucer’s friend John Gower; and Long Will was, I am sure, some one named William Langland, who was both long and wilful. And it is equally certain that Chaucer the pilgrim, “a popet in an arm t’enbrace,” was in every physical respect Chaucer the man, whom one can imagine reading his work to a courtly audience, as in the portrait appearing in one of the MSS. of *Troilus*. One can imagine also the delight of the audience which heard the Prologue read in this way, and which was aware of the similarities and dissimilarities between Chaucer, the man before them, and Chaucer the pilgrim, both of whom they could see with simultaneous vision. The Chaucer they knew was physically, one gathers, a little ludicrous; a bourgeois, but one who was known as a practical and successful man of the court; possessed perhaps of a certain diffidence of manner, reserved, deferential to the socially imposing persons with whom he was associated; a bit absent-minded, but affable and, one supposes, very good company—a good fellow; sagacious and highly perceptive. This Chaucer was telling them of another who, lacking some of his chief qualities, nevertheless possessed many of his characteristics, though in a different state of balance, and each one probably distorted just enough to become laughable without becoming unrecognizable: deference into a kind of snobbishness, affability into an over-readiness to please, practicality into Babbitry, perception into inspection, absence of mind into dimness of wit; a Chaucer acting in somerespects just as Chaucer himself might have acted but unlike his creator the kind of man, withal, who could mistake a group of stock satirical types for living persons endowed with all

sorts of superlative qualities. The constant interplay of these two Chaucers must have produced an exquisite and most ingratiating humor—as, to be sure, it still does. This comedy reaches its superb climax when Chaucer the pilgrim, resembling in so many ways Chaucer the poet, can answer the Host’s demand for a story only with a rhyme he “lerned longe agoon”—“Sir Thopas,” which bears the same complex relation to the kind of romance it satirizes and to Chaucer’s own poetry as Chaucer the pilgrim does to the pilgrims he describes and to Chaucer the poet.

#### E. Talbot Donaldson (essay date 1958)

SOURCE: “Troilus and Criseide,” in *Chaucer’s Poetry: An Anthology for the Modern Reader*, Scott, Foresman and Company, 1975, pp. 1129-44.

[In the following excerpt from an essay originally published in 1958, Donaldson presents the theme of Troilus and Criseyde as a paradoxical statement in which Chaucer asserts both the importance and the transitory nature of human values.]

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**G. D. Josipovici (essay date 1965)**

SOURCE: "Fiction and Game in *The Canterbury Tales*," in *The Critical Quarterly*, Vol. 7, No. 2, Summer, 1965, pp. 185-97.

[In the following excerpt, Josipovici explains the function of the game motif as a method of resolving immoral aspects of the "Miller's Tale" and "The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale," and as a method of ironic self-revelation that reveals the folly of the pilgrims.]

Wherever we turn in *The Canterbury Tales* [quotations are taken from *The Poetical Works of Chaucer*, ed. by F. N. Robinson (1933)] we are faced with a conflict between the moral and the immoral, the edifying and the unedifying, the religious and the secular. This conflict is first suggested by the narrator in the "General Prologue"; it provides the theme of a number of the headlinks; it forms the substance of the Pardoner's Prologue and Epilogue, and dominates the Parson's Prologue; and the work concludes with the Retraction, which appears to reflect Chaucer's final stand on this central issue. Yet *The Canterbury Tales*, unlike so many medieval works, including *Troilus and Criseyde*, does not find itself irremediably split in an attempted allegiance atone and the same time to the religious and to the secular. Although the conflict between the two stands at the centre of the poem it does not imply any submission by Chaucer to the conventions of his age at the expense of his artistic design. On the contrary, Chaucer uses this conflict to conduct a bold and original strategy whose aim is to free his poem from moral jurisdiction and ensure its autonomy as a fictional construct.

The first enunciation of the conflict occurs towards the close of the "General Prologue." The narrator has just finished telling of the dress, appearance, and number of the pilgrims, and explained why they were all assembled at the Tabard. Before going on with his story he pauses and addresses the reader:

But first I pray yow, of youre curteisye,  
That ye n'arete it nat my vileynye,  
Thogh that I pleyedly speke in this mateere,  
To telle yow hir wordes and hir cheere,  
Ne thogh I speke hir wordes proprely.  
For this ye knowen al so wel as I,  
Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,  
He moot reherce as ny as evere he kan  
Everich a word, if it be in his charge,  
Al speke he never so rudeliche and large,  
Or ellis he moot telle .  
He may nat spare, although he were his brother;  
He moot as wel seye o word as another.  
Crist spak hymself ful brode in hooly writ,  
And wel ye woot no vileynye is it.  
Eek Plato seith, whoso that kan hym rede,  
The wordes moote be cosyn to the dede.

On the face of it Chaucer is here merely protecting himself against possible charges of immorality. He is, he says, a mere reporter of stories and events. He writes down what he sees and hears, and he would be failing in his duty as impartial recorder were he to pass over in silence those tales that might cause offence: neither the manner nor the matter of the tales are to be imputed to him. The narrator appeals to a higher authority, truth, fidelity to fact, to exonerate him from charges of bawdiness. But beneath this concern lest he be accused of indecency lies another, and graver, concern: to free his poem from the bondage to reality and ensure its status as fiction. Paradoxically this can only be done by having the narrator insist on his purely reportorial status. The explanation of this paradox lies in the frequently noted fact that the pilgrim narrator of *The Canterbury Tales* is not to be identified with Chaucer, but is the poet's ironic creation. . . .

It is not only in the "General Prologue" that the pilgrim narrator affirms his purely reportorial status. He repeats his assertion in the Prologue to the "Miller's Tale," where his passive role is emphasized by making the drunken miller insist on telling his bawdy tale despite the vigorous efforts of the Host and the Reeve to stop him. It seems that he is determined to tell his story whether the pilgrims like it or not, and the narrator warns his readers that those who are squeamish should move on to less offensive tales. And he concludes:

The Millere is a cherl, ye knowe wel this;  
So was the Reve eek and othere mo,  
And harlotrie they tolden bothe two.  
Avyseth yow, and put me out of blame;  
And eek men shal nat maken ernest of game.

In other words, if the reader should choose to read the ensuing tale he should not be offended even if it does

turn out to be bawdy because none of it is meant to be taken seriously, it is all part of a game. Chaucer is once more assuring us that this is a fiction and not to be confused with reality. Unlike the pilgrims, who must listen to the Miller whether they like it or not, the reader is free to skip the tale if he chooses; but even if he doesn't, to take offence at such a tale is to make the same sort of error as is made by those listeners who send money for the relief of the heroine of a radio serial. It is to forget that *The Canterbury Tales* is not a veridical report but a game played by Chaucer with his readers.

Chaucer is able to introduce the notion of game at this point because here his game with the reader coincides with another game, played within his poem by the pilgrims. It is the pilgrim narrator as well as the poet who insists that the words of the Miller are only a "game." The kind of relationship which Chaucer has established between himself, his poem, and the reader, is mirrored in the relationship established *within the poem* between the pilgrim storytellers, their material, and their audience.

It is the Host who first suggests that the pilgrims play a game to relieve the boredom of the journey to Canterbury, and it is he who lays down the rules for this game when the company assents to his suggestion. Each person is to tell two tales on the way to the shrine and two on the way back; the teller of the best tale is to be given dinner by all the other pilgrims; and anyone who fails to abide by the decisions of Harry Bailly is to pay a forfeit. The pilgrims agree to these rules, and, with the drawing of the shortest "cut" by the Knight on the following morning, the game is on. The ensuing tales, then, are not simply stories told to pass away the time on the road to Canterbury; they are part of a game, with rules of its own, which all the pilgrims have e of *The Canterbury Tales* stands a game, mirroring that other game, which poet and reader have agreed to play. Both games take place within a context of real life, but, because they are games, the participants are answerable to none of the laws which govern real life, but only to those rules which they have agreed upon beforehand.

The Host, who has set himself up as arbiter, has, it soon transpires, very clear ideas as to what it is he requires from a story. His words to the Clerk form perhaps the best summary of his attitude:

Telle us som myrie tale, by youre fey!  
For what man that is entred in a pley,  
He nedes moot unto the pley assente.  
But precheth nat, as freres doon in Lente,  
To make us for oure olde synnes wepe,  
Ne that thy tale make us nat to slepe.

The primary requirement is that the story must not be boring. The Host is willing to listen to a tale in the high style or the low style, in prose or verse, a saint's life or a fabliau. But if he considers the tale boring then he has no hesitation in cutting it short and asking for something better. The ultimate crime of the story-teller is to send his audience to sleep, for to do so is to destroy the very

*raison d'être* of the story: you cannot very well tell a tale without listeners, as he points out to the Monk.

It is partly for this reason too that the Host warns pilgrim after pilgrim not to preach. A sermon for the Host represents the acme of boredom. But there is another reason for his dislike of preaching, which is related to the desire that a story should hold the listener's interest, but which must not be confused with it. What the Host particularly dislikes about preaching is that the preacher has designs on his listeners. Although Harry Bailly never loses a chance to attack or ridicule preachers, he has nothing against them as such. His attitude is that they have no place in his game. The whole point of a game, after all, is that it is freely joined, that the only laws are the rules that have been agreed upon beforehand. Hence propaganda of any sort, however exalted the motive, has no place in a game.

The Parson is obviously the chief offender in this respect. In the "General Prologue" we see him as an ideal figure who, with the Knight, the Plowman and the Clerk is contrasted to all the other pilgrims by the fact that with him the word does indeed stick close to the deed: "first he wroughte, and afterwards he taughte." In all the other ecclesiastics—and most of the laymen—the gap between the word and the deed, the habit and the person, is more or less large, and one of the functions of the irony in the "General Prologue" is to reveal the degree of deviation. In the Prologue we are given an idealized description of the Parson, and we have to accept it since we are not allowed to see him in action. But later, on two separate occasions before he tells his own tale we do so see him, and in both he is involved in a quarrel with the Host.

In the Epilogue to the "Man of Law's Tale" Harry Bailly turns to him and asks him for a tale, "by Goddes dignitee." The Parson's only answer is to reprove him for swearing; whereupon he turns to the other pilgrims in mock surprise, and warns them that they "schal han a predicacioun," that "this Lollere heer wil prechen us somewhat." But at once the Shipman leaps in:

"Nay by my fader soule, that schal he nat!"  
Seyde the Shipman; "heer schal he nat preche;  
He schal no gospel glosen here ne teche."

This time the Parson subsides into silence, but the next time he and Harry Bailly clash it is he who wins the victory. For some unknown reason Chaucer changed his mind about the number of tales he was going to tell, and in the Parson's Prologue it transpires that all the tales have been told except for that of the Parson. The Host thus turns to him:

"Sire preest," quod he, "artow a vicary?  
Or arte a person? sey sooth, by thy fey!  
Be what thou be, ne breke thou nat oure pley;  
For every man, save thou, hath toold his tale . . .  
Telle us a fable anon, for cokkes bones!"

But once again the Parson reprehends him. He will take part in the "pley," but only on his own terms:

"Thou getest fable noon ytoold for me;  
For Paul, that writeth unto Thymothee,  
Repreveth hem that weyven soothfastnesse,  
And tellen fables and swich wrecchednesse . . .  
For which I seye, if that yow list to heere  
Moralitee and vertuouse mateere,  
And thanne that ye wol yeve me audience,  
I wol ful fayn, at Cristes reverence,  
Do you plesaunce leefful, as I kan."

The figure who emerges from these two scenes is not that of the ideal ecclesiastic of the "General Prologue," but a type as common as the Friar and the Summoner: a medieval Puritan rigidly opposed to any form of swearing and to all but overtly moral tales on the grounds that they are lies and hence conducive to sin. And as we must weigh the words of the Friar and the Summoner against their deeds, so it would be incorrect to see Chaucer everywhere behind the Parson. Medieval scholars have for a long time now been stressing that it would be wrong to see the "Parson's Tale" as deliberately boring in the way that the "Monk's" is meant to be, and they have insisted that there is no irony in the apparent discrepancy between the Host's admonition to "be fructuous, and that in litel space," and the length and dryness of the ensuing sermon. Sermons in the middle ages were one of the only forms of entertainment, they remind us, and men were quite used to even longer ones than the Parson's. At the same time they have been pointing out that it was traditional in the middle ages to end a collection of tales with a particularly moral one, as Boccaccio does in the *Decameron*, for instance. Such warnings are certainly necessary, for there is nothing easier than to foist one's own sympathies on an ironic writer. But they tend, I believe, to do less than justice to Chaucer's artistry, and to blur the larger patterns of the poem.

In his *Essay on the "Vita Nuova"* C. S. Singleton has convincingly argued that only Dante, in the whole of the middle ages, was able to reconcile, artistically, human and divine love. Even *Troilus and Criseyde*, so poised a work in almost every respect, ultimately fails to reconcile the two, and, however one may justify the moral with which it ends, is a lesser work for the failure. The problem, of course, is not simply one of reconciling the love of woman and the love of God. It is equally the problem of reconciling the work of art with the Cot rest in the creations of this world, but must use them to come to God. As such, the problem is less epistemological than artistic. Dante's solution was to make of Beatrice an analogy for Christ. Beatrice is not an allegory of Christ, as Renaissance interpreters believed. Only *through* her, as Singleton and Charles Williams have shown, can Dante come to God. The method of analogy was never Chaucer's, but in the *Canterbury Tales* he hit upon a solution that left him as much artistic freedom as Dante had enjoyed, but of a kind new to the middle ages. He stressed the fact that his poem was a fiction. What this means is that every episode, every statement in the poem is enveloped in a web of irony which cannot be broken by reference to laws or rules in operation outside the fictional construct. So that if, from one point of view we assent to the right-

ness of the Parson's telling the last tale of all, and accept as the necessary prelude to salvation a sermon on penitence, from another the ironic device of the fictional narrator permits us to question the validity of the Parson's methods, and frees us from taking at its face value the retractation which follows. The Parson's sermon becomes an element of the poem, to be listened to as morality by the pilgrims, but read as fiction by the reader. For if the game devised by the Host breaks down at the close of the journey, the game played by Chaucer with his readers holds to the end.

What the Host objects to in the Parson is his tendency to destroy the game by substituting his own rules for those agreed to by the pilgrims. But Harry Bailly is not so disinterested himself as he would have one believe. To begin with there is the question of the prize dinner. Whoever wins, part of the spoils will go to the keeper of the Tabard who has undertaken to prepare the meal. But there is another, less material advantage which accrues to the organiser of the game: his role as docent allows him to indulge his love of mockery and sarcasm and his need to cover the rules. Thus he can insult the Cook and the Monk to their faces, while avoiding their censure by immediately reminding them to

. . . be nat wroth for game;  
A man may seye ful sooth in game and play.

The Parson refuses to play the game. He confuses fiction with falsehood, and stands firm in his determination to preach a sermon rather than tell a tale. The Host plays the game, but he is even more at fault than the Parson for he plays it for his own ends. So long as it is he who is making the jokes he is only too eager to invoke the game as an excuse; but as soon as the joke turns on himself he forgets all about the game and its rules in his blind anger at the joker. As the Pardoner concludes his tale the Host finds that for the first time the joke is on him, and he does not like it.

"The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale" stands at the centre of *The Canterbury Tales*. It reveals the final turn of the ironic screw. Other tales had been told with another end in view than the winning of the prize dinner. The Miller had told a tale about a carpenter who aimed higher than was natural and so fell lower, and the Reeve had replied in similar vein with a story about a miller. The pilgrims could sit back and laugh at the knaves who fool others only to be fooled in their turn through lack of self-knowledge, and the reader could laugh with them. But the Pardoner has designs upon the whole company of pilgrims, and so, implicitly, upon ourselves, the readers.

What the Pardoner does is to tell the company that he is going to fool them, and then to go ahead and do it. As the pilgrims drink in the conclusion of the tale of the three rioters and submit to the inevitable moral:

Now, goode men, God foryeve yow youre trespas,  
And ware yow fro the synne of avarice!  
Myn hooly pardoun may yow alle warice,

So that ye offre nobles or sterlynges,  
Or elles silver broches, spoones, rynges.

they automatically reach into their pockets, only to be brought up sharp by the sudden realisation that the Pardoner is only going through his old routine, which he had explained at length in his Prologue. The reaction of the Host is violent in the extreme:

But, by the croys which that Seint Eleyne fond,  
I wolde I hadde thy coillons in myn hond  
In stide of relikes or of seintuarie.

The Pardoner grows speechless with indignation at this, and a fight seems to be about to break out when the Knight interposes, reminding Harry Bailly of what he had himself so often said to cover up his own insults, that all this is nothing but a game:

Namoore of this, for it is right ynough!  
Sire Pardoner, be glad and myrie of cheere;  
And ye, sire Hoost, that been to me so deere,  
I prey yow that ye kisse the Pardoner.  
And Pardoner, I prey thee, drawe thee neer,  
And, as we diden, lat us laughe and pleye.

It would be a mistake to imagine that the Host is angry because the Pardoner has asked him for money. What arouses his indignation is that the Pardoner has fooled him. The Pardoner is not out to make money off the pilgrims, otherwise he would never have revealed to them so candidly his methods of doing so in his Prologue. What he is out for is to prove the power of his words, and in order to succeed he has to make the pilgrims see that he has been able to fool them despite their previous knowledge of his methods. In that moment between the conclusion of his tale and the outraged cry of the Host, the moment when the power of his rhetoric wears off enough to be recognised as such, he has won his victory. And as the power he is allowed to exercise over others under cover of the game seemed more important to the Host than the money he might make over the prize dinner, so we may be sure that the Pardoner would not have foregone his mental triumph for all the relics in the world.

But what in fact has the Pardoner done that was so obnoxious? After all, he has only played the game to its limits. His tale is the very reverse of that of the Parson, since it accepts itself as merely a tale. Although on the one level it is aimed at making a fool of everybody, on another level it is not aimed against anyone—except those who refuse to recognise it as a fiction, a tale told as part of a game. . . .

"The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale" stands at the centre of *The Canterbury Tales* because it is a paradigm of the whole poem. All the tales, and the poem as a whole, can be seen as an effort to bring to the consciousness of the reader the fact that it is easier to lay down rules for others than to abide by them oneself, easier to invoke the game when it is oneself who is making the jokes than when one is the victim of a joke. This is the theme of the tales of

the Miller, the Reeve, the Merchant, and the Nun's Priest. But it is also the theme of the debate between the Miller and the Reeve, the Friar and the Summoner. The Miller is as blind to the mote in his own eye as is John the Carpenter, the gull of his tale. But the Reeve, who points this out to him, and goes on to tell a tale of a gulled miller, is equally blind. All the pilgrims and the characters in their tales are quite capable of seeing the folly of others, but none is capable of seeing that he too is tainted. And the regression from John the Carpenter to the Miller to the Reeve can end only with one person: the reader. After he has laughed with the Miller at John, and with Chaucer and the Reeve at the Miller, and with Chaucer at the Reeve, the reader suddenly finds, as the Host found at the close of the Pardoner's tale, that the joke is on himself. And at this point there is only one way of escape: to acknowledge one's folly and learn from the game. The Pardoner's ironic self-revelation is a mirror of Chaucer's insistence that his poem is not truth but fiction.

Norman Knox (essay date 1965)

SOURCE: "The Satiric Pattern of *The Canterbury Tales*," in *Six Satirists*, edited by Beekman W. Cottrell et al., Carnegie Institute of Technology, 1965, pp. 17-34.

[Knox has written a study of irony in literature from 1500 to 1755. In the following essay, Knox analyzes the forms of irony in the *Canterbury Tales*.]

Suppose we put to ourselves this question: To what extent, precisely, are the *Canterbury Tales* a work of satire? From one point of view we might answer the question very easily, simply by running through the *Tales* collecting an exhibit of disengaged passages and episodes which strike us as obviously satiric. But suppose we put the question this way: To what extent are the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole a work of satire? We now face difficulties, at least two of them, which we did not have as long as we considered the *Tales* only a collection of bits and pieces.

The first difficulty is that in fact the *Tales* are a collection of bits and pieces. What we have are nine fragments of a structure which Chaucer drew up plans for but which, whether because of weariness, boredom, or death, he never finished. We are not sure how these particular pieces were meant to fit in, nor how Chaucer might have changed their shape as he worried them into place. On the other hand, everyone knows what his overall plan was. Now when a writer, after trotting out thirty characters in a row, informs us that we are about to hear 120 short stories, it is not unreasonable to suppose that the thirty narrators are merely glue to hold the stories together, that telling the stories themselves is what he really wants to do. Again, even in the light of Chaucer's overall plan, we seem to be dealing with fragments. If in this sense we are dealing with a collection of fragments, then the question we started out from is idle, for such a collection is not very susceptible to being talked about as a whole. Fortunately for our enterprise, it is now generally agreed that Chaucer's plan

was more ambitious than we might at first glance suppose. Refusing to content himself with a perfunctory framework, he apparently hoped so to. With this critical backing, then, we may go ahead on the assumption that it is not entirely idle to talk about the nature of the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole, even though our conception of that whole must always remain hypothetical.

Our second difficulty becomes clear when we review the variety of the fragments we do have. They range from earthy, uproarious farce through sophisticated burlesque, religious and romantic idealism, to superb melodrama. No tales in the collection are more uproariously funny than the fabliaux. Four of them find the thread of their plots in the clever tricks by which a young bachelor manages to seduce another man's wife. Ordinarily we might take this somewhat seriously, but in Chaucer's tales the characters themselves are not deeply involved emotionally in the event—though of course they are involved in less profound ways; equally important, the plot of each tale becomes such a magnificently intricate machine for discomfiting certain of the characters that we lose our sense of reality in watching it work itself out.

An instructive contrast with the fabliaux is the "Franklin's Tale." Here too a handsome young fellow wants to seduce another man's wife. But the young fellow is a squire, the husband a knight, and his wife a noble lady. Adultery is important to these people, not because their emotions are deeply involved, but because their ideals of behavior are. Consequently, even though the squire calls in a magician to remove all the rocks from the coast of Brittany, he cannot bring himself, his prize in his grasp, to act less nobly than he should. The event does not occur and all the characters leave the stage feeling very noble indeed. We are now clearly into the realm of ideals: knights and squires, great ladies and beautiful damsels, magnificent tournaments and undying, unrequited love. On the whole, Chaucer asks us to take the tales which deal with these matters with some seriousness, but in the unfinished "Sir Topaz," he gives us an amusing burlesque of their preposterous aspects.

Chaucer adopts a more consistently serious tone in the tales which celebrate Christian faith and related virtues. The plot pattern of these tales is a simple and familiar one: in each, a heroine—all the protagonists are women except one, who is a small boy—a heroine of saint-like perfection undergoes a terrible trial of her faith or virtue. These do not desert her and her cause emerges triumphant, either because of her own actions or because of the miraculous intervention of Heaven. No doubt for us these tales seem in many ways bigoted, violent, naive. But they also express the passionate faith and the intense morality—at least on the theoretical level—so often to be found in the Middle Ages. In the "Parson's Tale" and the "Tale of Melibee" Chaucer gives us a more reasonable and discriminating expression of these characteristics—and a duller one. Neither is really a story at all. There is a good deal of hard-headed worldly wisdom in the Melibee, and several of the other *Canterbury Tales* are of the sort often used to illustrate and teach such wisdom. For instance,

both the "Manciple's" and the "Nun's Priest's" tales are at bottom fables, like Aesop's fables, the characters animals whose small adventures point a moral.

These are the *Canterbury Tales*, and the difficulty is clear enough. When we put the label *satire* under *Gulliver's Travels* we are allowed to go our ways in peace, for *Gulliver's Travels* is one of the things everyone means when he talks about satire. But when, after looking at the miscellany I have sketched above, we put the question whether this is satire, we come face to face not only with the problem of defining the nature of the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole, insofar as we can, but also with the problem of defining the farthest outskirts of meaning in our term. I would be happier if we could skirt the maze of definition in this corner of the critical garden, but we cannot. Unless we establish a few elementary distinctions we will not reach any conclusion at all. "Satire," Northrop Frye asserts in his broadly based *Anatomy of Criticism*, as useful a book for matters of this sort as we will find, "satire is militant irony: its moral norms are relatively clear, and it assumes standards against which the grotesque and absurd are measured. Sheer invective or name-calling . . . is satire in which there is relatively little irony: on the other hand, whenever a reader is not sure what the author's attitude is or what his own is supposed to be, we have irony with relatively little satire." Frye has gone directly to the center of the maze, for if it is difficult to define *satire*, a reader of current literary criticism may be pardoned for feeling that it is impossible to define *irony*. But let us try. Perhaps, if we keep matters as basic and as simple as possible, we can find the distinctions we need.

One distinction sometimes made by the better college textbooks—and not made often enough by professional critics—is that between irony of language and irony of situation. If I happen to see a truck driver, his face distorted with brute fury, swearing and gesturing at a traffic officer, and if I turn to a companion and say, "There's pretty fellow," I am using irony of language: the meaning of the words I use does not fit the object we both see in front of us. Suppose, then, that as the officer, ready to give as good as he got, walks over to the truck driver, there arrives on the scene a little old lady thrusting up a massive poster: "Have You Made Your Peace With God?" It may strike me that the little old lady and the two men, though they are all situated on the same streetcorner, are not really operating in the same world, and if it does so strike me, I am aware of irony in the situation.

The above distinction may seem an unimpressive one, but no other is as fundamental, whether we think in terms of the history of literary criticism or of the theory of literary structure. Irony of language arises out of the interaction between two of the levels of any literary structure: the verbal level and the level that is often called the *world* created in our imaginations. Irony of situation, on the other hand, arises out of the interaction between two elements at the *world* level, and it need not depend any more on the verbal level than does any other element in the imagined world. Again, when we turn to the history of literary terms, we find that before the late eighteenth

century, the word *irony* was virtually always used to mean irony of language. Irony of situation, as a meaning available in the word *irony* itself, seems to be the invention of the last two centuries.

If this distinction is fundamental, it ought to lead us to some useful observations, and I think it does. Let us examine three.

(1) If we have a solid historical understanding of a literary text, solid in relation to the author, the language, and the cultural milieu, we can say with some certainty whether and where that text exhibits irony of language. We know what the author means by the words he uses, and the world to which these words correspond or do not correspond, complex as it may be, is in front of us. Of course there are borderline cases, but they are borderline because our historical understanding of the text is not fine enough. On the other hand, we cannot say with the same kind of certainty whether a given text "contains" irony of situation. The reason is simply that here a good deal depends on the reader's "philosophy of life," to use a handy phrase. Every teacher has, at one time or another, been obliged to *tell* his students that there is an ironic conflict in the world of a Hardy poem, a conflict which Hardy "put into" the poem, and teachers of the metaphysical poets are nowadays obliged to warn students that Donne probably did not "put into" his poems all the ironic conflicts which critics of a few years ago were determined to see there. But suppose a "world picture" or an author's personal "world view" does not control us? Then everything depends on the point of view—the reader's point of view. For the extreme Platonist who thinks the world ought to be one clear, unbroken light, everything except a blank mirror is riddled with irony. This explains why it is so easy for graduate students and other industrious critics to turn out paper after paper on "Irony in——."

The above observation may also help us to a convenient name for the irony of situation. *Verbal irony* is an accurate and widely accepted name for many of the ironies of language; I intend to use it to cover all of them. When we want to talk about the irony of situation, however, we are confronted with a number of terms that are either too narrow or too broad: *Socratic irony*, *Sophoclean irony*, *dramatic irony*, *irony of fate*, *cosmic irony*, *philosophic irony*, and worst of all, the word *irony* without a modifier—a popular usage which confuses the whole issue. Since the term *Philosophic irony* has had some currency, since it has narrowed the meaning in the direction we want to go, and since the irony of situation does in fact depend on the philosophic angle from which a situation is viewed, I intend to adopt that term to cover all the ironies except verbal ones.

(2) In his analysis of the ironic *mode*, to return to Northrop Frye for a moment, he points out that the writer who specializes in this mode generally presents his ironic world without comment. That is, he employs philosophic irony but not verbal irony. In the broad historical categories Frye works in, this is probably true enough, but we should not go on to suppose that there is a necessary antagonism between verbal and philosophic irony. They may coexist



in all sorts of ways, and it is perhaps worth saying that only some of these ways have been usefully explored, in, for instance, studies of dramatic and Socratic irony.

(3) Finally, to make the last of our three observations, we can say that verbal irony is always used at least partly for the purposes of satire or, much less frequently, of compliment; philosophic irony, on the other hand, may be used for the purposes of satire or it may not. And this brings us, at last, back to Chaucer.

What I wish to do, now that some of the ground has been cleared, is to examine certain aspects of irony in the *Canterbury Tales*, aspects which will exhibit several of the basic kinds of verbal and philosophic irony both in Chaucer and in general, and having done this, I will return to our initial question. Let us begin with the "Pardoner's Tale."

It is the time of the plague when thousands are dying. Three young men, drunk and riotous, hear the hand-bell clink as a coffin is borne past the tavern on the way to church. "Whose corpse is in that coffin passing by?" one of the men calls to the serving lad. "He was a friend of yours," is the answer; "a privy thief, they call him Death . . . speared him through the heart. . . ." The youths are infuriated. Inquiring where Death lives, they set out in a rush to kill him. On their way they meet an old man, one of the most ambiguous and haunting figures in English literature. He is not eager to give directions, but when they insist he points to a grove of trees where, he says, Death is waiting. For us the warning is clear, of course, but the drunken youths cannot grasp it. What they find under the tree is a great pile of gold. Visions of endless wealth and pleasure fill their minds; death is forgotten. One runs eagerly into town to fetch bread and wine while the other two stay to guard the gold—and to plot the death of their absent friend. Knowing this, we follow the third youth into an apothecary's shop. "Sell me some poison," he says, "I have a lot of rats I want to kill . . . I'll get even . . . with vermin that destroy a man by night." We think at once of his two comrades waiting, weapons in hand, under the tree, but he, of course, is all unconscious of the sinister meaning in his excuse. When he returns to his comrades, his wine bottles filled with poison, they murder him. "Now for a drink. Sit down and let's be merry," one of the murderers says. And Chaucer has him add, "For later on there'll be the corpse to bury." And he drinks the poisoned wine.

What we have here in the "Pardoner's Tale" is the pattern of ironies sometimes called Sophoclean, sometimes dramatic, sometimes a combination of dramatic irony and the irony of fate. But let us analyze the pattern in our own terms. The dominant irony is philosophic, and so plain I don't suppose anyone would doubt that Chaucer put it in. The chief characters set out to find happiness, first by seeking the death of Death, then by pursuing the glorious life a pile of gold is reputed to bring. All their efforts lead only to the grave. Some readers, possibly, feel "the mockery which our ultimate achievement casts on rosy expectations," to quote Robert K. Root, but I do not myself think that the weight of the irony falls in quite this direction.

The wages of sin is death: events turn out ironically because the supernal powers are moral powers and the aspirations of the three youths are sinful. If satire is militant irony in which the moral norms are clear, then the "Pardoner's Tale" is, surely, to some extent satiric. It becomes more certainly so if one feels, as I do, that the young men's inability to grasp life by the right handle makes them seem rather stupid, even in places grotesque, a feeling that may come from the way Chaucer mixes realism and allegory in this particular story.

At the verbal level of this tale there are several ironies like "For later on there'll be the corpse to bury." When the Old Man advises the three youths that they will find Death under a tree, his statement conflicts with the actual fact, for they find gold there, and in its second meaning it conflicts with the view of the situation taken by the youths: they cannot see death in the gold. It is perfectly true, of course, that in this second sense the statement accurately reflects the ultimate turn of events and that we as the audience should suspect this, but we are not, after all, part of the *world* of the tale, and if the three youths, who are part of that world, could see the truth in the statement, it would immediately cease to be ironic. From the point of view of dramatic effect, however, an important function of these verbal ironies is to bring into focus for the audience the whole dramatic shock of the ironic situation, which for a startled moment we see in all clarity. We may even find a parallel to the duplicity of the events in the duplicity of the language.

Verbal ironies of this sort have also their independent effect, aside from underlining the philosophic irony, and here, as elsewhere, it is satiric, for no character can survive the unrecognized passage of a meaning over his head without incurring some loss. The reader inevitably convicts him of general stupidity, moral stupidity, a wrong view of life, a wrong view of himself, or whatever. In the "Pardoner's Tale," the three roisterers seem to be convicted not only of moral obtuseness but of a certain stupid, though superficially shrewd, vulgarity, and at times there is even an element of grotesque comedy in the tone, though that is on the whole not, we would agree, comic. In this tale, then, verbal and philosophic irony are working together to reach the same satiric ends. And we can probably say that although the philosophic irony could exist alone, it is not easy to see how the verbal irony could; its philosophic basis in this case is essential.

We might now pursue the sort of analysis we have just made through a number of the *Canterbury Tales*, and perhaps it would be a profitable thing to do. No doubt we would find considerable variety, as I suggested in my review of the tales at the beginning of this essay, variety in the importance of the part, if any, which satiric ironies play, variety in the tone they are given, and even variety in the norms the stories appeal to. But if I may take this variety for granted, I would like to turn now not to further analysis of individual tales but to our image of the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole, an image in which the tales are parts of a larger pattern. From this point of view, I suspect, the exact nature of the various

tales will not be so important as the fact that they are various, and we will also see more directly some kind of answer to our initial question.

We recall that some thirty people are making the pilgrimage. Obviously there is opportunity for all sorts of tension and excitement in a group like this. At the beginning things go quietly. It is a bright April morning and the pilgrims have ambled as far as St. Thomas's watering-place. For the first story our Host turns to the Knight, who recounts a tale of chivalry and romantic love. All the pilgrims, especially the gentlefolk, agree it is a noble story. "Come on, Sir Monk," says the Host, now it is your turn. But by this time the Miller is very drunk, "straddled on his horse, half-on, half-off, and in no mood for manners." He is determined to tell a very funny story about an old carpenter and his wife. At this the Reeve, who is himself a carpenter and not young, looks up to shout, "Give over with your drunken harlotry." But nothing will stop the Miller, who tells his riotous tale to the amusement of nearly everyone. The Reeve, however, is still angry. I'll pay you back for that story, he says, and proceeds to tell a fabliau about how a miller's eye was bleared. This so amuses the Cook, who claws his back for joy, that he asks leave to tell a little joke that occurred in his city, and we get still a third fabliau. So the first fragment ends.

The second begins with a tale of Christian virtue and fortitude told, perhaps surprisingly, by the Man-of-Law, who does not strike us as an especially devout person. Thinking to preserve the decorous tone, our Host, with his habitual harmless profanity, asks the Parson for a tale, whereupon the Parson reproves him for swearing. "Ho! . . . I smell a Lollard in the wind," exclaims the Host, at which the Shipman starts. There will be no heretical preaching while he is around, he exclaims. "My jolly body has a tale to tell!" And he swings into a fabliau. He is followed by the Prioress, who as a virgin dedicated to the Church quite appropriately tells a story celebrating the miracle of the Virgin. Soberness descends upon the crowd. Hoping to shake them up again the Host turns to Chaucer, poking fun at Chaucer's plump, well-padded figure and his elvish silence. Without anger Chaucer begins the "Tale of Sir Topaz." Suddenly the Host breaks in: "No more of this for God's dear dignity!" he exclaims; "My ears are aching from your frowsty story!" Chaucer is mildly offended, but acquiesces and now tells the prose Tale of Melibee. In this Dame Prudence, a remarkably wise woman and wife, argues that husbands should trust their wives and follow their advice. Much struck by Dame Prudence, the Host describes for his fellow pilgrims his own battling shrew of a wife. In fact the question whether husband or wife should rule the roost seems a sore one for a number of pilgrims, for when his turn comes the Nun's Priest, who works under the thumb of a woman, goes out of his way to illustrate how misleading women's advice really is. The Wife of Bath determinedly reasserts wives' prerogatives, and in passing takes a dig at all clerks like the Priest. Each in his turn—the Clerk, the Merchant, the Squire and the Franklin—all, directly or indirectly through the tales they tell, have something to say on this interesting subject. And so the procession moves on amidst quar-

rels and sudden friendships, jokes, and unexpected revelations. It is the unpredictable, confusing, characteristic human chaos, and as we move along with it we gradually become aware of a unity in the *Canterbury Tales*.

In modern English—or American—life probably nothing except an air-raided shelter would gather into one group, a group with a common purpose, such a diverse collection of individuals as were the Canterbury pilgrims. But medieval religion was accepted as solid fact by everyone, the Miller and the Reeve as well as the Prioress and the Parson. In observing its rites everyone felt himself a member of one community. Chaucer does not in fact represent everyone among his pilgrims, but so diverse are the social types he does represent that he gives us the impression almost of a complete society joined in pilgrimage. As we watch it move along the road across southern England, there grows up in us the sense of a longer pilgrimage moving toward another goal, a goal of which Canterbury is the local symbol.

But I have said nothing of another element which also brings unity and something more to the unfinished *Tales*. I am thinking of the role played by their narrator, the pilgrim Chaucer. We have been talking as though the *Canterbury Tales* were a play the author of which never appears, but in fact when the poem begins the first character we meet is Chaucer himself. As W. W. Lawrence says, he takes us into his confidence at once, as though we were "dear and intimate friend[s], from whom he will keep no secrets and whom he will never willingly deceive——." It all happened, Chaucer begins, exactly as I will tell you, for I was there:

. . . one day

In Southwark, at *The Tabard*, as I lay  
Ready to go on pilgrimage and start  
For Canterbury, most devout at heart,  
At night there came into that hostelry  
Some nine and twenty in a company  
Of sundry folk happening then to fall  
In fellowship, and they were pilgrims all  
That towards Canterbury meant to ride.

("General Prologue," *The Canterbury Tales*,  
translated by Nevill Coghill)

So obviously candid and unpremeditated are his words, so almost naive, that we trust him at once. Here is a fellow who will indeed tell us what happened; he has not the self-consciousness to distort and color things.

"While I have time and space," he goes on, let me describe the other pilgrims. He begins with the Knight, his son the Squire, and their servant the Yeoman, and clearly he admires them all. "A most distinguished man . . . a true, perfect knight," he says, and his son was just what a fine young squire should be, handsome, brave and strong, courteous, "a lad of fire." All the facts he gives us confirm his judgment. Here, indeed, were admirable people. As he turns now to the Prioress, her too he finds admirable. She never, he points out, swore any oath worse than "By St. Loy," who, we know, had been a remarkably diplomat-

ic, courteous, and handsome saint. She spoke extremely dainty French, in the manner of the English school at Stratford, and her manners were exquisite. She was always "straining to counterfeit a courtly kind of grace." Especially appealing was her tender-heartedness; if she saw a mouse in a trap or a dog beaten she would burst into tears. And finally, he says, she wore a bright golden brooch on which was engraved, "Love conquers all." For the first time we hesitate, somehow, to concur with the judgment of our honest guide. His prioress sounds very charming, yes, but there is a note of affectation about her, and we pause for a moment over the question whether a prioress, who devotes her life to religion and the education of young girls, ought to swear at all, even by so nice a saint as St. Loy. We are bothered too by her straining after courtly graces when she has in a sense rejected the worldly court. Should she not weep for the sorrows of men, rather than for those of small mice and mistreated puppies?—But we are being overcritical. We are breaking this gracious woman on the wheel of large ethical and social standards she had not the slightest intention of offending against. Still, a hint of doubt remains as we turn to the Monk.

Here, certainly, there can be no doubt. Our guide is all enthusiasm. "A manly man," he says of the Monk, "fit to be an Abbot," fit really to be exhibited as the paragon of monks: plump, bright-eyed, full of the zest of life. He loved good food and hunting, owned a fine horse and greyhounds swift as birds. His monk's garb was the finest to be had, trimmed with the most expensive fur in the country, the hood fastened with a gold pin in the shape of a lover's knot. As for studying old books, working the land, turning his back upon worldly temptations and riches, as St. Benedict and St. Augustine require of monks, he rejected them all as old-fashioned notions. "And," our honest Chaucer relates,

I said I agreed with his opinion;  
 What! Study until reason lost dominion  
 Poring on books in cloisters? Must he toil  
 As Austin bade and till the very soil?  
 Was he to leave the world upon the shelf?  
 Let Austin have his labor to himself.

Is this our admirable Chaucer speaking? Surely he is not taken in by such arrogant hypocrisy. Even as practical, hard-headed men of the world we expect the proprieties to be observed. A man of God should at least pretend a little. This fellow openly flouts the very doctrines he is expected to live by. And here is Chaucer praising him, even going him one step better! Honest as our guide seems to be, we begin to suspect him of gullibility, and the further we read the stronger our suspicion becomes. Apparently he accepts everything. He accords the same praise, the same objectivity, to the most flagrant cheats and liars among the pilgrims as he does to the most upright and conscientious of them. In fact, the worse they are the more enthusiastic he becomes.

He does have, however, one redeeming trait. As you will understand, he says, "I'm short of wit," and we are happy

to see that he recognizes this handicap. When later in the pilgrimage the lawyer speaks slightly of Chaucer's poetry, Chaucer himself very sensibly keeps quiet, and when the Host pokes fun at his plumpness and shyness, he replies:

"Host, . . . I hope you are not one  
 To take it in bad part if I'm a dunce;  
 I know only a rhyme which, for the nonce,  
 I learnt."

And he recites the hilariously bad "Rime of Sir Topaz," so bad that the Host stops him in exasperation. Well, we think, it is awful stuff if you take it seriously, but at the same time it very cleverly exaggerates and thereby reveals what is wrong with the worst metrical romances. Perhaps the Host is a little obtuse not to see this. But Chaucer seems totally unaware that he has beguiled the Host into betraying himself.

This, then, is our pilgrim Chaucer. Virginia Woolf catches his character exactly. As his simple, friendly, ingenuous narrative proceeds, suddenly, she says, "out from behind peeps the face of Chaucer, grinning, malicious, in league with all foxes, donkeys, and hens . . . witty, intellectual, French, at the same time based upon a broad bottom of English humor." The game he plays is as old as Socrates and the *ieron* of Greek comedy. "What a very stupid fellow I am," these mockers tell us, "but my friend here is most admirable, most admirable indeed. You can see that for yourself." And as they turn the searchlight of their praise on this character or that, every wart, wrinkle, and blemish is exposed by the merciless glare, and woe unto those who are not, indeed, praiseworthy.

Let us stand back, now, from this character and this scene, and see what in general we have. We have, first, two groups of verbal ironies: Chaucer's comments and verbal performances which misrepresent himself; his comments which misrepresent the other pilgrims. Few of these are doubtful. Nothing we know of Chaucer allows us to accept him as "short of wit," and nothing we know of fourteenth century norms allows us to accept the Monk as genuinely "fit to be an abbot." Both groups of ironies function satirically in two ways. They both force us to take a hard look at the actual nature of the object: at Chaucer's delightful sophistication, at the Monk's hard-boiled worldliness; and they both hold up to ridicule the characters over whose heads the ironies pass unrecognized; Harry Bailey is caught flat-footed by Sir Topaz, and the Monk by Chaucer's praise. The norms applied throughout are definite and positive, the norms of Geoffrey Chaucer's sensitive intelligence, both moral and artistic: the Monk is wrong, and Harry Bailey is wrong.

The verbal ironies have also an effect similar to that we observed in the "Pardoner's Tale." Quite early in the "Prologue," I would say, we become aware of the part we must play in Chaucer's game—when he agrees so heartily with the Monk, to be exact. Now that we know our author is capable of sly irony, we read on looking for other ironies, and so often do we find them that by the

time we end the "Prologue," our suspicions are aroused by every incongruity, we are hounds sniffing after the slightest scent of a quarry. Thus Chaucer, by lighting a fire under our critical faculties, illuminates the whole world of the *Canterbury Tales*. After the Prologue, he himself, as author or as pilgrim, seldom appears, but we are never quite able to lose ourselves in the fictional world he creates. Having alerted us, he is now able to disappear into this world, offering it to us without open comment and with apparent fidelity to the characters and limitations of his people, but we, if ever we are tempted to accept these people uncritically, on their own terms, are brought up sharp by a malicious little smile on Chaucer's good-natured face.

It is tempting to see Chaucer as a writer in Northrop Frye's ironic mode, a writer who in fact does present his world without comment. But such a view is mistaken. I have pointed out some of the verbal ironies through which Chaucer judges his world, and although it is true that he more often than not seems to disappear, that he presents his characters with apparent fidelity to their natures, if we recall the burlesque exaggeration of Sir Topaz, of the "Nun's Priest's Tale," of the Wife of Bath, we realize that very often he does not in fact disappear, does not present his people with strict fidelity to their natures, but simply finds a subtler form of verbal irony to serve as vehicle for his satiric judgments. And even when he genuinely withdraws, it takes a while, as I have suggested, for the critical faculties of his audience to run down.

Let us examine now what we have in the way of philosophic ironies. We notice first that there are a number which are of a familiar and obviously satiric nature, analogous, perhaps, to the kind we found in the "Pardoner's Tale." An instance we can be certain of is the Pardoner himself: he preaches magnificently against the very vice he himself is most passionately fond of. The ironic conflict here makes a satiric comment on the Pardoner's public image, very much as the ironic conflict between aspiration and accomplishment in the Pardoner's Tale makes a satiric comment on a wrong view of the moral universe. We can be certain Chaucer put this irony in, both because it is so obvious and because the Pardoner himself points it out. But what of the Prioress? Devout and tender-hearted, she takes sadistic pleasure in the torture of the Jews. We may appeal to historical prejudices, but one wonders whether Chaucer was really limited to these, and the question remains open.

It becomes even more puzzling if we take another step backward in order to see some of the larger relationships in the *Tales*. Consider the relationship between the teller of the tale and the tale he tells. When, for example, the Wife of Bath asserts the eternal right of women to dominate their husbands, it is the Clerk who answers her. His story celebrates the duty of absolute obedience in wives. Do we smile when we recall that the Clerk is a cloistered scholar, lean, sober, studious, and unmarried? Or consider the relationship between two tales which Chaucer places cheek by jowl. For instance, the Monk, fat and arrogant, entertains the company with seventeen tragedies, each

relating the sad fate of a great and prosperous man brought low by ill-fortune. He is followed by the Nun's Priest, silent, poor, and thin, a man who never has been and never will be prosperous, but who nevertheless tells a delightfully humorous fable in pointed contrast to the Monk's lugubrious tragedies. To point the contrast further, he decorates his comic little tale of a fox and a chicken with all the tragic paraphernalia the Monk has just used. Or consider certain of the relationships of a character to himself. The Pardoner, as we have said, is a complete religious hypocrite, fattening his purse by preaching against the very sin he is himself the most guilty of—avarice. And he is unrepentant; in fact, he is proud of his cleverness and moral hardness. But when he tells his dark tale of riot and death, it is not the other pilgrims who are impressed, it is he, and for a moment, quite unintentionally, he seems to reveal beneath his hard, braggadocio surface the fear and self-hatred which he hides chiefly from himself.

Finally, I want to suggest a set of relationships which is so complex that it is better experienced than explained, but I shall try. We know, as did Chaucer's readers in his own time, that he was an artist of wide reputation, and when we read the *Canterbury Tales* we know that this wise and practiced artist is telling us a story. In that story we make the acquaintance of another Chaucer, the pilgrim Chaucer, who is both like and unlike the first Chaucer we know, and he too is telling us the story. In his story are some thirty other pilgrims, and they, each in their turn, also tell the story. And in each of their stories are characters who, at their own level, have their own reality. The *Canterbury Tales* are in this aspect very like a set of Chinese boxes. As we read along we are quite often aware of only one box, as when we watch the pageantry of the Knight's Tale. Sometimes we are aware of two boxes at once, as when we think of the relationship between the Clerk's Tale and the Clerk who is telling it, or of the relationship between the real Chaucer and Chaucer the innocent pilgrim. But every once in a while Chaucer rattles three or four boxes at once, and the resultant ironies pretty much defy description. In his book on Chaucer G. K. Chesterton, alone among the critics I am familiar with, has made an attempt to describe one important effect of these interrelationships.

The Poet is the Maker; he is the creator of a cosmos; and Chaucer is the creator of the whole world of his creatures. He made the pilgrimage; he made the pilgrims. He made all the tales that are told by the pilgrims. . . . Then in due course, as the poet is also a pilgrim among other pilgrims, he is asked for his contribution. He is at first struck dumb with embarrassment; and then suddenly starts a gabble of the worst doggerel in the book. . . . [He] can only defend himself by saying sadly that this is the only poem he knows. . . . The point is in the admirable irony of the whole conception of the dumb or doggerel rhymer who is nevertheless the author of all the other rhymes; nay, even the author of their authors. . . . But the irony is wider and even deeper than that. . . . Chaucer has made a world of his own shadows, and, when he is on a certain plane, finds himself equally shadowy. It has in it all the

mystery of the relation of the maker with things made. There falls on it from after even some dark ray of the irony of God, who was mocked when He entered His own world, and killed when He came among His creatures. . . .

That is laughter in the grand style. . . . It is the presence of such things, behind the seeming simplicity . . . which constitutes . . . the greatness of Chaucer.

The question that naturally arises in our minds as we read Chesterton's remarks and consider the sort of ironic juxtapositions I sketched above, the first question that has to be answered, is whether all this irony is really there. Are we writing our own *Canterbury Tales*? We may answer the question by saying that for the reader who feels these philosophic ironies strongly, they are there. Right you are if you think you are. And if it is not taken in a naive way, this is a sensible answer. But it does not get rid of one historical question. If Chaucer ever re-read all the manuscripts at once, did he see that he had put these ironies in? Did he feel them as an essential element in the work he envisioned? We may well wonder. After all, what we read are fragments, fragments which probably create accidental impressions that would not be created if our responses were controlled by a complete work of art. And does not any long, comprehensive, various work inevitably generate the sort of ironies we are dealing with here? If we read half a dozen fragments of *Tom Jones* or the *Decameron*, could we not take off on a flight of fancy like Chesterton's?

Granting that these considerations should make us cautious, I am nevertheless inclined to think that Chaucer fully intended the ironic world some readers feel. He was, after all, an ironic fellow. We are certain of many of his verbal ironies, and they are not the narrow, virulent irony of dogmatic controversy but the irony of a fine discrimination and an unfailing sense of proportion. Moreover, the world view that was second nature to a man of Chaucer's age made an ironic vision of human life quite as available as does our own. Indeed, if we divest ourselves of the provincial superiority of modernism, we will see that the medieval view perhaps led more naturally than ours does to such a vision. We will remember Dante gazing down from Saturn: "With my sight I turned back through all and every of the seven spheres, and saw this globe such that I smiled at its sorry semblance"; and we will remember Troilus gazing down from the eighth sphere at "this little spot of earth . . . this wretched world," and laughing.

An awareness of this medieval vision helps us to accept the presence of broad philosophic ironies in the *Canterbury Tales*. It also helps us to see the exact nature of those ironies and thus to answer the question from which we started: To what extent, precisely, are the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole a work of satire? A comparison with *Point Counter Point*, to choose a modern novel which is in many ways similar to the *Tales* (even in the Chinese boxes of creator and creation), will be useful here. That novel is notoriously full of philosophic irony. When we examine the lives of Lucy, Walter,

Illidge, the Tantamounts, old Bidlake, Webley, Quarles Junior and Senior, we find that in every case the event of the character's hopes and aspirations is only ironic defeat. When we move from the world of one character to the world of another, we find that from the point of view of A, B is wrong, from the point of view of B, C is wrong, and so on around the circle. Everything is cancelled out by something else and in the end we can only turn up empty hands.

It is tempting to read the *Canterbury Tales* in this way. The Clerk and the Wife of Bath, the fabliaux and the "Franklin's Tale," Chaucer the Creator and Chaucer the gabbling storyteller, all seem to balance each other off. Yet no sooner do we make such a statement than we realize how wrong it is, for everything in the *Canterbury Tales* is not really cancelled out by something else. We recall the firmness of Chaucer's verbal irony, we realize that the Wife and the fabliaux cancel out the Clerk and the "Franklin's Tale" only on this little spot of earth, and we hear Troilus laughing in the eighth sphere. Chaucer does not leave us with empty hands; as Virginia Woolf remarks, "we absorb morality at every pore." No doubt, in the practical chaos of our pilgrimage through this world, it does seem that every human vision is partial and all human life pointlessly ironic, but from the eighth sphere we may laugh and turn our faces upward.

If, then, satire is "militant irony," if "its moral norms are relatively clear, and it assumes standards against which the grotesque and absurd are measured," the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole, a comprehensive pattern which governs all the individual tales, romantic, tragic, farcical, melodramatic, do indeed seem to be satiric. But if Chaucer had finished his work, had taken his commul back to the Tabard for a grand feast celebrating the end of their successful journey, would not the *Tales*, like Dante's great poem, be a comedy? The answer to this question is probably yes—and irrelevant. We do not have the finished work, and because we do not, the pattern of what we do have is that of satire. Not, I hasten to add, satire of the gloomy sort that *Gulliver* and the *Dunciad* end with. Though at bottom Chaucer's view of humanity was probably not widely different from Swift's, he seems to have been the most cheerful and serene of men. The native cast of his mind led him, as it led Dryden, to understand and to appreciate many sides to many questions. But his awareness of the grain of truth or of humanity in conflicting points of view did not make him depressed and neurotic, as it makes so many of our modern ironists. He accepted this state of affairs, this confusion and contradiction, as the inevitable condition of human life; like Sophocles, he knew that "all the generations of mortal man add up to nothing." But in the *Canterbury Tales* he chose to face the human condition not with sorrow or anger but with serene laughter from the eighth sphere.

Ian Robinson (essay date 1967)

SOURCE: "Chaucer's Religious Tales," in *The Critical Review*, No. 10, 1967, pp. 18-32.

[Robinson is the noted author of *Chaucer and the English Tradition and Chaucer's Prosody: A Study of the Middle English Verse Tradition*. In the following essay, Robinson discusses the religious motifs used in the "Prioress's Tale," the "Clerk's Tale," and the "Man of Law's Tale."]

Of the devotional and moral *Canterbury Tales*—a surprisingly large proportion of the whole work—the potentially interesting ones are the Prioress's, the Man of Law's and the Clerk's; and about these three there is a deep-seatedly mistaken critical tradition, namely that they are all pretty much the same sort of thing. Mr R. O. Payne is one of the most interesting modern writers on Chaucer, and when he follows the tradition it is time to protest on behalf of the "Clerk's Tale." Mr Payne writes of these three tales, when calling them all saints' legends,

In only one of these is the protagonist literally a saint, but in form and effect, as well as in the characters of the protagonists, they are so much alike that the distinction is doctrinal rather than literary. (*The Key of Remembrance*.)

The statement is very representative of what many people think of the three tales. It is also common to be exasperated by both the "litel clergeoun" of the "Prioress's Tale" and Constance and Patient Griselda. All three are felt to be representatives of a rather sickly-sweet goodness, a goodness simply of its time and place, with nothing to say to *our* world. The three tales also appear to share a sentimentality, particularly about mothers and infants, which may make the reader want afterwards to rinse his mind in something like the "Miller's Tale."

A variation on the common view is to find Chaucer's emotion effective but to see it as the enemy of any real religious depth or artistic control. The influential statement of this view of the "Clerk's Tale" is Mrs Elizabeth Salter's *Chaucer, the Knight's Tale and the Clerk's Tale* (*Studies in English Literature*, 1962)—a work which uses an unpromising opportunity to treat these poems with due seriousness. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the three tales are quite different, that the various reactions I have been describing are fully appropriate to none of them, and that the "Clerk's Tale," at any rate, is one of Chaucer's most arresting and daring performances. And I hope that I may be able to show this by arguing against Mrs Salter's central proposition that "the more vividly [Griselda] emerges as a sentient being, the less will be her power to move and instruct as a pure religious symbol." Perhaps if we can see a connection between the symbol and the vividly pathetic character we can simultaneously vindicate the tale's religious feeling and rescue it from sentimentality.

A feeling that the "Clerk's Tale" is not to be dismissed comes out of our two best critics in an oddly tentative way. Mr John Spiers is here at his most tantalizing, making some very leading remarks which he doesn't follow up—the most interesting of all in fact coming in his section on the "Man of Law's Tale":

There is the same quality of tenderness for Griselda and her child in the "Clerk's Tale." The natural human feeling has acquired a peculiar sanctity and grace which we should hesitate to find sentimental. (*Chaucer the Maker*.)

But he leaves it there. Mr Muscatine records this impression:

[The "Clerk's Tale"] requires rereading; and with successive readings one's indifference turns to tolerance, then to admiration. (*Chaucer and the French Tradition*.)

But he too, beyond a few hints that I shall try to use later, doesn't explore very far how the tale works to create that admiration. And Mr Sledd, in another widely-read essay (reprinted in *Chaucer, Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. Wagenknecht) makes interesting suggestions about the necessity of connecting the moral and the action of the "Clerk's Tale" and of defending it against the more extreme charges of sentimentality. But instead of following his ideas through, he lapses into the very odd notion that the tale is "a fairly straight-forward, middling kind of yarn"—which doesn't get us far either.

## I

The "Prioress's Tale" is the easiest of the three to grasp, though the critics have not generally found it so. The tale is occasionally found detached from the other *Canterbury Tales* and bound up in pious collections, so it must have been acceptable to some people in the fifteenth century as an ordinary Miracle of the Virgin, presumably to be read aloud for the edification of pious audiences. On the other hand it has occasionally been seen by later critics as a satire on the form. F. N. Robinson comments in his edition that the latter view is "certainly wrong." But how do we know? And if he is right, are we forced into the former view?

The "Prioress's Tale" fits easily into one useful account of what Chaucer is doing in *The Canterbury Tales*. He tells us so much about what mattered to people in the fourteenth century by showing ways of life in action, being judged by their action and interaction, and he does this by taking over the heterogeneous literary traditions he found and relating them to one another. The "Prioress's Tale" is the clearest example of the process. So it would be a mistake to ask whether Chaucer is *pro* or *anti* the Prioress's kind of piety. He is evidently in a way superior to it, able to view it from a height.

Much of what the Prioress says, both in her "Prologue" and in her "Tale," has a genuinely touching beauty and even, sometimes, has more strength than one might expect. Her "Prologue" links her own tender feelings with a much more powerful-seeming God than she seems to worship in the "General Prologue." And, recalling some of her tenderness in the "Tale" itself, I find it hard to sympathize with those moderns who *only* sneer at her.

The swetnesse hath his herte perced so  
Of Cristes mooder that, to hire to preye  
He kan nat stynte of syngyng by the weye.

That does express to me a touchingly delicate religious sentiment, and there is quite a lot like it in the tale.

But the tale is not to be taken at its face value as a Miracle of the Virgin. The religious feeling, though sometimes so beautiful, is seen to be both damagingly limited and in some ways perverse. The limitation comes out, for example, in the Prioress's use of her favourite word *litel*. The school is *litel* (though it contains "children an heep"); the hero is a "litel clergeoun, seven yeers of age," and the *litel* son (of a widow, of course). Even his grammar is a little one:

This litel child, his litel boke lernyng . . .

and when he is finally dead,

in a tombe of marbul stones cleere  
Enclosen they his litel body sweete.

There is a similar force of limited emotion behind the Prioress's use of *innocent*—and those who argue that because *innocent* is a technical term in theology the Prioress is not using it sentimentally ignore the way the poem works. The Prioress is tenderly sentimental about the martyr in much the same way as she is about her dogs in the "General Prologue."

We can enjoy this tenderness, but to do so will establish the devotion, also, as *litel*. Perhaps "charming" is the word for it. What is not so charming is the Prioress's attitude to the Jews. There the sentimentality becomes, in its wilful thoughtlessness, actually wicked; the tenderness is seen to be connected, by way of unintelligence, with something the opposite of tender. Her view of the Jews is, as you might expect, a naive and simple one:

Ther was in Asye, in a greet citee,  
Amonges Cristene folk, a Jewerye,  
Sustened by a lord of that contree  
For foule usure and lucre of vileynye,  
Hateful to Crist and to his compaignye—

which is a simple example of the usual mediæval Christian party line on the Jews. For the Prioress, whose *conscience* has nothing to do with intelligence, it is simply natural and right that the Jews (all of them?) should commit a murder out of mere hatred of Christianity. At the end of the tale there is a surprising concatenation of piety and tenderness about the martyr with rancorous and savage injustice to the Jews—both equally part of the Prioress's religion:

This child with pitous lamentacioun  
Up taken was, syngyng his song alway,  
And with honour of greet processiou  
They carrien hym unto the nexte abbay.  
His mooder swownyng by the beere lay;  
Unnethe myghte the peple that was there  
This newe Rachel bryng fro his beere.

With torment and with shameful deeth echon  
This provost dooth thise Jewes for to sterve  
That of this mordre wiste, and that anon.  
He nolde no swiche cursednesse observe.  
"Yvele shal have that yvele wol deserve";  
Therefore with wilde hors he dide hem drawe,  
And after that he heng hem by the lawe.

Not only the murderers, but everyone who knew of the murder, are killed; you could hardly call it execution, since death precedes trial. First the Jews are tortured to death then the trial takes place and the corpses are hanged.

Any apology for the Prioress would be sure to bring out the unreality of her religion, its discontinuity with any real world. It might be said that her hatred of the Jews cannot be equated with modern anti-semitism: as a provincial Englishwoman she had probably never seen a Jew in her life; the pogroms were well over in England by Chaucer's day, the Jews having been allowed to leave (after several requests, and taking with them only portable property) in 1290. But if this hatred is not inspired by real Jews it becomes as unreal and limited as the love for the martyr. And if the unreality of this anti-semitism means that the Prioress is not a dangerous character, the charm of her religion is hardly rescued. That religion is a kind of private luxury which could sustain nobody in adversity and could tell nobody anything about God.

## II

The "Man of Law's Tale" and the "Clerk's Tale" are more difficult because in them Chaucer is committing himself further. Neither has the perfection of the "Prioress's Tale," but they show it to be a minor perfection. (Cf. Lawrence's remark, "Give me a little splendour and I'll leave perfection to the small fry.") We see the Prioress's religion in its charm and depravity, but I know of no reason for supposing that it mattered much more to Chaucer than it does to us. In the "Man of Law's Tale" he commits himself *not* to place the piety in such a detached and central way. In fact the great weakness of the tale is that in it Chaucer seems to be stifling his critical intelligence—which, however, occasionally breaks out with disastrous results. What is he trying to do in the "Man of Law's Tale"?

He seems to me to be trying to create the aura of magical significance that can sometimes be found at that end of the range of Saints' Lives which continues without a break into folk-tales. Shakespeare could bring ghosts and witches into his plays: where could Chaucer go for anything comparable? Perhaps *folk-ballads* is the most obvious answer; but Chaucer, as a courtly poet, was cut off from the folk poems as effectively as Alexander Pope. If he is trying for the sense of the numinous there is a good reason why he should not be trying to "place" it. It is one thing to put the Prioress's religion in perspective, another to do the same thing for a ghost: a criticized ghost would disappear. Only Shakespeare can laugh at a ghost without destroying it. The equivalent of ghosts in the "Man of Law's Tale" is the feeling of miraculous sanctity. And

the best bits of the tale are those where Chaucer for a moment brings it off:

That oon of hem was blynd and myghte nat see,  
But it were with thilke eyen of his mynde  
With whiche men seen, after that they ben blynde . . .

and so on. But such places are only a small fraction of a long tale, and in the rest Chaucer seems to be filling out his flagging inspiration with whatever comes to hand. The tale gives him a chance to indulge in the kind of touching sentiment found in the "Prioress's Tale," and here too it is beautiful enough. Little children and their mothers were certainly a chance for Chaucer's emotionality—though, to use the most obvious comparison, it is a pity that Chaucer's feeling is so facile compared with Dante's in the Ugolino of Pisa episode (*Inferno*, xxxiii, used in Chaucer's "Monk's Tale").

But Chaucer often seems to be trying to get at the right feelings without doing any work for them. So he has to strain to keep it up. Several different sets of celestial machinery are switched in; as well as God there is Fortune, Satan and several of the astrological deities, all used to inflate the feeling of significance. The astrology here seems (very unlike the gods in the "Knight's Tale") to be there only to impress the reader, and it may misfire by provoking him to answer the rhetorical questions wrong:

Imprudent Emperour of Rome, alas!  
Was ther no philosophre in al thy toun?  
Is no tyme bet than oother in swich cas?  
[NO! Or at any rate the stars won't tell you  
which time is best.]  
Of viage is ther noon eleccioun,  
Namely to folk of heigh condicioun?  
Noght whan a roote is of a burthe yknowe?  
[Certainly not. Roots of births have nothing to do  
with it.]

One may be similarly tempted into rude answers to the series of rhetorical questions during Constance's first marooning:

Who kepte hire fro drenchyng in the see?  
Who kepte Jonas in the fisshes mawe  
Til he was spouted up at Nynyvee? . . .

Who indeed?

Another sign of strain is the very frequent resort to apostrophe. Nobody can do anything wrong, whether it be Satan or the Sultaness or one of the careless messengers, without receiving a solemn denunciation in high style ("O messenger, fulfild of dronkenesse!" &c.).

The result of this straining for effect is that the tale fails to make its moral point and, in a way, takes its revenge on the morality. When we come to such lines as these we are plainly meant to receive a strong moral, embodied by the tale:

But natheless she taketh in good entente  
The wyl of Crist, and knelynge on the stronde,  
She seyde, "Lord, ay welcome be thy sonde!"

—which is one sign that Chaucer needs the story to be more than a convenient cloak for the moral. The same lines in the "Clerk's Tale" might have been more convincing. Similarly, the first villainess of the piece has to be the Sultaness; but she seems to me a relatively heroic figure, defending the things she believes in against the weak caprice of her son.

The final sign that Chaucer can't keep up the mysterious holiness is the occasional lapse into the manner of the Wife of Bath, which produces in this context something very like a snigger:

Housbondes been alle goode, and han been yooore;  
That knowen wyves; I dar sey yow na moore. . . .

They goon to bedde, as it was skile and right;  
For though that wyves be ful hooly thynges,  
They moste take in pacience at nyght  
Swiche manere necessities as been plesynges  
To folk that han ywedded hem with rynges,  
And leye a lite hir hoolynesse aside,  
As for the tyme,—it may no bet bitide.

The use of such a key term as *pacience* in such a way must carry over to, and attack, its use in other contexts; the atmosphere is destroyed; the tale cannot bear the intrusion of Chaucer's other, better styles.

The result is that the "Man of Law's Tale" is Chaucer's nearest approach to Lydgate. It seems to come not from anyone's soul—the Man of Law's or Chaucer's—but from a rather mechanical exercise in the rhetorical art of religious tale-telling. But what of the "Clerk's Tale"?

### III

Even before facing the central problem of the "Clerk's Tale" we can see that it is much better written than the "Man of Law's Tale." Take, to begin with, the very different openings of the two poems. In the "Man of Law's Tale" the poet's emphases are in all the wrong places and attention quickly wanders. The verse-form isn't doing anything in particular except to announce that the poem is to be taken solemnly whether or not it deserves to be.

In Surrye whilom dwelte a compaignye  
Of chapmen riche, and therto sadde and trewe . . .

These rich merchants are of no importance in the tale but they are introduced with an emphasis suitable to the tale's hero. The tale's heroine, however, slips in almost un-awares in a subordinate clause:

Sojourned han thise merchantz in that toun  
A certain tyme, as fil to hire plesance.  
And so bifel that th' excellent renoun



Of the Emperoures doghter, dame Custance,  
Reported was, with euery circumstance,  
Unto to this Surryen marchantz in swich wise,  
Fro day to day, as I shal yow devyse.

This is second-rate verse. The enjambement is careless, as if this were the first way the poet thought of putting things, but which turned out not to be the best. Chaucer's padding lines and half-lines often serve to highlight an intense statement by their side, but there is no good reason why the sense of this stanza should stop, as it does, a line and a half before the end. Contrast the "Clerk's Tale":

Ther is, right at the west style of Ytaille,  
Doun at the roote of Vesulus the colde,  
A lusty playn, habundant of vitaille,  
Where many a tour and toun thou mayst biholde,  
That founded were in tyme of fadres olde,  
And many another delitable sighte,  
And Saluces this noble contree highte.

A markys whilom lord was of that lond,  
As were his worthy eldres hym bifore;  
And obeisant, ay redy to his hond,  
Were alle his liges, bothe lasse and moore.  
Thus in delit he lyveth, and hath doon yoore,  
Biloved and drad, thurgh faour of Fortune,  
Bothe of his lordes and of his commune.

The first stanza does not introduce any of the tale's major figures but it does establish very carefully the tone as well as the scene. The deliberation and quiet definiteness establish right from the start a tone that is later seen to be specifically the Clerk's, and which is maintained throughout the poem. (Muscatine writes very well of the Clerk's style in *Chaucer and the French Tradition*.) In this passage Chaucer manages to focus attention on the more important words in a way that makes the passage, though slower and more formal, as careful as anything in the *Wife of Bath*. In fact the verse has a considerable density of meaning despite what Muscatine calls the "frugality" of the style. When Walter is introduced in the second stanza it is in this already established tone, and with a care and emphasis fitting his importance in the tale. In parallel with "Saluces" he is named in the last line of the third stanza. (Griselda is introduced in a very similar way at the beginning of Part II.) And the regularity of the metre here is very far from removing the verse from the life of the spoken language. The rhetorical balances between and within the lines help the metre in its task of measuring the delivery peech. The rhetorical groupings of the last-quoted couplet convey by their repetition and variation of phrase-pattern something weightier than one might expect from the unaided metre.

The first two parts of the tale, before Griselda's trials begin, may be found attractive by many readers who can't stand the rest. There is nothing thin about the tale's frugality; the control and economy of style and content are apparent, but there is no deprivation in the poor life of Janicula and Griselda, which reminds one of the opening scene of the "Nun's Priest's Tale," seen with less partic-

ularity. We are not told the name of Griselda's sheep, but she does live in a world from which sheep are not excluded. And the description of Griselda, though it concentrates on her morality, is far from suggesting that she is unattractive or sexless:

But for to speke of vertuous beautee,  
Thanne was she oon the faireste under sonne;  
For povreliche yfostred up was she,  
No likerous lust was thurgh hire herte yronne.  
Wel offer of the welle than of the tonne  
She drank, and for she wolde vertu plesse,  
She knew well labour, but noon ydel ese.

But though this mayde tendre were of age,  
Yet in the brest of hire virginitee  
Ther was enclosed rype and sad corage . . .

But here we are still on the edge of the tale's problems. The main one is, of course, how to see Griselda as a moral heroine. In a most obvious way she is exactly the opposite, and in several places the Clerk has to disclaim any intention of making her a model for wives. A wife who allows the children to be carried off apparently to a violent death is a wicked woman. So the Clerk says,

This storie is seyde, nat for that wyves sholde  
Folwen Grisilde as in humylitee,  
For it were inportable, though they wolde—

"this story is told not to make wives imitate Griselda in humility, for that would be *intolerable*—even if they wanted to." But it is equally clear that in another sense Griselda is a moral example. The Clerk continues:

But for that every wight, in his degree,  
Sholde be constant in adversitee  
As was Grisilde; therefore Petrak writeth  
This storie, which with heigh style he enditeth.

For, sith a womman was so pacient  
Unto a mortal man, wel moore us oghte  
Receyven al in gree that God us sent . . .

But how can that follow if Griselda ought not to have been so patient to a mortal man? Griselda can only be a moral example if at certain crucial moments we can discount or forget her wickedness. How could that be?

Professor Muscatine writes, "The whole ordonnance of the poem invites, constrains a symbolic reading" (*Chaucer and the French Tradition*), but does not take his own hint. Let us try to (Why should the form of the "Clerk's Tale" present difficulties to a generation at home with *Measure for Measure*?) The first part of the tale could hardly announce more plainly that we are not reading a novel, that the characters—if that is the right word—are not to be shown naturalistically any more than the actions, but are there for the sake of their further significance. (Though there are naturalistic touches, which have their place in the tale, as I shall argue.) It is rather obvious that in the "Clerk's Tale" we are somewhere between fable, parable and allegory.

Let us see what will happen if we opt for the last term. Consider, out of context, some of the things Griselda says to Walter, and let us try to forget for the moment the situations in which these speeches occur:

Wondrynge upon this word, quakyng for drede,  
She seyde, "Lord, undigne and unworthy  
Am I to thilke honour that ye me beede,  
But as ye wole youreself, right so wol I.  
And heere I swere that nevere willyngly,  
In werk ne thought, I nyl yow disobeye,  
For to be deed, though me were looth to deye. . . ."

She seyde, "Lord, al lyth in youre plesaunce.  
My child and I, with hertely obeisaunce,  
Been youre al, and ye mowe save or spille  
Youre owene thyng; werketh after youre wille.

"Ther may no thyng, God so my soule save,  
Liken to yow that may displease me;  
Ne I desire no thyng for to have,  
Ne drede for to leese, save oonly yee.  
This wyl is in myn herte, and ay shal be;  
No lengthe of tyme or deeth may this deface,  
Ne chaunge my corage to another place. . . ."

"I have," quod she, "seyd thus, and evere shal:  
I wol no thyng, ne nyl no thyng certayn,  
But as yow list. Nought greveth me at al,  
Though that my doghter and my sone be slayn,—  
At youre comandement, this is to sayn.  
I have noght had no part of children tweyne  
But first siknesse, and after, wo and peyne.

"Ye been oure Lord, dooth with youre owene  
thyng  
Right as yow list; axeth no reed at me.  
For as I lefte at hoom al my clothyng,  
Whan I first cam to yow, right so," quod she,  
"Lefte I my wyl and al my libertee,  
And took youre clothyng; wherefore I yow preye,  
Dooth youre plesaunce, I wol youre lust obeye.

"And certes, if I hadde prescience  
Youre wyl to knowe, er ye youre lust me tolde,  
I wolde it doon withouten negligence;  
But now I woot youre lust, and what ye wolde,  
Al youre plesance ferme and stable I holde;  
For wiste I that my deeth wolde do yow ese,  
Right gladly wolde I dyen, yow to plese.  
"Deth may noght make no comparisoun  
Unto youre love. . . ."

Out of context these all seem quite clearly to be addresses by the Christian soul to God. Would they have been out of place in Rolle or Julian of Norwich? And considered as devotional verse these passages are perhaps more convincing than anything in Rolle in the restraint and dignity that accompany their deeply felt submission to the divine will. It cannot be merely accident that Griselda's words fit another situation so exactly.

There are plenty of hints in the tale that Griselda is either the Christian soul or the Church in its union with Christ, and that Walter is God. Look how Janicula phrases his reply to Walter:

"Lord," quod he, "my willynge  
Is as ye wole, ne ayeynes youre likyng  
I wol no thyng, ye be my lord so deere;  
Right as yow lust, governeth this mateere."

At Griselda's first meeting with Walter,

doun up on hir knes she gan to falle,  
And with sad contenance kneleth stille,  
Til she had herd what was the lordes wille—

not, you note, *this* lord's will. In answer to his question, "Where is youre fader, O Grisildis?" she

with reverence, in humble cheere,  
Answerde, "Lord, he is al redy heere."

And much later in the tale Griselda exclaims

"O goode God! how gentil and how kynde  
e semed . . ."

where it would make good grammatical sense to take *Ye* as God.

But in another way Walter is very obviously not God, and the Clerk has to say or imply this repeatedly to avoid imputing pointless cruelty to God. Can the tale only make its point if we take the religious passages out of context? If so it is a failure, of course. Yet there has to be some separation of the meaning from the figure that expresses it if the Clerk is not to be blasphemous. Is that an admission of the tale's failure?

The function of the context, the tale, must be to give the patience of the Christian soul a particular life that even as the finest general statement it must lack. Some connection between the literal and figurative meanings is therefore necessary; but I have argued that some disconnection is also necessary. Here the delicacy of the Clerk's task is clear: Chaucer has to detach the religious passages from the context in every way but one, leaving only the thread of *pacience* to connect them with the tale; but with that thread he has to draw across from the tale the emotional poignancy that is not found in the doctrine on its own.

The tale, then, depends on the generation of emotion and its bearing across to the partly detached doctrine. I have shown the detachment by quoting key passages out of context. There remains the question of the tale's pathos and its connection with the doctrine.

Some people cannot stand the emotions of the "Clerk's Tale" (and other people cannot bear them). I find especially that young women can rarely forgive or forget that Griselda fails to stand up to her husband. I can't always take this in the necessary way myself, but sometimes I

manage to; of moral comment on Griselda is an unnecessary refusal to suspend disbelief, a refusal to let the tale be itself. Here of course we have to follow the Clerk along another tightrope: if he makes the situations too real Griselda, as a real woman, will disgust us; if too unreal there will not be the involvement that enriches the doctrine. Certainly we need some flexibility and delicacy of response to move between the tale's different levels; but to do so it is only necessary to follow the directions of the tale itself, which is one of the most delicately controlled of all Chaucer's works. The model of what is to happen is given in the episode of Walter's proposal. There, surely, we can respond warmly and without qualms to Griselda's realization that she is the chosen one; and we can do that without any knowledge of Walter's personality. The feeling is then channelled by Griselda's words into the other context, the religious one. Why should this be so difficult?

And generally speaking, the pathetic scenes throughout the tale are overwhelmingly successful in their creation of poignant emotion. If we are taking the tale properly we can respond with strong compassion and pity. Why not? He would be hard-hearted indeed who refused to share Griselda's joy or grief merely because the tale is not a novel. If it *were*, it wouldn't be so moving. Griselda has something in common with the characters of folk or fairy tale: a naturalistic Cinderella would bore children. We need to avoid the cynicism or the demand for naturalism that can destroy the tale.

When the children are so callously removed by the Fell Sergeant, some critics find Griselda's calm unemotional, a sign of coldness. The very opposite seems to me to be the case: Griselda is more poignant here, when she must allow herself no murmur, than she is at the end of the tale, when she can show the ordinary signs of her feeling by fainting. These are the places where Chaucer seems to have profited by his reading of the Ugolino of Pisa episode. In the "Clerk's Tale" we have the best of the tender mother and child situations that so appealed to Chaucer; it is the best in itself and also because here, at last, Chaucer is doing something with it more important than placing it or wallowing in it.

And thus she seyde in hire benigne voys,  
 "Fareweel my child! I shal thee nevere see.  
 But sith I thee have marked the with the croys  
 Of thilke Fader—blessed moote he be!—  
 That for us deyde upon a croys of tree,  
 Thy soule, litel child, I hym bitake,  
 For this nyght shaltow dyen for my sake."

We bear across the emotion of these situations to the doctrine.

The "human touches" (if the phrase is still possible) make their point too. For all the frugality of the tale, it need not altogether cut itself off from the ordinary world, as the "Man of Law's Tale" has to. The Clerk scores mild but precise debating points against the Wife, joking about marriage as slavery, and hitting the right nail squarely on

the head when he calls her doctrine that of a sect. Before Griselda can fall on her knees before the Lord she has to put down her water-pot. The ladies who are to array the bride do not like to handle her old clothes, the suggestion being not that they are dirty but that they are unfashionable. The multitude welcoming Walter's second wife is as fickle as any in Shakespeare, and remark that the new wife is more beautiful and younger than Griselda. And Griselda's faint is such a real one that the children have to be torn from her hard grip. All these things help to provide a background for the action.

But even if you concede all this, is it not still true that the Clerk's example is a bad one? Isn't it a dangerously chosen example because, with that plot, thoughts about Griselda's unsatisfactoriness must intrude? Wouldn't another example have shown *patience* better and without leading to these objections?

The tale is not about consequences. It is not a tragedy embodying its moral in the fable so that the moral is not extractable and can only be stated by a performance of the tragedy. The Clerk needs a tale for his moral, but not in that way. His tale would have made its point equally well, I suspect, without the happy ending. The Clerk, being a very orthodox Christian, has to show that all things work together for good to them that love God; but would the quality of Griselda's patience have been impaired if the tale had ended with her retirement to obscurity, and Walter's second marriage? The value of Griselda's response to adversity is not that it is finally rewarded, but in itself, heroic patience in a particular situation.

[God] suffreth us, as for our excercise,  
 With sharpe scourges of adversitee  
 Ful ofte to be bete in sondry wise . . .

And the point of the "exercise" is in the submission itself. Or, as Muscatine puts it,

Walter's lack of motivation is an advantage in presenting this theme. This is *pure* chastening, *pure* correction. Griselda's trial is a trial because there is no reason for it. (*Chaucer and the French Tradition*)

The Clerk is not trying to convert us to Christianity; he is not telling a tale to show the *advantages* of patience. Rather, the tale is a genuine philosopher's example; it makes a doctrine clearer. The Clerk is saying that Christian patience, submission to God's will, is *as if* a wife should behave like Griselda, even without hope that the husband is really kind. And as a philosopher's extreme example the tale shows what God may require of a Christian soul, and suggests the kind of sense a Christian soul might make of the demand. The marriage agreement is not what a husband has any right to require of a wife, but the suggestion that it is what God may require of us can give the reader the kind of shock about the inevitable conditions of human life that is one mark of the powers of a great poet. The tale, that is, makes its point in a way that can challenge us as well as that scholarly fiction the fourteenth-century audience.

It puts the case that, whatever the consequences, Griselda's patience is best for her. (Would it have been better for her to revile Walter and return home bitterly to Janicula? The Tale's final realistic touch is the revelation that that is exactly what Janicula expects.) Would it be better for the Christian to renounce God if he feels that God has renounced him? By holding on to her sense that her marriage has existed—her one insistence to Walter is that she *has been* his true wife—Griselda in a way preserves the sense the marriage has made. Perhaps she could have responded similarly if Walter had died.

By putting Christian patience so starkly and so poignantly, the Clerk challenges us to see it and make up our minds about it.

But if the reader feels something monstrous in Griselda's patience, too—something demanding rebellion against such a God—perhaps that is implied as well, at least as a possible response to the Clerk's challenge. We might reject the doctrine, having seen it clearly for the first time. I confess that the "Clerk's Tale" is for me the chanciest of Chaucer's great things. Sometimes I hate Griselda's patience. But at other times I admire it as a heroic human possibility. In either case I am clear—as nowhere else in mediæval literature—about what this religion is and what it demands. *That*, I think, is the triumph of the tale.

Even so, the "Clerk's Tale" is such an extreme that if it alone had survived of Chaucer's works we should probably have thought of Chaucer as a brilliantly fanatical contemporary of Langland. The tale needs the Wife's "Prologue" as an opposite extreme to balance it, and it needs the famous Envoy with which Chaucer breaks the Clerk's spell and brings us back to a more ordinary world.

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**Paul Beekman Taylor (essay date 1991)**

SOURCE: "The Uncourteous Knights of *The Canterbury Tales*," in *English Studies*, Vol. 72, No. 3, 1991, pp. 209-18.

[*Taylor is the author of Chaucer's Chain of Love. In the following essay, he examines Chaucer's portrayal of flawed knighthood by analyzing the "Franklin's Tale," the "Physician's Tale," the "Wife of Bath's Tale," and the "Merchant's Tale."*]

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Carol Falvo Heffernan (essay date 1995)

SOURCE: "The Book of the Duchess: Chaucer and the Medieval Physicians," in *The Melancholy Muse: Chaucer, Shakespeare and Early Medicine*, Duquesne University Press, 1995, pp. 38-65.

[In the following excerpt, Heffernan analyzes the narrator of the Book of the Duchess in terms of medieval concepts of depression.]

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Comparing Chaucer's understanding of mental states, as it appears in *The Book of the Duchess*, with those ideas recorded in medical texts makes even more evident the human values in the poem to which generations of readers have responded. Examining Chaucer thus is not an un-literary approach. Even Robert Jordan [in *Chaucer's Poetics and the Modern Reader*], examining the poem to uncover the general principles that preside over its status as literary discourse, gets dangerously close to meaning (for a critical theorist) when he points to the fact that 1,000 lines of this 1,300-line poem are elegiac. It has been called "the most historically contextualized of Chaucer's early narrative poems" [Edwards, Robert R. *The Dream of Chaucer: Representation and Reflection in the Early Narratives*. Further references to this text will be given in parentheses]. Chaucer himself makes the poem part of the history of his time by tying it to the death of John of Gaunt's wife, Blanche; he has Queen Alceste, in *The Legend of Good Women*, refer to the poem as "the Deeth of Blaunche the Duchesse." As this historical reference dictates the gravity of the poem's opening, so its other historical components sharpen and season its tone. Medical knowledge is one of those components.

The varying ways in which Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* portrays and addresses melancholy deserve a more comprehensive examination, particularly in terms of what medical texts reveal. Descriptions of three diseases are almost always found in close proximity to one another in early medical treatises: melancholy, *heroes* and mania. Distinguishing between them is complicated by the fact that these diseases had a number of symptoms in common. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that Stanley Jackson begins his study, *Melancholia and Depression*, with these words:

In the terms *melancholia* and *depression* and their cognates, we have well over two millennia of the Western world's ways of referring to a goodly number



of different dejected states. At any particular time during these many centuries the term that was in common use might have denoted a disease, a troublesome condition of sufficient severity and duration to be conceived of as a clinical entity; or it might have referred to one of a cluster of symptoms that were thought to constitute a disease.

But as a point from which to begin, it is probably safe to generalize by saying that medieval physicians meant by *depression* or *melancholia* a disease in which sadness and fear were dominant emotions and the imagination disordered, by *mania* a disease in which the prime emotion was anger with some disturbance of the imagination and, to a lesser degree, reason, and by *hereos*—a disease that always ended in mania—a type of melancholia characterized by an obsessive preoccupation with a beloved person. . . .

In their efforts to identify the disease the narrator of *The Book of the Duchess* has suffered for eight long years, several modern scholars have already attempted a more complete evaluation of the evidence. John Hill pointed out that “One of the most prominent symptoms of love melancholy, fixation on the object of desire is missing” [Hill, John M. “*The Book of the Duchess*, Melancholy, and that Eight-Year Sickness.” *Chaucer Review*, 1974] Judith Neaman concluded that the narrator suffers from ordinary melancholy, the main consequence of which is an inability to write [Neaman, Judith. “Brain Physiology and Poetics in *The Book of the Duchess*.” *Res Publica Litterarum*, 1980] and, in a recent note, I argued that the narrator of Chaucer’s poem is an example of a neglected variety of melancholy known in the medical literature as *melancholia canina* [in “That Dog Again: *Melancholia Canina* and Chaucer’s *Book of the Duchess*.” *Modern Philology*, 1986]. In broader terms, John B. Friedman, in a 1969 *Chaucer Review* article, described the narrator of the poem as spiritually distressed [“The Dreamer, the Whele, and Consolation in *The Book of the Duchess*,” *Chaucer Review*, 1969]. In discussing Chaucer’s concern with poetic subjectivity, Robert Edwards, in his recent book on the dream visions, has made a telling observation, “We might take this [the account of the narrator’s mental state] as the originary gesture of his narrative for he explicitly identifies the narrator’s interior world as ‘our first mater’ and ‘my first matere.’” That is, the primary subject of Chaucer’s poem is the anguished inward life of the narrator, to which the outward dream bears witness.

I think on reconsidering the evidence—the poem itself and the medical treatises—that the pathological condition described in *The Book of the Duchess*, both in its symptomatology and treatment, cannot be identified as a clear-cut case of lovesickness as set forth in discussions by classical and medieval physicians. Furthermore, making clear distinctions between *amor hereos*, melancholy and mania is difficult because early descriptions of these diseases—particularly their treatments—tend to overlap. The difficulty is worth coping with, however; exploring Chaucer’s poetic descriptions of melancholy and the medical discussions of the disease by classical and medieval physicians reveals the kind of striking similarities that imply

close interrelationships between medieval poetry and medieval medicine. In studying the resemblances between Chaucer’s poetry and medieval medical thinking on melancholy, more light can be shed on the poet’s keen psychological perceptiveness, as well as on the breadth of knowledge that fed his poetic imagination. Early physicians may have diagnosed and written about mental disorders, but Chaucer’s poetry contributed much to popularizing their thinking.

Part of the task of this chapter will be to examine the way sleeping, reading and talking are used by classical and medieval physicians to treat the symptoms of mental diseases and the extent to which Chaucer’s suffering narrator-dreamer employs these same three “cures.”

#### SLEEPLESSNESS

*The Book of the Duchess* begins with a portrait of a narrator rendered sleepless by a great sorrow; whether it be “unfulfilled desire” [Robertson, Jr., D. W. and Bernard F. Huppé. *Fruyt and Chaf: Studies in Chaucer’s Allegories*, 1963] or “a general, unfathomable state of *melancholia*” (Hill) is not immediately clear.

I have gret wonder, be this lyght,  
How that I lyve, for day ne nyght  
I may nat slepe wel nygh noight;  
I have so many an ydel thought,  
Purely for defaute of slep.

(*Duchess*)

The passage, [F. N.] Robinson points out in the Explanatory Notes to his edition, resembles both the opening of Froissart’s *Paradys d’Amours* and several passages in Machaut’s *Dit de la Fonteinne Amoureuse*. He adds that the situation described was one which “according to medieval theory or general human experience would have led to dreams.” The problem of whether Chaucer or other medieval poets had direct knowledge of scientific treatises or were drawing on observable human experiences is one we will put aside for now and return to later in the chapter. Suffice to say, at this juncture, the comment is correct; a dream does occur, but not until the theme of sleep is worked through. The narrator goes on at length with a discourse about his condition in which the word “sleep” frequently appears, as, for example, in this brief excerpt:

And wel ye woot, agaynes kynde  
Hyt were to lyven in thys wyse,  
For nature wolde nat suffyse  
To noon erthly creature  
Nat longe tyme to endure  
Withoute slep and be in sorwe.

Something is dangerously wrong; life cannot be maintained for long without sleep. In an effort to conquer his sleeplessness, the narrator turns to reading the eleventh book of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the story of Ceyx and Alcyone, married lovers separated by death. Suspending for now discussion of what the narrator may have gained by his emotional involvement with the grieving wife of

Ovid's tale, we see immediately that the discovery of the god of sleep is crucial for him. Chaucer handles the section on the intervention of the god with a light, comic touch that throws the tragic circumstances into high relief. To answer Alcyone's prayer for information about her husband's fate, Juno sends a messenger in quest of a revelatory dream from the Cave of Sleep. The messenger can hardly rouse the god, in a passage Chaucer modulates comically without allowing the tone to become jarring:

This messenger com fleyng faste  
 And cried, "O, ho! awake anon!"  
 Hit was for noht; there herde hym non.  
 "Awake!" quod he, "whoo ys lyth there?"  
 And blew his horn ryght in here eere,  
 And cried "Awaketh!" wonder hye.

The poem continues the elaboration of the theme of sleep in the following section, in which the narrator, much struck by his reading of the account of "the goddes of slepyng," prays to the newly discovered Morpheus who brought sleep to Queen Alcyone:

Me thoghte wonder yf hit were so,  
 For I had never herd speke, or tho  
 Of noo goddes that koude make  
 Men to slepe, ne for to wake,  
 For I ne knew never god but oon.  
 And in my game I sayde anon  
 (And yet me lyst ryght evel to pleye).

If only Morpheus will let him "slepe a lyte," the narrator will offer the comic sacrifice of a featherbed "Of down of pure dowves white" and a black and gold sleeping chamber. No sooner is the promise made than he promptly falls asleep and becomes a dreamer who has "so ynly swete a sweven" that no one, not even Joseph or Macrobius, could interpret his dream.

In early medical treatises, the inability to sleep is a serious symptom, and it follows naturally enough that inducing sleep is curative. One of the first medical writers to discuss mental diseases and, in particular, melancholy and mania, was Soranus of Ephesus, who studied medicine at Alexandria and practiced at Rome during the reigns of Trajan and Hadrian. According to his editor and translator, I. E. Drabkin, "Soranus' works, in common with Hippocratic and Galenic writings, were among those most widely excerpted and translated" (Aurelianus, *On Acute Diseases*). His foremost translator was the African, Caelius Aurelianus, who probably lived in the fifth century. His major contribution to communicating Greek medicine to the Middle Ages is his translation of two important works by Soranus, the *Acute Diseases* (three books) and the *Chronic Diseases* (five books). Charles Talbot, the eminent authority on medieval medicine in England, has called this translation by Caelius Aurelianus "the main link in the transmission of ancient medical thought to the Middle Ages" ["Medicine." In *Science in the Middle Ages*, 1978]. The fate of this lengthy and popular work was to undergo changes and abridgements: the portion on acute diseases appeared alone early, with the name "Aurelius" as author; the second half on chronic diseases was circulated in

the seventh century under the name "Aesculapius." These two abridgements spawned many other smaller compilations, some of which were practical, others more theoretical (Talbot). The two treatises examine both melancholy and mania; the latter is described as "a major disease; it is chronic and consists of attacks alternating with periods of remission; it involves a state of stricture."

The question of sleep is taken up only in the section of the book that considers mania. Aurelianus cites "continual sleeplessness" as one of the "observable causes" of mania. Among its symptoms he lists "light and short sleep," "tossing in sleep," as well as "sleep marked by great fear and turmoil." He observes that "in most cases of mania, at the time of an actual attack, the eyes become bloodshot and intent. There is also continual wakefulness." Here it is a symptom or effect, not a cause. The prescribed cures were physical as well as chemical. First he writes that "If the patient is wakeful, prescribe passive exercise, first in a hammock and then in a sedan chair. The rapid dripping of water may be employed to induce sleep, for under the influence of its sound patients often fall asleep." Dripping water appears within the context of sleep in both the *Book of the Duchess* and the Ceyx and Alcyone myth of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*:

ther were a fewe welles  
 Came rennyng fro the clyves adoun,  
 that made a dedly slepyng soun,  
 And ronnen doun ryght by a cave  
 That was under a rokke ygrave  
 Amydde the valey, wonder depe.  
 There these goddes lay and slepe,  
 Morpheus and Eclympasteyr,  
 That was the god of slepes heyr,  
 That slep and dide noon other werk.

(*Duchess*)

But from the bottom of the cave there flows the stream of Lethe, whose waves, gently murmuring over the gravelly bed, invite to slumber. Before the cavern's entrance abundant poppies bloom, and countless herbs, from whose juices dewy night distils sleep and spreads its influence over the darkened lands.

(*Metamorphoses*)

Ovid's passage includes not just Lethe's drowsy streams but other allusions as well to gentle murmuring waves, blooming poppies and numerous night-distilling herbs, all of which make it a comprehensive poetic treatment of Morpheus. At a later point in his discussion of mania and ways of enabling the patient to sleep, Caelius Aurelianus observes that some physicians take a psychopharmacological approach and "try to produce a deep sleep with certain drugs, fomenting the patient with poppy and causing stupor and drowsiness rather than natural sleep." Of the latter approach he is obviously critical, as he adds, "in so doing, they constrict the very parts which require relaxing measures."

#### READING

Another frequently discussed cure for melancholy is reading; the narrator's insomnia, it will be recalled, was the

cause of his turning to Ovid's tale. In *Chaucerian Fiction*, the chapter entitled "The Book of the Duchess: The Kindly Imagination," Robert Burlin observes that the poem "differs from the later dream-visions in that we find the dreamer literally 'using' a work of fiction. The story of Seys and Alcyone, directly or indirectly taken from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, serves therapeutically to divert the narrator from an insomnia induced by an imprecisely defined melancholy." The narrator, unable to sleep, turns to an old romance because he thinks "it beter play/Then play either at ches or tables" (*Duc! ss*). Now the narrator can view someone else's sorrow—Alcyone's—made beautiful and distant by art, which allows him to sublimate and, perhaps, transcend his own sorrow. Such fables as the narrator turns to were intended by their creators to be reflected upon by those in need of counsel:

And in this bok were written fables  
 That clerkes had in olde tyme,  
 And other poetes, put in rime  
 To rede and for to be in minde,  
 While men loved the lawe of kinde.

We cannot evade sorrow, but we can assert our human nature through reflection. As Chaucer retells Ovid's tale, he enlarges on the sufferings of Queen Alcyone, separated from her husband, so that the narrator may concentrate on a loss other than, but similar to, his own:

Such sorowe this lady to her tok  
 That trewly I, that made this book,  
 Had such pittee and such rowthe  
 To rede hir sorowe that, by my trowthe,  
 I ferde the worse al the morwe  
 Aftir to thenken on hir sorwe.

Ovid's tale deepens the narrator's understanding of his own sorrow. The tale of Alcyone's grief, her husband Ceyx's message in her dream—"I nam but ded"—and her death, precipitated by the blunt, stunning news, offers a lesson about *the lawe of kinde*: sorrow must come to an end. The husband's message is clear on this point, "farewel, swete, my worldes blysse!/I praye God youre sorwe lyses." While the narrator empathizes with Alcyone's story, he does not come to terms with the fact of her sudden death. Chaucer, in fact, abruptly cuts off the story, omitting Ovid's reunion of the lovers after death as birds, and lets the narrator drop off to sleep without the Roman poet's happy ending.

The narrator's dream is itself a kind of fable, for, indeed, when he awakens he thinks to himself,

"Thys ys so queynt a sweven  
 That I wol, be processe of tyme,  
 Fonde to put this sweven in ryme  
 As I kan best."

That is, he will make of his dream something like Ovid's tale of Ceyx and Alcyone. When the dreamer encounters the sorrowing black knight in the dream, he finds him beyond the consolations offered by life—he is not interested in the hunt—or by art:

Nought al the remedies of Ovyde,  
 Ne Orpheus, god of melodye,  
 Ne Dedalus with his playes slye.

The black knight, whose name suggests a melancholic condition, is like the dreamer; his sorrowing heart "gan faste faynte" and "his spirites wexen ded". Here, as in Froissart's *Paradys*, imitated at the beginning of *The Book of the Duchess*, the connection between the loss of a loved one and lovesickness is explicit. Moreover, also like the dreamer, he wonders "how hys lyf myght laste", for "he had wel nygh lost hys mynde." For both the grieving dreamer and the black knight, "a tale" becomes the path to gaining "more knowynge of hys [the knight's] thought." In reality, of course, the conversation of the two within the dream framework *is* literature. The black knight's account of his courtship of the lady White memorializes his feelings about her and is a kind of romance. His account of her appearance, even if accurate, is conventional to romance literature, specifically Machaut's *Remede de Fortune* and the *Jugement dou Roy de Behaingne*:

And goode faire White she het;  
 That was my lady name ryght.  
 She was bothe fair and bryght;  
 She hadde not hir name wrong.  
 Ryght faire shuldres and body long  
 She had, and armes, every lyth  
 Fattyssh, flesshy, not gret therwith;  
 Ryght white handes, and nayles rede,  
 Rounde brestes; and of good brede  
 Hyr hippes were; a streight flat bak.

Not only is White's beauty like something out of a story-book, but so is her virtue. She is likened to the fabulous bird of legend, "The soleyn fenix of Arabye" and, for her "debonairte," to "Hester in the Bible." Much of *The Book of the Duchess* grows out of the dreamer-turned-poet recording the black knight's description of his lost lady. His memory of her is already a fiction, caught in the images of his suffering mind. In the end, without any solution, religious or philosophical, to the problem of mortality, the black knight is able to say plainly, "she ys ded!" As Burlin so aptly summarizes, "in purely human terms: the perceptive powers of the imagination in intimate cooperation with memory bring about a release from the paralysis of sorrow." Interestingly, the imagination, over time an important element of the cure, is also an aspect of the disease, since, in love melancholy, it is the imagination that is affected, trapped by the image of the beloved so that the sufferer abandons all other bodily needs, including food and sleep. One could argue that the reading of Chaucer's narrator-dreamer strongly colors the contents of the dream, so that the preoccupations of the waking life are carried on in sleep. While the dream at first offers Ovidian coincidence of detail, it also gradually shows the way to escape.

The therapeutic effect of literature, especially in treating mental disease, was recognized by the ancients, and they continued to praise it up until Chaucer's day and beyond. Glending Olson observes of this poem, "however original

and humorous Chaucer may be in describing his [the narrator's] means of falling asleep, it is worth noting that his invention in the *Book of the Duchess* seems predicated on a psychology of reading and sleeping that is explained in the *Tacuinum*, a Latin manual on hygiene translated from the Arabic in the thirteenth century. Olson's quote from this work, however, indicates that it is no more than an item from a table on sleep: "*Confabulator*: a teller of stories should have good discernment in knowing the kind of fictions in which the soul takes delight." The idea of the therapeutic good of pleasurable reading is explicit enough, but, as we shall see, many other more learned and elaborated statements on "literotherapy" were abroad in Chaucer's day in the medical literature (and some of these embody ideas that still hold weight today).

Among the many early physicians who give space to the importance of literary diversion is Paul of Aegina who, in discussing lovesick persons, comments that these are frequently "wasted" by physicians who misdiagnose their ailment and prescribe "quietude"; whereas, "wiser ones" who are more skilled at diagnosis advise, among other treatments, "spectacles and amusing stories" (*The Seven Book*). Such entertainment is likewise prescribed for melancholy by Avicenna in his *Canon of Medicine* and by Bartholomaeus Anglicus in *De Proprietatibus Rerum*, and for both melancholy and *amor hereos* by Valescus de Taranta in the *Philonium* (fol. 11r and 13r). Clearly the idea that the pleasures of literary diversion gave melancholics relief had currency in Chaucer's day; it would have had to be a virtual commonplace to have sifted down into a manual on health such as the *Tacuinum*. But the appearance of the idea in Avicenna and Bartholomaeus Anglicus has added significance in terms of the interplay of poetry and science during the Middle Ages, because Chaucer could easily have encountered their works.

Avicenna was readily available, and we know Chaucer was acquainted with his work, for in the "Pardoner's Tale" he mentions the distinctive chapter and ten divisions of the *Canon's* structure when he discusses the symptoms of poisoning:

But certes, I suppose that Avycen  
Wroot nevere in no canon, ne in no fen,  
Mo wonder signes of empoisonyng  
Than hadde this wrecches two, er hir endyng.

J. A. W. Bennett, who considers Chaucer's learning unmatched by any other late medieval English poet, even though he never took a university degree, is persuaded that his interest in and proximity to Oxford and the rich holdings of the Merton College Library may have contributed to his achievements. As a lifelong servant of kings, Chaucer would have attended court at the palace of Woodstock, regularly used by Edward and Richard, which was eight miles to the north of Oxford and only accessible from London (where Chaucer lived) by passing through Oxford (Bennett). The first appearance of Chaucer's name, in fact, occurs in the Woodstock household accounts for 1357. The poet associates his pilgrim clerk with Oxford, names two men with close ties to Oxford in his writing,

"philosophical" Strode and Bishop Bradwardine, gives his tale of student life an Oxford setting, and credits his physician pilgrim with a knowledge of medical works so vast that he could not have owned them all. Bennett comments, "I can find no record of any collection containing them except Merton College." If Chaucer himself spent time at Oxford, and if he went to the Merton College Library, one of the works he could have read there was Avicenna's *Canon*. The *Canon* contains a long section on signs of melancholy care, followed by a section on its cure. While emphasizing somatic cures such as bathing, drinking wine and being rubbed with aromatic oils, Avicenna also includes "listening to songs" in the context of such pastimes as hunting and sensual delights. Equally accessible was Bartholomaeus Anglicus's *De Proprietatibus Rerum*, translated into Middle English by John of Trevisa in the fourteenth century. This encyclopedia also advises literary entertainment for the relief of those who are cast down— "þe remedye of þise is þat þe sike man be ileide in a ly3t place and þat þere be iangelinge and grete spekinge and disputesoun," "by swete voys and song[es] and armonye, accord, and musik, sike men and mad and frenetek come ofte to hire witt a3ee and hele of body"—albeit of a distinctly oral, lyric nature.

But by far the most detailed discussion of the therapeutic value of literary entertainment appears in Caelius Aurelianus's *Chronic Diseases*, as he considers cures for mania:

. . . have the patient read aloud even from texts that are marred by false statements. In this way he will exercise his mind more thoroughly. And for the same reason he should also be kept busy answering questions. This will enable us both to detect malingering and to obtain the information we require. Then let him relax, giving him reading that is easy to understand; injury due to overexertion will thus be avoided. For if these mental exercises overtax the patient's strength, they are no less harmful than passive exercise carried to excess.

And so after the reading let him see a stage performance. A mime is suitable if the patient's madness has manifested itself in dejection; on the other hand, a composition depicting sadness or tragic terror is suitable in cases of madness which involve playful childishness. For the particular characteristic of a case of mental disturbance must be corrected by emphasizing the opposite quality, so that the mental condition, too, may attain the balanced state of health. And as the treatment proceeds, have the patient deliver discourses or speeches as far as his ability and strength permit. And in this case the speeches should all be arranged in the same way, the introduction to be delivered with a gentle voice, the narrative portions and proof more loudly and intensely, and the conclusion, again, in a subdued and kindly manner. This is in accordance with the precepts of those who have written on vocal exercise (Greek *anaphonesis*). An audience should be present, consisting of persons familiar to the patient, by according the speech favorable attention and praise, they will help relax the speaker's mind.

A related cure in *The Book of the Duchess* is the process of "talking it out"—the backbone of current day psychotherapies—as exemplified by the conversation between the black knight and the dreamer.

## TALKING

Years ago, at a time when some critics accused the dreamer of stupidity and lack of tact, Joseph E. Grennen [in "Hert-Huntyng in the *Book of the Duchess*." *Modern Language Quarterly*, 1964] stated flatly, "The dreamer does clearly see himself in the role of physician" and cited the supporting lines:

But certes, sire, yif that yee  
 Wolde ought discure me youre woo,  
 I wolde, as wys God helpe me soo,  
 Amend hyt, yif I kan or may.  
 Ye mowe preve hyt by assay;  
 For, by my trouthe, to make yow hool  
 I wol do al my power hool.  
 And telleth me of youre sorwes smerte;  
 Paraunter hyt may ese youre herte,  
 That semeth ful sek under your syde.

Penelope Doob [in *Nebuchadnezzar's Children: Conventions of Madness in Middle English Literature*] cites this passage as well and observes that the minor but very fine fifteenth century poet, Thomas Hoccleve, uses the same technique in the *Regement of Princes* (ca. 1412), wherein the poet depicts himself as a melancholic wandering in a state of distraction who has the good fortune to be found by a benevolent beggar (Doob). This man insists on getting Hoccleve to talk with him and tell "the verray cause of þin hyd mala-dye." Hoccleve is generally thought to be describing his own madness, and Doob credits him with "considerable scientific and medical knowledge." It is likely that Hoccleve is drawing on his personal experience combined with medical learning; there is also a strong probability that he is consciously reworking Chaucer's dialogue. Like the narrator in *The Book of the Duchess*, Hoccleve's beggar uses talk as a diversion from grief. Actually, as noted earlier, Chaucer's dreamer wants to establish contact with the bereaved knight even before the above-cited passage:

Anoon ryght I gan fynde a tale  
 To hym, to loke wher I myght ought  
 Have more knowynge of hys thought.

Far from stupid or clumsy, the dreamer's desire to intervene flows from his sense of the enormity of the black knight's grief,

Hit was gret wonder that Nature  
 Myght suffre any creature  
 To have such sorwe, and be nat ded,

gathered from tactful eavesdropping while the knight sange his "complaynte":

"I have sorwe so gret won  
 That joye gete I never non,  
 Now that I see my lady bryght,  
 Which I have loved with al my myght,  
 Is fro me ded and ys agoon."

The second half of the poem essentially relates the conversational give-and-take between the dreamer and bereaved knight, whereby the latter is enabled to express his sorrow directly to himself and another person. When, for instance, the black knight avoids the truth by losing it in the indirection of the figure of the chess game, the dreamer's conscious pose of obtuseness—"But ther is no man alyve her / Wolde for a fers make this woo!"—gently prods the knight in the direction of unburdening his heart. As the dreamer well knows, the sorrow springs from the loss of a human being, and his remark opens the flood-gates of memory. The bereaved knight spends some 300 lines detailing the beauty and virtues of his "lady dere." After that space of recollection, the dreamer poses the unavoidable question, "Sir . . . where is she now?" which, briefly avoided, leads finally to the open confession, "she ys ded!" This frees the knight to return home to his castle and presumably to reenter the world of active living. The "hert-huntyng" is done, heart's ease has been achieved, and the dreamer awakens thereafter with the book about "the goddes of slepyng" in his hand. By that point two mourners have been restored: the black knight of the dream is ready to resume the work of governance and the dreamer feels nearly ready to put the strange dream into "ryme / As I kan best." It seems reasonable to view the second half of *The Book of the Duchess* as mostly detailing the progress of, as Robertson and Huppé so aptly put it, "the poet's discovery of his mourning self through facing its simulacrum." This is a rather sophisticated development of one of the more frequent pieces of advice offered by early medical writers: that melancholics ought to get out and speak with friends. . . .

On the basis of this examination of *The Book of the Duchess*, and in light of earlier scholarly discoveries about the interchange between medieval physicians and medieval poets, it appears that Geoffrey Chaucer knew well the medieval thinking and practices of his time, though it is impossible to ascertain how much of the medical writing he knew firsthand. But what, finally, can be said about the narrator's eight-year sickness? Is it *amor hereos*? melancholy? mania? Hill, as mentioned in opening this chapter, astutely observes that "One of the most prominent symptoms of love melancholy, fixation on the object of desire, is missing." Chaucer's narrator emphasizes, rather, that "al is ylyche good to me—/ . . . for I have felynge in nothing," (*Duchess*), and that he is always dazed and dizzy. Hill's diagnosis of the disease is "head melancholy," a term borrowed from Robert Burton's *Anatomy*, which leaves the narrator "in danger of dying from default of sleep caused by his sorrowful *ymagynacioun*" (Hill). It may be that there is only dazed numbness without fixation on the object of desire because White is dead: the ideal woman has become inaccessible forever. My own earlier comments on the poem in terms of *melancholia canina* would not, however, rule out *amor hereos*; indeed, that category of melancholy may embrace *hereos*. The tenth century physicians Rhazes and Haly Abbas are responsible for a loose association of *melancholia canina* with *amor hereos* that could lend support to the view that frustrated love is, indeed, the cause of the narrator's eight-year sickness. In Rhazes's *Continens*, for instance, he links

the two categories of melancholy in a chapter heading: "Concerning Coturub." But again, as the present examination shows, symptoms as well as treatments for lovesickness, melancholy and mania tend to overlap. The narrator's initial complaint of insomnia is a serious symptom shared by each of the three diseases. His recourse to reading Ovid is a sensible diversion that, again, is prescribed by early physicians for all three mental diseases. Moreover, the dialogue between the narrator and black knight, a benefit to both participants, is also in accord with treatments recommended for each of these diseases.

In the final analysis, a definitive diagnosis is not only hard to make but unnecessary, as lovesickness, melancholy and mania are not only perceived but treated in many of the same ways. Implicit in Chaucer's description of Arcite's mental condition in the "Knight's Tale" is the poet's understanding of the interrelationship of the three mental conditions—*amor hereos*, mania and melancholy. He says of Arcite's psychological state that it was

Nat oonly lik the loveris maladye  
Of Hereos, but rather lyk manye,  
Engendred of humour malencolik  
Biforn, in his celle fantastik

It appears that Lowes began the scholarly journey from a very fruitful place.

Chaucer's passage on Arcite's mental state expresses a psychological subtlety that suggests his comprehension of the extremes of human behavior went beyond merely being in touch with medical commonplaces of his day. It is, nonetheless, difficult to know just how much direct knowledge Chaucer had of the writings of that rather comprehensive list of medical authorities cited in the portrait of his physician pilgrim. In *Chaucer's Physician*, Huling Ussery discusses John of Arderne as a reasonable model for the physician, in preference to John of Gaddesden, who died too early (1349) to be a reasonable candidate. Chaucer probably had heard that "Peter de Barulo *alias* Master Peter de Salernia, physician" was arrested in 1387 and may have been acquainted with one of his treatises. For all we know, this possibly unscrupulous man was a model for the physician pilgrim. But such evidence does not make it possible to prove that Chaucer read the writing of medieval medical authorities; we are simply assured that it was not impossible. Rossell Hope Robbins, an indefatigable tracker of manuscripts, in his essay, "The Physician's Authorities," points out that in the fourteenth century, ten of Chaucer's authorities were among the 230 medical works in St. Augustine's Abbey at Canterbury; nine appear among 208 medical books in the fifteenth century catalogs of Christ Church, Canterbury; and all except two, Gaddesden and Rufus, are also found in the library of Dover Priory. Thus it was possible for Chaucer to consult medical treatises firsthand. Of course, the availability of texts only makes their reading possible, no more; I have never read *The Magic Mountain* though a copy is on a bookshelf in the living room. Yet over and over again, one senses behind Chaucer's verse not just the intuition of poetic insight but actual scientific learning. When, for

instance, right before the dreamer offers his help to the Black Knight, Chaucer conveys the man's danger, expressing poetically his unnatural state of cold joylessness and nature's mechanism for correcting it, the poet does so in a way clearly informed by a knowledge of contemporary physiology. One hardly needs the evidence of parallel medical texts to feel convinced of a meeting of poetic vision and scientific knowledge in this passage:

Hys sorwful hert gan faste faynte,  
And his spirites wexen dede;  
The blood was fled for pure drede  
Doun to hys herte to make hym warm—  
For wel hyt feled the herte had harm—  
To wite eke why hit was adrad  
By kynde, and for to make hyt glad.

The ability of poets and physicians to see in parallel ways accounts for the ease with which they move in and out of one another's territory—not merely human nature, there for mutual viewing, but their works *about* that nature.

#### A. J. Minnis (essay date 1995)

SOURCE: "The Book of the Duchess," in *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Shorter Poems*, edited by A. J. Minnis et al., Clarendon Press, 1995, pp. 73-90.

[Minnis is a scholar of Medieval Literature and the author of many notable works including *Chaucer and the Pagan Antiquity* and *Chaucer's Boece and the Medieval Tradition of Boethius*. In the following excerpt, Minnis uses historical information and analyses of verse form, rhetoric, and style to praise Chaucer's *The Book of the Duchess*.]

Blanche of Lancaster died on 12 September 1368, perhaps of the plague. Two major monuments were constructed to preserve her memory. One was a poem by Geoffrey Chaucer, this being (as far as we know) his first substantial composition; he was probably in his mid-twenties at the time of Blanche's death. The other was the work of her husband, John of Gaunt, the third surviving son of King Edward III. In 1374 he commissioned from master mason Henry Yevele a splendid alabaster tomb, surmounted by sculptures of the duchess and himself. Perpetual masses were to be said for her soul at an adjoining altar, and a memorial service held on 12 September of each year. Gaunt's will contained the directive, 'My body to be buried . . . beside my most dear late wife Blanche, who is there interred.' And that was done. However, the tomb of Gaunt and Blanche, which was located in the north arcade of the choir of old St Paul's cathedral church in London, perished in the Great Fire. Chaucer's poem has survived. Is it a record, however idealized, of a genuine love-affair, or an elaborate piece of prince-pleasing which plays fast and loose with the facts, assuming that the poet knew them? Many critics have felt obliged to speculate on the nature of the royal relationship, since on it hangs—or at least they have made to hang—their

views on the negotiations between artifice and life, conventional discourses and emotional integrity, which are made by the *Book of the Duchess*.

It has been argued that Gaunt's first marriage was dictated by political expediency every bit as much as his second, to Constance of Castile. Worse still, in some medieval accounts he appears as an inveterate womanizer: having fathered an illegitimate daughter before he met Blanche, during the time of his marriage to Constance he took Katherine Swynford as his mistress (they were to marry in 1396). Indeed, it has even been suggested (though hard evidence is lacking) that this affair began while he was married to Blanche. Katherine had been one of Blanche's ladies-in-waiting and the governess of her daughters. Chaucer could hardly have been unaware of such events, if it is true that his wife Philippa was the sister of Gaunt's long-time mistress.

One would give much to know what the poet had in mind as he wrote the *Book of the Duchess* and as he looked back on it in later years. But that knowledge will, of course, never be forthcoming, and in the absence of such intimate biographical detail we may isolate the appropriate critical issues by means of a modern meditation on a medieval tomb—not Blanche's lost tomb, to be sure, but one belonging to the Howard family, once earls and countesses of Arundel, which may be seen in Winchester Cathedral. Philip Larkin's poem "An Arundel Tomb" raises questions concerning the artistic imitation (or is it illusion?) of feeling and the needs of the audience which confronts such an image, questions which lead us into vital regions of the aesthetics of Chaucer's poem.

Side by side, their faces blurred,  
The earl and countess lie in stone,  
their proper habits vaguely shown  
As jointed armour, stiffened pleat

What these people really felt for each other has also become 'blurred,' as the poem will make abundantly clear. In what sense do they 'lie in stone'? The earl's left-hand gauntlet is empty, and

One sees, with a sharp tender shock,  
His hand withdrawn, holding her hand.

But this serves to perplex as well as please. Is this a true or false image of historical reality? 'They would not think to lie so long', the repetition of 'lie' underlining the double meaning of the word: the sculptures lie together there as part of the tomb, and yet they may be perpetuating an untruth. (The fact that the hand-clasp is the result of later 'restoration' of the tomb serves to reinforce Larkin's point!) The next line, 'Such faithfulness in effigy,' is similarly ambiguous. That particular effigy could be an accurate representation of genuine fidelity; yet, taken in its entirety, the phrase also suggests something grimly static and cold, the life-affirming quality of fidelity in love being impossible to preserve artificially.

The role of the artist, the sculptor responsible for this fabrication, is then considered. Maybe the holding of hands

was simply a grace-note ('A sculptor's sweet commissioned grace') which he added on his own initiative (though of course he had been paid to display his skill), in the hope that its rarity would aid the memory of the beholders. If so, it would seem that time has reversed such priorities. Now tourists stare uncomprehendingly at the Latin names 'around the base,' not being able to understand this dead language. What seems to be familiar, what they fancy they recognize, is that hand-clasp; here is something which transcends temporal and linguistic differences. 'Only an attitude remains'—the configuration of the sculptures, existing irrespective of, and maybe even despite, what the original attitudes of the medieval lord and lady may have been. It seems to affirm that human love is durable. Certainly, that is what (the poem's assumed) 'we' want to believe; what is seen on the tomb appears

to prove  
Our almost-instinct almost true:  
What will survive of us is love.

But the poem will not allow 'us' to luxuriate in such a sentiment, tempting though that may be. It persists in asking, *does* love survive, in general, and is this what has happened in the case of the Howards, whose identities are lost in the past?

Time is not passive; it has not merely permitted the effigy to travel unhindered in its 'supine stationary voyage' down to the present. Rather, it is a power which effects transformation.

Time has transfigured them into  
Untruth. The stone fidelity  
They hardly meant has come to be  
Their final blazon

In this case it may have exercised a heightening, and hence a distorting, effect on something which owes more to art than to life, more to fiction than to truth. The medieval aristocrats may not have lived up to their image; 'hardly meant' evinces at once possible misunderstanding and firm affirmation—the hard stone declares its own meaning. The 'attitude' of love has thus been created by art; art has the power, as it were, to 'make' love. But are we dealing, then, with a lie? In terms of historical truth, maybe—though we shall never know. But the desire of human beings to believe in the survival of love in itself constitutes a major truth. Hence one can justifiably speak of an 'almost-instinct' as being 'almost true.' The agnostic modern, seeking to avoid sentimentality and dubious of the existence of a destiny which shapes our ends, is not prepared to go any farther than that. Yet this almost-truth is, in Larkin's terms, a fact of the first magnitude.

Due to the carefully wrought ambiguity of this poem, neither element of the balance is allowed to dominate. It cannot be said that this has always been the case in modern interpretation of Chaucer's 'lie' in verse, the *fabula* of the *Book of the Duchess*. Some have been convinced that time, with the help of Chaucer's artistic 'grace' (whether

specifically 'commissioned' or not) has transfigured Gaunt and Blanche into untruth. The possibility that John of Gaunt had committed adultery with Katherine in Blanche's lifetime has occasionally been raised, with Gaunt's wish to be buried beside his first duchess being taken as indicative of his thankfulness for her acquiescent forbearance. Then there is the question, did Gaunt do enough on Blanche's death? One may contrast, for example, Richard II's order, on the death of his queen in 1394, that the royal manor at Sheen be destroyed; he had once enjoyed happiness with her there. (As Clerk of the Works, Chaucer had overseen alterations to that royal residence.) But, even by the standards of the age, this was an extravagant expression of grief; it can hardly be taken as a norm against which to measure Gaunt's behaviour and find it wanting.

Others have perceived an even more elaborate web of intrigue, which included Chaucer's own wife and the poet himself. For instance, it has been suggested that Gaunt may have had an affair with Philippa, the issue of which was Thomas Chaucer. Such a claim, however, rests on an extraordinarily partial interpretation of such evidence as does exist and a determination to make gaps in the historical record into significant silences. Moreover, it is quite unnecessary: such links as we know Chaucer to have had with Gaunt certainly did not require him to have been in the position of a 'contented cuckold' (as B. J. Whiting puts it) who merited some compensation, and 'in later years the fact that the duke truly loved Chaucer's sister-in-law may be reason enough why he granted financial favors' to her kin, to quote Donald Howard [in *Chaucer and the Medieval World*].

But let us concentrate on the relationship between Gaunt and Blanche. It has often been declared or implied that love is the most important thing that has survived of them. Sydney Armitage-Smith, in his 1904 biography of John of Gaunt, saw Blanche's death as marking the end of the best years of Gaunt's life. 'Of the sincerity of the Duke's grief there need be no question'; his 'gratitude to the memory of his first wife never failed.' Monkish attacks on Gaunt's subsequent affair with Katherine are trivialized as 'merely the venom of the cloister,' and there is special pleading with reference to the 'standard of English society in the fourteenth century,' which is supposed to have been 'not exacting' in matters of personal morality. Gaunt's conduct, Armitage-Smith believes, was 'if no better . . . certainly no worse' than that of others. Writing over eighty years later, Howard follows in Armitage-Smith's footsteps by seeing Gaunt's life with Blanche as marking the end of his golden age: 'Her death . . . wrought a change in his character. He was to be thereafter a man possessed by ambitions.' Concerning the quality of Gaunt's first love, while noting that 'Medieval knights of royal lineage are often depicted as unfeeling military leaders whose relationships with women were exploitative and wanting in sentiment,' Howard prefers to throw his own weight behind the belief that 'they could love their wives with towering and noble emotion,' and unhesitatingly takes the commemorative masses and services which Gaunt ordered, along with his declared desire to be buried beside Blanche, as firm evidence that he 'loved her deeply.' A similar dichotomy pervades Derek Brewer's approach. Evincing a

robust willingness to accept medieval *realpolitik* and mores, he refuses to be surprised by Gaunt's prompt remarriage: 'Private sentiment could not weigh against public policy; and there was anyway a hardboiled acceptance of death in the fourteenth century.' However, these general facts of late medieval life certainly do not, in Brewer's opinion, rule out the possibility that profound 'private sentiment' could have existed in this case: 'Lancaster's genuine love for Blanche and his grief at her death are not to be questioned' [*Chaucer and His World*]. Chaucer's poem, he continues, is 'not so much an idealized account of life as the ideal truth to which life was so fortunate to approximate.'

George Kane, *pace* Chaucer's poem, is determined to portray Gaunt with warts and all, and to remind us that they were clearly visible before, as well as after, his time with Blanche. 'There was nothing [in the *Book of the Duchess*] about the daughter Gaunt fathered before he married Blanche'; nor could one know from it that 'Gaunt's marriage to Blanche had in fact been arranged by his father to consolidate the kingship' [*Chaucer*]. Yet, later, Kane declares that although this was an arranged marriage, 'It turned into a love match.' 'Lovely Blanche . . . never lost her place in his heart,' as is manifest by his wish to be buried beside her. However, Chaucer's latest biographer, Derek Pearsall, has challenged such reasoning. 'It was usual to be buried next to one's first wife,' he claims, 'especially when she was the foundation of one's fortune.' And the phrase 'my most dear late wife,' apparently so appropriate as applied to Blanche, is also applied to Constance of Castile (who died in 1394). Anyway, declares Pearsall, here we are dealing with 'the routine commonplaces of inky clerks' [*Life of Chaucer*].

How, then, can one possibly sum up Gaunt's behaviour in love? 'A spectacular man to whom the rules might not seem to apply' is Kane's verdict. Thus, Gaunt's best side is presented to the beholder: here is one who was not numbered in the roll of common men. And this is, of course, precisely what the *Book of the Duchess* shows and says, inasmuch as its Man in Black is an idealized figure of Gaunt. In the final analysis, we cannot claim familiarity with Gaunt. Similarly, there is considerable distance between the observer and the observed in the *Book of the Duchess*, the poet persona and the Gaunt-surrogate being divided by rank and experience. These matters will be discussed below. Suffice it to say here that Chaucer's portraits of Gaunt and Blanche, though idealized representations, are no effigies upon which the narrator can project his meditations—which is what is happening in the Larkin poem. For in the *Book of the Duchess* it is the black knight who is dominant, who imposes his meditations on a beholder, the narrator, a subordinate who can listen and learn even if he cannot fully understand. He, the marvelling reporter, invites his audience to share in his admiration. And in Chaucer's poem, art, far from turning feelings into stone, serves to conserve them—but here too the pleat has stiffened, inasmuch as they are presented in forms which owe much to the ritualizing processes of literary decorums and conventions. Whether or not this is a 'lie' or an approximation to ideal truth (to echo Brewer's phrase) is impossible to tell. History allows either opinion, and gainsays neither. . . .



Chaucer's use of the octosyllabic couplet . . . encourages the feeling that we are in the presence a young poet who is heavily influenced by French fashion. This was the verse-form used in the *Roman de la Rose*. Chaucer seems to have translated this extraordinarily influential poem into English, at least one fragment of which may have survived. It was also the measure of several of the direct sources of the *Book of the Duchess*, most notably Guillaume de Machaut's *Remede de Fortune* and *Dit de la Fonteinne Amoureuse* (c. 1360), and the *Ovide moralisé*, which was written between 1316 and 1328 by an anonymous Franciscan.

Some lines have one syllable more and others one syllable less. This cannot be put down to inexperience, however, since this variation is found also in the later *House of Fame*. Moreover, sometimes a trochee functions as the first, second, or indeed the third foot in place of the iambus. And on occasion Chaucer allows an extra syllable before the caesura and a short foot after it. All this indicates Chaucer's preference for a looser verse-form—by contrast with Gower, who in his *Confessio Amantis* creates octosyllabic couplets of exceptional regularity with apparent ease. The current consensus is that Chaucer cannot be judged strictly by French metrical standards, given that he seems to have been influenced by the freer English tradition of four-beat lines. Certainly there is no justification for thoroughgoing editorial attempts to 'restore' smooth octosyllabics.

Further, there is, perhaps, a general tendency to regard the octosyllabic couplet as a highly reductive measure, cramping and homogenizing in its limited scope. This should be resisted. An effective antidote is offered by the work of a contemporary master of the form, Tony Harrison. To take but two examples, his controversial poem on the Gulf War, "A Cold Coming," and his film poem "The Gaze of the Gorgon" prove beyond any shadow of a doubt that octosyllabics can accommodate both savage satire and subtle sensitivities, and are eminently capable of ranging from hope to horror, from the sublime to the ridiculous, from the tender to the obscene, even within a few lines. All the more reason to give Chaucer the benefit of the doubt.

At two points in the *Book of the Duchess* a more complicated rhyme scheme is used. This is in the case of the 'enclosed lyrics,' the Man in Black's initial 'compleynte' about his lost 'lady bryght' and the very first 'song' which, according to his reminiscences, he wrote in expression of his feelings for her. The latter rhymes *aabbaa*. The former has a more elaborate scheme, *aabbaccdd*, which seems to be imperfect. All the manuscripts agree here, but normally one would expect a second couplet rhyming on *a*, though as a genre the complaint can take many forms. In William Thynne's 1532 edition of Chaucer the line 'Now have I tolde the, sothe to say' appears after the indubitably authentic line 1180, but Thynne may simply have made it up.

By including lyrics in this way and highlighting them as discrete units within the narrative (we are told when a recital is about to begin, and some comment is made to

mark its completion), Chaucer was following in the footsteps of the Old French poets. The fiction of overhearing and recording a superior's lyric was almost certainly indebted to Machaut's *Fonteinne Amoureuse*, in which the patron's accomplished complaint is transcribed admiringly by the narrator. But the 'intercalated lyric' is a common feature of the *dit amoureux* genre. To take one of the most influential *dits* of them all as an example, in Machaut's *Remede de Fortune* the narrator composes a lay about his feelings for his lady and a complaint about Fortune. (At the end of the latter Machaut presents the I-persona as debating and struggling alone ('per moy debatus'). That particular phrase calls to mind Chaucer's statement that the Man in Black's complaint is 'to hymself,' and later, in *Troilus and Criseyde*, Troilus will be described as 'disputyng with hymself' in the 'matere' of fate and fortune.) Subsequently Hope sings a *chant royal* and a *baladele* to comfort and cheer the lover. Duly revitalized, he composes a *ballade* to his lady, and prays to Love. The climax comes when he actually performs a *chanson baladee* before her, after which she consents to be called his beloved; overjoyed, he sings a *rondelet* as he takes his leave. It could be said that here poetic production is being put in place of amatory experience, an effect which is even more obvious in Machaut's *Voir Dit* (c. 1364), wherein the lover-narrator and the beloved, Tote-Belle, exchange poems and verse letters, and when their relationship blossoms, each writes a lyric by way of celebration. Jean Froissart's *Prison Amoureuse* (c. 1360), which is fundamentally a sequence of lyrics and letters, is an obvious attempt to surpass the *Voir Dit*; similarly, Froissart's *Paradys d'Amours* (c. 1362-9) includes examples of the *rondel*, *rondelet*, *lay*, *virelay*, and *ballade*, which the characters sing with pleasure and much self-congratulation. Nominally these lyric performances record and reflect the psychological history of the narrator and/or some authority figure, but above all else they are an ostentatious display of technical virtuosity, the narrative functioning as a show-case.

Chaucer is rather more interested in having the intercalated lyric fulfil a definite narrative function. Thus, it is the Man in Black's complaint that first tells us that his beloved is dead; thereby the scene is set for the lengthy conversation which follows. And the composition of his very first song in honour of the lady White is also presented as an event of real significance in the furtherance of the story. Knowledge of the bereaved lover's past emotions helps us to understand his present ones. The fact that there are only two lyrics, rather than a formidable arsenal, makes them all the more effective in these terms; they function symmetrically as a neatly contrasting pair. The point which I want to emphasize, however, is that these lyrics keep the action moving rather than hold it up; to some extent this is due, of course, to the fact that they are a lot shorter than most of the effusions in the French *dits*, but different literary priorities are the major determining factor. When John Lydgate came to produce his own version of Chaucer's poem, the *Complaynt of a Loveres Lyfe* (written during the period 1398-1412), he returned to the French manner of doing things which we have just described, the result being a poem which comprises a sequence of quite

static set pieces. The actual complaint of 'a man / In black and white, colour pale and wan' occupies some 356 lines within a poem of 681 lines, thus constituting over half its total length. Lydgate's eavesdropping narrator does not actually converse with the grieving knight, but carefully records what he said—to entertain the audience!

A pene I toke and gan me fast[e] spede  
The woful pleynt[e] of this man to write,  
Worde by worde as he dyd endyte:  
Lyke as I herde and coud him tho reporte  
I haue here set, youre hertis to dysporte.

And he utters a twenty-five-line prayer to 'lady Venus' on the knight's behalf. The poem ends with two envoys, of eight lines each, the first to 'Princes' and 'womanhede' in general and the second to his 'luyves quene' in particular. Here direct human contact is avoided, Lydgate being more interested in the aureate encrustation of disembodied emotions than the creation of selfhoods or with their interaction. The contrasts with the *Book of the Duchess* are striking.

Chaucer's interest in the intercalated lyric was by no means confined to the *Book of the Duchess*. *Anelida and Arcite* contains an elaborate 'compleynt,' and a 'roundel' in praise of St Valentine's Day appears near the end of the *Parliament of Fowls*. In the F Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* a 'balade' beginning 'Hyd, Absolon, thy gilte tresses clere' is recited ('seyn') by the I-persona, while in the G Prologue it is sung by the group of ladies which accompanies the God of Love; these performances have an ornamental function in the main. Moreover, in *Troilus and Criseyde* there is a *Canticus Troili* at i. 400-20 (on the contrary emotions characteristic of love) and another at v. 638-44 (on the torment caused by Criseyde's absence). In the second book Antigone sings 'cleere' a 'Troian song,' which encourages Criseyde to sympathetic to Troilus, while the final book includes two verse letters, one from Troilus to Criseyde, the other, Criseyde's reply. More unusually, in the third book Boethian philosophy is recast in the form of yet another *Canticus Troili*, sung by the overjoyed prince in celebration of the consummation of his love. As Ardis Butterfield has argued so well, this may be regarded as a development of the French practice of lyric enclosure, less surprising given the manifest debt of some of the *dits amoureux*, particularly the *Remede de Fortune*, to the *Consolatio philosophiae*. Clearly, Old French verse-forms and intercalating techniques exercised an influence on Chaucer which lasted well into his so-called Italian period.

Moving on now to discuss the poem's style, with special reference to its rhetoric, it may be said that Chaucer took a calculated risk in introducing idiomatic dialogue, which is generally awkward to handle in verse. Lines 1042 ff. work very well, the tricky exchange at 1045-7 being handled with especial skill. Then again, a wonderfully comic effect is achieved at lines 184-6, when Juno's messenger wakes up Morpheus ('Who clepeth ther?' / 'Hyt am I'). But lines 1309-10 pose problems even for some of the poem's greatest admirers.

'She ys ded!' 'Nay!' 'Yis, be my trouthe!'  
'Is that youre los? Be God, hyt ys routhe!'

For a climax to a long apotheosis of love and the lady, is not this rather disappointing? Of course, it could be said that here at last the poem's displacing and ritualizing decorums have been left behind, as the plain fact of death is confronted in plain speech. But there is a hint of something else, something which feels uncomfortably like bathos. The chime of the rhyme diminishes the emotional force of the exchange, making it sound inappropriately pat and curt. A similar effect occurs at the end of the 'poem within the poem', the story of Ceyx and Alcyone, when the traumatized queen is dismissed rather brusquely:

. . . 'Alas!' quod she for sorwe,  
And deyede within the thridde morwe.

Here, however, the effect can be justified as part and parcel of the 'game' which the narrator may be playing with the ancient text. Alternatively, Chaucer could have been striving to construct a blunt statement of the facts of death, a theory which can claim support from the emphasis on earthly transience that is characteristic of the entire passage which culminates with this couplet.

The prevailing impression given by the poem, however, is of an enthusiastic and highly ambitious writer who is in love with rhetoric. This may be illustrated with reference to Chaucer's long *descriptio* of 'faire White', which occupies lines 817-1041, with a brief continuation at lines 1052-87, making a grand total of some 261 lines of verse. Chaucer took the account of a beautiful lady (who, incidentally, proves unfaithful) as seen through the eyes of her lover from Machaut's *Jugement dou Roy de Behaingne* (composed before 1342), and embellished it further, developing its theme with devices of *amplificatio* (amplification, enlargement) and enriching its language with the ornaments of style. Both descriptions follow a set pattern, as recommended by the medieval arts of poetry and followed with extraordinary consistency by generations of medieval poets writing in the several European vernaculars as well as in Latin. Medieval gentlemen certainly preferred blondes, and ladies with golden hair, thin brown eyebrows, slender waists, swelling bellies (suggesting child-bearing potential), and of lily and rose complexion are ubiquitous in literature and painting.

The rhetoricians had listed the personal attributes which should be included in a description, including name, nature, style of life, fortune, quality, diligence, and the like. Chaucer is particularly interested in the lady's name, whereas in the *Behaingne* Machaut was not:

And goode faire White she het;  
That was my lady name ryght.  
She was bothe fair and bryght;  
She hadde not hir name wrong.

By the interpretation of a person's name something good or bad about them may be intimated, declares Matthew of Vendôme in his *Ars versificatoria* (written before 1175).

For example, Maximus lives up to his great name in nobility and soul (Ovid, *Epistulae ex Ponto*), whereas Caesar 'takes his name from his achievement' (a reference to one of Matthew's own examples of *descriptio*). Similarly, 'faire White' is white by name and white and bright by nature. Moreover, she is determined to live up to her good name: 'She loved so wel hir owne name.' The *artes poetriae* advocate an emphasis on a person's rank, and that certainly is being placed here: the lady White knows who she is, and the poem makes sure that we know it too. Her beauty functions to confirm her high birth and impeccable breeding.

Chaucer takes Machaut's statement that the lady's hair 'was like strands of gold, neither too blond nor too brown,' and builds it up into a *circumlocutio* or roundabout statement, which ends with an affirmation of his conclusion:

For every heer on hir hed,  
Soth to seyne, hyt was not red,  
Ne nouthur yelowe ne broun hyt nas;  
Me thoughte most lyk gold hyt was.

In his *Documentum de modo et arte dictandi et versificandi* Geoffrey of Vinsauf—the 'Gaufred, deere maister soverayn' referred to in the "Nun's Priest's Tale"—says of this device, 'instead of speaking of a thing directly, we move about [it] in a circle.' And certainly that is what is happening here.

*Exclamatio*, exclamation which expresses vehemently some emotion, occurs at lines 895-7 and 919-20 (cf. 1075, etc.). Chaucer employs *repetitio*, repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of several lines, at 827-9 ('Of . . .'), 869-70 ('Hyt . . .'), 906-7 and 911-12 ('And . . .'), 927-8 ('Ne . . .'), 988-9 ('And . . .'), 1025-6 ('To . . .'), 1038-40, ('My/Myn . . .'), etc. Then there is *interrogatio*, where a question is asked for rhetorical effect and not as a request for information. The comparison of White to the phoenix in order to emphasize her uniqueness is of course an *exemplum* (cf. 1052-87, where a formidable arsenal of *exempla* may be found, White being likened to Penelope and Lucrece). The older poet was to exploit the funny side of the ponderous use of *exempla* in *Troilus and Criseyde*. There Troilus, having been warned against excessive weeping like Niobe (who turned into stone when grieving), tells Pandarus that he has had enough:

'What knowe I of the queene Nyobe?  
Lat be thyne olde ensaumples, I the preye'.

But that is some time away in the future, and of course the context is very different. To be sure, the Man in Black is hardly impressed with the role model of Socrates as recommended by the dreamer, but he is too polite to protest much, even when his companion provides him with five further *exempla* for good measure. Later, he himself demonstrates a fatal attraction to the device.

There are, however, aspects of Machaut's account in the *Behaingne* which Chaucer abbreviates rather than amplifies. The descriptions of the lady's 'forehead, eyebrows,

nose, mouth, teeth, chin, haunches, thighs, legs, feet, flesh' and the statement of her age are all omitted, as Derek Brewer succinctly puts it. This was probably due to decorum: Chaucer could not be too familiar in textualizing the wife of the powerful Gaunt, a woman who had been one of the most eminent heiresses throughout England. Indeed, some of the specimen descriptions provided in the *artes poetriae* include rather salacious passages, as when Matthew of Vendôme, having described a woman's ivory teeth, milky forehead, snowy neck, star-like eyes, rosy lips, narrow waist, and 'luscious little belly,' moves on to consider her 'sweet home of Venus': 'The sweetness of savour that lies hid in the realm of Venus / The judging touch can fortell.' This voyeurism (fairly standard in Matthew) sees the female body very much in terms of its sexual attractions to the male. Machaut's lover was more circumspect: 'Of the rest, which I did not see, I can assure you . . . that it was in perfect accord with Nature, pleasing in shape and contour. This remaining part, which I wish to speak no more of here, must be held without comparison to be sweeter and more beautiful than any other.' Chaucer took discretion even further—

I knew in hir noon other lak  
That al hir lymmes nere pure sewynge  
In as fer as I had knowynge.  
*perfectly proportioned*

—even though he is putting these words in the mouth of the man who, within the narrative, subsequently wins her. The Man in Black is, of course, speaking of White as she was when he first knew her, rather than from the point of view of a husband married to her for nine years (the length of time that Gaunt was married to Blanche).

Not that Chaucer is averse to elaborating on the traditional physical attributes: he moves away from Machaut in adding plumpness to the arms and red fingernails to the customarily white hands and in noting her straight flat back and long body. Moreover, he describes her speech, as goodly, friendly, soft, and reasonable; here he was following another poem of Machaut's, the *Remede de Fortune*. Matthew of Vendôme recommends the inclusion of this attribute, for someone's character can be established through reference to a 'cultivated manner of speaking', as when Ovid says that grace was not absent in the 'eloquent speech' of Ulysses (*Metamorphoses*). Of course, some aspects of Machaut's description simply did not apply to Blanche, as, for example, her age. The Machaut lady, the subject of so much male praise and the cause of so much sorrow on account of her infidelity, is fourteen and a half years old. Heroines in medieval literature can be, by today's standards, surprisingly young, probably a reflection of the medieval belief that women matured and died earlier than men. For instance, Emilia in Boccaccio's *Teseida* (the primary source of the "Knight's Tale") is only 15 when she marries Palemone. By contrast, Chaucer makes no comment about how old his Emelye was, and professes ignorance of the age of Criseyde (*Troilus and Criseyde*). He also avoids mentioning White's age. Blanche was 27 when she died, and thus past her prime (as envisioned in Chaucer's day), and so it may have been delicacy which

prompted him to avoid that matter. Against this, it may be noted that Froissart described her as having died 'fair and young'—but then, he was vague about her age, remarking that she was 'about twenty-two years old,' which is a considerable underestimate. Returning to Blanche as textualized by Chaucer, there is another possible reason for his silence. She was slightly (at the most one year) younger than Gaunt, and so the specification of her age might have made her greater maturity seem implausible, even allowing for the belief that women were thought to mature earlier. But of course, it would be quite naïve to talk as if White is Blanche or the Man in Black is Gaunt, for we are dealing with fictions which maintain some distance from their real-life equivalents, in a manner which owes much to the practice of the *dits amoureux*.

Moreover, certain aspects of White which Chaucer wished to describe simply had no precedent in the *Behaingne*. Her moral qualities are emphasized, qualities markedly absent in the case of the lady in Machaut's poem, who left her adoring knight for another man. Once again, Chaucer follows the precepts and the practice of the rhetoricians. Matthew of Vendôme includes in his series of model *descriptions* an account of the virtuous woman, here identified as Marcia, wife of Cato. This paragon is said to reject 'feminine deceits,' display understanding, and radiate trustworthiness. 'The honesty of her speech portends / The value of her virtue'; she 'lacks guile,' the 'goodwill of her gaze' not being 'a craving for Venus' sport . . . Marcia is strong in mind.' Similarly, White is friendly but not forward; no prude (she enjoys dancing and modest 'pleye') but certainly no flirt. Her glance is direct, quite lacking in coquettishness and sexual allure, as is her behaviour in general. Her intelligence is disposed to all goodness, and she is incapable of wronging anyone. In her dealings with men she is honest and straightforward, giving no encouragement where none is meant and not being the type to set a suitor elaborate tests of love, sending him off to foreign lands to win 'worshyp' before he can enter her presence again. However, she is not to be won easily; the black knight has to 'serve' her for a year before she takes him into her 'governance,' thereby making a man of this rather callow youth. Marcia, Matthew of Vendôme concludes, is a fit wife for the wise Cato. White, Chaucer's poem implies, was the perfect match for the Man in Black.

Geoffrey of Vinsauf, in his *Poetria nova* (composed between 1200 and 1213), recommends that *descriptio* be delightful as well as large, 'handsome as well as big.' In order that the mind should be 'fully refreshed,' he continues, 'her conventional nature should not be too trite'; 'more unusual usages' should therefore be sought. In similar vein, Matthew of Vendôme declares that a writer is at fault when he employs 'a superfluous flourish of words and ornamented speech and grasps at clouds and vacuities.' In the *Book of the Duchess* Chaucer's verse sometimes comes perilously close to doing just that. It must be said, of course, that medieval vernacular poetry is generally designed for oral performance, or at least circumscribed by strategies which had developed to enhance oral delivery. Here is literature composed above all else to be

heard, when read aloud to a company or indeed to oneself (whether the words were declaimed or mouthed), 'silent reading' being a rarity. Hence the rhetorical nature of so much medieval literature. We are dealing with 'performance texts' *par excellence*, works which require room to create their effects, long periods to build up their descriptions, since the writer cannot rely on his public reading and rereading a passage until all its significance is grasped (this being the usual means in which poetry is experienced in an age of print rather than script).

After all due allowance is made for these factors, however, it may be said that Chaucer has not as yet learned that big may not be beautiful and that more can mean less. On the other hand, certain passages in the *Book of the Duchess* have an exquisite charm which is scarcely rivalled by anything he was to write later: the lightsome dream-chamber, the lush landscape through which the mysterious dog leads the dreamer, White dancing 'so comlily' and laughing with her friends, the black knight's description of how he and she lived as one, and so forth. And as a whole the poem has retained its power to move.

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