The Canterbury Tales Study Guide

The Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer

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Contents

Introduction

Geoffrey Chaucer began writing *The Canterbury Tales* sometime around 1387; the uncompleted manuscript was published in 1400, the year he died. Having recently passed the six hundredth anniversary of its publication, the book is still of interest to modern students for several reasons. For one thing, *The Canterbury Tales* is recognized as the first book of poetry written in the English language. Before Chaucer's time, even poets who lived in England wrote in Italian or Latin, which meant that poetry was only understandable to people of the wealthy, educated class. English was considered low class and vulgar. To a great degree, *The Canterbury Tales* helped make it a legitimate language to work in. Because of this work, all of the great writers who followed, from Shakespeare to Dryden to Keats to Eliot, owe him a debt of gratitude. It is because Chaucer wrote in English that there is a written record of the roots from which the modern language grew. Contemporary readers might find his words nearly as difficult to follow as a foreign language, but scholars are thankful for the chance to compare Middle English to the language as it is spoken now, to examine its growth.

In the same way that *The Canterbury Tales* gives modern readers a sense of the language at the time, the book also gives a rich, intricate tapestry of medieval social life, combining elements of all classes, from nobles to workers, from priests and nuns to drunkards and thieves. The General Prologue alone provides a panoramic view of society that is not like any found elsewhere in all of literature. Students who are not particularly interested in medieval England can appreciate the author's technique in capturing the variations of human temperament and behavior. Collections of stories were common in Chaucer's time, and some still exist today, but the genius of *The Canterbury Tales* is that the individual stories are presented in a continuing narrative, showing how all of the various pieces of life connect to one another. This entry does not cover all the tales, only some of the most studied.

Author Biography

Geoffrey Chaucer came from a financially secure family that owned ample wine vineyards but held no title, and so from birth he was limited in his capacity for social growth. His date of birth is uncertain but is assumed to be around 1340-1345.

While he was still a child in London, it became clear that Chaucer was a brilliant scholar, and he was sent to the prestigious St. Paul's Almonry for his education. In 1357, he rose in society by taking a position in the royal court of Elizabeth, Countess of Ulster. His duties as a squire in court would have included those that are usually associated with domestic help: making beds, carrying candles, helping the gentleman of the house dress. Chaucer was given an education in his association with the household, and he met some of England's exalted royalty.

He left in 1359 to join the army to fight the French in the Hundred Years' War (1337-1453). Captured near Rheims, he was ransomed the following year and returned to being a squire. Being intelligent and witty, he became increasingly valuable at court for the entertainment of his poetry. By 1367, he was the valet for the King himself, and that same year, he married a woman whose rank added to his social standing: Philippa de Roet, the sister to Catherine of Swynford, the third wife of John of Gaunt. John of Gaunt, the Duke of Lancaster, was later to take over the responsibility for ruling England when his father, Edward III, became too senile to rule before a successor was crowned. As a valued and trusted member of the court, Chaucer was sent on several diplomatic missions, giving him a rare opportunity to see Italy and France. The influences of these languages can be traced in his poetry, and the worldliness of travel affected his storytelling ability. His political influence grew with a series of appointments: to Comptroller of taxes on wools, skins, and hides at the Port of London in 1374; Comptroller of petty customs in 1382; Justice of the Peace for the County of Kent in 1385; and Knight of the Shire in 1386. In December of 1386, he was deprived of all of this political influence when his patron, John of Gaunt, left the country on a military expedition for Spain and the Duke of Gloucester replaced him. It is assumed that it was during this period of unemployment that Chaucer planned out and started writing *The Canterbury Tales*. When John of Gaunt returned to England in 1389, he was given a new government post, and Chaucer lived a prosperous life from then on.

There is no record of his progress on *The Canterbury Tales*. The plan that he laid out in the Prologue was left unfinished when he died on October 25, 1400. He was buried in Westminster Abbey and was the first of the writers to be entombed there in the area known as the Poets' Corner.

Plot Summary

The Prologue

In the Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, Geoffrey Chaucer introduces the speaker of the poem as a man named Chaucer, who is traveling from London with a group of strangers to visit Canterbury, a borough to the southeast of London. This group of people is thrown together when they travel together on a trip to the shrine of Saint Thomas a Becket, who was murdered in Canterbury in 1170. The Prologue gives a brief description of the setting as they assemble at the Tibard Inn in Southwark to prepare for their trip. It describes each of the pilgrims, including ones who were meant to be discussed in sections of the book that were never written before Chaucer died. After the introductions, the Host, who owns the inn that they gather at and who is leading the group, suggests that they should each tell two stories while walking, one on the way to Canterbury and one on the way back, to pass the time more quickly. He offers the person telling the best story a free supper at the tavern when they return.

The Knight's Tale

The first pilgrim to talk, the Knight, tells a long, involved tale of love from ancient Greece about two knights, Arcite and Palamon. They were captured in a war between Thebes and Athens and thrown into an Athenian prison to spend the rest of their lives there. From the tower they were locked in, they could see a fair maiden, Emily, in the window of her chamber every morning, and they each fell in love with her. An old friend of Arcite arranged for his release, and the ruler of Athens, Duke Theseus, agreed with just one condition: that Arcite had to leave Athens forever or be killed if he ever returned. In exile, all he could do was think about Emily, while Palamon, who was in prison, could at least look at her every day.

For two years Arcite wandered, suffering so much from lovesickness that he became worn and pale. When the god Mercury came and told him to return to Athens, he realized that he did not even look like the man he had once been. Upon returning, he secured a job in Emily's court and became one of her servants. Meanwhile, Palamon, after seven years in prison, escaped. The two former companions soon ran into each other in the forest and fought. While they were fighting, Theseus stumbled upon them and, finding out who they were, was ready to have them both killed. His wife, however, was moved by their love for Emily and convinced them to settle their argument by leading the best soldiers in the land against each other, with the winner marrying Emily.

The Knight's Tale goes on for hundreds of lines detailing the historic noble personages who participated in the battle and the preparations they made, including sacrifices to gods. In the battle, Palamon was injured, but no sooner was Arcite declared the winner than his horse reared up and dropped him on his head. He died that night and was given a hero's funeral, and Palamon married Emily. They lived happily ever after: "Thus

endeth Palamon and Emelye," the Knight's Tale ends, "And God save al this faire companye! Amen."

The Miller's Tale

The Miller is the next speaker; he is drunk and picks an argument with the Reeve before beginning a story about a carpenter at Oxford, who was rich and miserly. To make extra money, the carpenter rented a room to a poor student, Nicholas, who lived with the carpenter and his young, beautiful wife. Eventually, Nicholas and the young wife, Alison, started scheming about how they could have an affair without the carpenter finding out. They made use of the fact that the parish clerk, Absalon, had a crush on the wife, and would sing songs outside of her window at night. Once, Nicholas stayed up in his room, and didn't come down for days, having prepared by hoarding enough food for a long period. When the carpenter sent a servant to get him, he found Nicholas lying as if he had suffered a seizure. The fit was caused, Nicholas explained, by a startling discovery he had made while studying astrology: that a terrible flood was coming. He convinced the carpenter to hang three tubs from the roof, so that both men and Alison would be safe from the rising waters. On the appointed day, they climbed into their separate tubs, but once the carpenter was asleep Alison and Nicholas sneaked down to the bedroom together. While they were in bed, Absalon came to the window, and, thinking Alison was alone, demanded a kiss; she put her naked backside out the window, and he kissed it in the dark. When he climbed the ladder again to object, Nicholas put his own behind out and passed gas in Absalon's face. When John, the carpenter, came out of his basket, the young lovers told everyone in town that he was insane and had made up the crazy story about the flood, ruining his reputation forever.

The Wife of Bath's Tale

The Wife of Bath's tale starts with a long Prologue, much longer than the tale she eventually tells, in which she describes to her fellow pilgrims the history of her five previous marriages and her views about relations between men and women. She defends at length the moral righteousness of people who marry often, as long as their spouses are dead, quoting the Bible as only stating that sexual abstinence is preferred but not required. In fact, she explains, the sexual organs are made to be used for sex and supports this claim with a quote from the Book of Proverbs, "Man shal yelde to his wyf hire dette" ("Man shall yield to his wife her debt"). After the Pardoner interrupts to say that he has been thinking of being married soon, the Wife of Bath describes marriage to him, using her own marriages as examples. The first three, she says, were to old men who were hardly able to have sex with her. She flattered these men by pretending to be jealous of them, using the excuse of keeping an eye on them as an explanation for why she was always out at night. She also argued with them constantly, bringing up every stereotype about women they had ever uttered and every suspicion that they'd had about her in particular so that she could argue from a defensive position. By arguing, she was able to make them appreciate her more when she did decide to be nice to them. Her fourth husband was younger, but he made her jealous by having a

mistress so she made him miserable by making him jealous too: not, as she points out, by having a sexual affair, but simply by having a good time. Her fifth and last husband, Jankin, was physically abusive, but she loved him best nonetheless because he was a good lover. She met him while still married to her fourth husband when he was living next door to her godmother. When her fourth husband died, she married Jankin and signed over to him all that she had inherited from her four previous husbands. She continued her active social life, and her sarcastic talk. One night, as Jankin was reading aloud from a scholarly work about the evils of women, she became exasperated and, reaching over, tore a page out of the book. He hit her, which permanently made her deaf, but when he realized what he had done he apologized, and after that, she explains, they have been happy together. There is a brief interval, during which angry words are exchanged between the Friar, who mocks the Wife of Bath for her long preface, and the Summoner, who tells him to leave her alone. The wife then begins her tale, which takes place during the time of King Arthur, which was ancient legend even in Chaucer's time. In the tale, a knight came upon a maiden walking beside the river one afternoon and raped her, for which he was condemned to death. The queen interceded, asking the king to spare the knight. When he could not answer her question about what women really desire most, the knight was sent off for a year to try to find the answer. The Wife of Bath relates several of the answers he received, including the one she favors, which is that women want to be flattered. On the day he was to return from his quest, the knight came across several dozen women in the forest, but when he approached them they disappeared, leaving an old lady in their place. She told him that the answer was that women wanted equality, which is what he told the queen, sparing his life. For giving him the right answer, the knight was obliged to marry the old woman.

On their wedding night, when he would not take her to bed, she talked to him about the difference between being born noble and being truly noble. Gentleness is a virtue, she told him, as are poverty and age. She then gave him a choice: he could have her old and ugly and faithfully devoted, or young and pretty and courted by other men. He left the choice to her, proving her equality with him, and for that she kissed him and turned into a young maiden, faithful to him forever after.

The Franklin's Tale

A Franklin was a person who held property but no title of nobility. In the Prologue to his tale, the Franklin explains that he is going to tell a story that has been passed down in English from troubadours, who traveled from town to town, singing the story with musical accompaniment. He apologizes for lacking the verbal skill to color in the details of the story as clearly as a skilled speaker might be able to do.

His tale takes place in Brittany, a region of France that was settled by English emigrants around the year 500. A knight loved a beautiful lady named Dorigene, and when she finally consented to marry him, he promised to never do anything that would embarrass her and treat her as a respected equal. When the knight, Arveragus, was called upon to fight in England, Dorigene was left home alone. Friends took her out for walks along the

ocean, but all she noticed was the dangerous rocks along the shore that Arveragus' ship might crash onto when he returned.

Her friends took her to a dance on the sixth of May, and there Dorigene was approached by a handsome young squire, Aurelius, who declared his love for her. Aurelius had all masculine attributes possible: he was "Yong, strong, right vertuous, and riche and wys, and wel biloved, and holden in great prys." Dorigene was too in love with her husband to care about Aurelius. To discourage him, she told him that he could have her if he could clear all of the rocks off the shoreline within two years. Aurelius set about to pray to various gods for help, asking them to raise the ocean. Meanwhile, Arveragus came home and was reunited with his wife. Aurelius' brother, a scholar, took him to the place where he had studied, and there they consulted with a man who had studied magic. This magician made them hallucinate so that they saw various scenes, including deer in a forest, knights battling, and Dorigene dancing. For a thousand pounds in gold, he agreed to make Dorigene think the rocks had sunk into the ocean.

Aurelius went to Dorigene after the spell was cast on her and reminded her that she had agreed to go to bed with him. Distressed about the prospect of losing her honor by either breaking her word or being unfaithful to her husband, she considered killing herself. Arveragus noticed how upset she was, and she explained the situation. He told her that she would have to sleep with Aurelius rather than break her word.

When she went to offer herself to Aurelius, he asked why she had changed her mind, and she explained that she was there because her husband had insisted that she keep her promise. Aurelius was so impressed with Arveragus and his concern that Dorigene should stay honest that he freed her from her promise without touching her. Then he realized that he was financially ruined by the thousand gold pieces he had promised to pay the magician. When he went to ask the magician to work out payment terms, Aurelius ended up telling him the whole story about letting Dorigene out of her promise. The magician was so impressed by his nobility, that he let Aurelius out of his own promise, and let him go without paying.

The Pardoner's Tale

Before telling his tale, the Pardoner expresses his need for a drink; this raises the fear in the other pilgrims that he will tell a crude or dirty joke, but he promises not to. The Prologue to "The Pardoner's Tale" is about his life, detailing how he makes his living by going from town to town with phony relics and documents allegedly signed by the pope and curing such ailments as snake bites and jealousy. He announces his ability to charm simple people with a well-told story, noting that they love stories that they can remember and retell: "lewd (unlearned) peple loven tales of olde; / Swich thinges can they wel reporte and holde." When he has had enough to drink the Pardoner starts telling a tale that he often tells, promising that it will be moral and not dirty.

He starts his tale by mentioning a gang of tough youths in Flanders but soon digresses from them for a detailed discussion of sin, not only the specific sins committed by the

rough characters in his story but sin in general. The irony of his lecture is that these are sins, like gambling and drinking and swearing, that the Pardoner himself is guilty of. The tale itself is about three men who were drinking in a tavern one morning when they heard the funeral of an old friend going by. Their friend died that morning, a tavern employee explained, killed by the plague, his life ended by the thief called "Death." They set off to find Death and came across an old man who complained that, as old as he was, he could not die, but he was able to direct them to a park where he had seen Death lingering. Instead of Death, they found a pile of gold coins. One of the three was sent off to get tools to carry the gold with, and while he was gone, the other two plotted to murder him and divide his share of the gold. He had the same basic idea, however, and returned with poisoned drinks for them. They fatally stabbed him, then drank the drinks, which in turn killed them.

When he is done, the Pardoner tries to sell the other pilgrims pardons for their sins, taking advantage of their attention and their feelings of piety after hearing about such wicked men. The Host, annoyed, threatens to cut off his testicles and make relics of them, which makes the Pardoner turn quiet, seething, until the Knight intercedes and has the two men make up.

The Prioress's Tale

A Prioress is the head nun at an abbey, or convent, and is therefore a very religious person. The irony of the tale that this Prioress tells is that she piously invokes the name of the Virgin Mary and then goes on to tell one of the most violent, bloody tales in the whole collection. The Prioress starts her short piece with an introductory poem, praising God for His goodness and praising Mary for Her great humility. From the introduction, readers are led to expect the Prioress to be a meek person who tells a simple, gentle story. Instead, she talks about an unnamed Christian town in Asia that had a Jewish ghetto. The inhabitants of the ghetto, the Prioress explains, were full of hate and anger toward the Christians, but the country's ruler kept the Jews around for their value in money-lending, or usury. As she puts it, they were "sustained by a lord of that contree / For foule usure and lucre of vileynye, / Hateful to Crist and to his compaignye." A seven-year-old boy, the son of a widow, lived in that town.

One day, when the boy heard the other children singing the Latin hymn *O Alma Redemptoris*, he was immediately smitten with the beauty of the song, so he set about to learn it, even though he didn't understand the words. One day, he walked through the Jewish ghetto singing the hymn, and the Jews, offended, hired a murderer to kill the boy. He was chased down an alley and had his throat slit and his body thrown into a drainage ditch that collected bodily waste.

The boy's mother went searching for him when he did not come home. She found no sign of him until, passing by the drain, she heard him singing *O Alma Redemptoris*. A lawman was summoned, and he passed a harsh sentence against the Jews, commanding that their bodies be drawn apart by horses and then hung on spikes from a wagon. Then an abbot came and asked the boy how he was still able to sing when his

throat seemed to be cut. The boy explained that his throat was indeed cut, to the bone, but that Mary came down to him and commanded that he keep singing. She placed a piece of grain on his tongue, he explains, and told him that he would only stop singing when the grain was removed. The abbot removed the grain, the singing stopped, and the boy was buried. The tale ends with the Prioress calling for guidance for Hugh of Lincoln, a martyr who was also murdered as a child.

The Nun's Priest's Tale

When the Knight declares the story that they have just heard to be too depressing, the Host asks the priest who is travelling with the nun to tell them a story that is more uplifting. His story concerns a widow who, he says, lived long ago on a farm. The widow's two daughters, three pigs, three cows, and a sheep also lived on the farm. A rooster named Chaunticleer and seven hens, who were his wives, lived in the yard. One morning, Chaunticleer told the prettiest of his wives, Pertelote, that he had dreamt about being attacked by a hound-like creature. She responded by calling him a coward for being afraid of a dream, explaining that dreams were a sign of an unsettled digestive system. She offered to make him a laxative that would empty his system out. In response, he cited numerous examples from the Bible and from ancient mythology that illustrated how dreams accurately predicted the future. Having said this, he let the matter drop, and it was forgotten for a little over a month.

On the third of May, a fox sneaked into the farm yard, waiting patiently until Chaunticleer came down out of the barn rafters and onto the ground. Chaunticleer was alarmed, and ready to fly away, until the fox flattered him, telling him that he had a beautiful singing voice, as did his mother and father. At the fox's request, Chaunticleer threw back his shoulder, ready to sing out a song, when the fox reached over and grabbed him by the neck. When all of the hens he was married to screamed an alarm, the fox tried to escape with the rooster in his mouth, but the widow and her daughters, hearing the alarm, ran out of the house and joined the other barnyard animals in chasing the fox. Coming to his senses, Chaunticleer suggested to the fox that he should taunt the people chasing him, telling them that they could never catch him; when the fox opened his mouth to do this, Chaunticleer flew free. The fox tried once more to convince the rooster that it was all a misunderstanding, that he actually had a secret reason for carrying him away in his mouth, but Chaunticleer, having learned his lesson, refused to go near him. The Nun's Priest ends this tale by reminding his listeners about the dangers of falling for flattery. In the epilogue to this story, the Host expresses his delight with the story that they have just heard, and he congratulates the Priest for being such a strong, brawny man, which is not what one expects from someone in his profession.

Themes

Christianity

When *The Canterbury Tales* were written, Christianity was the dominant social force throughout western Europe, including England. Its influence stretched across the social spectrum from nobles to poor beggars. In 1388, while Chaucer was working on the tales, a change occurred in the way that Christianity was perceived and practiced when John Wycliffe, an English reformer, released a version of the Bible translated into English. For the first time, people from the lower classes, who had not been educated in Latin, could read the Bible themselves instead of having its word interpreted to them by members of the clergy.

The influence of Christianity can be seen in *The Canterbury Tales* by the variety of social types presented. Fourteenth century Christian society had room for different ways of incorporating faith into lifestyle. The Knight, for instance, espouses romantic love and brotherliness, and the Franklin tells a tale that ends with mercy and forgiveness for all. The Prioress, on the other hand, tells a story that propagates hatred toward non-Christians, making them out to be evil and relishing their punishment. The Wife of Bath proves to be very familiar with Biblical Scripture, finding her own sexuality to be acceptable, if not ideal, by Biblical standards. The Pardoner is the most cynical Christian, condemning the very behaviors that he indulges in and trying to sell salvation by way of the counterfeit icons and the signed certificates from the pope he carries with him. It was in fact the sort of fraud perpetuated by people like the Pardoner, as well as actions by angry reformers like Wycliffe to make religion accessible to the common people, that eventually led to the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century that weakened the Catholic Church's powerful hold over Western thought.

Deception

Many of the stories in this book deal with deception the potential to mislead people with words and the consequences that result. In some cases, decent people are compelled to employ deception, such as when Arcite from "The Knight's Tale" disguises himself to enter the court of Emily, whom he loves, or when Aurelius from "The Franklin's Tale" is driven by love to trick Dorigene so that she will leave her husband for him. Other characters are deceptive for purely greedy reasons, such as the fox who charms Chaunticleer twice (once successfully, once not) in "The Nun's Priest's Tale," and the three thieves who plot to kill each other to increase their share of the found gold in "The Pardoner's Tale." Still, other characters in the tales deceive people for the noble cause of teaching them a lesson about how to behave. For instance, the "old woman" in "The Wife of Bath's Tale" only pretends to be old and ugly until the knight in that story proves that he has thought about how women should be treated and that he has learned to respect more than superficial beauty.

Spring

There is excitement in the air as this band of pilgrims travels toward the religious shrine at Canterbury, where they all hope to gain God's grace. Their trip begins in April, and the very first lines of the book emphasize the significance of that time of year: "Whan that Aprill with his shoures sote / The droghte of Marche hath perced to the rote." In other words, the poem begins by evoking the process of rainwater reaching dormant roots, revitalizing them. It is the period of revitalization that happens over and over in the earth's cycle each spring. It is a time of renewal, of life, of the glories of nature shaking off the mundane. It is a time of beginnings and a time of hope.

In addition to this beginning of the General Prologue, there are several additional places where the time of year is mentioned, referring back to springtime in several of the tales. In "The Franklin's Tale," the young wife who misses her husband while he is away is approached by a handsome, muscular, wealthy stranger while she is at a dance on the sixth of May, adding even more temptation to that presented by his charms. Spring is the time of fertility for plants, which has evolved over time to it being associated with romantic love. The text is also very specific in stating that it was the third of May when Chaunticleer forgot his foreboding dream and allowed himself to be tricked by the fox who asked him to sing. The implication is that the beauty of the season may have pushed the premonition of death from Chaunticleer's mind, driving his concentration toward more uplifting things (such as the sound of his own singing) and away from life's more frightening prospects.

Reputation

The characters in the tales told by the pilgrims on their way to Canterbury show more concern about their social reputations than the pilgrims themselves show. In part, this is due to the instructive nature of tales in general: many of these tales are told to teach a "moral" to their listeners, and so they often include advice about personal behavior, with an emphasis on observable behaviors. The most obvious example of one of these pilgrims preaching the need for a good reputation is the Pardoner, who claims that he cannot start his story until he has taken a drink and then immediately starts by warning his listeners against drinking with several stories from the Bible to illustrate his point that "The Holy Writ take I to my witness / That luxurie (lechery) is in wyn and drunkenness." The Knight, on the other hand, seems to live by the same code of nobility that the knights in his story live by, while the Nun's Priest, a meek man who almost escapes notice, tells the story of the danger that pride and bragging bring to the rooster Chaunticleer. Perhaps the most powerful story about keeping a good reputation is the Franklin's. In it, Dorigene is so torn by the prospect of having to cheat on her husband to stay true to her promise that she considers suicide as a way of avoiding either prospect, while her husband, who is just as concerned about her reputation, would rather have her sleep with another man than break her word. The story rewards them both by having Aurelius forgive the wife her promise because he is so moved by the honor they both show, and it rewards Aurelius by having the magician forgive his huge debt because he has shown himself noble enough to recognize the nobility of the couple.

Style

Heroic Couplets

The poetic meter, or rhythm, used throughout *The Canterbury Tales* is iambic pentameter. This means that each line is based on pairs of syllables, proceeding from one that would be unstressed in normal speech to one that is stressed. This pattern is called the *iamb*, and a poetic structure based on it is called *iambic*. When the English language is spoken, this pattern occurs naturally, so the rhythm of an iambic poem is hardly noticeable when read aloud. Because the lines generally have five iambs each, for a total of ten syllables per line, the rhythm is described as *iambic pentameter*□"penta" is the Greek word for "five."

Throughout *The Canterbury Tales*, lines are paired off into rhyming *couplets*, which means that each pair of lines has similar-sounding words that rhyme at the end. A poem that is written in iambic pentameter and has rhyming couplets is said to be written using *heroic couplets*. This structure drives the poem along, page after page, giving it a sense of order that it would lack if it were written without any structure but using a natural rhythm that readers do not have to focus on. Because the language of Chaucer's time is not familiar to modern ears, students, stopping frequently to look up pronunciations and spellings, often have trouble recognizing the ease of the rhythm unless the poem is read aloud by a reader experienced with Middle English.

Speech

One of Chaucer's greatest achievements with this poem is his ability to alter his style for the different speakers. The meter (rhythmic scheme) stays consistent throughout, but he is able to give distinctive personalities to each of the speaking characters by giving them different vocabularies and having them express themselves with different images. "The Knight's Tale," for example, is told with a more gentle and mannerly voice than, say, the Wife of Bath's or the Pardoner's. This can be seen when the Knight notices he has strayed from an important subject, at the start of the third section of his tale, and he chastises himself, saying, with formal diction, "I trowe men wolde deme it neglicence / If I foryete to tellen the dispence / Of Theseus." The Wife of Bath, by contrast, is so self-centered that she becomes caught up in talking about herself and nearly forgets to tell a tale. Her lack of refinement can be seen in her language, from the use of shorter words to the fact that she tells her tale in the present tense. A common example of her language comes from line 1022 of her tale: "When they be comen to court, this knight / seyde he had holde his day, as he hadde hight, / And redy was his answere, as he sayde." Each character speaks in a distinctive style that is appropriate to his or her social situation and, more importantly, to his or her specific personality.

Historical Context

The Black Plague

During Chaucer's lifetime, the Black Plague swept across Europe, causing hundreds of thousands of people to die in a gruesome way and changing the way that common citizens looked at mortality. The plague originated in the north of India during the 1330s and spread quickly, affecting much of Asia by the mid-1340s. Its spread to Europe was no accident. Mongol-Tartar armies, in an attempt to discourage Italian trade caravans from crossing their territory on their way to and from China, catapulted bodies of infected victims over the walls of their fortresses at the Italians, who subsequently brought the disease back to their country.

While carrying on their trade, they infected other travelers, who carried the disease to the most crowded cities on the continent. The plague struck Spain and France in 1348 and reached England the following year. By the time that *The Canterbury Tales* was published in 1400, a third of the people of Europe had died of the Black Plague. During the last half of the fourteenth century, though, scientific inquiry about the plague led to the discovery that it was spread by fleas that had picked up the virus from rats. Chaucer's pilgrims may seem lax in their hygienic practices: for instance, the specific point of the Nun being noteworthy for not getting grease into the wine cup when she drank from it and passed it on, or the characters who share beds with strangers. Still, their practices reflect a height- ened sense of the ways in which lethal diseases can spread, and their physical interactions with each other are more cautious than they would have been a generation earlier. The characters in *The Canterbury Tales*, such as the Pardoner, who mentions a death by plague in his poem, reflect an enlightened and cautious generation that is familiar with sudden illness and death and that hopes for a better life.

The Hundred Years'War

When Chaucer wrote this work, and throughout his entire lifetime, England was at war with France. The two countries had suffered strained relations for a long time before 1328, when war broke out between them following the death of France's king, Charles IV. Charles's daughter was rejected as a ruler, and so Edward II, the king of England, thought that he should be named king of France as well, for Edward's mother was Isabella, the sister of Charles IV. The French people did not want their country subservient to England in any way, and so they chose Philip Valois to rule as Philip VI. Edward, feeling that his claim on the French throne was stronger, led an invasion with 30,000 men. He was spectacularly successful, but the French had strong defenses around and within their major cities, and they were dug in to defend themselves in a series of battles fought during the ensuing century.

Of Edward's sons, one, also named Edward but called the Black Prince, led the British forces to victory in several battles, taking most of the south of France for the throne of England. The Black Prince died in 1376, after turning over his French holdings to John of Gaunt, another of Edward's sons. Geoffrey Chaucer was a squire in the household of John of Gaunt and was married to the sister of his wife. He served with John on several campaigns during the Hundred Years' War. In Edward III's last years, when he was too ill to oversee his government, John ruled England; he gave up his power when Richard II was named as successor in 1377. After that, John worked to bring peace between the English and the French, with Chaucer as a trusted aid.

Despite the military superiority of the English, the French resisted, fighting until 1453 and eventually taking back almost all of their land. The result of the war was to clarify France's identity as a separate social and political entity (one of the heroes of the Hundred Years' War was Joan of Arc, who remains today an important symbol of the French spirit) and to establish international relations between the countries of Europe.

The Renaissance

The word renaissance comes from the Old French word for rebirth and is commonly used to refer to the period of time, starting in 1350 and lasting into the seventeenth century, when a sudden, powerful thirst for knowledge swept through the western world's cultural institutions, signifying the start of modern thought. Renaissance art was derived from the art and ideas of ancient Greece and Rome, which had been ignored since the fall of Rome after the overthrow of Romulus Augustulus in 476. From 476 to 1350, generally identified as the Middle Ages, there was little scientific inquiry and development of the arts. Renaissance thinkers considered this middle period to be the Dark Ages, during which all prior discoveries had been lost, and they set the enormous task of reinventing human knowledge.

Several cultural elements came together in the fourteenth century to bring about the Renaissance. For several hundred years, Christians from Europe had invaded the Middle East in an attempt to chase the Muslims out of the Holy Land. One result of these Crusades was that much of the presumably lost knowledge of the Roman Empire was found to survive in Constantinople, the seat of the Eastern Roman Empire. With a renewed sense of history, scholars and artists basked in relative financial security, with wealthy nobles giving them financial support while they worked on intellectual pursuits. Such relationships worked to mutual advantage, as the patrons were often glorified in art, architecture, and music. Starting in Northern Italy, concentrated efforts were made to assemble the scattered records of past civilizations, piecing together knowledge and artistic theory from fragments of old Roman and Latin texts found in private libraries and abbeys. Because of this interest in knowledge for its own sake, the Renaissance figure came to be a person who was skilled in many different subjects. Leonardo da Vinci, for example, is known equally for his paintings of the Last Supper and Mona Lisa as for designing flying machines four hundred years before the Wright Brothers. Michelangelo's fame would have survived for his skilled architecture alone, even if he

had not also painted the Sistine Chapel or carved his statue of David. Chaucer was a Renaissance Man of this sense, proficient in court politics as well as in writing.

Critical Overview

In an age when authors announce with pride when their book has continuously been in print for twenty years, there cannot be enough said about the significance of *The Canterbury Tales*, which has been with us for six centuries. It is the first poem written in the English language and is therefore given much credit for actually inventing modern English, recording words and phrases that were commonly spoken but had never been put on paper before. As the first English poet, Chaucer is considered the model and inspiration for the grand history of English poetry that followed him. Because it uses the overall narrative structure of the pilgrimage to hold all of the individual tales together, *The Canterbury Tales* is also considered to be the first English novel, with sharply defined characters that remain consistent throughout.

Over time, thousands of essays have been written about Chaucer, but, as Thomas C. Stillinger points out in his introduction to a recent collection of *Critical Essays on Geoffrey Chaucer*, most recent criticism can be broken down into two categories: "he is an ancient writer, his texts silent monuments of a lost world; and, at the same time, he is a living poetic voice." One of the principle reasons that Chaucer is still studied so actively today is that critics can find such a wide range of things to say about him. Lee Patterson, in a brief review of the criticism written in the twentieth century about *The Canterbury Tales*, cited a 1906 essay by Robert Root as saying that "we turn to [Chaucer] . . . for refreshment, that our eyes and ears may be opened anew to the varied interest and beauty of the world around us." Patterson also includes the thoughts of other important critics:

some fifty years after Root's book, one of the greatest of the next generation of Chaucerians, E. Talbot Donaldson, described Chaucer as possessed of "a mind almost godlike in the breadth and humanity of its ironic vision"

Patterson also shares Derek Pearsall's introduction to his excellent Chaucer study by insisting that "*The Canterbury Tales* neither press for [n]or permit a systematic kind of ideological interpretation." In short, critics continue to find issues of both human behavior and historical significance in this complex work.

In some cases, such universal approval can dull critics' understanding of an author, as the British novelist and essayist G. K. Chesterton pointed out in his 1932 essay "The Greatness of Chaucer." Chesterton felt that critics tended not to take Chaucer seriously:

there has been a perceptible, in greater or less degree, an indescribable disposition to *patronize* Chaucer. Sometimes he is patted on the head like a child because all our other poets are his children. Sometimes he is treated as the Oldest Inhabitant, partially demented and practically dead, because he was alive before anybody else in Europe to certain revolutions of the European mind. Sometimes, he is treated as entirely dead; a bag of dry bones to be dissected by antiquarians, interested only in matters of detail. Chesterton's observation about the danger of patronizing critics is even more relevant today, in a world that is moving forward so quickly that there is hardly time to give the

past its due consideration; still, *The Canterbury Tales*, which was there at the beginning of the English language, is likely to be there until the end.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4
- Critical Essay #5
- Critical Essay #6
- Critical Essay #7
- Critical Essay #8
- Critical Essay #9
- Critical Essay #10
- Critical Essay #11
- Critical Essay #12
- Critical Essay #13
- Critical Essay #14
- Critical Essay #15
- Critical Essay #16
- Critical Essay #17
- Critical Essay #18
- Critical Essay #19

Critical Essay #1

Kelly is an instructor of creative writing and literature at Oakton Community College in Illinois and is currently working on a book about comedy in twentieth century America. In this essay, he compares Chaucer's constant inventiveness to techniques used throughout the centuries by jesters and stand-up comics to hold their audiences' attention.

One of the first things that students learn when they begin to study *The Canterbury Tales* is that Geoffrey Chaucer, its author, is frequently called "the father of English poetry." He was the first significant poet to write in the English language, as opposed to Italian, Latin, or French, which were the languages favored by educated people of his time, the late fourteenth century. The entire tradition of English literature, therefore, points back to Chaucer. He deserves respect, but, unfortunately, respect too often makes readers feel that they have to be reverential and solemn when considering *The Canterbury Tales*.

Over the centuries, Chaucer scholars have attempted to show that the book is not just a dry textbook and is actually quite a lot of fun, but their attempts consistently fall on deaf ears. English teachers see episodes like the flatulence scene in the "The Miller's Tale" as the same gross-out comedy that Jim Carrey or Tom Green would use for laughs today. Students today are more inclined to view Chaucer's low-brow moments as a senior family member struggling to be hip, like a grandfather wearing a shockingly loud tie to show that he still remembers fun. It is hard to think of the father of English poetry as working for attention because he had to.

But *The Canterbury Tales* is all about the struggle to keep audiences entertained. The central conceit is that a group of pilgrims enter into a storytelling competition to take their minds off the labor and monotony of their journey. They are not competing to see who will tell the most uplifting story or the most intellectually enriching; they are each trying to be the most entertaining (although some do abuse their forum and sneak in moral tales about spiritual correctness). Designed around performers who are fighting for attention, the book has more in common with a court jester doing handsprings and backflips for the king's pleasure than it does with the sort of staid literature that it is often shelved with. Chaucer was a raconteur, a teller of amusing stories, and he did whatever he had to do to keep audiences interested.

Like a jester, Chaucer's audience was the royal court. He was an attendant to royalty throughout his adult years, starting in the house of Elizabeth of Ulster and rising to be the valet to the King himself. In later years, he left domestic service and was given political responsibilities that were better suited for his intelligence. By all accounts, and as evinced by his poetry, Chaucer was a man of incredible intellect. His intellect alone could have accounted for his fortune in government matters, but there are and always have been bland functionaries who understood issues but cannot draw enough attention to let their knowledge be known. Chaucer was lucky enough to be a true Renaissance man, talented in several fields, with each feeding the other. The stories and poems that

he wrote and recited assured that the rulers of England knew who Geoffrey Chaucer was.

The court that he served in expanded during Chaucer's stay there. Historically, the English government had been mobile, not only to deal with matters of law in different parts of the kingdom at a time when there was no reliable system of communications, but for the very practical reason that there were few places that could provide for all of the government functionaries for any length of time. In his book *Chaucer in His Time*, Derek Brewer explains that "such large gatherings were difficult to feed at a time when communications were slow and almost every household had to be self-sufficient. The court had to move about the country so as to spread the burden of its maintenance." This practice changed in 1382, when King Richard II married Anne of Bohemia and established a permanent court patterned on the French court in Paris and the Papal court at Avignon. Settled, the ranks of the court grew, with dozens of royals and the hundreds of attendants that each required. In such a crowded environment, it helped Chaucer to be known as a wit and as one whose reputation as a poet had spread to France and Italy. A wit becomes tiresome when he runs out of things to say, but Chaucer was clever enough to never run out of new items or new methods.

We think of jesters as being self-deprecating fools, willing to humiliate themselves if that is what is required to keep the royal family amused. Modern performers are given more respect if they are considered artists, but those who are thought of as mere entertainers are still considered somewhat embarrassing. What they both have in common with Chaucer's "performance" in *The Canterbury Tales* is that they all are continuously in motion, struggling for innovation, line after line, sentence after sentence, valuing attention before respect. It may be difficult for some contemporary readers to accept that the primary purpose of the tales is to entertain, even when the Host focuses on that as the purpose of each narration. Some of the tales seem just too complex, too tied up in learning to fit in with modern standards, which separate learning from entertainment and see them as being mutually exclusive. Still, if the purpose of entertainment is to keep one interested, then some education is bound to become part of the process. And if the main lever of humor is, as many have claimed, the element of surprise, then the most amusing tales are the ones that establish a sense of familiarity that they can eventually disturb. The tale that uses the broadest humor is, of course, the Miller's tale, which has no reason for existing other than to see an unpleasant man, a "riche gnof," gotten the best of. It is a pretty straightforward joke, about a man thinking that he is going to survive a flood while his fellow citizens drown, unaware of the fact that his wife and lodger are sleeping together in his own bed. The most noteworthy thing about this tale is that it is so silly as to include the nonsense, already mentioned, about a man breaking wind in another man's face. There really is no place for the flatulence episode in the story that the Miller tells, but its complete inappropriateness is what makes it funny: readers expect the drunken Miller to be tasteless, and he is warned by the Host to watch his manners. That concern is forgotten as the story turns out to be a mild tale of adultery, until a superfluous character appears out of nowhere. Readers are prepared for this level of vulgarity, but are then surprised by it all the same.

"The Pardoner's Tale" works on a similar comic device, of bad people unwittingly participating in their own downfall. The story itself has a surprise, ironic ending, as the man who prepared poisonous drinks is stabbed and the men who did the stabbing unknowingly drink poison. There is a richer layer here, though: while the Miller came across with exactly the sort of crude story that was expected of him, the Pardoner preaches a tale about conventional morality but turns out to be a con man looking to sell religious icons. Chaucer does not make much of this contradiction, but it is clear, and it makes the story more engaging and interesting. A similar level of irony invigorates "The Prioress' Tale": the introduction prepares readers for a shy, gentle soul, but the tale she tells reveals the imagination of a bloodthirsty anti-Semite with true hatred in her heart. In both cases, Chaucer gives a text□the tale□and a context□the personality of the teller□that contrast with one another. Modern comedy might achieve the same results by having an unscrupulous, oily character pose as priest or politician, or by having a meek nervous character suddenly fill up with angry ferocity.

The tales that are hardest to recognize as entertainment are those that do not find humor at the expense of some braggart, poseur, or deluded fool. There are tales, like the Knight's and the Franklin's, that celebrate noble behavior and mourn the tragedy of the death of a good person. Though not funny, these tales fit loosely into the definition of humor as surprise. Not all surprises are humorous, but the basic element of a sort of gallows humor is at least nearby, even in the most serious turns of events presented in these tales. It would not take much to see Arcite's fall from his horse as a deadpan punchline that is meant to contrast the huge buildup preceding it in "The Knight's Tale," with pages and pages of battle preparation and combat mocked by stupid, ignoble fate. Similarly, it would not take much to make a comic buffoon out of Arveragus, who is so committed to the abstract concept of keeping one's vow that he is willing to give up his beloved wife. In each case, readers' expectations are set up and then demolished with such an ease of presentation that the readers do not even notice Chaucer's presence, looking instead to the characters who tell the stories.

The main thing that makes contemporary stand-up comedy an appropriate analogy for *The Canterbury Tales* is the desperation required by each. Comedy, often dismissed as mere entertainment, is able to make its audience think, but only when it has their attention. Some comedians are all about drawing attention to themselves, but once they have that attention, they have nothing to say; others have serious points to make, but they forget to entertain. The best will be able to make audiences think, but they also know that on some level they are the heirs of the court jester who would jump, shout, and ring bells just to keep his audience from looking anywhere but at him. This is the tradition of the entertainer that is too often overlooked by people who read Chaucer as if he were some sort of icon. His tales can turn vulgar or sentimental, didactic or warmhearted, but he was not afraid to use any trick at his disposal□and he had quite a few□to make sure that they stayed interesting.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on *The Canterbury Tales*, in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Alexander examines the treatment of Jews and anti-Semitism in the "Prioress's Tale."

The history of the criticism of Chaucer's "Prioress's Tale" affords proof, if proof be needed, that the attitudes and events of their own days affect how critics read literature, even literature of the distant past. As Florence Ridley notes, the question of anti-semitism in the "Prioress's Tale" has in recent years become an important critical issue, to the extent that most contemporary readings of the text seem to involve, explicitly or implicitly, a response to this problem. The explanation is not far to seek. Critics cannot view the "Tale" after the holocaust in quite the same way as they viewed it before.

Since the holocaust anti-semitism has become academically discredited: it is now one of the few generally acknowledged intellectual heresies. So for a critic today to expound the "Tale" and to ignore the question of anti-semitism would strike most educated people as displaying a detachment from life bordering on the irresponsible, if not on the perverse. Most who have written on the problem of the anti-semitism in the "Prioress's Tale" have been literary critics by calling. Few historians of Judaism, or of anti-semitism, seem to have addressed the question. As a result some of the analysis, though painstaking and well intentioned, has been historically and philosophically confused. The sort of confusion that can arise is illustrated by John Archer's article, "The structure of anti-semitism in the *'Prioress's Tale'."* Archer, unlike some, perceives the importance of defining anti-semitism. His stated aim is 'to examine the operation of the imagery in the "Prioress's Tale" against the background of the traditon, and in the process to extrapolate three or four categories of imagery that might be used to analyze anti-semitism in so far as it functions in other literary works.' He stresses the transformation of society that takes place within the "Tale." The opening lines depict the secular authorities as being subservient to the Old Law: they sustain the Jews in their usurious practices, which are 'hateful to Crist.' At the end of the "Tale," however, in the person of the Provost, they break with the Jews and with the old dispensation, and embrace the New Law of Christ. The decisive change is wrought by the clergeon's death, which is 'a sacrifice as well as a murder because it has loosened the hold of the Old Law over the secular positive law'. The clergeon is a Christ-figure and his death recapitulates

Christ's death, which by redeeming man from the curse and bondage of the Old Law transformed society. All this is moderately persuasive till we recall that the purpose of Archer's article is to lay bare the structure of anti-semitism in the "Prioress's Tale." Anti-semitism turns out for Archer to be identical with the central tenets of the Christian faith! Archer shows not a flicker of awareness of the radical implications of this analysis, which at a theological level risks delegitimizing Christianity, and at a literary level, if extrapolated, appears to brand much of European literature as anti-semitic.

Clearly we need a more historically-informed view of the nature of anti-semitism if we are to deal responsibly with the question of anti-semitism in a given piece of literature. Anti-semitism is not a charge to be lightly bandied about: it is more than 'queasy,

resentful feelings about Jews.' The definition of the phenomenon is not self-evident. The term 'anti-semitism' itself did not emerge till the late nineteenth century, when it was used by the proponents of a world-view (widely deemed then as acceptable), which embraced three main tenets: first, Jewish culture is inferior to Germanic culture; second, the Jews are plotting to undermine Germanic culture and to foist their own cultural values on society; and, third, in the interests of progress and civilization society has a duty to defend itself against Jewish domination and to purge itself of decadent Jewish culture. Nineteenth-century antisemitism was often racist in that it espoused the belief that culture and race were interconnected, and so the inferior Jewish culture was seen as the product of inferior Jewish genes. However, racism, in this precise technical sense, was not fundamental to the anti-semitic point of view.

Nineteenth-century anti-semitism presented itself, often aggressively, in secular and scientific terms, and some of its proponents fastidiously distanced themselves from the crude 'Jew bashing' of earlier centuries. It has, consequently, been argued that modern secular anti-semitism should not be confused with the religious anti-Judaism of the middle ages. If this view is correct, then the problem of anti-semitism in the "Prioress's Tale" is solved at a stroke. What we have in Chaucer may be anti- Judaism (and deplorable), but not anti-semitism in any exact sense. The dissimilarities can, however, be overplayed. The fact is that mediaeval christendom espoused a set of beliefs which are strikingly congruent in content and structure with the nineteenth- century anti-semitic creed: Judaism is inferior to Christianity; the Jews, motivated by malevolence, and in alliance with the powers of darkness, are seeking to overthrow Christian society; the Church, in the interests of humanity, has a sacred duty to protect society from the baleful influence of the Jews and Judaism. Nineteenthcentury anti-semitism was not a bolt from the blue.

Rather it represented the modernization of the antisemitism of the middle ages. At a time when religious language and religious categories were losing their power, nineteenth-century anti-semites found a modern, intellectually more acceptable way of restating the mediaeval position. In much the same way nineteenth century Christian theologians, in the face of the onslaught of Darwinism, found more modern and acceptable ways of restating the biblical doctrine of creation. There is, then, a deep, underlying continuity between the modern and the mediaeval phenomena, and in virtue of this continuity the term anti-semitism can be applied properly to both.

There is a consensus among critics that the "Prioress's Tale" has been carefully constructed not simply in terms of a limited, local incident, but in terms of timeless absolutes. It is intended to represent the conflict between truth and error, between good and evil. The clergeon died as a martyr, because he testified to his faith, not because he disturbed the peace and quiet of the neighbourhood. It was the content of his song that raised the Jews' ire. The Jews *as a whole* are blackened, and it is this which makes the story anti-semitic. They conspire as a group to kill the boy (even though only one of them actually slits his throat), and this is recognized by the Provost who holds them all guilty and has them all killed. The confrontation between the seeking mother and the Jews is handled in a masterly way, so as to put the Jews as a whole in the worst possible light. Unmoved by the mother's pitiful distress, each and every Jew denies that

he has seen the boy: 'they seyde "nay."' Not a flicker of conscience, no attempt to soften the answer, or even to be economical with the truth, only barefaced villany! There are racist undertones here. It is often said that mediaeval Christian anti-semitism was not, unlike much modern anti-semitism, racist, in that it always left open a way of escape for the Jew through conversion. This is broadly true, but it should also be borne in mind that there were some Christian authorities in the middle ages who found it very hard to accept the sincerity of *any* Jewish conversion. Hence the whole tragic problem of the Conversos in Spain. Conversion did not always save the Jew from harrassment or even death. It is chilling so early in the Tale to find the line: 'Children an heep, ycomen of Cristen blood.' Why 'blood'? Was Chaucer strapped for a rhyme for 'stood', or is there a more sinister note here? Is Christian blood any different from Jewish blood? Running like a refrain through the "Tale" is the description of the Jews as 'cursed.' 'Cursed Jews' is not a generalized term of abuse like 'damned Frenchies'. It means very literally that Jews are under a divine curse, a curse which they called down upon their own heads when they goaded Pilate into crucifying Jesus: 'When Pilate saw that he could prevail nothing, but that rather a tumult was made, he took water, and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, I am innocent of the blood of this just person: see ye to it. Then answered all the people, and said, His blood be on us, and on our children' (Matthew 27:24f). Jews were Christ-killers, and they killed Christ with their eyes open, thus taking upon themselves and their descendants the consequences of that dreadful deed. This charge was used throughout the middle ages to deny Jews the due process of law, and to justify lynchings and pogroms. Note in this context line 578: 'The blood out crieth on youre cursed dede'. There is a clear echo here of the story of Cain and Abel. God says to Cain: 'What hast thou done? The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground. And now thou art cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand ... a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth. And Cain said unto the Lord, My punishment is greater than I can bear. Behold thou has driven me out this day from the face of the earth; and from thy face shall I be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth; and it shall come to pass, that everyone that findeth me shall slay me' (Genesis 4:10-14). In Christian exegesis Cain is often seen as typifying the Jew (the wanderer rejected by both God and man); Abel is taken as a type of the just man, or of the Christian, or (most significantly) of Christ, on whom the Jew tries to vent his spite. The Prioress invites us in all kinds of subtle but not unmistakable ways to see the death of Mary's little devotee as being parallel to the death of Mary's son. To this extent Archer's analysis of the "Tale" is sound. In murdering the clergeon the Jews are giving rein to the same evil nature which led them to kill Christ. The parallelism is very explicit in some forms of the tradition on which Chaucer has drawn: the boy is ritually murdered, crucified in repetition and mockery of the death of Christ. There is no hint of ritual murder in Chaucer. Nevertheless the parallelism between Jesus and the clergeon is clearly implied. It comes out, for example, at 574f: 'O cursed folk of Herodes all newe, / What may youre yvel entente yow availle?' Just as the Jew Herod had tried to kill the infant Christ, but killed the holy innocents instead, so had the Jews killed the innocent clergeon. The reference to the slaughter of the innocents, which picks up allusions to the liturgy for Childermas in the Prioress's Prologue is further strengthened by 625ff: 'His mooder swownynge by his beere lay; / Unnethe myghte the peple that was theere / This newe

Rachel brynge fro his beere'. This echoes the application in Matthew 2:18 of Jeremiah 40:1 to the slaughter of the innocents: 'In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they were not'. Implicit parallelism between Christ and the clergeon may also lie behind 628-34: '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 swich cursednesse observe. / "Yvele shal have that yvele wol deserve"; / Therfore with wilde hors he dide hem drawe, / And after that he heng them by the lawe'. Though the Provost may have been acting within his legal powers (a point carefully stressed in 'by the lawe'), the execution is, in effect, summary. Why the haste? Because the Provost was unwilling to abide such 'cursednesse'. The murder of the clergeon was a curse-bringing act, like the murder of Jesus. By taking prompt and decisive action the Provost ensured that the divine curse would fall on the Jews and not on the community at large.

At 558ff the Prioress gives expression to one of the standard charges of mediaeval anti-semitism, namely, that the Jews are in league with the devil: 'Oure first foo, the serpent Sathanas, / That hath in Jues herte his waspes nest, / Up swal, and seide, "O Hebrayk peple, allas! / Is this to yow a thyng that is honest, / That swich a boy shal walken as hym lest / In youre despit, and synge of swich sentence, / Which is agayn youre lawes reverence?"'

As early as the New Testament a special relationship is alleged to exist between the Jews and the devil. John 8:44 is the *locus classicus:* 'Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him.' The Book of Revelation twice savagely refers to 'the synagogue of Satan.' Such language may have begun as straightforward abuse, but later it took on more sinister, theological connotations: the Jews were sorcerers able to do evil by the power of the devil. Some even regarded them as devils incarnate. The pact between the devil and the Jews is a common theme of the mystery plays. Lines 558ff of the "Prioress's Tale" are strongly reminiscent of the scenes in the mystery plays in which devils are shown inciting the Jews to demand the crucifixion of Jesus.

At the very outset of the "Tale" the Jews are put in a bad light by linking them with usury□the activity which more than any other distorted their relationships with their non-Jewish neighbours and brought down opprobrium on their heads: 'Ther was in Asye, in a great citee, / Among Cristene folk a Jewerye, / Sustened by a lord of that contree / For foul usure and lucre of vileynye, / Hateful to Crist and to his compaignye'. The Prioress could have found no surer way to dispose her audience against the Jews than by raising the charge of usury. The charge is incidental to the main thrust of the story and plays no direct part in the development of the plot, but it is more than local colour. Dramatically it helps to justify the gory punishment meted out to the Jews at the end.

There are, in fact, as Yunck has pointed out, technically two distinct charges here: usury was the lending of money on interest; 'lucre of vileynye' was profiteering. Both were condemned in canon law, and in using such precise legal terms the Prioress is showing

herself a well-informed daughter of the Church. Her knowledge also comes out in her claim that usury and profiteering are 'hateful to Crist and to his compaignye'. At first sight this is odd since one would assume that at least the prohibition of usury was based on the Old Testament, and not on the New. However, canon lawyers often appealed to Luke 6:35 (Vulgate: *mutum date, nihil inde sperantes*), a fact which the Prioress is presumably supposed to know. A New Testament text certainly lies behind 'lucre of vileynye'. As the gloss *turpe lucrum* in the Ellesmere and Hengwrt manuscripts indicates, it is 1 Timothy 3:8: 'Likewise must the deacons be grave, not doubletongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre' (Vulgate: *diaconos similiter pudicos, non bilingues, non multo vino deditos, non turpe lucrum sectantes*).

The charge of usury was well founded: Jews *were* heavily involved in moneylending in the middle ages. There were a number of reasons for this. Other professions and means of livelihood were not readily open to them. Since the various trades and crafts were dominated by guilds which were often anti-Jewish, it was difficult for a Jew to become, for example, a carpenter or a stone-mason. It was also difficult for them to break into the feudal system of land tenure. In fact it was not advisable for them to hold much land, for if they tied up their wealth in real estate they ran the risk of losing everything when, as so often happened, they were forced to flee. The only means of livelihood readily open to them were trading and moneylending, in which they put to some use the surplus of money they acquired through trading.

The civil authorities actively encouraged Jewish moneylending. They used the Jews as a caste of untouchables to do a necessary but 'dirty' job. The financial systems of the mediaeval world were primitive in the extreme. There was only a rudimentary bureaucracy to collect taxes, and few sources of cash existed from which one could get a loan to finance a project or to tide one over a financial crisis. The chronic shortage of money and credit particularly affected kings and princes, who, though potentially rich, were often short of hard cash if the need to wage war or to build a castle made sudden demands on the exchequer. Jews were encouraged to perform the function both of substitute tax-collectors and bankers. Through various privileges the state promoted their wealth, and then creamed off a proportion of that wealth into the state coffers. As Lilian Winstanley succinctly puts it: 'The Jews were permitted to fleece thoroughly the people of the realm on condition that the king fleeced them'. This placed the Jews in an invidious position socially and exacerbated their already fraught relations with the Christian population. The social basis of Jewish moneylending is not entirely lost on the Prioress: the ghetto is sustained by 'a lord of that contree'. Once again the Prioress reveals that she is *au fait* with Church teaching and politics. The Church often had occasion to rebuke Christian princes for allowing and for benefiting from Jewish usury. The Church had only limited powers of physical coercion. To compel compliance with its wishes it had to rely on the secular authorities, whom it had to persuade to do its will. The negative picture of civil authority at the beginning of the "Tale" is offset, as Archer rightly notes, by the picture of the Provost at the end. Here was a secular authority who, acting in concert with the Church, knew how to defend good Christians against the blaspheming Jews. Article LXVII ('On Jewish Usury') of the decrees of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 provides an illuminating commentary on the opening lines of the "Tale:"

The more the Christian religion refrains from exacting interest [*usura*], the more does the perfidy of the Jews in this practice increase, so that, in a short time, they exhaust the wealth of Christians. Desiring, therefore, to protect the Christians in this matter from being immoderately burdened by the Jews, we ordain by synodal decree that if, on any pretext, Jews extort heavy and excessive interest from Christians, all relationships with Christians shall be withdrawn from them, until they make adequate restitution for their exorbitant exactions. The Christians also shall be compelled, if need be, by ecclesiastical punishment against which no appeal will be heard, to abstain from business dealings with the Jews.

Moreover, we enjoin princes not to be hostile to the Christians on this account, but rather to endeavour to restrain the Jews from so great an oppression. And under threat of the same penalty we decree that the Jews shall be compelled to make good the tithes and offerings owed to the Churches, which the Churches were accustomed to receive from the houses and other possessions of the Christians, before these came, by whatever entitlement, into the hands of the Jews, in order that the Churches may be preserved against loss.

Though the Prioress is Chaucer's creature, her voice cannot automatically be identified with his. An author, holding up a mirror to life, may express through his characters ideas which he himself would repudiate. However, the author may find himself on morally dubious ground if he insists on being an out-and-out realist, a recorder but not a commentator. He is responsible for his creatures, and he cannot be allowed *carte blanche* to publicize any point of view purely and simply on the grounds that there are people who say such things. Inevitably he has his own perspective and where this clashes with the perspective of his characters he can reasonably be expected to find ways of distancing himself from them. The more momentous the issues and the deeper the clash, the more imperative does such distancing become. If the author is totally self-effacing he can hardly complain if the reader assumes that his voice and the voice of his character are one and the same. Is it possible to distance Chaucer from the Prioress? An influential body of criticism claims that it is. Two main lines of argument have been followed.

The first involves playing off the General Prologue against the Tale. An ironic, satirical tone pervades Chaucer's treatment of the Prioress in the General Prologue. Her nice manners (139-40: 'And peyned hire to counterfete cheere / Of court') and fashionable dress (151: 'Ful semyly hir wympul pynched was') sit uneasily with her spiritual calling. She is lax in the observance of monastic rules: she eats roast meat, keeps lap-dogs and wears a brooch with the ambiguous inscription *Amor vincit omnia*. The description of her physical charms in terms of the conventions of courtly love poetry, ending with the understatement, 'For, hardily, she was not undergrowe', is comical. Even her linguistic accomplishments (and her finishing school) are made the butt of barbed comment: 'And Frenssh she spak ful faire and fetisly, / After the scole of Stratford atte Bowe, / For Frenssh of Parys was to hire unknowe.' She weeps easily□at the suffering of small animals: 'She was so charitable and so pitous / She wolde wepe, if that she saugh a mous / Kaught in a trappe, if it were deed or bledde.' The bathetic 'mous' is surely mocking. A picture emerges of a rather large, sentimental, vain woman. But against all

this must be set the verve and passion of the Prioress's actual words. The brilliance of her narrative, its burning sincerity and its persuasiveness show that Chaucer was prepared to give her a fair hearing, without a shadow of satire or mockery to cloud her actual speech. Critics have rightly remarked in particular on the power of the Prologue to the "Tale." Here is a liturgical composition of the very highest order. Whether or not we feel a tension between the Tale and the "General Prologue," and how we interpret that tension, once felt, will depend in the final analysis on our own innate moral sense. We may see the Prioress's concern for the suffering of small animals, in contrast to her relish at the hanging and drawing of the Jews, as evidence of her stunted moral development. But we may equally choose to see her love of small animals (so modern in its concern for animal welfare!) as all of a piece with her horror at the fate of the little clergeon. Chaucer keps his own counsel, and offers no clear guidance. He has simply given us a slice of life□a well-observed, fullblooded portrait of a certain human type. If he meant to distance himself from the Prioress's views then the means by which he has chosen to do so are inadequate.

A second line of argument used to exculpate Chaucer is to urge that he is simply drawing on traditional material: he is repeating what was in his sources, not inventing anything significantly new. In fact, the "Prioress's Tale" can be seen as representing one of the more moderate forms of the tradition; it could have been worse, a lot more lurid and virulently anti-semitic. At least in Chaucer, as we noted earlier, the clergeon is not crucified, as he is in some other versions; the murder is not a ritual murder, nor is the blood used for nefarious purposes. Moreover, it is urged, since Jews had been expelled from England in 1290, the Jews of the "Prioress's Tale" are not drawn from life, but from literature and folklore. They are not perceived as real people, but almost as mythical beings, like hobgoblins. These arguments, however, can easily be stood on their head. It is the very fact that Chaucer is writing within a well established tradition that demonstrates beyond all doubt the antisemitic character of the "Tale." The tradition was so well known that the audience would have confidently classified and interpreted it in a certain way. Elements not explicitly mentioned could still have been read in by them. And although the Prioress may not have been to 'Parys', Chaucer himself had travelled widely on the continent. In fact a realistic topographical detail at lines 493-4 suggests that he was directly acquainted with Jewish ghettoes. The implication that because the Jews of the "Tale" may not be perceived as real people, Chaucer or the Prioress are in some sense exonerated, shows insensitivity to the history of antisemitism. It was precisely such mythologization (a process of dehumanization unchecked, as history shows, by face-to-face contact with Jews in the flesh) which hardened people to committing appalling atrocities against them.

"The Prioress's Tale" belongs to the large and varied mediaeval genre of Miracles of the Virgin. More precisely it can be assigned to a sub-group of that genre consisting of tales which link the Virgin's miracle to the blood-libel. The first recorded mediaeval case of the blood-libel was at Norwich in 1144: the story was written up with considerable flair by Thomas of Monmouth. The veneration of the Blessed William of Norwich provided a useful source of income for centuries for Norwich cathedral, and to this day on rood screens in churches around Norwich representations of the foul murder of William can be found. Within a short time of the Norwich incident blood-libel accusations were

springing up all over Europe. Between 1144 and the 1390s, when Chaucer composed the bulk of the Canterbury Tales, at least twenty-three instances in England, France, Germany, Spain and Czechoslovakia are documented. Another famous English example was the case of Hugh of Lincoln, supposedly done to death by the Jews in 1255. Hugh, like the Blessed William of Norwich, was venerated in the local cathedral. Hugh's story is recounted in the Annals of Waverley and by Matthew Paris. Significantly, it is the subject of a ninety-two stanza Anglo-Norman ballad dating probably from the late thirteenth century□a hint, perhaps, of how these stories were spread. Hugh's case is particularly relevant because it is mentioned at the end of the Prioress's Tale: 'O yonge Hugh of Lyncoln, slayn also / With cursed Jewes, as it is notable, / For it is but a litel while ago, / Preye eek for us, we synful folk unstable, / That of his mercy God so merciable / On us his grete mercy multiplie, / For reverence of his mooder Marie. Amen.' Chaucer had close connections with Lincoln cathedral. He clearly knew Hugh's story. Indeed, it is puzzling that he did not simply tell Hugh's story, which is in all essentials parallel to the clergeon's. Why does he go back in time, to a nameless Christian youth in a distant land when he knows a recent case so close to home? Have we here, perhaps, a later edition to the "Tale?" This, then, is the tradition within which Chaucer was working. He knew what he was doing, and his readers knew what he was doing. He set out to create a version of a well-known type of anti-semitic tale, and he succeeded wonderfully well.

Chaucer's "Prioress's Tale" may fairly be described as an anti-semitic tract. Most anti-semitic writing has been poor and shabby, but here is a piece which displays fine intellect and consummate artistry. Artistically it may be the best anti-semitic tract ever written. Chaucer was a child of his time□ no better, no worse in his attitudes towards the Jews than many of his contemporaries. But that is hardly a defence. The verdict that he was anti-semitic is not entirely based on hindsight or on the morality of a later age. There were wiser heads throughout the middle ages ready to defend the Jews, at least against grosser charges such as the blood libel. There were even some who argued, on good theological grounds, that the Gospel demanded that the Jews be treated with compassion and respect. This sorry conclusion leaves us with a reflection and a problem. The reflection is on the amorality of art. Art, being largely a matter of form and proportion, can, it seems, be used to articulate morally bad ideas as well as morally good. One may acknowledge the aesthetic power of a piece of writing without endorsing its sentiments. The problem is what to do with the "Prioress's Tale" today, now that it has entered the canon of English literature. Lumiansky's exclusion of it from his 1948 prose version of the *Canterbury Tales* does more credit to his heart than his head. Such censorship is dangerous and futile. We should also resist the temptation of apologetically re-reading the text in such a way that it is made to say the opposite of what it appears to say, and to express politically correct opinions. That sort of hermeneutic has been widely used within religions to make classic religious texts acceptable to later ages. It is hardly proper in the academic study of Chaucer. Chaucer, though a classic, does not have the status of Scripture. Applied to Chaucer such an approach is fundamentally dishonest, and the dishonesty will be rapidly perceived. The only course of action left open is to ensure that when the "Prioress's Tale" is expounded, the basic facts of anti-semitism are expounded as well. Some critics may be irked when

asked to play the historian or the moral 'nanny', but in this case there is no honourable alternative. Art may be neutral on morality; the criticism and appreciation of art cannot.

Source: Philip S. Alexander, "Madame Eglentyne, Geoffrey Chaucer, and the Problem of Medieval Anti-Semitism," in *Bulletin of John Rylands Library of Manchester*, Vol. 74, No. 1, Spring 1992, pp. 109-20.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay excerpt, Williams explores how the Pardoner poses a threat to the other authors and to Chaucer himself in Canterbury Tales.

There are several similarities between the Wife of Bath and the Pardoner, not the least of which is the intimate relation between the prologue and tale of each author. If it can be said that the basis of this relation between prologue and tale in the Wife's case is that she denies and destroys reality to make her fictional life valid, perhaps it may then be said that the Pardoner in turn destroys fiction in order to complete the process of rendering everything subjective and meaningless. In this sense they are in league with each other, and we see this in several ways. Whereas the Wife may be seen as a figure who distorts reality through a carnal willfulness and weakness of which she is only partially aware, the Pardoner emerges as a highly astute figure who has developed his depravity into a powerful intellectual theory, which in his prologue and tale he attempts to impose on the pilgrimage in order to destroy it. Unlike other flawed characters in the company who, despite themselves, reveal the intellectual or moral basis of their corruption (which, in many cases, they do not fully understand), the Pardoner intentionally exposes his vice in the prologue in order to raise evil to a theoretical level on which he can confront good. For if, in fact, the various authors of the pilgrimage have shown themselves as imperfect, each would seem to have also shown the origin of this imperfection to be misunderstanding or moral weakness. The great challenge to a figure like the Pardoner is to provide a theoretical basis for his fellow authors' misconstructions and for the audience's misinterpretations, and so trap them intellectually, as well as morally, in error. The Pardoner is, then, a formidable challenge not only to the authors of the Canterbury pilgrimage but also to the author of the *Canterbury Tales,* and to its audiences.

The nature of that challenge is a form of radical nominalism that calls into question the function of language in revealing truth, our ability to know truth, and consequently (in this kind of reductive logic), the objective existence of truth. On the surface, nominalism would seem to favor the fictive use of language, since its basic claim is that universals and abstract concepts are merely names, or words, which do not correspond to or represent any objective reality. In the medieval context, however, this did not lead to a greater prestige of the imaginative use of language, but rather, just the opposite; under nominalism, the interest in language became increasingly speculative and severely logical, and literary analysis of texts lost importance. The force of imaginative creation, in the medieval view, existed precisely in the correspondences that could be perceived to what lay outside the text, and part of the delight of the beautiful was generated through the multiple analogies that could be perceived between the fiction of the created artifact and the realities beyond it. Naturally, when beyond the text there is nothing other than more words, these analogies are not possible, or, at least, not delightful. In other words, the basis of fiction is reality, and when that is removed all communication becomes expository. Harry Bailly realizes this keenly, although not at a theoretical level, and continually tries to keep the "fun" in fiction; his good instinct for literature, limited though it may be, is what accounts for his eventual rage against the Pardoner.

The Pardoner is an enemy not only of orthodox medieval philosophy, but of poetry as well. His challenge to a certain theory of universals and of language is felt directly as a threat to the activity of the Canterbury authors and to the act of pilgrimage itself. By constructing the figure of the Pardoner in this way, Chaucer succeeds both in raising the theory of poetry to the level of the theme of his work, and in forcing the audience to reflect on the process of understanding and interpretation in which they are engaged.

The Pardoner's attack on the audience is launched at the outset of his introduction. The Host instructs the Pardoner to "Telle us som myrthe or japes", but having perhaps perceived by his appearance and earlier behavior the Pardoner's inclination to depravity, some of the other pilgrims countermand the Host: "Nay, lat hym telle us of no ribaudye [ribaldry]!" The Pardoner realizes that the pilgrims would be safer with a ribald tale than that which he has in store for them, and his ironic use of the contraries of honesty and drunkenness in agreeing to their demand expresses the disdain with which he regards their self-righteousness: "'I graunte, ywis,' quod he, 'but I moot thynke / Upon som honest thyng while that I drynke.'"

He begins by telling the audience how he uses rhetoric and for what purpose, revealing that in his tale-telling his theme is always the same: "*Radix malorum est Cupiditas* [Cupidity is the root of all evil]." The irony that he intends is in the double sense that he preaches against the sin of cupidity while having cupidity itself as his personal motive for such preaching. For the several members of his audience who are slow in catching irony, he spells it out. With papal documents, the seals of church powers, and his own ecclesiastical title, he establishes his authority and attempts to win the respect and confidence of his audience. He then reveals his glass boxes full of old rags and bones, which the audience believes, based on the authority of the speaker, are relics. And their belief, the Pardoner tells us, is all that matters: "Relikes [relics] been they, as wenen [imagine, suppose] they echoon [each one of them]." This is an important statement, for it reveals the basis of the epistemology of the Pardoner as author, and, of course, it foreshadows his final proposition to his fellow pilgrim-authors at the end of his tale.

It is unlikely that this revelation is merely more of the Pardoner's considerable cynicism toward his audience and his fellow man. Rather, it is a statement of principle. For the Pardoner, all signs are systems of discourse, language and relics alike, and what is significant in them is their manner of communication, not the validity of what they communicate.

The Pardoner himself is an expert in the analysis of communications, as he amply demonstrates, and this expertise is built on the idea that no objective truth can be communicated by any system because there is none to communicate. Therefore, whatever the audience believes, or can be made to believe, through a particular discourse is, indeed, correct. That is to say, since words and other signs do not correspond to any reality other than their own process of signifying, whatever meaning they are understood to have is as good as any other; therefore, what the audience is led to believe is the best understanding that can occur. These are the pragmatics born of extreme nominalism, which make of the lie, misrepresentation, and propaganda intellectual virtues, and identify nominalism as a descendant of sophistry.

The self-revelations of his prologue present us with the paradox of the dishonest man being honest about his dishonesty. That is not to say that the Pardoner is above seduction; for, indeed, he seems to gear his words initially to the individual pilgrims seemingly most vulnerable to his rhetoric. His sheep's shoulder bone, he says, cures not only animal illnesses, but, he adds with an eye to the Wife of Bath no doubt, it cures the jealousy of husbands, even those who are quite correct in their suspicions of their wives' adultery. He has a mitten, too, that multiplies the grain it handles. The Miller is likely to have an interest in it. But his ultimate ploy is one that few in his audience are likely to be strong enough to refuse. "Anyone," he seems to say, "who is guilty of truly horrible sin, particularly women who have committed adultery, must not come forward to venerate my relics." With this trick, as he boldly tells the pilgrims, he makes a very good living. The Pardoner is not now playing his tricks, but describing them. Since he is a pardoner, he is more than personally concerned with sin, for penance and contrition are his professions, and he soon reveals his theory on this subject, as well. The rest of his prologue is devoted largely to the broad topic of intention and effect:

Thus kan I preche [preach] agayn [against] that
same vice
Which that I use, and that is avarice.
But though myself be gilty in that synne,
Yet kan I maken oother folk to twynne [separate
from],
From avarice, and soore to repente.
But that is nat my principal entente [intention].

The Pardoner here engages a topical subject of the Middle Ages□whether an evil man can know, and thus teach, the truth. On the one hand was the position generally associated with Augustine and the Neoplatonists that true knowledge presupposed a union between knower and known, which knowledge was love. Therefore, he who did not love the truth could not be described as having real knowledge of it. On the other hand was the equally orthodox position of the Scholastics that knowledge was a function of intellect and love a function of the will. Theoretically, these faculties were separate although related, and the possibility of the coexistence of a correct intellect and a corrupt will existed. Therefore, a thoroughly evil man might know and accurately express the truth. The Pardoner obviously allies himself with the Scholastic position, for he sees the many advantages to himself that lie therein. The fully articulated theory is sufficiently complex for there to be plenty of room for distortion. By extension, it also applies to tale-telling and thus becomes a pertinent consideration for poetry. Must a poet be a good man in order to practice his art? Or, to restate it, what is the relationship of the practice of fiction and the moral probity of the practitioner? What, in addition, is the role of authorial intention in the construction of meaning in a tale? The Pardoner provides implicit answers to these questions in his prologue and tale, and Chaucer suggests alternative responses within the larger structure of the *Canterbury Tales.*

The Pardoner ends his introductory words with a statement of principle concerning virtue, knowledge, and truth, and from this theory flows his tale. A vicious (in the original sense: full of vice) man can tell a virtuous tale, he claims, and it is clear that this implies

the ability of the vicious man to know that the content of the tale is, indeed, virtuous. This is possible on the basis of the theory mentioned above that intellect and will can function independently. Thus a separation of the two faculties is introduced. This disjunction, in the Pardoner's presentation, reminds us of the Wife of Bath, who separates and divides, but never unifies, and like her, he is engaged in his storytelling in a plan to separate word from meaning, language from reality, in such a way that signs will mean anything he wants them to.

That a vicious man can tell a moral tale indicates that there really exists a moral truth that can be known. But the separation between universals and particulars is posited on the idea that if there is universal truth, it cannot be known because only particulars can be known. The further separation between signs (words, things, and concepts) and what they signify (represent, symbolize, make known) makes impossible both real knowledge of the truth and accurate expression of it. Thus, analogies between these separations can be, and in the case of the Pardoner certainly are, misleading. In Scholastic theory the truth spoken by a vicious man remains the truth, totally independent of his love or knowledge of it. Indeed, it is precisely because of its independent existence that the truth can be attained by the correct intellect despite the subject's moral condition. In nominalist theory, on the other hand, the intellect, regardless of its condition, cannot know anything beyond what the particulars of experience yield. The Pardoner, whose intellect is governed by the principle that truth cannot be known because reality is essentially a linguistic construct, can only preach the most relative kind of morality and will only create fiction of the most self-referential kind.

The Pardoner, then, because he believes that truth can never be known, lies through mental reservation in his claim about the easy accommodation of immoral author with moral fiction, just as he lies in his claim concerning the efficacy of false relics for the repenting of sin. Whereas a genuine desire to turn away from error remains genuine regardless of the authenticity of any sign which may have inspired it, the Pardoner is saying, as if in response to the Wife's earlier lament about sin and love, that "there is no sin." In this view, the repentance related to sin is illusory, and the words, objects, and ideas employed to produce this illusion are of little consequence, as long as they are believed. Reality has become an enormous pile of old rags and bones.

As with other figures of the pilgrimage, Chaucer (as author) establishes the significance of the Pardoner by his appearance and by the authoritative texts he gives him to cite. In the *"General Prologue,"* several details of the Pardoner's description suggest effeminacy and even eunuchry.

The Narrator clearly sees and states the physical dimension of the Pardoner's condition through equine analogies: "I trowe [believe] he were a geldyng or a mare." His sexual orientation is alluded to in the description of his relationship with the apparently leprous Summoner: "Ful loude he soong [sang] 'Com hider, love, to me!'." The Summoner, it is said, bore him a "stif" accompaniment. The Pardoner's lack of virility, his sexual impotency and sexual orientation, are not the result of genetic chance, a dominant mother, or the unfortunate consequence of disease, as our modern sciences might try to

explain such characteristics. Instead, according to the medieval science of physiognomy, the Pardoner's physical endowments and health are direct reflections of his intellectual and moral condition, and the same holds true for all the pilgrims.

Just as his intellect is divorced from reality, selfreferential, and incapable of fruitful relation with the world, so his sexuality is narcissistic, divorced from nature, sterile, and nonlife-giving. In this way Chaucer incarnates in the very physical condition of the Pardoner the philosophy and morality that the pilgrim will attempt to promote.

The Pardoner's perverse use of Scripture also harmonizes with his other characteristics. Like the Wife, the Pardoner refers only to that part of the text that serves his immediate purpose, usually distorting it, and Chaucer relies on the audience's familiarity with the true sense of the text to introduce a meaning ironically contrary to that which the Pardoner intends. Such is the case with the Pardoner's motto, "*Radix malorum est Cupiditas,*" which he takes from Saint Paul's letter to Timothy (one of Paul's most prominent disciples), in which Paul gives instructions on the creation and maintenance of the Christian community. Much of the letter is concerned with false teaching and empty speech, and these are connected with cupidity by Paul: "Now the end of the commandment is charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned: From which some having swerved have turned aside unto vain jangling." Chaucer encourages and expects his audience to go beyond the lines of the text quoted by his pilgrim and to consider it in its wider context, which ironically reflects on the storytelling author-pilgrim.

There is much in the Pauline text from which the Pardoner extracts his dictum that reflects directly on the Pardoner himself, but perhaps nothing quite so pertinent as the following: "He is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, Perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness." The irony of the Pardoner's citing of Saint Paul is not only that the Pauline text exposes the vice of the very one who cites it, but also that it provides an alternative position on the function of language to that held by the Pardoner. Paul's view, stated here and elsewhere, is that true language and true doctrine come directly from God so that man may know the truth, which is divine in origin and eternal: "Whereunto I am ordained a preacher, and an apostle, (I speak the truth in Christ, and lie not;) a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and verity." Thus, before the pilgrim- author has succeeded in establishing his intended meaning, the text is invested by a higher authorship with an alternative meaning capable of changing the nature of the whole text. The audience need only be capable of finding it.

Apparently originating in the East in Buddhist literature, versions of the *"Pardoner's Tale"* are found throughout the world in all times up to our own (John Huston's film *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* is such a version). Its timeless appeal certainly has something to do with its enigmatic quality and the multiple layers of meaning and of irony it contains. Chaucer's original contribution is in the development of the figure of the old man who points the way to the final denouement. Chaucer's rendering of the tale, however, is one that maintains the commentary of the Pilgrim-Author throughout in the

form of the sermon, which also characterized his prologue. Having established the three protagonists of the tale as figures of capital sins, many of which he has accused himself of earlier, the author interrupts the narrative of the tale to comment on its moral significance.

Gluttony, avarice, and idolatry are the chief sins of the Pardoner's characters, and as he enumerates and describes them he also shows them to be related to each other. Appealing to a series of ancient sources, including both wise pagans and Scripture, the Pardoner creates a powerful condemnation of these sins:

Allas! a foul thyng is it, by my feith,
To seye this word, and fouler is the dede,
Whan man so drynketh of the white and rede
That of his throte he maketh his pryvee [privy /
toilet],
Thurgh thilke cursed superfluitee.

In this formulation, the Pardoner alludes to the relationship between the word and that which it signifies, declaring the reality (gluttony or fornication) the signifier, to be more than the "word", or signifier, but, also, the word to be appropriate to what it expresses; both are "foul." However, were the author sincere in this belief, he would personally repudiate the thing he so describes. Rather, in the case of the Pardoner, who has openly established himself as the personification of these vices, we are treated to a display of rhetorical skill, for he is engaged in creating a fiction about three characters guilty of these vices. By interspersing the fictional narrative with a discourse on the nature of those sins, he deliberately blurs the boundaries between the fictional universe of the tale and the real world to which it should correspond. In other words, by reweaving into the fiction the lesson, or meaning, that may be derived from it, the Pardoner attempts to neutralize that meaning by making it fictive. Like the Pardoner himself, the three rioters of his tale take signs of all kinds for reality. Hearing that Death has slain one of their companions, they set out to find and to slay Death, swearing by "God's bones" to accomplish the deed before nightfall. This additional reference to bones recalls the author's earlier description of his false relics, and associates the rioters' quest to control the reality of death with the Pardoner's theory of reality as illusion.

This brotherhood, whose members have sworn to live and die for each other, encounter in their quest an old man whose quest is not to slay Death but to join it, to remedy a life overextended and empty of vigor. His instructions to the youths are correct:

To fynde Deeth, turne up this croked wey,
For in that grove I lafte hym, by my fey,
Under a tree, and there he wole abyde;
Noght for youre boost he wole him no thyng hyde.
Se ye that ook? Right there ye shal hym fynde.

The old man not only pursues Death, but knows where, for all but himself, it is to be found, as his advice to the youths demonstrates. Yet he, himself, is unable to possess Death, condemned, as he tells us, forever to wander in search of what he knows but cannot become one with. Like the Pardoner, according to his own boast, the old man can lead others to what they seek, but is forever separate from it. The three rioters conceive of reality in a material and literalist way, thinking that death is a tangible, and thus controllable, phenomenon.

Their dedication to food and drink is another dimension of their materialism, and so for them, signs, words, and concepts, such as the death bell they hear, the oaths they swear, and Death whom they pursue, contain no greater reality than their experiential existence. The old man, on the other hand, has lost this naive enthusiasm for the world of particulars, having long lived the bitter experience of a radically nominalist world disconnected from the real. He has become the empty sign: "Lo how I vanysshe, flessh, and blood, and skyn! / Allas! whan shul my bones been at reste?" Still another reference to bones! He is the very sign of Death by his appearance and words, but he cannot connect with the reality that he signifies and remains a particular in search of a universal. He is the living death, the oxymoron, the contradiction that so permeates the Pardoner's prologue and tale. All the characters of the tale, then, constitute the pilgrim-author and reveal him. The Pardoner's gluttony and swearing is echoed in the rioters who further establish his materialist-relativist philosophy in the narrative, while his eunuchry and spiritual oldness are reflected in the old man's physical lifelessness; that figure further establishes his author's nominalist philosophy in the tale through his isolation from what he knows. The tale is brought to a wonderfully ironic end through the Pardoner's brilliant use of a Eucharistic metaphor when, having found gold instead of Death under the tree, one of the trio is sent for bread and wine to celebrate their fortune. After murdering their brother, who has brought back the food, so as to divide the gold between them, the two survivors drink the wine, which the younger victim has poisoned in the hope of having the treasure all for himself. For the first and only time in the tale, the sign (gold: cupidity) and what it signifies (death) are brought together to the confounding of character and author alike.

At various levels of the tale, the Pardoner's authorial intentions are fulfilled. As a moral sermon the tale conditions the audience to repent of the various sins that they have seen so dramatically depicted and punished, and as an intellectual proposition it sufficiently confuses the nature and efficacy of signs so as to gain possible acceptance for his nominalist literary theory. But most important, from the author's point of view, the tale has set the stage for his ultimate extension of both theory and practice, the use of morality to destroy morality and the use of literature to destroy literature. The Pardoner hurries at the end of his tale toward that goal, immediately offering to his audience his false relics as means of redemption. The Pardoner has good reason to hurry, realizing, perhaps, that within his tale, for all his careful rhetoric, lurks another possible significance antithetical to the meaning and application he intends. The longer the audience explores the text's allegorical relations to the world and to other texts, the more this meaning emerges from it. The bread and wine that bring death expand in significance as they are inevitably associated with the bread and wine that truly slay death; the oak under which the rioters find gold and death similarly unfolds into symbol

when associated with the tree of life and the text "the wages of sin is death"; the numerous partial citations from Scripture and other authoritative texts reach out to their full contexts to create a larger and inevitably contradictory meaning to that intended by the author. But nothing so menaces the Pardoner's success as the figure of the old man who, as the personification of the author, reveals the Pardoner's way as living death. With the memory of the skeletal old man who points the way to death so fresh in their minds, how terrifying to the pilgrims must seem the old bones which the Pardoner now offers to them as relics.

In order to ensure the self-referentiality of the tale (so important to the success of his enterprise), the Pardoner attempts to extend its terms into the world of the Canterbury pilgrimage itself by urging his fellow travelers to accept his false relics and thereby give assent to the ideology of empty signs, meaningless experience, and positivist art:

But, sires, o [one] word forgat I in my tale:
I have relikes and pardoun in my male [pouch],
As faire as any man in Engelond,
Whiche were me yeven [given] by the popes hond.
If any of yow wole, of devocion,
Offren, and han myn absolucion,
Com forth anon, and kneleth heere adoun,
And mekely receyveth my pardoun.

While we cannot know which, if any, of the pilgrims reached for coins in order to buy into the Pardoner's proposition, we see the destruction of his scheme when he appropriately singles out Harry Bailly as his main target. As Harry has, in fact, invented the idea of a tale-telling pilgrimage and acts as the official literary critic, his assent to the Pardoner's theory is most crucial. For, just as the pilgrimage itself is a physical journey toward an objective reality in time and space, that is, the shrine of Canterbury and its relics, which is a sign of a spiritual journey toward salvation, so too the tales told during the pilgrimage are an intellectual use of sign implying such a spiritual reality and the purposeful mental journey toward it. Harry's assent to the Pardoner's epistemological principles would have destroyed the meaning of both the physical and mental journeys and would have provided the Pardoner with the vengeance and the leadership he seems to desire.

The Host's ferocious rejection of the Pardoner's philosophy arises out of both his abilities and his limitations. Although he has shown himself throughout to be unable to interpret the tales beyond their level of entertainment, he nevertheless has a strong and correct instinct for what makes fiction work: Harry knows what constitutes tedium and what constitutes delight, and as far as his judgments go, they are correct. This common man's intuition about art's need for reality, for mimesis, coupled with his natural, virile heartiness, define Bailly as the Pardoner's contrary and his natural antagonist. When these opposites clash, the violence is considerable:

"Nay, nay!" quod he, "thanne have I Cristes curs
[curse]!

Lat be," quod he, "it shal nat be, so theech [as I hope to prosper]!
Thou woldest make me kisse thyne olde breech [breeches],
And swere it were a relyk of a seint,
Though it were with thy fundement depeint [stained by your buttocks]!
But, by the croys [cross] which that Seint Eleyne fond,
I woulde I hadde thy coillons [testicles] in myn hond
In stide of relikes or of seintuarie [holy objects].
Lat kutte [cut] hem of, I wol thee helpe hem carie;
They shul be shryned [enshrined] in an hogges toord [turd]!"

This very personal attack on the Pardoner addresses his intellectual position as well as his corporeal condition and is both appropriate and extremely telling, rendering the Pardoner speechless in defeat. The Host has at once cruelly unmasked his adversary's physical deficiency and the sterility of his philosophy. "Your relics and your theories," Harry storms, "are as worthless as your testicles," thus knitting up and exposing all the elements of this author's motives and methods.

That the Pardoner's downfall comes through his misuse of relics is significant. By his forceful rhetoric he has succeeded in purging verbal signs of their significance, but his war on meaning is total. Like words, relics were also conceived of as signs, but as signs with a simpler and more direct relationship to what they signified. As the etymology of the word suggests, a relic was considered the "remains" of a person or object especially sanctified. Often they were parts of a saint's body or something that had touched the body and had thus taken into themselves a degree of the power of the sacred object. Like icons, relics do much more than represent what they signify; they cause the reality to be present: "The icon is not consubstantial with its prototype and yet, while employing symbolism, is not itself a symbol. It causes to emerge, not without a certain artistic rigidity, a personal presence; and it is symbolism which reveals this presence, as well as the entire cosmic context that surrounds it."

Differing from the usual function of words, relics incarnate what they stand for and are a conduit for a power no longer present. Their authenticity, then, is more obviously crucial to their function, although, like the false words of the Pardoner, a false relic may inspire real faith and devotion. Relics and icons are, therefore, more powerful than words and yet far less supple. Language, even false language, does, in fact, participate in the making of meaning, whereas a false relic, like an impotent man, can engender nothing, as Harry Bailly so bluntly puts it. According to medieval theory, a false relic will under no circumstances have the effect it is supposed to have, although the subjective belief that it inspires may have merit as piety. The relic, then, depends completely for its power on the objective, independent existence of that of which it is the remains and the sign.

The Canterbury pilgrimage is one directed toward a relic, the remains of Saint Thomas à Becket. The Pardoner realizes that it is not only the stories told on the journey that must be the object of his attack, but also the goal of the journey itself, if he is to impose his view of reality upon the pilgrims. But at the same time that he voids words of their signifying power and relics of their incarnating power, he also assults a third category of sign, one preeminent and unique in medieval Christian thought, the Eucharist. The Pardoner's central allusion to this "sign of signs" comes in his insincere denunciation of gluttony: "Thise cookes, how they stampe, and streyne, and grynde, / And turnen substaunce into accident."

The theory of the Eucharist is that through the repetition of Christ's words at the Last Supper, bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ while retaining their natural form and appearance. Through this transubstantiation the *accidents,* or visible and tangible aspects of the bread and wine, remain while the *substance,* or essence, is changed to that of the Divinity. Just as the Pardoner uses the image of bread and wine at the end of the tale to denote death, so here he uses the theory of transubstantiation to describe gluttony and luxury, and for good reason. For in the Eucharist is discovered the highest order of the real, in that it is both sign and signified simultaneously. For it is not a true sign of something else, nor only a representation, nor even an icon that calls forth the divine presence in the Eucharist, but it is a complete union of symbol and reality, which, as it is eaten by the faithful, denotes the complete union of knower and known, creator and created, universal and particular.

For the radical nominalist, the possibility that every day, in every church, the particulars of bread and wine not only communicated a universal, but became the universal of universals (Plato's *nous*, Christianity's superessential Being), posed a serious problem, and in Chaucer's time more than in any other the question of transubstantiation was hotly argued. Robert E. Nichols, Jr., in his study of the Eucharistic symbolism in the *"Pardoner's Tale,"* describes one side of the controversy: "Wyclif, who declared that hypocritical clergy by their actions 'ben made wafreris,' protested the fiction that any priest can 'make' the body of Christ daily by saying mass, arguing that he simply 'makes' in the host a sign of the Lord."

We see how far-reaching is the Pardoner's attack on cognition when we realize that the three cornerstones of knowledge□language, icon, and Eucharist□which he attempts to undermine, constitute the epistemological structure of the Middle Ages. Just as he empties signs of their signification through his manipulation of language, and just as he demotes the function of the relic to that of the empty sign, so, too, he attempts to devalue the mystery of the Eucharist to the status of a human sign. Attempting to project his own spiritual decay onto the world through the use of fiction in his tale, this author threatens the basis of fiction itself. But in Chaucerian poetics there is within language, and thus within fiction, the power to reassert the essential connection with reality, as is revealed in this case through the unlikely agency of the Host, "moost envoluped in synne."

Source: David Williams, "Language Redeemed: 'The Pardoner's Tale,'" in *"The Canterbury Tales": A Literary Pilgrimage*, Twayne Publishers, 1987, pp. 53-100.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay excerpt, Williams examines how the Wife of Bath wields her own version of experience and authority in telling her tale.

Whatever may be the interpretation she places on the "Miller's Tale," the Wife of Bath must have enjoyed it thoroughly. Her own prologue and tale are similar exercises in turning everything upside down, but with the Wife of Bath, Chaucer seems to be exploring similar questions under a different theme, a theme that the Wife herself identifies as experience and authority as alternative means of understanding the truth. In his important study *Chaucerian Fiction,* Robert Burlin has shown the central importance of this theme in all of Chaucer's work, but nowhere is it as explicitly addressed as in the "Wife of Bath's Tale": "She was preserved illiterate, allowed only the puny weapon of her own 'experience' to contend with an armory of masculine 'auctoritee'. No wonder, then, that the Wife uses any strategy that comes to hand to establish and defend her identity. No wonder, either, that she finds herself uncomfortably contrary, consistently obliged to assume the very position she is opposing." Philosophically she is off to a bad start, however, since in the Middle Ages this somewhat complicated concept of authority and experience as the basis of human cognition normally regarded both elements as necessary for correct understanding. But the Wife is a dualist in all she undertakes; she divides, differentiates, and emphasizes conflict wherever possible.

Ideally, human knowledge of truth is achieved through both experience and authority, although each, and the sources of each, are different. In this tradition, all texts represent authority; all interpretation is experience. The ultimate textual authority is Scripture, of course, because God is its Author. The ideal of experience, it follows, is to be found in the life of Christ, who is seen as the definitive interpreter of Scripture, the paradigmatic exegete.

It is here in the authoritative Word of God as revealed in Scripture and in the historical life of Christ, the *Verbum Dei,* that the junction of experience and authority is to be found. Beyond these models lie numerous other examples of authority and experience: truth is authority, language is experience; meaning is authority, signification is experience; the knowable is authority, reason is experience; universals are authority, particulars are experience. Usually authority is superior to experience, but this is not always the case. Particularly when the authority is human□for instance, a manmade text□the right use of reason, which is experience, may be the better guide. In any case, both ideally coincide in the Augustinian "good man skilled in teaching [*vir bonus discendi paritus*]" whose experience guided by authority leads to correct perception and communication of the knowable. The "Wife of Bath's Prologue" begins for the *Canterbury Tales* a debate on the question of marriage in which several other pilgrims participate. It is the woe in marriage that the Wife announces as her theme, while declaring that were there no authority on which to base her understanding of the subject, her own experience would be sufficient.

On at least one level this is quite true, since she herself is the "author" of that woe experienced by her five husbands. Immediately, then, we see that the terms and concepts of authority and experience are to be used in several ways typical of Chaucerian irony. It is clear, for instance, that the Wife's use of "experience" has little to do with Thomas Aquinas's *experimentum,* the intellectual ordering and unifying of present perceptions with previous remembered perceptions.

While the Wife's entire prologue consists of memories of her past, neither her reasoning in the present about them nor her interpretation of other tales that she hears in the present pilgrimage bring order, or understanding, or meaning to her life. To cite Burlin's convenient summary of the medieval sense of experience: "This, then, is the 'experience' that underlies the Middle English definitions. It is more than the apprehension of the senses, or a collection of remembered objects; it is a unifying activity linking actual perception to what has been apprehended in the past." The Wife's sense of experience is hardly a unifying activity, but rather one that separates her from everything she seeks. As opposed to integrating present with past, it leads only to a melancholy desire for what was. As the champion of experience over authority, she fails dismally, since the one thing that eludes her is real experience in the meaningful sense. To the Wife of Bath, experience is understood only in its most literal and banal senses: it means sex and power. Significantly, in her prologue, experience is something that exists only in the past and in the future, and, as the Wife makes clear, she looks forward hopefully to more sex and power as soon as possible.

Experience for the Wife has become memory and anticipation without reality in the present. Ironically, it is to authority that the Wife appeals in her assertion of the superiority of experience, and we are treated to a sustained demonstration of reason applied to text. She begins with scriptural stories of the wedding at Cana and the oft-married Samaritan encountered by Jesus at the well. Her exegesis of these passages is forthright: she has no idea, she declares, what they could possibly mean! She is much more comfortable with the Old Testament, particularly the commandment of Genesis, "Go, wax and multiply!" Wax she will, but she prefers division and subtraction to multiplying and goes on to cite the command that *husbands* must leave fathers and mothers, dividing it from the commandment to wives about their obligations. Several scriptural figures are used to characterize the Wife. We recall her introduction in the "General Prologue": "A good Wif was ther Of biside BATHE, / But she was somdel deef [somewhat deaf], and that was scathe [a pity]". Her own reference to the Samaritan woman whom Jesus meets by a *well* identifies her, a woman from near *Bath,* with that other, five-time-wedded figure. But the Samaritan understands the words of Christ ("I perceive that thou art a prophet", whereas the Wife is "somdel deef." She prefers to be the vessel of wood or earth (dishonor) rather than one of gold or silver (honor) and is content to be humble barley bread as long as she does not have to be refined white bread, especially when she recalls that it was with "barly-breed [bread]" that "Oure Lord Jhesu refresshed many a man." She is associated with multiplicity and the "old," both physically and spiritually, as she complains of advancing years and as she adopts the literalist, "old-law" interpretation of life.

The Wife's prologue is the longest by far of all the pilgrims', and in its biographical character seems to grow into a tale in its own right, one that is intimately related to the story of the rapist knight she tells later on. The Wife's life, then, becomes her text and sole authority. Since we find no indication that the account she gives is not accurate, the fictitiousness of that text arises, rather, from the basic fiction of its model: that is, her life is shown to be a lie, a flawed text giving no authoritative knowledge of the real.

The Wife has a strong effect on her audience as we see when the Pardoner interrupts her during her prologue to compliment her for being a "noble prechour [preacher]" on the subject of marriage. She has just finished misinterpreting Saint Paul: "The wife hath not power of her body, but the husband: and likewise also the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife." As she disjoins the unity of authority and experience, so too, here, as in all other authorities she cites, the Wife fragments the text and cites only the part that advances her interpretation: "I have the power durynge al my lyf / Upon his propre body, and noght he." The Pardoner, like the Wife, approves the text he hears for his own reasons, and will adopt her method of interpreting texts when his turn comes. He was about to marry, he says, but has learned the disadvantages of such a course from the Wife's description of wedded life. Throughout the *Canterbury Tales,* the Pardoner is a figure anxious to conceal and to rationalize his lack of virility; his "celibacy" is thus given a rational basis in the Wife's text. But this author encourages her audience to believe that there is more complicated matter in her tale to come and by careful attention the listener, in this case the Pardoner, may better judge the proper application of the fiction they are about to hear to the reality they live.

"Telle forth youre tale . . . / And teche us yonge men of your praktike [practice]" urges the Pardoner, and the Wife goes on to conclude this contract with the audience in the now-familiar formula: "For myn entente is nat but for to pleye." The Pardoner has good reason to welcome the Wife's fiction, for as a perceptive interpreter of tales, he has already gleaned this author's poetics as one grounded in the pleasant relativist theory that isolates fiction from reality in order to assert the one for the other.

Although still only at the beginning of her prologue, the Wife proclaims, "Now, sire, now wol I telle forth my tale," and proceeds with an account of her married life with five spouses. In a way, this point in her prologue really is the beginning of her tale, for as we shall see, her tale proper becomes a metaphoric representation of the life she describes in the prologue, while the meaning she ascribes to her autobiography is firmly grounded in fantasy.

Alisoun boasts of her triumph over her husbands and describes the techniques by which she mastered them. The husbands fall into two categories: three were rich and old but inadequate to her erotic demands; the last two were sexually vigorous but more difficult to control. In the one kind of relationship the Wife achieves half of what she desires□power; in the other, she achieves the rest□sex; but at the end of her prologue we see that she has failed to attain the unity of the two, which she desires. Like her method of reasoning, her experience is fragmented and divided, ever at war with itself, and as she attains satisfaction in one way, she loses it in another. Her situation is not without pathos, for as a sensualist and materialist, she is doomed to a life of fleeting

experiences, which never quite attain the real and which are, thus, interpretable only within the limitations of the flux of time and matter. It is this materialism that gives such prominence to memory and anticipation in her moving lament:

But, Lord Crist! whan that it remembreth me
Upon my yowthe, and on my jolitee,
It tikleth me aboute myn herte roote.
Unto this day it dooth myn herte boote [good]
That I have had my world as in my tyme.
But age, allas! that al wole envenyme [poison],
Hath me biraft [robbed] my beautee and my pith [vigor].
Lat go, farewel! the devel go therwith!
The flour is goon, ther is namoore to telle;
The bren [bran], as best I kan, now moste I selle;
But yet to be right myrie wol I fonde [invent].

With her last husband, Jankyn, the clerk, the Wife is seen anew in the role of audience, for her learned spouse has taken to educating her through readings from several authoritative texts, which include those of Theophrastus, Tertullian, and Saint Jerome. She is a most unwilling audience, and in her fury against these antifeminist readings she demonstrates something of the powerful relation of literature to life. The tales that Jankyn reads are of evil women throughout history and legend, and they largely preach chastity and marital affection, virtues not likely to excite the Wife's sympathies. She is particularly enraged when her husband continues to read these texts instead of coming to bed, so much so that she finally tears pages from the book, strikes him, and knocks him into the fireplace. In the ensuing battle, the Wife's persistence is sufficient to overcome Jankyn's scholarship; the book is burned, and according to one party, at least, they live for a while in a harmony based upon her mastery and his capitulation, described in terms that echo those of the ending of the tale the Wife is about to tell.

The irony of the Wife's feminism as seen in her literary creation□her tale□is that the tale not only subscribes to the antifeminist cliché that all women, in their heart of hearts, desire to be raped, but it reinforces it. We see this first at the very outset, in her lament for the disappearance of incubi and spirits, who, according to the Wife, were capable in former ages of relieving women of reticence in sexual affairs, and perhaps teaching them a thing or two. In her day, alas, there were only inept (or, perhaps, incapable) begging friars lurking behind every bush. We see the pro-rape theme next in the construction of the tale, in which female authority forgives rape, and we see it finally, when the denouement of the tale becomes an occasion for the universalized mutual rape of mind as well as body. As a tale to illustrate her theme, in which female authority deposes male authority, it serves particularly poorly, just as her apologia in her prologue turns her argument upside down. For in the Wife's "faerie-lond" there are no men or women, just morally androgynous personifications of herself, and the dialectic that she attempts to set up between the male and the female shows itself false. The only authentic figures of womanhood and manhood are the aggrieved maiden seeking justice and the abdicating King Arthur possessing just authority, and these two

characters are quickly disposed of by the carnal author to make room for the personifications of herself in the queen, the hag, and the knight.

The queen's usurpation of authority and the transformation of justice into a game prefigure the hag's preempting of the knight's will at the end of the tale, turning moral choice into an illusion of shape-shifting and fantasy. But this inversion has already been established for the tale in the knight's aggression against the maid, in which he has allowed the hag of lust to usurp the moral choice of his victim, imposing his will on hers. Thus the fantasy of the Wife's world is that of the shell game, and the con man, where despite the physical shape-shifting of the tale and the conceptual shape-shifting of her interpretation, nothing changes because nothing has any substance to change. Feminism is another form of antifeminism, love another form of lust, and the possibility of rational understanding, a fantasy.

In the conclusion to the "Wife of Bath's Tale" we see the triumph of her theme□tyranny. The author herself is the rapist knight. In her relationship with her five husbands, she has imposed her will and her desires; in her exegesis of Scripture and authoritative texts, she has imposed her interpreta- tion. She abuses both. Authority, represented by the king, would have inflicted the appropriate punishment on the violent knight, but the Wife in her role as fairy queen commutes his sentence in order to rape him back in a kind of eye-for-an-eye ("gattooth- for-gat-tooth") justice. The knight will be raped morally when he relinquishes his integrity to the hag and gives up the power of choice in order to live happily ever after in the world of rape, which the Wife as author promotes. But, as we have seen, he has already accomplished this, without any help from the hag, in his encounter with the maiden, by abdicating to carnal impulse. He has, as it were, raped himself, just as the tale's author, the Wife of Bath, who has created him and the theme of rape, is a perpetual self-rapist.

The Wife's tale is set in the past, for which she expresses a nostalgic preference. It is a past so remote as to constitute for Chaucer's time an epoch of myth and fantasy, and it is this fantastic dimension that makes "th'olde dayes of the Kyng Arthour" so much more attractive than the present to the aging Wife. As in her personal past history there were youth, vigor, and unlimited sensuality (or so she now believes), so she posits in the days of Camelot a world of magic and lawlessness. Nowadays, she laments, a woman may go where she pleases with no fear of rape, for all the fantastic elements have been chased from the world by religion and law. In the world that the Wife constructs for her tale, all desires, no matter how contradictory, no matter how base, come true. The author's prologue has revealed an experience of life in opposition to reality and the sorrow it entails: "Allas! allas! that evere love was synne!" In her tale the opposition is resolved by doing away with reality altogether. It is only in unified reality, a reality that the Wife's dualistic experience has concealed from her, that love is never sin. She therefore seeks this unification in fiction, both in the necessarily incomplete fiction of her life and in the more complete fiction of her tale.

What law is found in fairyland is soon overturned when Arthur, like the Wife's husbands, capitulates to the queen and her ladies. Feminine justice seems more merciful, since unlike established law, which prescribed death for rape, the queen merely assigns a

riddle: "What thyng is it that wommen moost desiren"; only in failing to obtain the right answer will the knight die. The false solutions to the riddle offered to him by those he questions constitute a justification of the author's theoretical position, for they are, by and large, the same as the accusations against women that her last husband asserted: desire for wealth, flattery, lust, and license. The true answer comes by magic when in the place where he has been watching a fairy dance, he discovers a "wyf"□old and foul□who teaches the young knight, just as the Pardoner had urged the author to do, the right response. The knight thus wins his life and the old hag a young husband by the formula that what women most want is power over men. But the knight finds that he is immediately faced with still another riddle, which, like the first, is deeply rooted in dualism: how can a woman be both beautiful and faithful? Through the fiction of her tale the author has fulfilled her desires and resolved the oppositions they engendered in life. In the allegory of her tale, the narrative relates only to the biography of her own desired future life, not to a higher level of meaning in reality external to the text. Merging with her characters, she is the raped maiden, but delighting in the lawless and violent sexuality she complains has disappeared from the contemporary world; she is the queen wresting from her husband the administration of the law; and she is, of course, the hag, suffering the rejection of the youthful knight because of her age. But in fairyland and in fiction this, too, is easily overcome: the author and the knight merge into one, in a dialogue between young husband and old wife that constitutes a monologue in which the author communicates only with herself.

Source: David Williams, "Language Redeemed: 'The Wife of Bath's Tale,'" in *"The Canterbury Tales": A Literary Pilgrimage*, Twayne Publishers, 1987, pp. 53-100.

Critical Essay #5

In the following essay, Gallacher applies Maurice Merleau-Ponty's ideas on perception to "the much-discussed portrait of Alison and to the perceptual responses of John, Absolon, and Nicholas" in "The Miller's Tale."

The "Miller's Tale," if not the fabliau as a genre, presents us with a pattern of mistakes in perception, a sharp, dramatic contrast between the real and the imaginary, which confirms basic assumptions about our world at the same time that it raises important questions. Although our sense of the real begins with what is both actual and possible in perception, it is easy to confuse the two, or to underestimate one or the other. The relevant truism, of course, is that we usually think we know what's there, but we often don't. In fact, the main comic incidents in the "Miller's Tale"□kiss, laying on of hot ploughshare, falling off the roof□belong to that type of slapstick comedy based on such confusion. Our response to the confusion derives from assumptions concerning perception, or, according to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, from the fact that the perceived world is an ensemble of routes taken by the body. The characters portrayed by the brilliant practitioners of this kind of comedy□Charlie Chaplin, Peter Sellers, or Jacques Tati□cannot discover these routes. Given a metaphysical ungainliness in such clowns, the ordinary routes of the body are like mysterious passages sought by legendary navigators. Inspector Clouzot cannot walk into a room without being ambushed by lamps and chairs, or becoming locked in mortal combat with a telephone. In what follows, I shall give a much abbreviated summary of Merleau-Ponty's ideas on perception, the most important of which are immanence and transcendence, or presence and absence, which, in turn, are basically different aspects of the more inclusive antithesis of the actual and the possible. I shall then apply these ideas to the much-discussed portrait of Alison and to the perceptual responses of John, Absolon, and Nicholas.

Merleau-Ponty attempts to explain the sense of the real that begins in perception through a program of perceptual calisthenics that both trims our assumptions and tones up our expectations. Perception, he points out, is always both more and less than we think, potential and actual in surprising ways, both unlimited and limited, transcendent and immanent. We always see, hear, and touch from the point of view of a limited perspective; but within that limited point of view there are clues, reflections, implied textures of "an immense latent content of the past, the future, and the elsewhere." We are always confronted by the unchallengeable presence and the perpetual absence of things, and nothing reveals itself without thereby hiding most of itself. Perception then is paradoxically both immanent and transcendent: immanent because I cannot conceive a perceptible place in which I myself am not present. Even if I try to imagine some place in the world which has never been seen, the very fact that I imagine it makes me present at that place. By transcendence in perception is meant that the things which I see are things for me only under the condition that they always recede beyond their immediately given aspects. I never see a house in its entirety, or the house as seen from everywhere. The house is given as an infinite sum of perspectives, a series of partial views in each of which it is given, but in none of which is it given exhaustively. An

observation of Paul Claudel's brilliantly dramatizes the paradox: "a certain blue of the sea is so blue that only blood would be more red." Itself paradoxical, this poetically schematic insight captures that sense of expansiveness and singularity which describes perception, the synecdoche or metonymy within the basic act itself.

In general, then, our perceptual existence is fully accounted for by what we actually and potentially see, hear, smell, touch, and taste. This actuality and possibility are inextricably bound together in the same act of perception, with an emphasis, however, on what can be, on the fact that a thing continues to be defined by that which is beyond our immediate sense experience. The contrast between the real and the imaginary, an essential feature of the climactic incidents in the "Miller's Tale," invokes a special manifestation of this transcendence. When an illusion dissipates, when an appearance suddenly breaks up, it is always for the profit of a new appearance which takes up again for its own account the ontological function of the first. The dis-illusion is the loss of one evidence only because it is the acquisition of another evidence. A convincing substitution of the real for the imaginary reveals the "prepossession of a totality which is there before one knows how or why, whose realizations are never what we would have imagined them to be, and which nonetheless fulfills a secret expectation within us, since we believe in it tirelessly." The least particle of the perceived incorporates it from the first into this paradoxical totality and the most credible phantasm glances off at the surface of the world, because the whole world is present in one reflection and is ir- remediably absent in the richest and most systematic deliriums. The act of judgment, by distinguishing the real from the imaginary, by saying that one thing is not and that something else is, invokes the mysterious totality of what is, of being, which is all there is, because outside of this, there is nothing. The portrait of Alison provides not only an emblem of totality by the encyclopedic variety of its imagery, but introduces us also to the insistent presence and absence in perception itself. Images of things that are early, young, new, or fresh give us a sense of unchallengeable presence akin to seeing something for the first time. She is more joyous to look at than the "newe pere-jonette tree." Other images, such as the primrose, cuckoo flower, and the latten pearls on her leather purse, suggest a filling out of vegetative and mineral categories; and, indeed, the *effictio* as a device is intended to give satisfaction precisely by its completeness. Again, it is the actuality of presence and immanence that we primarily experience in Alison's resemblance to young animals in her sudden, playful bursts of vitality; and yet the skittish, elusive quality of these images suggests the unforeseen, the unpredictable Alison's enticing possibilities, which in turn reflect a seductiveness in reality itself. With this elusiveness, a kind of absence comes into her portrait that has further sensuous developments: "Hir mouth was sweete as bragot or the meeth, / Or hoord of apples leyd in hey or heeth." The apple simile, with its circular rhythms, directs perception sensuously to Alison, who, though not seen in her entirety, is nevertheless amply comprehended. The rotund depth of the store of apples intimates the unseen, unfelt, secret life of what is perceived. What is inviting to taste and sight here is potential, not actually tactile or visible and hence part of the perceptually transcendent. The most compelling union of presence and absence, however, of the actual and the possible, is the image of the doll *popelote*, which, by evoking the urge to grasp and fondle, elicits such a lively possibility that its realization seems already present. The response intended by the portrait is perhaps summed up in Absolon's reaction: "if she

hadde been a mous, / And he a cat, he wolde hire hente anon." In a word, there is a *pounceability* about Alison that sets in motion the exploration of physical and moral space. Just as the courtly heroine often has a philosophical dimension, Alison, her rural counterpart, brings us uniquely into contact with what is real. In reacting to Alison, her two suitors and husband display ludicrous, but unmistakable metaphysical gestures. Nicholas is precipitous in seizing upon the newly perceived and manifests a raunchy grabbiness. Absolon courts the real by dandyism. The apprehensive husband, John, only wants to imprison the real, which is unpredictable in its hiddenness, and to keep Alison "narwe in cage."

John's view of the world rejects what is transcendent in the real, a rejection that begins in his habits of perception and becomes especially clear in his boastfully ignorant attitude towards "Goddes pryvetee." Two uses of this phrase, which richly suggests the mysterious totality of the real, occur in a sequence that begins when Nicholas sequesters himself in his room: for John, this hiddenness refers to things that men should not know; for Nicholas, it is an effectively persuasive reason for not informing Robin and Gill of the flood. At John's anxious insistence, his "knave" goes up to the room "ful sturdily," in that manner of confidently and precisely taking hold of things that characterizes the tricksters in the story, recalling the directness of Nicholas's first approach to Alison. Receiving no response to his knock, he opens another route to his perception. His gaze enters through a hole in the door and encounters a gaze of Nicholas in the act of seeming to pry open the universe:

An hole he foond, ful lowe upon a bord,
Ther as the cat was wont in for to crepe,
And at that hole he looked in ful depe,
And at the laste he hadde of hym a sight.
This Nicholas sat evere capyng upright,
As he had kiked on the newe moone.

The manner in which the "knave" looks in has those aspects of limited perspective□its immanent particularity□that foreshadow much of the action. In contrast, the bodily posture of Nicholas reveals someone exhausted by looking, someone who has tried to see things as they are in themselves, that is, from all perspectives. Nicholas's pretended overgaping at the stars shows a perceptual hubris, a cocky omniscience that will be chastened by the hot coulter, whereas Robin's peeping through the hole is a more accurate example of limited, serial human perception. John's first reaction to his servant's report□"Men sholde nat knowe of Goddes pryvetee"□anticipates his credulity and determines his subsequent remarks about perception.

With an uneasy mixture of fear and scorn, he focuses warily on transcendence, on what can happen□" A man woot litel what hym shal bityde"□on the planes and routes within our perception that escape us:

So ferde another clerk with astromye;
He walked in the feeldes, for to prye
Upon the sterres, what ther sholde bifalle,

Til he was in a marle-pit yfalle;
He saugh nat that.

For John, to employ anachronism, clerks belong with men in top hats and monocles who slip on bananna peels, who forget the routes taken by the body. The anecdote typifies the comic confusion of immanence and transcendence in perception, of thinking we know what's there. John prides himself on his grasp of the obvious, but nothing, of course, can be so elusive. He is betrayed by the transcendence of what is in front of him. Having boasted of pious ignorance, he will be reproved for his superstition. His manner of entering Nicholas's room□prying under the door with a staff while Robin knocks it off its hasp□shows his artless, downright style of being; and his exhortation to Nicholas reveals attitudes towards the transcendent that undo him:

Awak, and thenk on Cristes passioun!
I crouche thee from elves and fro wightes.
Therwith the nyght-spel seyde he anon-rightes
On foure halves of the hous aboute,
And on the thesshfold of the dore withoute:

"Jhesu Crist and seinte Benedight,
Blesse this hous from every wikked wight,
For nyghtes verye, the white *pater-noster!*
Where wentestow, seinte Petres soster?"

Superstition characterizes John's sense of the unseen. He cannot grasp the fact that mystery begins in perception itself: that "Goddes pryvetee" is the theological resolution of a more prosaic transcendence that begins in the senses. For him, elves and "creatures" people horizons that he fears to acknowledge. He has changed the reflections and clues of an elsewhere into beings that can threaten the security of his immediate perception. Closing off his thresholds, he uses religion to avoid risks and construct defenses against reality. His secret preparations for the flood, designed to escape the notice of Robin, Gill, and others, remove him from that social contact that adds to our own perspectives and ironically distances him from the open totality suggested by the phrase, "Goddes pryvetee." A ludicrous obsession with the wrong perceptual clues, especially a "listening in depth," chronicles his final experience of gravity and solidity. Appropriately situating himself in darkness, which is the absence of figure and ground, he gives himself to prayer, and "stille he sit, / Awaitynge on the reyn, if he it heere." Sleeping soundly through the romp below him, he is awakened by Nicholas's loud, wild pleas for water, and once more gives into fantasy, thinking

"Allas, now comth Nowelis flood!"
He sit hym up withouten wordes mo,
And with his ax he smoot the corde atwo,
And doun gooth al; he foond neither to selle,
Ne breed ne ale, til he cam to the celle
Upon the floor, and ther aswowne he lay.

Having desired to keep Alison "narwe in cage," praying to be secure from the elves and wights of feared perceptual horizons, he plunges with due justice into what is not actually perceived, the perceptually transcendent, the real possibilities of "Goddes pryvetee." That a real perception dissipates an illusion could not be more emphatically dramatized; and with authentic perception comes the presence of the whole world, a definitive experience of the real, whose accomplishment, however, is still deferred. For the sobering future that awaits John begins with the neighbors who run to "gauren on this man"; his broken arm; oaths proclaiming his madness; the failure of his own explanation; and the general laughter. Although the victim of yet another fiction, he, of course, is not deceived; and, although isolated once again, he is situated within a more reliable and enlarged perceptual field, whose pungent reality is incontestable, for "stonde he moste unto his owene harm . . . ".

The prelude to Absolon's perceptual experience is the immanent, self-regarding way in which he defines the space of his world, an attitude manifested especially in two passages. First, the virtuosity of his dancing is presented as an unsituated physical dexterity. Exceeding the properly gratuitous movements of dance, Absolon seems to indulge a kind of unattached flurry that anticipates his failures to locate himself in real perceptual fields:

In twenty manere koude he trippe and daunce
After the scole of Oxenforde tho,
And with his legges casten to and fro . . .

This prodigality of movement affects mastery of the body's routes belied by later developments. The second characterizing passage occurs when, taking his gitern to the carpenter's house and dextrously poising himself by the shuttered window, he makes musical advances to a wife actually in bed with her husband. The insouciance of the exchange between John and Alison reverses Absolon's own opinion of his adroitness and proficiency:

This carpenter awook, and herde him synge,
And spak unto his wyf, and seyde anon,
"What! Alison! herestow nat Absolon,
That chaunteth thus under oure boures wal?"
And she answerde hir housbonde therwithal,
"Yis, God woot, John, I heere it every deel."

Attaching so little importance to the husband's presence shows a carelessness of figure and ground in perception that makes him especially vulnerable to the punitive effects of an unwary imagination. When, therefore, John ceases to be in evidence because of his hidden preparations for the flood, such total perceptual absence guarantees misadventure. Immediately for Absolon, as previously for John, fantasy begins to outrun perception, the imaginary to usurp the real, which will, however, soon return with an earthy tenacity. His sense of taste becomes the focus of the tension between perceptual immanence and transcendence: "My mouth hath icched al this longe day; / That is a signe of kissyng atte leeste" (3682-83). The initial clue of a future elsewhere□an itching

mouth□builds lavishly to the dream of a feast, and, as he rises and prepares himself to visit Alison, becomes a sensual concern with oral messages:

But first he cheweth greyn and lycorys,
To smellen sweete, er he hadde kembd his heer.
Under his tonge a trewe-love he beer,
For therby wende he to ben gracious.

There may be something even in his manner of walking□"He *rometh* to the carpenteres hous" (my italics)□that suggests inattention to the body's proper routes. Worsted in his first exchange with Alison, he is promised a kiss. Most deliciously, a false transcendent anticipation bids him open his taste buds to the fullest. His imagination is already actually enjoying the kiss before the message of the real perception enters his consciousness:

This Absolon gan wype his mouth ful drie.
Derk was the nyght as pich, or as the cole,
And at the wyndow out she putte hir hole,
And Absolon, hym fil no bet ne wers,
But with his mouth he kiste hir naked ers
Ful savourly, er he were war of this.

Having wiped his mouth with expectant certainty, he prolongs this assurance into the manner of the act itself□"Ful savourly"□a phrase which itself suggests lingering exploration. The reversal of this virtually absolute assumption that we know what's there becomes only slowly instructive for Absolon. His answer to the real sense experience is once more fantasy, this time, to the delight of Nicholas, a beard, "a thyng al rough and long yherd." Biting his heretofore pampered lip, Absolon contemplates revenge, while taking temporary comfort in the different textures of sand, straw, cloth and chips, which parody the opulent, sensual transcendence that he sought in the kiss. The chaste plainness of these purifying textures□granular, fibrous, smooth, incisive□corrects his wayward labial expectations and recommends a more plausible world. Narcissism has humiliatingly distorted his capacity for accurate perceptual transcendence. Therefore, just as John, pushed across the threshold guarded by the elves and wights of his superstition, will fall into the real world, so with Absolon. Unsentimental, functional anatomy presses through his fantasies to reach his actual senses. An unforeseen possible has become actual. Having selectively defined the world by dandyism, he has been exquisitely apprised of a more inclusive view.

Finally, the nemesis of the arrogantly successful lover provides for the tale's perceptual experiences a generalization that is spatial and concrete, but philosophical as well. Nicholas, having successfully manipulated John by the phrase, "Goddes pryvetee," believes himself to be in control of the actual and possible structure of space, but fails, like John and Absolon, to realize the range of perceptual transcendence. Laying the plot for John and watching Alison entice Absolon to the disillusioning kiss, he has contained their perspectives and situated their worlds within his own. In seeking to amend the jape, Nicholas wants to ascend to a new level of trickery, a parody of further

transcendence. The motif of secrecy is cumulatively present, as Nicholas once more attempts to manipulate the hiddenness of things: "up the wyndowe dide he hastily, / And out his ers he putteth *pryvely* . . . " (my italics). This final repetition of a secrecy word invokes the whole pattern□the Miller's jibe about not being inquisitive, Nicholas's plot, John's anti-intellectualism, the clandestine preparation of the tubs□but especially the ontological ground of the action, that totality on whose threshold their perceptions take place□"Goddes pryvetee." Furthermore, "pryvely" may suggest that Nicholas's attempt at a new level of trickery parodies Theseus's ascent to a new understanding of mystery in the *"Knight's Tale."* A startlingly different possibility, however, is actualized. When Absolon requests the object of his vengeance to speak, because he doesn't know where she is, we are reminded, for the last time, of the night's darkness which creates a space of almost pure possibility and transcendence, without figure and ground. Mortifyingly situated by the fart that gives a final response to his own squeamishness, Absolon "was redy with his iren hoot, / And Nicholas amydde the ers he smoot." Having fouled the air, burned in his tout, Nicholas cries out for water; John awakens to his fantasy of a flood and falls to the ground. A parodic succession of the elements that bind Theseus's fair chain of love□air, fire, water, earth□attends upon this nearly apocalyptic triumph of the real over the imaginary, and alludes to the principles of material totality in the medieval world. Nicholas, who had pretended to view things from a kind of ubiquity, is reintroduced to the situated world of comic limitation. Having presumptuously exploited the mysterious for the purpose of sexual gratification, he is surprised by that literal, immediate world which he has considered his domain. His mad plea for water testifies to the fecundity of those astonishing possiblities that he has considered so predictable.

Each of Alison's three suitors, on one dramatic occasion, fails to gear himself successfully onto the real world. John and Absolon most obviously and habitually have situated themselves in relation to static worlds, one defined by narcissism, the other defined by anti-intellectual credulity; whereas Nicholas has situated himself beyond these structures. Because of the inflexible nature of these other worlds, Nicholas, as trickster, has been able to exploit the possibilities of real space. His own world, though combining the actual with the possible, is, in turn, limited by the trickster's own narrowly focused conception of this scheme. All these worlds lack a due regard for perceptual transcendence. The fact that Absolon's revenge, which initiates the tale's climax, takes the specific form of the trickster tricked makes a final essential point. If the trickster can be tricked, he can also further trick those who are trying to trick him, a complication which in fact develops in the "Reeve's Tale." This unlimited vulnerability suggests a definition of human experience, at least in the fabliau, as an open process of interactions between actual and possible, a process which points to what in the Middle Ages was the true field of fields. The ubiquity that Nicholas has assumed does not pertain to the real nature of human space, which is, instead, a pact between the virtual body and the actual body, a physical experience of potency and act, terms which for the Middle Ages encompass what is real, or being itself. This pact is a function of the immanence and transcendence of perception, and emphasizes what can happen, that range of very concrete possibilities that is partly the subject matter of human choice, divinely foreknown but no obstacle to human freedom, in a phrase, "Goddes pryvetee." The structure of perception, as described by Maurice Merleau-Ponty and dramatized, as

I hope to have shown, in the "Miller's Tale," provides for this metaphysical principle a concrete manifestation. It is, I believe, partly for this reason that in the "Miller's Tale," as Charles Muscatine observed, the "genre is virtually make philosophical" and so completely fulfills its "fabliau entelechy."

Source: Patrick J. Gallacher, "Perception and Reality in the 'Miller's Tale,'" in *Chaucer Review*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 1983, pp. 38-48.

Critical Essay #6

In the following essay, Mann explains how understanding "The Franklin's Tale" and its theme of patience can lead to a greater understanding of the Canterbury Tales *as a whole.*

The "Franklin's Tale" is not only one of the most popular of Chaucer's tales, it is also one whose emotional and moral concerns lie at the centre of Chaucer's thinking and imaginative activity. It is usually thought of as a tale about 'trouthe'□ or perhaps about 'gentillesse'□but it is equally concerned with the ideal of patience and the problems of time and change, which are subjects of fundamental importance not in this tale alone but in the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole. What follows is intended to be not only a close discussion of the "Franklin's Tale," but also an attempt to indicate how a proper reading of it can help with a proper reading of the rest of the *Tales*□and indeed, of Chaucer's work in general.

The "Franklin's Tale" begins by introducing a knight who has, in best storybook fashion, proved his excellence through 'many a labour, many a greet emprise' and thus finally won his lady who, likewise in best storybook fashion, is 'oon the faireste under sonne'. 'And they lived happily ever after' is what we might expect to follow. And so far from trying to dispel the reader's sense of the familiar in this situation, Chaucer takes pains to increase it. He refers to the actors only in general terms ('a knyght', 'a lady'), and attributes to them the qualities and experiences normally associated with tales of romantic courtship (beauty, noble family, 'worthynesse', 'his wo, his peyne and his distresse'). Only after eighty lines are the knight and the lady given the names of Arveragus and Dorigen. This generality cannot be accidental, for Chaucer's apparently casual comments are designed precisely to emphasize that this individual situation takes its place in a plural context:

But atte laste she, for his worthynesse, And namely for his meke obeisaunce, Hath such a pitee caught of his penaunce That prively she fil of his acord To take him for hir husband and hir lorde, Of swich lordshipe *as men han over hir wives*.

What is more, they stress this plural context even in describing the feature of the situation which seems to make it an unusual one: the knight's promise to his lady that he

Ne sholde upon him take no maistrye
Again hir wil, ne kithe hire jalousye,
But hire obeye, and folwe hir wil in al,
As any lovere to his lady shal.

And after the lady's delighted promise of her own faithfulness and humility, we have a warm outburst of praise which again consistently sets this mutual understanding in the context of a whole multiplicity of such relationships.

For o thing, sires, saufly dar I seye,
That freendes everich oother moot obeye,
If they wol longe holden compaignye.
Love wol nat been constreined by maistrye.
Whan maistrye comth, the God of Love anon
Beteth his winges, and farewel, he is gon!
Love is a thing as any spirit free.
Wommen, of kinde, desiren libertee,
And nat to been constreined as a thral;
And so doon men, if I sooth seyen shal.
'Love . . . maistrye . . . freendes . . . wommen
. . . men'□the terms are abstract, plural, general.

They relate general human experience to this situation, and this situation to general human experience, with no sense of conflict or discontinuity between the two.

I stress the importance of the general here for two reasons. The first is that this interest in the *common* features of human experience is characteristic of Chaucer. The parenthetical comments which transform the singular of the story into the plural of everyday experience are not confined to this passage or this tale alone; on the contrary, they are so ubiquitous in Chaucer that we may take them for granted and fail to question their significance. The second reason is that the unusualness of the relationship between Arveragus and Dorigen has often been taken as a sign that it is aberrant□that it represents an attempt to break away from the normal pattern of marital relationships which inevitably invites problems to follow. Against this view we should note that however unusual the *degree* of generosity and humility in this relationship, Chaucer very firmly roots it in the normal desires and instincts of men and women. Nor is there any reason given for supposing that these desires and instincts are merely human weaknesses. Chaucer's own comments, some of which have been quoted, constitute an unhesitating endorsement of the wisdom of this situation and of the participants in it. The relationship between the knight and his lady is called 'an humble wys accord', and the knight himself 'this wise, worthy knight'. It would not affect this point were anyone to argue that the comments are the Franklin's, not Chaucer's. For in either case any reader who wishes to dissociate him- or herself from the warm approval in these lines will face the same difficulty□ and that is the difficulty of finding a location in the tale for true wisdom and worthiness, if both characters and narrator offer only false images of these qualities. The only way out of this difficulty would be to claim that the reader already knows what true wisdom and worthiness are, and brings this knowledge to bear on the tale, in criticism of its values. But this idea assumes that it is possible for his or her knowledge to remain detached from the tale in a way that the passage we are considering simply refuses to allow. For if the reader is a woman, to refuse to acknowledge the truth of what is said about her sex is, *ipso facto*, to accept the legitimacy of her own 'thraldom':

Wommen, of kinde, desiren libertee,
And nat to been constreined as a thral.
If, on the other hand, the reader is a man, and feels inclined to respond to these lines

with a knowing smile at the ungovernable nature of women, then the following line□
And so doon men, if I sooth seyen shal

□immediately challenges him in turn to measure the reasonableness of the female desire for liberty by matching it against his own. The result is that both men and women readers are made aware of the need for the liberty of the opposite sex through the recognition that it is a need of their own. The use of the plural, the appeal to the general, is indeed an invitation to readers to bring their own experience and feelings to bear, but it invites them to an identification with the narrative, not to a critical dissociation from it. Chaucer's use of the plural is thus intimately connected with his use of the second person, an equally pervasive and significant feature of his style. His appeals to the reader as judge have often been discussed□'Who hath the worse, Arcite or Palamon?' ("Knight's Tale"); 'Which was the moost fre, as thinketh yow?' ("Franklin's Tale"). But to emphasize these formal appeals alone is to imply, again, that the reader, in the role of judge, remains detached from and superior to the narrative. If, on the other hand, we look at the whole series of addresses to the audience in Chaucer, we shall see that the situation is more complicated. Certainly it is true that the narrative is subordinate to the reader, in the sense that it acknowledges that it relies on a particular experience of the reader for its life and depth; the appeal for judgement on the situations of Arcite and Palamon, for example, is specifically addressed to 'Yow loveres'. The opening of *Troilus and Criseyde* similarly invites 'ye loveres' to read the narrative in the light of their own experience. This call for 'supplementation' of the narrative from one's own experience is often implicitly, as well as explicitly, made. Such an appeal can, for example, be felt in the rhetorical question that concludes the praise of the marriage in the "Franklin's Tale":

Who koude telle, but he had wedded be, The joye, the ese, and the prosperitee That is betwixe an housbonde and his wif? The rhetorical question here makes a space for the reader's own experience to give full meaning to the description, just as it makes space for a very different kind of experience to give a very different kind of meaning to the apparently similar question in the "Merchant's Tale." But if the story needs the reader, it can also make claims on the reader. Precisely because the narrative is based on 'common knowledge', on experiences and feelings shared by the narrator, the readers, and the characters in the story, it is possible for its third-person generalizations to issue into second-person imperatives. Thus, when Troilus falls in love, the generalizations about Love's all-conquering power ('This was, and is, and yet men shal it see') issue naturally into a command:

Refuseth nat to Love for to ben bonde,
Syn, as himselven list, he may yow binde.

We can thus see that in the narrator's comments on the marriage of Arveragus and Dorigen, the apparently casual insertion of 'sires' in the first line is a deliberate preparation for the intensification of the narrative's claims on the reader□claims which make themselves known not only as commands but also as threats.

Looke who that is moost pacient in love,
He is at his avantage al above.

Pacience is an heigh vertu, certeyn,
For it venquisseth, as thise clerkes seyn,
Thinges that rigour sholde never atteyne.
For every word men may nat chide or pleyne.
Lerneth to suffre, or elles, so moot I goon,
Ye shul it lerne, wherso ye wole or noon;
For in this world, certein, ther no wight is
That he ne dooth or seith somtime amis.

The command 'Lerneth to suffre' does not stand alone; if we disobey it, we face a threat, an 'or elles'. If we search for the authority on which we can be thus threatened, we find it, I think, in the appeal to *common* human experience that I have been describing, in the generalizations from which the imperative issues and into which it returns. And because the experience is common, the speaker himself is not exempt from it; it is perhaps possible to detect in the parenthetical 'so moot I goon' a rueful admission that he has learned the truth of his statement the hard way. At any rate, the phrase stands as an indication that the speaker offers his own individual experience as a guarantee of the truth of the generalizations.

It is because Chaucer wishes to appeal to the general that he so often uses proverbs as the crystallizations of episodes or whole narratives. The proverb which underlies the description of the marriage in the "Franklin's Tale" is perhaps the most important one of all to him; the attempt to understand the paradoxical truth 'Patience conquers' is at the heart of the *Canterbury Tales* and much of Chaucer's other work besides. It animates the stories of Constance and Griselda; it is celebrated in Chaucer's own tale of Melibee. It undergoes, as we shall see, a comic□realistic metamorphosis in the "Wife of Bath's Prologue," and it also stimulates Chaucer's exploration of the qualities that represent a rejection of patience□'ire', 'grucching', 'wilfulnesse'. It is tinged with a melancholy irony in *Troilus and Criseyde*, where Criseyde quotes another version of the proverb□'the suffrant overcomith'□ in the course of persuading Troilus of the wisdom of letting her go to the Greeks. This latter instance shows us that an understanding of the truth to be found in such proverbs does not give us clues to the instrumental manipulation of life□quite the reverse, in fact. The parallel truism that Criseyde also quotes□'Whoso wol han lief, he lief moot lete'□does not become the less true because in this case Troilus fails to keep possession of his happiness even though he follows her advice. It is precisely the knowledge that proverbs carry with them the memory of human miseries as well as human triumphs and joys that gives depth and emotional power to the apparently worn phrases.

But of course it is also the story, the new setting which will give fresh meaning, that gives new depth and emotional power to the old words, and we should therefore look to the rest of the "Franklin's Tale" to see how much it can help us to understand the nature of patience and 'suffrance'. The first thing that the story shows us is the link between patience and change. In the first place, it is because human beings are inevitably and constantly subject to change, not just from day to day but from moment to moment, that the quality of patience is needed. In his list of the influences that disturb human stability, Chaucer makes clear that they come both from within and from without the person.

Ire, siknesse, or constellacioun,
Win, wo, or chaunginge of complexioun
Causeth ful oft to doon amis or speken.
On every wrong a man may nat be wreken.
After the time moste be temperaunce
To every wight that kan on governaunce.

All these things disturb the stability of a relationship by altering the mood or feelings or behaviour of an individual. Thus, the only way that the stability and harmony of a relationship can be preserved is through constant adaptation, a responsiveness by one partner to changes in the other. The natural consequence of this is that patience is not merely a response to change; it *embodies* change in itself. And this is at first rather surprising to us, since we tend to think of patience as an essentially static quality, a matter of gritting one's teeth and holding on, a matter of eliminating responses rather than cultivating them. But it is the responsive changeability of patience which is emphasized in Chaucer's final lines of praise for the marriage of Arveragus and Dorigen.

Heere may men seen a humble, wys accord:
Thus hath she take hire servant and hir lord□
Servant in love, and lord in mariage.
Thanne was he bothe in lordshipe and servage.
Servage? nay, but in lordshipe above,
Sith he hath bothe his lady and his love;
His lady, certes, and his wif also,
The which that lawe of love acordeth to.

It is often said that this passage illustrates Chaucer's belief in an ideal of equality in marriage. But the patterning of the language does not give us a picture of equality; it gives us a picture of alternation. The constant shifts in the vocabulary suggest constant shifts in the role played by each partner: 'servant . . . lord . . . servant . . . lord . . . lordshipe . . . servage . . . servage . . . lordshipe . . . lady . . . love . . . lady . . . wif'. The marriage is not founded on equality, but on alternation in the exercise of power and the surrender of power. The image it suggests is not that of a couple standing immutably on the same level and side-by-side, or marching in step, but rather of something like the man and woman in a weather-house, one going in as the other comes out. Except of course that this image gives a falsely mechanical idea of what is, as Chaucer describes it, a matter of a living organic responsiveness, and that it is also incapable of expressing an important aspect of the relationship□ that the ceaseless workings of change lead to an unchanging harmony, and to the creation of a larger situation in which each partner simultaneously enjoys 'lordshipe' and 'servage', as the passage itself stresses. The result of these constant shifts could be called equality (though I should prefer to call it harmony), but the term equality is too suggestive of stasis to be an accurate description of the workings of the ideal involved here. The ideal of patience better befits the way human beings are, because the simplest and most fundamental truth about people, for Chaucer, is that they change.

'Newefangelnesse', the love of novelty, is part of their very nature ('propre kinde'; "Squire's Tale"). Human beings are not only subject to change in themselves; they also live in a changing world.

The opening of the "Franklin's Tale" might seem at first to belie this, since it reads more like an ending than a beginning, so that the story seems, with the long pause for the eulogy of the marriage, to have reached a full stop before it has begun. What prevents a sense of total stagnation is that the unusualness of the situation□of Arveragus' surrender of absolute control□creates a powerful expectation that something is going to happen. This is not just a stratagem for holding our interest; on the contrary, Chaucer uses narrative expectation as a way of indicating the persistence of change even when events have apparently reached a standstill, of making us feel the potentiality for change within the most apparently calm and closed of situations. Thus, as Chaucer allows himself his leisured commentary on the 'humble, wys accord', we find ourselves asking not 'Is this a good thing?', but 'How will this turn out?' We await the completion which the development of events will bring to our understanding and evaluation, and we are thus taught to expect development, the breaking of stasis, as natural.

The stasis is first broken in a very simple way: Arveragus departs for England, and Dorigen's contentment changes into a passionate grief. This grief is described in a long passage which takes us from her first agonies, through her friends' attempts at comfort, to her final subsidence into a kind of resignation which creates a new, if provisional, stasis.

Two features of this passage are important: the first is that Dorigen's experience is, once again, placed in a general context.

For his absence wepeth she and siketh *As doon thise noble wives whan hem liketh*. Secondly, her experience is not only generalized, it is also abbreviated:

She moorneth, waketh, waileth, fasteth, pleyneth.

Dorigen experiences her grief intensely and at length, but it is described summarily and□*ipso facto*□with a sort of detachment. This does not mean, however, that we need to qualify what was said earlier about the identification established between character, writer and reader; the detachment here is not due to lack of sympathy or to criticism, but to a difference of position in time. Dorigen moves slowly through a 'process' which is for her personally felt and unique; the image of the slow process of engraving on a stone emphasizes its gradualness, its almost imperceptible development. The teller of the story (and the reader of it), on the other hand, can from the outset see Dorigen's experience in a general context of human suffering, and from a knowledge of the general human experience which is embodied in the formulae of traditional wisdom□'Time heals', 'It will pass'□can appreciate not only what is pitiable about Dorigen's misery but also the inevitability of its alleviation, and thus, what is slightly comic about it. The amusement denotes no lack of sympathy, no sense that Dorigen's grief is melodramatic or insincere; it is the kind of amusement which might well be felt

by Dorigen herself, looking back on her former agonies six months after her husband's safe return.

As time goes on, and Dorigen succumbs to the natural 'proces' of adjustment, she herself comes nearer to this view, so that the passage ends with a rapprochement between her position and that of the storyteller and the reader, and the calmer wisdom of 'wel she saugh that it was for the beste' is shared by all three.

The celebrated Chaucerian 'ambiguity of tone', of which this passage might well be taken as an example, is often regarded as an equivocation between praise and blame, a confusion in our impulse to approve or disapprove. Complex the tone may be, but it does not lead to confusion if we read it aright. The complexity is often due, as it is in this case, to Chaucer's habit of fusing with the narrative account of an event or situation the differing emotional responses it would provoke□and with complete propriety□at different points in time. Different contexts of place and time allow and even demand quite different emotional and intellectual responses. In common experience we take this for granted; we find it entirely proper and natural that a widow should be consumed with grief at her husband's death and equally proper and natural that several years later she should have found equanimity. Time thus affects not only decorum, but also morality; were the widow to show at the time of her husband's death the reactions of a widow several years later, we should find her behaviour unfeeling and wrong. Chaucer's complexity arises from the fact that he encourages us to bring to bear our knowledge of both points in the process at the same time. He is helped in this by the fact that a story always abbreviates experience; the protracted time-scale of experience is condensed in the time-scale of the narrative, so that we can more easily and more swiftly achieve those shifts of perspective which are in life so laboriously accomplished. This is, of course, even more true in short narrative, because in such a narrative the disparity between the time-span of the occurrences and the time-span of the relation of them is most striking. Chaucer's interest in short narrative, the beginnings of which can be seen in the *Legend of Good Women*, and which finally achieved success in the *Canterbury Tales*, seems to me, therefore, to be a natural consequence of what he sees as interesting in human experience. The short narrative is a powerful way of provoking reflection on the process of change and of vitalizing our sense of the moral and emotional complications created by change, by our existence in the 'proces' of time. And a multiplicity of short narratives can suggest the multiple individual forms in which a common experience manifests itself, and the constitution of common experience out of a multiplicity of variant instances.

The processes of time and change are not all, however, a matter of the development of inner feeling; change, as we have already observed, can equally originate in the outer world□in its most dramatic form, in the kind of sudden chance or accident for which Chaucer uses the Middle English word 'aventure'. This is a word that can be used with deceptive casualness to refer to the most mundane and minimal sort of occurrence, but also, more emphatically, to refer to the strange and marvellous. The other words which Chaucer uses to mark the operations of chance are 'hap', 'cas' and 'grace', the last of these being usually reserved for *good* luck unless accompanied by an adjective like 'evil' or 'sory'. Chaucer's concern with the problems of chance, with human helplessness

before it, and with the difficulties it opposes to any belief in the workings of a co-ordinating providence, is something that can be observed throughout his literary work. The operations of 'aventure' are often examined, (as they are in the "Franklin's Tale") in the sphere of love, and for good reason. The disruptive, involuntary, unforeseeable and unavoidable force of love is perhaps the most powerful reminder of the power of chance over human lives. What is more, it increases human vulnerability to other chances, as Dorigen, in her persistent fears for her husband's possible shipwreck on the 'grisly rokkes blakke', is only too well aware. What she at first fails to perceive is her possible vulnerability to an 'aventure' which is closer at hand: the 'aventure' of Aurelius' love for her.

This lusty squier, servant to Venus, Which that ycleped was Aurelius, Hadde loved hire best of any creature Two yeer and moore, as was his aventure. Chaucer's description of the wearing away of Dorigen's grief means that we can dimly see several possible patterns into which the coalescence of inner 'proces' and outer 'aventure' might fall. Were Arveragus' ship in fact, to be wrecked, we could visualize not only Dorigen's passionate grief but also its susceptibility to slow assuagement, so that when healing processes of time have done their work, Aurelius *might* hope at last to win his lady (as Palamon does). Or Arveragus might simply be forced to stay away so long that by the same process of imperceptible adaptation, Dorigen finds Aurelius a more vivid and powerful presence to her thoughts and feelings than her husband, and changes her initial rejection into acceptance in which case the story would come closer to the pattern of *Troilus and Criseyde*. The openness of Chaucer's stories to other possible developments makes us aware that they are not fixed into inevitable patterns; like life itself, they are full of unrealized possibilities. In this case, the menace symbolized in the black rocks is not realized, and the other possibilities thus evaporate.

'Aventure' does not take the form of shipwreck and Arveragus returns. But that there is no other kind of disaster is due also to the power of patience, of the ability to 'suffer' the shocks of 'aventure'.

In order to understand this conception of 'suffering' more fully, I should like to make some comparisons with another example of the genre to which the "Franklin's Tale" belongs, the Breton lay, a comparison which will have the incidental advantage of suggesting why Chaucer assigns the tale to this genre, even though his source was probably a tale of Boccaccio. The "Franklin's Prologue" suggests that the Breton lays are centrally concerned with 'aventures':

Thise olde gentil Britouns in hir dayes
Of diverse aventures maden layes . . .

The notion that this is the proper subject of the lays can be traced back to one of their earliest composers, the late twelfth-century writer Marie de France, who says that each lay was written to commemorate some 'aventure'. There is no direct evidence that Chaucer knew Marie's work, but a brief comparison with some aspects of the lay of *Guigemar* will help to illustrate the literary tradition which lies behind Chaucer's thinking on 'aventure', and also to understand the imaginative core of the "Franklin's Tale," the

underlying pattern of experience which it shares with a lay like *Guigemar*. Like the "Franklin's Tale," *Guigemar* deals with 'aventure' in relation to love; it is interested both in the way that love is challenged by 'aventure', by the shocks of chance, and equally in the way that love itself *is* an 'aventure', a force which is sudden and overwhelming in its demands, and to which the only fitting response is surrender or commitment of the self. What we also find in Marie's lays is the idea that such a surrender acts as a release of power. It is this pattern□surrender to 'aventure' followed by release of power□which can be linked with the 'Patience conquers' of the "Franklin's Tale."

The hero of the lay, Guigemar, is a young man endowed with every good quality, but strangely resistant to love. One day while out hunting he shoots a white deer; the arrow rebounds and wounds him in the thigh, and the dying deer speaks to him, telling him that he will only be cured of this wound by a woman who will suffer for love of him greater pain and grief than any woman ever suffered, and that he will suffer equally for love of her. Guigemar's actions indicate an immediate and unquestioning acceptance of the doom laid on him by the deer. He invents an excuse for dismissing his squire, and rides off alone through the wood, not following any predetermined direction, but led by the path. That is, he follows not the dictates of his own wishes, but the dictates of chance. Eventually he comes to the sea, and finds a very rich and beautiful ship, entirely empty of people. Having boarded the ship, Guigemar finds in the middle of it a bed, sumptuously and luxuriously arrayed. The bed is an emblem of an invitation to rest, to relax, to surrender control□or rather to surrender it still further, since he in fact lost control at the moment when he shot the white deer.

He climbs into the bed and falls asleep; the boat moves off of its own accord, taking him to the lady who is to be his love, and who is kept imprisoned by her jealous husband in a castle surrounded by a high walled garden, open only to the sea. The castle and the sea, and their relation to each other, are images that the tale endows with symbolic meaning. The sea (as often in medieval literature) is an image of flux or chance, of something vast and unpredictable which can carry one with the force of a tide or a current to strange harbours. The image of the imprisoning castle which is nonetheless open to the sea suggests the openness of even the most restrictive marriage relationship to the threat of 'aventure'. The jealous husband cannot shut out the power of chance; his marriage□and equally the generous marriage of the "Franklin's Tale"□must remain vulnerable to the assaults of chance.

Guigemar, in contrast, surrenders to the dictates of chance. When he wakes from his sleep on the boat, he finds himself in mid-ocean. Marie's comment on this situation brings a new extension to our notion of 'suffering'; she says

Suffrir li estut l'aventure.
Both the infinitive 'suffrir' and the noun 'aventure' seem to call for a double translation here.

'Aventure' simply means, in the first place, 'What was happening'; but the word also emphasizes the strangeness and arbitrariness of the event, its lack of background in a

chain of causes. 'Suffrir' seems to ask to be translated not only as 'suffer, endure', but also as 'allow', a usage now familiar to us only in archaic biblical quotations such as 'Suffer the little children to come unto me'. So that the line cannot be confined to a single interpretation: 'He had to endure / allow / what was happening / chance'. Guigemar prays to God for protection, and goes back to sleep, another acknowledgement that control is not in his hands. So it is in the surrender or abandon of sleep that he arrives at the lady's castle, is found by her, and becomes the object of her love.

Guigemar's 'suffering' can help with the understanding of the 'suffering' urged in the "Franklin's Tale:"

Lerneth to suffre, or elles, so moot I goon,
Ye shul it lerne, wherso ye wole or noon

This sort of 'suffering' is not simply a matter of enduring pain or vexation; it is a matter of 'allowing', of standing back to make room for, the operations of 'aventure', and thus of contributing to the creation of something new by allowing the natural process of change to work. It is the generous in spirit who do this, in both Marie's work and Chaucer's, and it is the mean-spirited, such as the lady's jealous husband, who vainly try to close off possibilities for change, to wall up what they have and to preserve it in a state of fixity.

It is a later moment in the lay, however, that provides the most powerful image of a surrender of the self which miraculously releases power. After Guigemar and the lady have enjoyed each other's love for some time, his presence is discovered by the lady's husband, and he is put back on to the magic ship (which has miraculously reappeared) and sent back to his own country. After his departure, the lady suffers intensely, and finally she cries out with passion that if only she can get out of the tower in which she is imprisoned, she will drown herself at the spot where Guigemar was put out to sea. As if in a trance, she rises, and goes to the door, where, amazingly, she finds neither key nor bolt, so that she can exit freely. The phrase that Marie uses is another that seems to call for a double translation:

Fors s'en eissi par aventure.

'Par aventure' is a casual, everyday phrase, meaning simply 'by chance, as it happened'; thus on one level, all this line means is 'By chance she got out'. But the miraculous nature of the event, and the way that the phrase recalls the other miraculous 'aventure' of the ship, suggest something like 'By the power of "aventure", she got out'. The intensity of the lady's surrender to her grief, which is imaged in her wish to drown herself, to 'immerse' herself in her love and sorrow, magically transforms external reality. 'Aventure', which had earlier been a force that impinged on people and acted on them, here becomes something which is itself acted on by emotion, which miraculously responds to its pressure. When the lady goes down to the harbour she finds that the magic ship is once again there, so that instead of drowning herself, she boards it, and is carried away to an eventual reunion with Guigemar. Her readiness to 'suffer', the depth

of her surrender, magically transforms her external situation and releases the power for a new departure. A surrender paradoxically creates power.

The surrender that leads to the release of power is also at the heart of the narrative in the "Franklin's Tale." It can be seen, first of all, in Arveragus' surrender of 'maistrye', which wins in return Dorigen's promise of truth and humility. Neither of them knows what their promises are committing them to, and it is precisely such ignorance that makes the commitments generous ones. But the underlying principle can operate in far less noble and generous situations, as Chaucer shows us by repeating such a pattern of reciprocal surrender in varying forms, through the rest of the *Canterbury Tales*. The most comic and 'realistic' version is to be found at the end of the "Wife of Bath's Prologue," in the quarrel provoked by the Wife's fifth husband, who insists on reading to her his 'book of wikked wives'. The Wife, in fury, tears three leaves from his book, and he knocks her down. With instinctive shrewdness, the Wife exploits the moral advantage that this gives her, and adopts a tone of suffering meekness.

'O! hastow slain me, false theef?' I seyde,
'And for my land thus hastow mordred me?
Er I be deed, yet wol I kisse thee'.

Such a display of submissiveness elicits a matching submissiveness from the aghast Jankin, and he asks for forgiveness. The quarrel ends with the establishment of a relationship that follows, in its own more robust way, the pattern of that between Arveragus and Dorigen: the husband's surrender of 'governance' is met by unfailing truth and kindness on the part of his wife. The description of this reconciliation stays within the sphere of comic realism, however, not least because every gesture of surrender carries with it an accompanying gesture□albeit softened and muted□of selfassertiveness: the 'false theef' of the Wife's first speech; Jankin's excusing of himself for striking the blow by insisting that she provoked him; the Wife's final tap on his cheek to settle the score and make their kind of equality. The generosity here is a matter of letting these last little pieces of selfassertiveness pass, of 'allowing' them to be submerged in the larger movements of self-abasement which are being enacted. Such a comic-realistic version of the notion that surrendering power gives one back power enables us to see that although its operations may be 'magical' in the sense that they are not easy to rationalize, the roots of this principle lie in the everyday world of instinctive interaction between human beings. The fairyland world where wishes come true is not an alternative to this everyday experience, but a powerful image of its more mysterious aspects.

Such an image is offered us, of course, by the end of the Wife's tale, in the account of the working out of the relationship between the knight and the ugly old lady he has been forced to marry. After lecturing the knight on the value of age, ugliness and poverty, the old lady offers him a surprising choice: whether he will have her 'foul and old', but a 'trewe, humble wif', or whether he will have her 'yong and fair', and take the chance ('take the aventure') that others will compete to win her favours away from him. The knight's response is to make the choice over to her, to put himself in her 'wise governaunce', and the miraculous result of this is that the ugly old lady is transformed

into a beautiful young one, who promises to be faithful in addition. As in the lay of *Guigemar*, a mental surrender has magical effects on physical reality. But the magical transformation in physical reality is the manifestation of an equally magical inward transformation which accompanies and causes it: the knight who began the tale with a particularly brutal assertion of masculine 'maistrye', the rape of a young girl, is transformed into a husband who humbly relinquishes control to his wife. What is more, he must accept that possession can never be complete in the sphere of human relations; to accept happiness is to accept the possibility of its loss, and to take a beautiful wife is to incur the risk of unhappiness at losing her ('Whoso wol han lief, he lief moot lete', as Criseyde puts it).

In the "Franklin's Tale," the magic has rather a different role to play. The magic does not bring about the dénouement of the tale: on the contrary, it creates the problem. The clerk from Orléans uses it to remove all the rocks from the coast of Brittany so that Aurelius may fulfil the apparently impossible condition for winning Dorigen's love. As Dorigen herself says of their removal: 'It is agains the proces of nature'. The magic is used to create an 'aventure'□a sudden, disruptive happening that interrupts the gradual rhythms of natural change. It is as an 'aventure' that the situation created by the removal of the rocks presents itself to Arveragus; he says to Dorigen, 'To no wight telle thou of this aventure.' But he has also told her, 'It may be wel, paraventure, yet today.' There is the same kind of 'hidden pun' in the qualifying 'paraventure' here as there is in Marie de France's use of the phrase. On the face of it, it simply means 'perhaps'. But it also suggests a deeper appeal to the power of chance□the power of 'aventure' which has created the problem and which has, therefore, also the power to resolve it *if* it is allowed to operate. Arveragus allows it; he stands back, as it were, to make room for it, subduing his own claims and wishes.

The test of his relinquishment of 'maistrye' is that he must submit himself to his wife's independentlymade promise so far that he is forced to order her to keep it; the test of Dorigen's promise to be a 'humble trewe wyf' is that she must obey her husband's command that she fulfil her independent promise to be unfaithful. The structure of their relationship at this point, therefore, is a poignant illustration of the simultaneity of 'lordshipe' and 'servage' which had earlier been described; each of the marriage-partners is following the will of the other and yet also acting out an assertion of self. And just as this moment in the tale provides an illustration of the fusion of 'lordshipe' and 'servage', so it provides an illustration of what is meant by the command 'Lerneth to suffre'. Arveragus 'suffers' in the double sense of enduring pain and 'allowing'; in bidding his wife to keep her promise, he provides a compelling example of patience in Chaucer's sense of the word, of adaptation to 'aventure', of allowing events to take their course. And he shows us very clearly that such an adaptation is not, as we might idly suppose, a matter of lethargy or inertia, of simply letting things drift. The easy course here would be to forbid Dorigen to go; Chaucer makes clear the agonizing effort that is required to achieve this adaptation.

'Trouthe is the hyeste thing that man may kepe.' But with that word he brast anon to wepe. In this tale, as in *Guigemar*, a surrender to 'aventure' is met by a response of 'aventure'. In this case, it takes the form of the meeting between Dorigen and Aurelius,

as she sets out to keep her promise. Chaucer emphasizes the chance nature of this meeting: Aurelius 'Of aventure happed hire to meete', he says, and a few lines later, 'thus they mette, of aventure or grace'. Yet nothing is more natural, since we are told that Aurelius was watching and waiting for Dorigen's departure. These comments point, therefore, not so much to the fact that this meeting is an amazing coincidence, as to the operation of 'aventure' within it. The intensity of Dorigen's surrender to the situation in which she has been trapped, perceptible in her anguished cry

'half as she were mad',
'Unto the gardin, as min housbonde bad,
My trouthe for to holde, allas! allas!'

has a dramatic effect on Aurelius; it mediates to him Arveragus's surrender to 'aventure' and stimulates him to match that surrender with his own. He releases Dorigen from her promise and sends her back to her husband. He accepts the chance by which he has come too late, by which his love for Dorigen post-dates her marriage□one of the arbitrary cruelties of time□and having perceived the inner reality of the marriage, the firmness with which each is linked in obedience to the other in the very act of consenting to Dorigen's 'infidelity', Aurelius 'allows' that relationship its own being, undisturbed; he too exercises patience and 'suffers' it.

But what if he had not? What if he had insisted on the fulfilment of the promise? For if Chaucer is pointing to the power of chance in human lives, he is bound to acknowledge that chance might well have had it so. One critic who correctly observes the perilous ease with which either development could realize itself at this point has written a conclusion to the episode in which Aurelius does just that. The freedom and openness of events in the Chaucerian world means that romance is always open to turn into fabliau□or into tragedy. But I think that in this tale the nature of such a tragedy would be qualified by our sense that Aurelius would have 'enjoyed' Dorigen in only a very limited sense; his possession of her would have been as much a matter of 'illusion' and 'apparence' as the removal of the rocks that made it possible. The magic, in this tale, suggests the illusory, forced quality of Aurelius's power over Dorigen (in contrast to the natural power won by Arveragus, spontaneously springing into life at the end of the long process of his courtship). That is why the magic removal of the rocks is presented as a laborious, technologically complex operation, rather than the wave of a sorcerer's wand. The real magic in this tale is Aurelius's change of heart, which is as miraculous as that of the knight in the "Wife of Bath's Tale." The magic removal of the rocks is merely a means by which we can measure the immensity of this 'human magic'; we can gauge as it were, the size of the problem it is able to solve. And this 'human magic' is nothing other than the human power to change. What the development of the tale brings to our notion of the human tendency to change is that it is not just an everyday, humdrum matter of our moods fluctuating with the passage of time, but that it is a source of power; its role can be creative.

As I have already suggested, Chaucer is well aware of the tragic aspects of the human propensity to change, as his constant preoccupation with the theme of betrayal shows. He is also aware of the saving power of human resilience, a sort of comic version of

patience, which can nullify the tragic aspects of 'aventure'; thus beside the serious transformation of the rapist knight in the "Wife of Bath's Tale" we can set the figure of Pluto in the "Merchant's Tale," the ravisher who has clearly been worn down by feminine rhetoric so that he presents the ludicrous picture of a henpecked rapist. Romances such as the tales of the Knight and Franklin, however, offer us a serious celebration of patience, of the creative power of change.

'Pitee' may be the quality that leads Criseyde's emotions away from Troilus to Diomede, or it may be ironically appealed to as the cause of May's amazing readiness to respond to Damian's advances ("Merchant's Tale"), but it is also the quality that enables Theseus to adapt himself to each new claim that chance events impose on him ("Knight's Tale"), or that leads Dorigen to accept Arveragus' suit, and it is 'routhe' (another word for pity) that leads Aurelius to release Dorigen.

Moreover, as the passage on patience makes clear, the responsiveness implied in the ideals of patience and 'pitee' must be exercised continually; the balance and poise achieved at the end of the "Franklin's Tale" is reached by a 'proces', a chain of ceaseless adjustment in which the magicianclerk, as well as the other three figures, must play his part. Ceaseless adjustment is, as we saw, something that characterizes the marriage, with its endless alternation of 'lordshipe' and 'servage', and it is for that reason that it can survive 'aventure'; it is founded on it. Only through ceaseless change can there be stability. Only through a perpetual readiness to adapt, to change, in each of the actors in the tale, can the status quo be preserved. Or, in Chaucerian language, 'trouthe' is the product of patience.

Chaucer's strength is that he gives us a creative sense of order; he makes us aware that static formulae, of whatever nature□the husband's sovereignty, equality in marriage□are inappropriate to human beings, since they are subject to change from within and chance from without. What is needed instead is an ideal such as the ideal of patience, which is founded on change, on the perpetual readiness to meet, to accept and to transform the endless and fluctuating succession of 'aventures' that life offers.

Source: Jill Mann, "Chaucerian Themes and Style in the 'Franklin's Tale,'" in *Medieval Literature: Chaucer and the Alliterative Tradition*, edited by Boris Ford, Penguin Books, 1982, pp. 133-53.

Critical Essay #7

In the following essay, Collette contends that the Prioress exhibits a "sensibility that dwells on the small, the particular . . . as a means of arousing deep emotional response."

Chaucer's Prioress has been the subject of lively literary debate for the better part of the twentieth century. Not content to let her go, in the words of Cummings's poem, "into the now of forever," modern critics have insisted that Madame Eglentyne face the now of the twentieth century and answer for her faults. Critics have reproved her vanity, chastized her worldliness, shaken their heads over her exaggerated sensibility, and even explored the hidden anal-sadistic focus of her tale.

Where, we might ask, in all of this is Chaucer's Prioress? The answer may lie in the fact that Chaucer's fashionable Prioress and her *litel* tale were more fashionable than most modern critics realize. Her concern with emotion, tenderness, and the diminutive are part of the late fourteenth-century shift in sensibility, which, following the socalled triumph of nominalism, produced the flowering of English mysticism, a highly particularized, emotional style in the arts, and the ascendancy of the heart over the reason in religious matters. In both her portrait and her tale the Prioress reflects these developments as she focuses on the physical, tangible, often diminutive□mice, dogs, and little children□as objects of her "tendre herte" and symbols of her understanding of Christian doctrine; the same attitudes and assumptions about the centrality of the heart and of the emotions dominate her use of the rhyme royal stanza in one of the most sensitively orchestrated narrations of the tales, wedding form and content absolutely. Because the Prioress's sensibility is the product of Chaucer's craft and of late medieval attitudes about religion, God, and man's relationship to God, it might be useful to review what is already common knowledge about late medieval culture before looking closely at her tale.

In literary criticism, art history, or historical analysis of the mid-to late-fourteenth century one hears sounded again and again the note of ritual and the ascendancy of the emotional over the rational. Obviously a simplification of a complex process not restricted to that century, this shift in emphasis produces the impression that the late Middle Ages valued emotion□intense, devout, almost sensual, religious emotion□as man's surest path to the knowledge of God. The reasons for such a stress remain obscure, too complicated to explore in a paper devoted to a reading of a single tale. Suffice it to repeat what is already well known, that the "triumph of nominalism," as David Knowles calls the Ockhamite revolution in medieval thought, denied the possibility of rational demonstrations of the truths of natural religion, while at the same time it declared God's revelations to be arbitrary, to be accepted without comment or explanation: " . . . Nominalism under the guise of a devout humility, left the door open for agnosticism or incredulity as well as for a fideistic acceptance of religious teaching." Charles Musçatine characterizes the thought of the age in a similar fashion:

"The cleavage between reason and faith, characteristic of post-Ockhamite thought, not only generated an unsettling scepticism, but also drove faith itself further and further into the realm of the irrational."

One senses such a reaction in the mystics' intense concentration on Christ's passion and the love it manifests. Richard Rolle, writing in the earlier part of the century, stresses the power of love in his poem "Love is Life," communicating the mystery of divine love through a rhetoric of emotion and human love: "Luf rauysches Cryst intyl owr hert . . . "; "Lere to luf, if þou wyl lyfe when þou sall hethen fare"; "Luf es Goddes derlyng; luf byndes blode and bane." Julian of Norwich, writing in the last third of the century, sounds the same theme in her *Revelations of Divine Love*, as she uses the now famous image of the hazelnut to symbolize the tender, all-encompassing nature of God's love which marks even the smallest and humblest of creation as miraculous. "What is this?" she asks, answering, "It is all that is made . . . In short, everything owes its existence to the love of God."

She underscores the universal significance of the hazelnut, perceiving and wishing us to perceive the miracle of God's universe, the miracle of the macrocosm, in that small, particular form. She writes, "In this 'little thing' I saw three truths. The first is that God made it; the second is that God loves it; the third is that God sustains it."

One finds a similar emphasis on the apprehension of divine mysteries through concentration on the small, particular elements of our world, and through the power of love, in countless late fourteenth- century lyrics. In hymns to the Virgin and songs of the Virgin, the physical element manifests itself in increased tenderness and in the depiction of Mary's relation to Christ in the intensely human terms of a mother's love for an infant child. A song of the Virgin in Harley MS. 7322 typifies the late fourteenth-century conception of the physical bases of the relationship. The Virgin addresses her infant son not as the savior of the world, the Godhead incarnate, but as a child, vulnerable to earthly suffering:

Iesu, swete, beo noth wroþ,
þou ich nabbe clout ne cloþ
þe on for to folde,
þe on to folde ne to wrappe . . .

The poem ends with an image both surprising and effective, for it drives home the physical basis of their relationship while it stresses human love and vulnerability over omnipotence and divinity:

"Bote ley þou þi fet to my pappe, / And wite þe
from þe colde."

We see equivalent processes in art of the period. Ockham's *Via Moderna* emphasized that all men could know surely was the experiential, the particular, that which one could comprehend through the senses. Emile Mâle traces the development of stylistic tendencies in art at the end of the Middle Ages, tying these new styles to this change in

sensibility and outlook which social historians of the period regard as one of its hallmarks:

From the end of the thirteenth century on, the artists seem no longer able to grasp the great conceptions of earlier times. Before, the Virgin enthroned held her Son with the sacerdotal gravity of the priest holding the chalice. She was the seat of the All-Powerful, 'the throne of Solomon,' in the language of the doctors. She seemed neither woman nor mother, because she was exalted above the sufferings and joys of life. She was the one whom God had chosen at the beginning of time to clothe His word with flesh. She was the pure thought of God. As for the Child, grave, majestic, hand raised, He was already the Master Who commands and Who teaches.

This conception, however, disappears. What replaces it is intense human tenderness captured in gestures between the Virgin and Christ. The forms no longer symbolize intellectual conceptions but exist in and for themselves. In contemplating the tenderness between the Virgin and Child we comprehend the nature of love. The art is no longer metaphor, or vehicle, but the image, the focus; it no longer symbolizes, it is. Fourteenth-century art, more particularized, often more highly detailed than twelfth- and thirteenth-century art, focuses on scenes, on moments that speak to the heart. In both the form and content of her narrative the Prioress, by concentrating on the diminutive, on the detail, not so much for its symbolic significance, but for its emotional value, gives literary expression to the attitudes and assumptions we have traced in religion and art. Her portrait has been treated too often and too thoroughly to be reviewed here, except to note that its major elements□her concern with manners and outward form, the court cheer she "peyned her" to copy, her tender conscience, and the rosary beads with the dependent motto, *Amor vincit omnia*□are all typical of and consonant with the patterns we have been tracing. In her concern with the small, with the particular, with the emotional, the Prioress is unquestionably a woman of "fashion."

It is often said that the *"General Prologue"* tells us very little of the Prioress's inner spiritual state, very little of her comprehension of the mysteries involved in her sacred vocation. We wonder about a woman whose conscience and charity work through a concern for mice and dogs, and whose apparent interest in sacred liturgy is the song, not the substance. The sensible world, and an immediate response to it, rather than any abstract philosophy, seems to form the basis of her faith.

Apparently for the Prioress the wide, deep spirit of forgiveness of the Gospels and the charity implicit in the doxology become real in the physical expression of love and conscience between herself and the small creatures that surround her. Mâle speaks of the influence of St. Francis on religious thought in the later Middle Ages; the Prioress's "conscience and tendre herte" follow in that tradition.

In any case, in all that she appears to be and does as a nun, the outward, physical sign is foremost, the substance of her religion either misunderstood or, more likely, reduced in scale and dimension to the humanly comprehensible, the emotionally appealing. Her tale reflects the same tendency. As a result, in both the *"Prologue"* and the *"Tale"* itself the mysteries of Christianity appear to us refracted through a lens of motherhood.

Mary the mother of Christ is the subject of the *"Prologue."* The Prioress, who seems to worship a God who is to be identified above all as the Son of Mary, refers to herself as like "a child of twelf month oold, or lesse, / That kan unnethes any word expresse." The *"Tale,"* set against a chronological background of the three seasons of the Christian year devoted to the nativity—Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany—turns on the learning of an anthem to the Virgin, an anthem especially appropriate to these seasons, an anthem devoted to the mother of the Redeemer. The Prioress refers repeatedly to the martyr as the "litel child" and to the Virgin as "Christes mooder," in effect recalling our attention to the Nativity, to the humanity of Christ as the means of approaching the greater mysteries of the incarnation and salvation. Mary in her motherhood helps man to understand the love of the Father and of the Son. She is the bridge. At the end of the tale her experience of earthly, maternal love is reflected in the words she speaks to the child, words generations of mothers have spoken: "Be nat agast, I wol thee nat forsake." In these words we can hear Christ's own promise, "Lo, I am with you always." Set in the proverbial long ago and far away of "a greet citee" in Asia, the tale is introduced almost as a fable, a romance. There is no effort to create a realistic setting, no attention to the possibilities and inevitabilities of life in such a place. The Jews in the Jewry are shadowy, not real. With the myopia characteristic of her approach to life and religion, the Prioress focuses on the center of the tale, that which for her does have reality, the "wydwes sone" who will be the martyred child-hero and in so dying will become an example for us of true love and devotion. We are told that this child is a student in a school as vaguely presented as the Jewry and the city, indeed as vague as the whole continent of Asia is for the Prioress; what is accomplished in the school we do not know, what is learned we are not told, except that the scholars

. . . lerned in that scole yeer by yere
Swich manere doctrine as men used there,
This is to seyn, to syngen and to rede,
As smale children doon in hire childhede.

Even the widowed mother is in the background at this point. What we remember of this child, this "litel clergeon," is his smallness; he is young, *sely*. His youth is emphasized by the repeated stress on the word *child:* "As smale children doon in hire childhede." There is an active, particular imagination here that responds to and can visualize the minute.

The child's youthful curiosity and his natural reverence for the Virgin, a reverence fostered by his own devoted mother, lead him to inquire about a song he hears his elder classmate sing, *Alma Redemptoris Mater*. In that exquisitely pictured and phrased stanza where the Prioress describes the child listening to the song we see a visual, metaphorical representation of the approach to God typical of the late fourteenth century—the heart is touched while the reason is bypassed; the soul seeks that which nourishes it:

And as he dorste, he drough hym ner and ner, And herkned ay the wordes and the noote, Til he the firste vers koude al by rote. Time here is virtually suspended as we see him, childlike, creeping closer and closer to that which for him has a magnetic attraction,

the song in praise of the Virgin. For the Prioress what is real here is the child and his natural affinity for religious beauty; she responds to and asks us to respond to the same elements. When the little child asks about the meaning of the song, his *felawe* tells him it is of the Virgin, but that he cannot say more of its significance: "I lerne song, I kan but smal grammeere." That line and the child's determination to learn the song, come what may, by rote, are the heart of the tale and the key to both it and the Prioress. One cannot escape the fundamental parallel between her religious practices and the children's attitude toward the song. To *lerne* the song, the outward, by rote, not to gain a full understanding, but in order to manifest praise and love, is for her, if not for us, an emblem of true, innocent faith. She seems to take literally Christ's words, "Except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven."

The child, in his innocence, which is stressed throughout, sings the song on his way home through the Jewry, where Satan inspires certain Jews to plot to destroy him. It is in these stanzas, through the contrast they present between what precedes and what follows them, that we see how effectively the Prioress manipulates the stanzaic form of her tale to stress emotion. Up to this point, each stanza has been a separate unit devoted to presenting and exploring an idea. For example, the stanza about the child's creeping closer to hear the song achieves its effect largely because its periodicity encloses a discursive, detailed account of a simple action:

This litel child, his litel book lernynge,
As he sat in the scole at his prymer,
He *Alma redemptoris* herde synge,
As children lerned hire antiphoner;
And as he dorste, he drough hym ner and ner,
And herkned ay the wordes and the noote,
Til he the firste vers koude al by rote.

The stanza images for us the sweet faith of the child, opening our hearts to his youth and his innocent devotion.

Those stanzas devoted to the Jews' motivation, action, and punishment are handled differently; each line is a unit, each line a new thought. In effect each stanza contains seven times as much "action" as the stanzas devoted to the child:

Fro thennes forth the Jues han conspired
This innocent out of this world to chace.
An homycide therto han they hyred,
That in an aleye hadde a privee place;
And as the child gan forby for to pace,
This cursed Jew hym hente, and heeld hym faste,
And kitte his throte, and in a pit hym caste.
I seye that in a wardrobe they hym threwe
Where as thise Jewes purgen hire entraille.
O cursed folk of Herodes al newe,
What may youre yvel entente yow availle?

Mordre wol out, certeyn, it wol nat faille,
And namely ther th'onour of God shal sprede;
The blood out crieth on youre cursed dede.

The Prioress's narrative technique dwells on devices directed at our emotions. In the next stanza the focus shifts to the child-martyr. Sonorous "o's" slow the movement, calling our attention to the mystery of his martyrdom:

O martir, sowded to virginitee, Now maystow syngen, folwynge evere in oon The white Lamb celestial□quod she□ Of which the grete evaungelist, Seint John, In Pathmos wroot, which seith that they that goon Biforn this Lamb, and synge a song al newe, That nevere, flesshly, wommen they ne knewe.

The next truly visual part of the tale, the next scene to bear the stamp of the Prioress's true interest, is the exquisite passage devoted to the mother's search for her son. Obviously the motherchild relationship parallels the Virgin-Christ relationship. It calls to mind the most human aspect of the most ineffable, mystical relation the world has known, the love of a virgin-mother for a God-child. No hint of that mystery appears here; what does appear is the closest human equivalent□deep emotion. In a tale so short, apparently so formal, the Prioress leads herself and her audience to a double pitch of emotion, both at the end of the tale, as we should expect, and also just beyond mid point:

This poure wydwe awaiteth al that nyght
After hir litel child, but he cam noght;
For which, as soone as it was dayes lyght,
With face pale of drede and bisy thoght,
She hath at scole and elleswhere hym soght,
Til finally she gan so fer espie
That he last seyn was in the Juerie.
With moodres pitee in hir brest enclosed,
She gooth, as she were half out of hir mynde,
To every place where she hath supposed
By liklihede hir litel child to fynde;
And evere on Cristes mooder meeke and kynde
She cride, and atte laste thus she wroghte:
Among the cursed Jues she hym soghte.

It is as if she meant us to experience the religious significance of her tale through the same intense, emotional reaction she obviously has to the action of her own story. In this effect the rhyme royal stanza, intensely expressive in its inherent periodicity, works as part of the story, not just as form, but as form become content. The sound echoes the sense as emotion builds through each line of the stanza. In the beginning the two adjectives, *poure* and *litel*, used to describe the widow and her son, catch our attention. Our sympathies are aroused as they would be if we, too, saw the defenseless and helpless suffering. The Prioress's narrative style plays on these sympathies□through the grammatical structure which saves till the end of the first clause the fact "but he cam

noght," and hurries in the third line, in a verbal foreshadowing of the distress and anxiety tearing at the mother's heart. Finally, near desperation, she discovers that he was last seen in the Jewry. She does not act on that knowledge, though. It is as if she wanted to ignore the dreadful news and its implicit horror. Psychologically valid, the continuing search also allows the Prioress simultaneously to develop our emotional response and to direct it toward a religious subject. The second stanza begins by focusing our attention on what is central, the emotional state of the mother; she becomes through the first line an emblem of all suffering mothers, of Rachel crying after her lost children, but especially of the Virgin mourning her crucified son. While the scene culminates both with the end of the search and the cry of help to the Virgin, *meek* and *kynde*, it seems clear that the Prioress sees the Virgin here less as queenly intercessor than as a mother; that, for this moment at least, Mary comes to mind because she, too, suffered the pain of losing a child. In short, the Prioress's primary focus here is on emotion, only secondarily on Christian doctrine.

The miracle, much like the miracle of Christ's resurrection, occurs in the Jewry. The Prioress's account instructs us both about the God who creates the miracle and about her conception of that God:

O grete God, that parfournest thy laude
By mouth of innocentz, lo, heere thy myght!
This gemme of chastite, this emeraude,
And eek of martirdom the ruby bright,
Ther he with throte ykorven lay upright;
He *Alma Redemptoris* gan to synge
So loude that al the place gan to rynge.

The God of Abraham and Joseph, the God of mercy and justice, becomes the God of innocents who reveals his might through the lowly. One might well infer here the lesson that Christianity teaches, that this God, being all-powerful, is so loving that He humbles himself. One might well infer, as critics have done, that the Prioress's humility stems from this divine example. Yet, typically, the focus of this miracle is not on God's divine power or His infinite humility. The focus is on the little boy himself. The child is imaged in those brilliant hues one so often associates with manuscript illumination; the gems here signify the refraction of the pure white light of God. In the midst of the miracle what emerges as central is not God but the child's perfect, albeit uncomprehending, faith. The grandeur of this miracle lies not in God's awful power but in the little boy's touching song. The effect, not the cause, is central; our attention is once more directed to the physical, the emotional, rather than to the grand conception behind the action of the tale.

By the same token the treatment of the Jews in the tale is also subordinated to the central point, the child. The Prioress, whose vision focuses always on the small, the physical, whose heart is touched by the tenderness of the story of the childmartyr, whose idea of God, Christ, and the Virgin is shaded in terms of sentiment and pity, simply does not regard the Jews in any thinking fashion. The Jews are not real in any living sense, certainly not as the child and his mother are real, invested with emotions

and personalities. The Jews are part of the plot, the necessary background of her story; they are but pale shadows beside the overwhelming reality of the little child. Like the setting in Asia they are a convenient backdrop, a catalyst necessary for the central action, the child's demonstration of innocent faith and the Virgin's maternal devotion to those who turn to her. Compare the treatment of the child with the treatment of the Jews:

This child with pitous lamentacioun
Up taken was, syngynge his song alway,
And with honour of greet processioun
They carien hym unto the nexte abbay.
His mooder swownynge by the beere lay;
Unnethe myghte the peple that was theere
This newe Rachel brynge fro his beere.

The descriptive, metaphorical quality here stands in sharp contrast to the almost aphoristic, matter-of-fact tone used to describe the fate of the Jews:

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 swich cursednesse observe.
"Yvele shal have that yvele wol deserve";
Therfore with wilde hors he dide hem drawe,
And after that he heng hem by the lawe.

The natural periodicity of the stanza form here builds not to a climax but falls flat. The description of the Jews' punishment creates the impression of reason, deliberateness, and inevitability. "He nolde," "therfore," "and after that" are the three phrases which encapsulate the sequential nature of the summary justice they receive. Of course the Prioress may mean deliberately to denigrate the Jews by using such a flat style to describe their ends, but Chaucer, behind both tale and teller, may mean to tell us something about the speaker. Indeed the simplicity of the Prioress's world view, implicit in her apparently unthinking adoption of the motto *Amor vincit omnia*, surfaces here in her phraseology. The provost "with torment and with shameful deeth" put the Jews who knew of the murder to death. Love may conquer all, but it is love of a particular sort, not the light of charity, but a narrow beam directed at the child. The rest of the world may suffer as it must.

In the bier scene the Prioress reveals the effect of the child's holiness. When the Abbot asks him how he can continue to sing, "Sith that thy throte is kut to my semynge", the emphasis both in his question and in our understanding of the story is on the physical phenomenon. The little martyr responds with an explanation that, in its dwelling on detail, echoes the question, calling our attention to the sad end of his physical body:

"My throte is kut unto my nekke boon,"
Seyde this child, "and, as by wey of kynde,

I sholde have dyed, ye, longe tyme agon.
But Jesu Crist, as ye in bookes fynde,
Wil that his glorie laste and be in mynde,
And for the worship of his Mooder deere
Yet may I synge *O Alma* loude and cleere."

The child's martyrdom and explanation are emblems of the sort of faith the Prioress espouses□ ritualistic, rooted in phenomena perceptible in this world, intensely emotional. The child's suffering, martyrdom, and death, as well as the faith which originally prompted him to learn the song by rote, lead our souls to God. He is the channel both for us and for the Prioress, whose religion is one of approaching God through the sensible manifestations of His love. Like fourteenth-century statues and illuminations, the child's martyrdom is not a static, intellectual ikon, a symbol to be understood, but a moving, temporal image which we contemplate with emotion and through which we come to understand in our hearts if not our heads the message of Christianity.

As the Abbot removes the grain from the child's tongue, the little boy's soul ascends and the Abbot's tears fall. The child's innocent faith overcomes and instructs even the convent. In two lines which seem almost to relish the prostration of the monk, the Prioress says, "And gruf he fil al plat upon the grounde, / And stille he lay as he had ben ybounde." Before the example of the boy's faith holy men fall down, and, like the convent, weep. The point of the story, then, is the power of emotion, of touching, overwhelming emotion exemplified by the child's faith and by the martyrdom of his "litel body sweete." The Prioress seems almost overcome by her own tale as she concludes "Ther he is now, God leve us for to meete!", yet hurries on to appeal to the *auctoritee* of Hugh of Lincoln as well as to pray for his intercession, finally concluding with the hope that Christ will grant us His mercy for his mother's sake. In her final appeal to Hugh of Lincoln she tries to ground the tale in fact, to remove it from the realm of the emotional, from the distant world where it takes place. It is as if the Prioress were saying, "And this is all true, as you know, because you all know about Hugh of Lincoln."

Try as she might to fix the tale in physical, historical reality by such allusions, the story she tells is still a miracle story, preeminently suited to her own outlook and to the religious fashion of the time. Of all the sorts of religious tales the Prioress could tell, surely the miracle story is the one least rational, most suited to the assumptions and attitudes of late fourteenth-century religion in its revelation of a God so arbitrary, so powerful, that He can and does suspend the operation of His own natural laws. What is left to the Prioress and to us is to worship Him as best we can. For the Prioress such worship involves two touchstones□emotion and the Virgin Mary, the hand-maiden of the Trinity.

In retrospect one remembers the Prioress best for her motto, *Amor vincit omnia*. The words seem especially fitted to be her creed once we consider the dynamics of her tale and its relation to the spirit of art and religion we may suppose she came in contact with. What Chaucer meant to suggest in the person of the Prioress we cannot know for sure. To discover that this woman, so careful to do the "right" thing, had also developed a

"fashionable" sensibility leaves unanswered the larger question of Chaucer's attitude toward that sensibility. What we can say is that her tale in both its theme and structure reflects late fourteenth-century ideas, that the Prioress's stress on love, emotion, and pity are all consonant with what we might call a fashion in religious taste. If we accept her on these terms, we find that, odd and inconsistent as the tale seems in its excessive pity for the child and its disregard for the Jews, there is yet a consistent sensibility behind it, a sensibility that dwells on the small, the particular, not as a symbol or even as a type but as a means of arousing deep emotional response; this sensibility also seeks wherever possible to understand the divine through the human; moreover, this sensibility is myopic in its tendency to select and focus on only that narrow range of experience which satisfies it. In all these ways, then, the sense of the "Prioress's Tale" lies in the Prioress's sensibility.

Source: Carolyn P. Collette, "Sense and Sensibility in "The Prioress's Tale,"' in *Chaucer Review*, Vol. 15, No. 2, Fall 1981, pp. 138-50.

Critical Essay #8

In the following essay, Hanning compares "The Knight's Tale" with epics by Boccaccio and Statius to gain a greater understanding of the themes of nobility and order in the poem.

There is perhaps no better illustration of the processes of continuity and change in medieval literature than the relationship between Geoffrey Chaucer's "Knight's Tale" (1386?), first of the *Canterbury Tales*, and its literary antecedents, both proximate—Giovanni Boccaccio's *Teseida delle nozze d'Emilia* (ca. 1340)—and remote—the *Thebaid of Statius* (ca. 92 AD). Moreover, a comparison of Chaucer's poem with Statius's epic and Boccaccio's epic romance offers important clues to the meaning of one of the most problematic tales in the Canterbury collection.

To Boccaccio and Chaucer, and to medieval authors generally, Statius was *the* authority on the fall of Thebes, one of the most traumatic events of classical legend. Charles Muscatine, in the most influential, and perhaps the finest recent assessment of the "Knight's Tale," states, "the history of Thebes had perpetual interest for Chaucer as an example of the struggle between noble designs and chaos," a struggle which Muscatine finds at the heart of the tale. According to Muscatine, "the noble life . . . is itself the subject of the poem and the object of its philosophic questions", and the manifestations of that life, "its dignity and richness, its regard for law and decorum, are all bulwarks against the ever-threatening forces of chaos, and in constant collision with them." In this reading, the significance of the "Knight's Tale" lies in Theseus' "perception of the order beyond chaos," revealed in his final speech urging a distraught Palamon and Emelye to marry, despite their grief at the death of Arcite, and thus to conform to the scheme of the universe's "Firste Moevere." As Muscatine puts it, "when the earthly designs suddenly crumble, true nobility is faith in the ultimate order of all things."

The present essay responds to Muscatine's analysis of the "Knight's Tale" in two ways. First, it examines two main sources of Chaucer's attitude toward Thebes, in order to confirm the contention that the English poet found in Boccaccio and Statius models for "the struggle between noble designs and chaos"—found, that is, a tradition of concern with the tense relationship between the human capacity to control and order life and the forces, internal and external, that resist or negate order. But if Chaucer is profoundly traditional in composing the "Knight's Tale," he is also profoundly original in telling it not *in propria voce*, but as the utterance of "a worthy man" and "a verray par-fit gentil knyght"—an exponent of the "noble life" of chivalry as Chaucer and his age knew it. By putting the Knight between us and the world of Theseus, Palamon, Arcite, and Emelye, Chaucer invites us to see the conflict of order and disorder as a reflection of the Knight's particular perspective on life. The "Knight's Tale" thus becomes simultaneously a comment on the possibilities for order in human life and a comment on the tensions Chaucer perceived within the system of late medieval chivalry. Further, since the Knight makes us painfully aware of his difficulties as an amateur story-teller, Chaucer innovates again in inviting us to equate Theseus' problems in seeking to control the realm of experience with his pilgrim-creator's trials in seeking to control the realm of art.

The coincidence of problems faced by Duke, gentil knight, and poet makes the "Knight's Tale" an even more complex and original poem than its most perceptive critics have noticed. Accordingly, an assessment of the tension between the Tale's levels of meaning will constitute my second, more revisionist response to Muscatine's thesis.

Critical Essay #9

The *Thebaid* recounts the fratricidal war between Oedipus's sons, Polynices and Eteocles, for the throne of Thebes. Its twelfth and last book con- tains the germ of Boccaccio's *Teseida*, and thus of the "Knight's Tale." In the twelfth book, after the brothers have destroyed each other in a final, emblematic single combat, Creon, their uncle and now ruler of Thebes, forbids burial rites for Polynices and the Greek warriors who beseiged the city with him. The grief-stricken widows of the unburied, outraged at the sacrilegious edict but powerless to contest it, are advised by a Theban soldier to turn to Theseus, ruler of Athens, for succor. The greater part of Book Twelve comprises a double action attendant upon Creon's prohibition and the widows' response. Spurred on by desperation, Argia, the Greek widow of Polynices, and Antigone, Polynices' sister, attempt to perform funeral rites for the slain prince, defying the edict. They find the body and put it on a pyre with another, half-consumed corpse who turns out to be none other than Eteocles. Implacable foes in death as in life, the brothers resist the joint immolation; the fire divides into warring tongues of flame while the women watch in helpless terror. The posthumous struggle shakes the pyre, and the noise arouses Creon's guards, who apprehend Argia and Antigone and bring them before Creon to be executed□victims, it would seem, of yet another grotesque manifestation of the curse on the house of Cadmus. Meanwhile, the rest of the widows journey to Athens, where, under Juno's tutelage, they win the sympathy of the Athenians and encounter Theseus as he returns in triumph from Scythia, victor over the Amazons and lord of Hippolyta. He learns the cause of the widows' sorrow and, his army swollen by recruits enraged at Creon's behavior, sets out for Thebes. Creon learns of Theseus' arrival as he prepares to punish Argia and Antigone; despite his speech of defiance, his troops are no match for Theseus, who seeks out and dispatches the Theban tyrant. The epic ends on a muted note of grief and resignation as the widows perform the obsequies for their men.

The *Thebaid* offers a dark view of life, shaped as it is by a legend that stresses the inescapable destiny which destroys a family and leads to fratricidal wrath between its protagonists. Yet the last act of the epic incorporates a movement back from the abyss of rage and destruction, and toward a reestablishment of civilized control over the darker impulses that have reigned throughout. Theseus, whose intervention saves Argia and Antigone and allows the fallen warriors to have the funeral rites owed them by heroic society, represents the belated, partial, but real triumph of civilization over passion, both at Thebes and in Scythia. The image of Hippolyta, brought back to Athens in triumph by Theseus, sums up his achievement and his function in the epic's economy: "Hippolyta too drew all toward her, friendly now in look and patient of the marriage-bond. With hushed whispers and sidelong gaze the Attic dames marvel that she has broken her country's austere laws, that her locks are trim, and all her bosom hidden beneath her robe, that though a barbarian she mingles with mighty Athens, and comes to bear offspring to her foemanlord." Every detail of this striking portrait testifies to the subduing of wildness by its opposite. The Amazon queen, sworn to enmity toward men, accustomed to flaunting her freedom from male (and social) restraint by her flowing hair, her dress with its one exposed breast (an affront to canons of feminine

modesty), and her fierce demeanor, has become a neat, proper, smiling wife and mother-to-be. And as Theseus has tamed the savage Amazon, so will he tame the sacrilegious Creon, rescue Argia and Antigone from being punished for wishing to perform the rituals by which civilization imposes order even on death, and permit the comfort of those rituals to all the bereaved.

Of course, Theseus paradoxically quells rage and violence by unleashing his own, righteous wrath. In his speech to his soldiers as they set out for Thebes, he declares that they fight in a just cause, and against the Furies, emblems of primal chaos; then he hurls his spear and dashes forth on the road to the rage-torn city. This is no statesmanship of sweetness and light, but the sanctioned unleashing of irresistible energy to assure the triumph of "terrarum leges et mundi foedera"□the laws of nations and the covenants of the world. A similar ambivalence hovers over Theseus' shield, on which is portrayed the hero binding the Minotaur on Crete, yet another emblem of terrifying force subjugated by a greater and more licit violence. All of these deeds of conquest take place away from home□in Scythia, at Thebes, on Crete; Athens, like the Rome of Virgil and Statius, remains the peaceful center of civilization, where mourning women are instructed by Juno in the proper decorum of grief, and where there is a temple dedicated to Clementia, the spirit of mildness and forgiveness.

Despite Theseus' authority and easy victory over Creon, there is still no erasing the terrible memory of the death and destruction which fate and the gods have rained down on Thebes throughout the epic, nor can any image of rage subdued by civilization□ not even the domesticated Hippolyta□ match for sheer evocative power the horror of that moment when the charred remains of Polynices and Eteocles continue in death the fratricidal fury that ruined their lives. Statius's vision of the noble life offers as its highest realization the double-tongued flame and trembling pyre, and the hysterical pleas of Argia and Antigone that the rage cease before it compels them to leap into the flames to separate the brothers. It was to such a pessimistic vision that Boccaccio, and later Chaucer, responded in taking up the poetic challenge of the *Thebaid.*

Critical Essay #10

Writing over twelve hundred years after Statius, Giovanni Boccaccio undertook in the *Teseida* to compose the first martial epic in Italian. He placed epic formulae of invocation at the beginning of the poem, and equally conventional addresses to his book and to the Muses at its conclusion; he imitated epic structure (the *Teseida*, like the *Aeneid* and the *Thebaid*, has twelve books) and diction, reinforcing the latter by some nearly verbatim translations from Statius. But if, in all these ways, Boccaccio self-consciously donned the epic mantle, he also brought to his encounter with Statius literary sensibilities formed by medieval courtly romance and lyric, and thereby created in the *Teseida* a new, hybrid version of the noble life. Boccaccio's eclecticism declares itself at the poem's beginning; he will tell of "the deeds of Arcita and of Palemone the good, born of royal blood, as it seems, and both Thebans; and although kinsmen, they came into conflict by their excessive love for Emilia, the beautiful Amazon . . ." The fate of a love affair, not a city, provides a suitably elevated subject. (Even the full title of the work is eclectic: *The Thesiad* [epic] of *Emily's Nuptials* [romance].)

The first book of the *Teseida* cleverly splices Boccaccio's story into Statius's epic world by recounting Teseo's war against the Amazons (mentioned but not described by the Roman poet) and his marriage to Ipolita. Early in the second book, Boccaccio links up with the *Thebaid*'s account of the last stages of the Theban war, and moves quickly to Teseo's encounter with the Greek widows at his triumphant homecoming from Scythia. The bulk of Book Two recounts Teseo's triumph over Creon (whom he kills, as in Statius) and the funeral observances for the Greek warriors. Neither Argia, Antigone, nor the pyre with the twintongued flame appear; Teseo is at stage center throughout. Then, as a coda to the action at Thebes, the Greeks who are searching the battlefield for their dead and wounded find two young men, badly wounded and calling for death, whose demeanor and dress proclaim them to be of royal blood. The princes are taken to Teseo, who treats them with respect and holds them in comfortable detention in Athens as Book Two ends. Thenceforth Palemone and Arcita, the young Thebans, usurp the plot from Teseo, thanks to their love for Emilia, Ipolita's sister (and a character unknown to Statius), which transforms their friendship into a near-mortal rivalry. The first two books of the *Teseida* abound with self-conscious references to Boccaccio's appropriation of the epic heritage for his own uses. The most obvious emblem of poetic metamorphosis is the discovery and "resurrection" of the half-dead Palemone and Arcita from the field of corpses that constitutes the end of the Theban war and the end of Statius' epic about it. In *The Thebaid*, Polynices and Eteocles "overcome" death by the sheer force of their mutual hatred, becoming, through the image of the warring flames, a symbol of destructive destiny's extension beyond the limits of any single life. Boccaccio replaces the pyre scene by the discovery scene, substituting a new beginning for epic closure, and his own heroes for Statius'. Moreover, Teseo responds to the new protagonists in a courteous, refined manner that distinguishes him from the spirit of the epic universe. When Palemone and Arcita are brought before him, he hears the *sdegno real* (royal disdain) in their voices, but doesn't respond to such *ira* as it deserves. Instead he is *pio* (compassionate), heals them, and, despite their danger to his rule,

refuses to kill them, as that would be a great sin; as Book Two ends, he installs them in his palace, to be served "at their pleasure."

One more emblem of the transformation the Italian poet has wrought on his Roman master's view of the noble life deserves special mention. After Teseo defeats Ipolita in battle, he falls in love with her, and his sudden subjection to Cupid is accompanied by an equally unexpected collective metamorphosis of all Ipolita's Amazon followers:

as soon as they put down their arms, they revert to being paragons of beauty and grace; their stern battle cries become pleasant jests and sweet songs, and even their steps, which were great strides when they fought, are dainty once again. Boccaccio was inspired to this felicitous passage by Statius' image of the domesticated Hippolyta, arriving in Athens as Theseus' captive and wife. But here a whole society of wild Scythian women spontaneously suffers a sea-change of beautifying refinement, manisfesting precisely the transformation that *courtoisie* as a behavioral ideal imposed on the ruder manners of European feudal society in the centuries just prior to Boccaccio's own, and that the courtly romance and lyric imposed on the martial style of the classical and feudal epic.

In deflecting the *Thebaid* from epic into a new, mixed genre, the *Teseida* comes to grips with the epic theme of order versus chaos in new ways, such as the emphasis on control and refinement implicit in Teseo's courteous treatment of Palemone and Arcita when they are first brought to him as captives, and in the metamorphosis of Ipolita's warriors after their defeat. Control also manifests itself in other elements of the poem. Boccaccio's mastery of epic conventions□those already mentioned, plus personified prayers flying to heaven, catalogues of heroes arriving for battle, descriptions of funeral obsequies and games□is a self-conscious exercise of poetic control, and the summit of literary self-consciousness is the temple Palemone builds to honor Arcita's memory: it is decorated with pictures that recapitulate the entire story of the *Teseida* (except Arcita's mortal fall from his horse!), and the narrator characterizes it as "a perfect work by one who knew how to execute it superbly"□ that is, by Boccaccio himself. The fact, however, that the "perfect work" omits the one detail of its protagonist's story□his death□that has called the temple and its pictures into being suggests that perfect control in art (and life?) is an illusion, created by overlooking those situations in which chaos erupts.

A similar cynicism about control underlies the manipulative gamesmanship used from time to time by Boccaccio's characters in dealing with persons and events. Emilia, having realized that Palemone and Arcita are watching her from their prison when she plays in her garden, encourages their ardor by flirtatious behavior□but out of vanity, not love. Arcita, having been released from prison by Peritoo's intercession with Teseo, speaks ambiguously to his benefactors, and lies outright to his kinsman Palemone, the better to hide his passion and his plans to assuage it. Nor is desire the only nurse of deceit; in Book Nine, after Palemone and Arcita, with one hundred followers each, have fought a tournament with Emilia as the prize, Teseo consoles those on the losing side with diplomatic words, blaming the defeat on the will of Providence, and complimenting them as the best warriors he has ever seen. The beneficiaries of Teseo's game of diplomacy are pleased, even though they don't believe all they have heard!

The *Teseida*'s ironic view of strategies for controlling life and art ripens at times into open recognition of how attempts to defeat chaos falter when faced by its irresistible forces. When Arcita, having encountered Palemone in the woods outside Athens, attempts to dissuade him from a fight to the finish over Emilia, he recalls the wrath of the gods against the Theban lineage to which they both belong; he points out that they are victims of Fortune, and says that in any case the winner of such a battle still will not have Emilia□and then, having marshalled all these sound arguments against strife, ends with the thumping non-sequitur that since Palemone wishes the battle, he shall indeed have it. Dominated by love's passion, Arcita can see (and speak) the truth, but cannot act on it. Later, at the climax of the story, the gods whose wrath Arcita has invoked as a reason for not fighting, intervene decisively (but not on epic grounds) when the young kinsmen commit themselves to battle for Emilia under Teseo's aegis. Arcita, who has prayed to Mars for victory, wins the tournament, only to be thrown from his horse and fatally wounded as he rides about the arena in triumph; Venus sends a Fury to startle the horse, so that she can award Emilia to Palemone, her votary. Emilia, denied her desire to remain chaste and marry neither Theban, can only blame Love for her sorry state.

To the extent that the poem's characters can control their fates by manipulation, their strategies of control and deceit make them figures of irony. But when they become prisoners of larger forces, they (and the poem's rhetoric about them) become pathetic and sentimentalized. This polarity of responses between ironic comedy, when characters act artfully, and pathetic melodrama, when they suffer victimization, differs markedly from our responses to the struggle between order and chaos in Book Twelve of the *Thebaid.* There Theseus' championship of civilized values is intended to provoke admiration, not cynical amusement, and the furious excesses of Polynices, Eteocles, and Creon horrified repugnance, not sentimental involvement. Sometimes, in the *Teseida*, sentiment and irony seem to pervade a scene simultaneously, especially a scene conceived in terms of the literary conventions of courtly love. The hot sighs of Palemone and Arcita in prison, as they debate whether Emilia is a goddess or a woman, and then languish and grow pale with love-sickness, conform so completely to those conventions as to invite us to smile at the predictability of it all, even as we sympathize with the helplessness of the imprisoned lovers. Elsewhere, our compassionate response to the affection the young men frequently express for each other must battle with our sense of the absurdity implicit in the repeated spectacle of the two dear friends trying to beat each other's brains out to win Emilia.

Much more than the *Thebaid*, then, the *Teseida* moves toward an interpretive impasse, resulting from the tense equilibrium between activity and passivity, irony and pathos, in its portrayal of the issues at stake in the noble life. Only Teseo's commanding presence seems to offer a way out of this labyrinth. Except for the brief period in Book One where he suffers from lovesickness for the vanquished Ipolita, Teseo is the active principle throughout the poem. He lacks the symbolic integrity of Statius' Theseus, the agent of civilization in a world driven mad with rage; rather, he functions as an emblem of controlled variousness in a world where variety of response and perception continually leads to situations of collision between and within selves. For example, when Teseo addresses the Greek widows who have sought his aid against Creon, he moves within a

single stanza from being "wounded in his heart by profound pity" to speaking "in a loud voice kindled by rage." Unlike Palemone or Arcita, Teseo is not hindered by such extremes. He acts with complete martial authority, killing Creon and capturing Thebes, then responds to the wrath of the distraught, newly captured Theban princes when they are brought before him by a show of magnanimity beyond their deserts; or, finding them later fighting in the woods, he not only grants them the amnesty they request for having broken his laws, but rewards them richly. He presides gravely over Arcita's obsequies and then, in a triumphant show of authority, convinces Palemone and Emilia to marry, despite their deeply felt unwillingness so to sully the memory of the departed prince.

Teseo, in short, makes everything look easy, and in so doing, he seems less to reflect a large view of the noble life as the triumph of order over chaos than to represent within the poem the virtuosity of its creator in assimilating and combining epic and courtly romance conventions, and thus the triumph of ingenuity over disparateness. The *Teseida*'s major concerns are finally aesthetic rather than moral or philosophical; its ultimate referent is literature, not experience.

Critical Essay #11

When Geoffrey Chaucer undertook to adapt the *Teseida* for his "Knight's Tale," he performed an impressive feat of truncation, shortening Boccaccio's nearly 10,000 lines to 2250 and compressing twelve books into four. Chaucer's omissions, and the way he has the Knight call attention to them, affect the meaning as well as the length of his revision of the *Teseida.* The change most immediately noticeable to a reader of both texts is Chaucer's wholesale jettisoning of Boccaccio's self-consciously literary epic trappings□ invocations, glosses, catalogues of warriors□so that the story, as told by the Knight, sounds much less like a virtuoso performance, much more like the effort of an amateur□a soldier, not a poet□ who, far from taking pride like Boccaccio in his poetic achievement, wishes primarily to finish his task as quickly as possible. (The one exception to the Knight's attitude of self-abnegation, his description of the tournament lists constructed by Theseus, will be discussed shortly.) The Knight shares his creator's desire to abridge his "auctor," although, unlike other, more learned or artistic Chaucerian narrators, he never alludes to his source either by real name (as in the reference to "Petrark" in the "Clerk's Tale") or pseudonymously (the "Lollius," alias Boccaccio, of *Troilus and Criseyde*). The rhetorical device by which the Knight (and behind him, Chaucer) calls attention to the process of abridgment is *occupatio*, the deliberate refusal to amplify (or describe completely) some aspect of the narrative. The Knight's first use of *occupatio* comes only fifteen lines into his tale:

And certes, if it nere to long to heere,
I wolde have toold yow fully the manere
How wonnen was the regne of Femenye
By Theseus and by his chivalrye;
And of the grete bataile for the nones
Bitwixen Atthenes and Amazones;
And how asseged was Ypolita,
The faire, hardy queene of Scithia;
And of the feste that was at hir weddynge,
And of the tempest at hir hoom-comynge;
But al that thyng I moot as now forbere.

Chaucer here digests the first book and beginning of the second of the *Teseida* by having the Knight, in effect, tell us what he won't tell us. Chaucer included these details of his omission, not because the story as he tells it needs them, but in order to dramatize the fact that story-telling requires the constant exercise of control in selecting material from a potentially much greater reservoir□ ultimately, in fact, from all experience and all antecedent literature. *Occupatio* is an emblem of the hard choices and discipline of art: what do I leave out? And the Knight, as an amateur, is particularly troubled by this aspect of his task, given the scope of his chosen story and his lack of skill.

As he puts it:

I have, God, woot, a large feeld to ere,
And wayke been the oxen in my plough.

The remenant of the tale is long enough. Although the Knight's reference to his limited powers is a traditional *captatio benevolentiae*, it strikes a very different note from Boccaccio's selfconfident epic invocations. The image of the oxen and plough is homely and unpretentious, and the idea it conjures up of the rest of the tale stretching before its teller like a great, untilled field conveys some of the nervous discomfort felt by the amateur who sets out to tell a story without fully controlling it, knowing that in any case his best hope is to shorten it where he can.

The Knight's difficulties in discharging his unaccustomed artistic responsibilities surface most spectacularly in his description of Arcite's funeral rites. He recounts in some detail the procession of mourners from Athens to the place of immolation (the same grove where Palamon and Arcite first fought for Emelye), and then launches into an *occupatio* forty-seven lines long, in which he describes the rest of the obsequies (including funeral games) while protesting that he will not do so! The distension of a curtailing device to a size that completely defeats its rhetorical intent is a masterful comic stroke on Chaucer's part, but also a strategy designed to drive home the impression of the amateur poet unable to control his material.

Precariousness of control in fact constitutes a main theme of the "Knight's Tale," linking the Knight's ad hoc artistic activities with the political, and finally philosophical, program of Theseus by which the Athenian duke attempts to solve the potentially disruptive problem of Palamon and Arcite. And behind Theseus lies yet a deeper level of unresolved tension: the ambivalence of the Knight about life's meaning, as revealed in his treatment of his characters. At this last, most profound level, Chaucer confronts the paradoxes inherent in chivalry, and thereby transforms Boccaccio's literary tour de force into a troubling anatomy of an archaic but, in his day, still influential ideal of the noble life.

The theme of precarious control finds emblematic embodiment in a detail included by the Knight in his description (absent in Boccaccio) of the preparations for the tournament battle between Palamon and Arcite. Amidst the bustle of knights, squires, blacksmiths, musicians, and expert spectators sizing up the combatants, he directs our attention to "the fomy stedes on the golden brydel / Gnawynge"□a superb image of animal passion at its most elemental, restrained by the civilizing force of the (symbolic, we feel) golden bridle, but clearly anxious to throw off restraint and liberate energy. The golden bridle is a microcosm of the entire artifice of civilization□the officially sanctioned tournament and the lists in which it is held□with which Theseus seeks to enclose and control the love-inspired martial energy of Palamon and Arcite. The lists deserve attention as a focal point of the "Knight's Tale" that illustrates with special clarity Chaucer's intent in transforming the *Teseida.* Chaucer has Theseus build them especially for this battle (in Boccaccio the *teatro* where the tournament is held pre-exists the rivalry of Palemone and Arcita); they are thus an emblem of his authority and wisdom in dealing with the young Thebans who threaten him politically and who wish to marry his ward. Furthermore, the description of the lists constitutes the sole instance

when the Knight, abandoning *occupatio*, waxes eloquent and self-confidently poetic. The lists, therefore, fuse the high point of the Knight's art of language and Theseus's art of government.

Theseus orders the lists to be built after he interrupts Palamon and Arcite fighting viciously, up to their ankles in blood, in the woods outside Athens to decide who will have Emelye. The tournament which the lists will house, and of which Theseus will be the "evene juge . . . and trewe", represents a revision of his first intention, which was to kill the young combatants when he accidentally comes upon them□one a fugitive from his prison, the other under sentence of perpetual exile from Athens□fighting on his territory without his permission: "Ye shal be deed, by myghty Mars the rede!" This second, less furious response of Theseus to the love-inspired violence of his former prisoners is also a second, more legal chance for Palamon and Arcite to fight over Emelye. Theseus controls himself, and thus controls the lovers' behavior. And since the lists are built on the very spot where Theseus found Palamon and Arcite in battle, the imposition of the constructed edifice on the hitherto wild grove provides yet another image of civilized control, this time over nature.

The significance of the lists grows as we learn that Theseus calls together all the master craftsmen and artists of his realm to perform the work of construction; indeed, in the light of these facts, and of the extended description of the finished product, we are justified in hearing echoes of Genesis (echoes that emphasize Theseus' powers of control) in the Knight's comment ending his account: "Theseus, / That at his grete cost arraryed thus / The temples and the theatre every deel / Whan it was doon, hym lyked wonder weel." But if Theseus is the deity behind this work of art and government, he must share the honors of godhead with the Knight, who not only uses the same verb, "devyse," to denominate the activities of those who made the lists and his own activity in describing it, but also (with artistic ineptitude but, for Chaucer, thematic significance) destroys the distance between his reality and that of his tale by describing, as if he had seen them, the insides of the temples built at three compass points atop the round enclosure of the lists ("Ther saugh I . . ."). Although the Knight clearly admires Theseus more than any other character throughout his tale, nowhere does he identify himself so directly with his surrogate as here, where both are constructing a universal image of their willed authority over their respective poetic and political worlds.

In the *Teseida*, we hear of the "teatro eminente," where the tournament will be held, at the beginning of Book Seven, but no details of its construction are given until stanzas 108-110, and then a mere twenty-four lines suffice (as opposed to Chaucer's two hundred). In between, various activities and speeches reduce the *teatro* to the periphery of our attention. Chaucer, instead, moves directly from Theseus' decision to build the lists to the elaborate description of them. He also includes in the description (and the structure) the temples to Mars, Venus, and Diana, which in the *Teseida* are not earthly but celestial edifices to which the prayers of Palemone, Arcita, and Emilia ascend. The cumulative effect of Chaucer's compression and redistribution of Boccaccian detail is to make of the lists the poem's dominant image, and a true *theatrum mundi:* an image of the universe, with men below and gods above (the temples are located above the gates

or in a turret), and Theseus in the middle, imposing order and public legitimacy on the private passions of Palamon and Arcite.

Seen in this light, the lists are also a concrete, palpable version and foreshadowing of the cosmic order, held together by Jupiter's "cheyne of love", which Theseus invokes in his last act of control, his proposal and arrangement of a marriage between Palamon and Emelye some years after Arcite's death. And, because of the selfconsciousness of the Knight about his artistry, the lists also claim a place in the cosmic order for poetry□not Boccaccio's epic-revival art, with its purely literary and aesthetic triumphalism, but a socially useful poetry that reflects and promotes cosmic order in a manner analogous to the deeds of a good governor. The close relationship between the enterprises of Theseus and the Knight is suggested by the direct juxtaposition of the passage expressing the Duke's godlike satisfaction in his creation and this other judgment on the quality of the painting (i.e., of the poetic description) in the temples: "Wel koude he peynten lifly that it wroghte; / With many a floryn he the hewes boghte."

The mention of the costs attendant upon the artist's triumph provides a transition to the larger costs of the ordering activities undertaken by Theseus. First of all, the gods Mars, Venus, and Diana are presented by Chaucer as much more threatening to human happiness than their Boccaccian equivalents, thanks to the later poet's insertion into the temple ecphrases of an accumulation of details illustrating catastrophic divine intervention in human life. More crucially, Chaucer invents the figure of Saturn, grandfather of Venus and Mars and presiding deity over the greatest human disasters, who undertakes to solve the problem created by his grandchildren's respective partisanship for Palamon and Arcite: Venus has promised to answer Palamon's prayer for Emelye, Mars Arcite's for victory. Theseus, acting as patron of the Theban princes, calls the lists into being, but the last word belongs to Saturn, who undertakes to use Theseus' creation to assert his own patronage over the celestial counterparts of Palamon and Arcite. Hence the question arises: has Theseus's activity, culminating in the building of the lists, really imposed order on potentially disruptive passions of love and prowess, or has it merely provided a compact and intensified "inner circle" within which the passions□ and the uncontrollable divine destiny that sponsors them□can operate to intensify human misery?

This is a sobering question, and not, I believe, one that can easily be answered positively or negatively from the data given us by the "Knight's Tale," albeit many critics have tried, over the years, to argue for Chaucer's philosophical optimism (or more rarely, pessimism) on the basis of the "Tale."

It seems to me more useful to search out the source of this deep ambivalence about human happiness□ about whether the golden bridle and the lists control human violence or merely license and intensify it□and thereby to understand more clearly the poet's intent in creating the "Knight's Tale." And here, in my view, is where the fact that the Tale is told by a professional warrior becomes extremely important.

Chaucer establishes the Knight's professional perspective on the tale he tells□and on life itself□ in several passages, too frequently ignored by critics, describing events and

feelings directly related to the career of a practitioner of martial chivalry. One such passage I have already mentioned: the powerfully mimetic description of the preparations for the tournament, rich with the closely observed sights and sounds of the stable, the grounds, and even the palace, where would-be experts, like bettors at a race track, choose their favorites in the coming contest:

Somme helden with hym with the blake berd, Somme with the balled, some with the thikke herd; Somme seyde, he looked grymme, and he wolde fighte, etc.

In another passage, the Knight describes the various choices of weaponry made by the participants, and ends his catalogue with the purely professional, almost bored comment: "Ther is no newe gyse [of weapon] that it nas old."

The Knight's treatment of the aftermath of the tournament is as professional (almost disturbingly so) in its tone as it is amateurish in its distortion of the narrative line of his tale. When Arcite is thrown from his horse while parading around the lists in apparent triumph, the Knight immediately declares (as Boccaccio's narrator does not) that this is a critical wound; Arcite is borne to bed, "alwey criynge after Emelye." The picture is infinitely pathetic: the tournament's victor pleads, as if to the heavens, for the prize he should now be enjoying, were it not for their intervention to deny it to him just when it seemed in his grasp. At this point, the Knight abruptly forsakes his wounded protagonist (and the story line) to describe in detail how Theseus entertained the rest of the tournament contestants, minimizing Arcite's injury□"he nolde noght disconforten hem alle"□and assuring them that there have been no real losers on this occasion: after all, "fallyng [as Arcite did] nys nat but an aventure," and to be captured (as Palamon was) by twenty men cannot be accounted cowardice or "vileynye." Theseus seeks to head off "alle rancour and envye" that might lead to post-tournament disruptions of the peace, of a kind that Knight would have seen often enough at tournaments in his day: the Duke calms the feelings of the warriors and holds a feast for them, then leads them out of town. The Knight reports Theseus' diplomacy here with the quiet approval of one who has himself been so entertained after numerous melees, and therefore recognizes how the Duke has effectively defused a potentially dangerous situation□yet another instance of his ability to control life. (By contrast, the purely rhetorical performance of Teseo at the analogous point in the *Teseida* is, as we have seen, greeted with some skepticism by its recipients; moreover, Boccaccio's version entirely lacks the verisimilar, "locker room" details of the combatants treating their wounds and talking about the fight after it is over□details that underscore the Knight's familiarity with the scene he is describing.)

The Knight's professional perspective also endows the tournament fighting with a dimension of mimetic power foreign to Boccaccio. The alliterative vigor with which the combat unfolds and the brilliant description of Palamon's capture, despite the fury of his resistance, owing to sheer force of numbers, convince us that a soldier is letting us see the martial life through his eyes, not (as in the *Teseida*) through the eyes of a poet steeped in epic conventions. But our deepest penetration into the Knight's vocational psyche comes, not in the lists, but when Palamon and Arcite are preparing to fight in the woods for the right to woo Emelye. Arcite, who has gone to Athens for two suits of armor, returns:

And on his horse, allone as he was born,
He carieth all the harneys him biforn.
And in the grove, at tyme and place yset,
This Arcite and this Palamon ben met.
Tho chaungen gan the colour in hir face,
Right as the hunters in the regne of Trace,
That stondeth at the gappe with a spere,
Whan hunted is the leon or the bere,
And hereth hym come russhyng in the greves,
And breketh both the bowes and the leves,
And thynketh, 'Heere cometh my mortal enemy!
Withoute faille, he moot be deed, or I;
For outher I moot sleen hym at the gappe,
Or he moot sleen me, if that me myshappe';
So ferden they in chaunging of hir hewe. . .

The Knight evokes a Hemingwayesque moment of truth to describe what it feels like to be about to undertake a "mortal bataille"□an experience the "General Prologue" of the *Canterbury Tales* tells us he has had fifteen times. The loneliness of the moment of truth is stressed at the beginning of this passage, and the role of Fortune ("myshappe") at its conclusion. The chilling insight and particular details of this passage are entirely the Knight's (and Chaucer's), yet it has a Boccaccian point of departure, comparison with which makes Chaucer's skill and his interests even more obvious. In *Teseida* vii, when Palemone and Arcita arrive at the *teatro* on the day of the tournament, each with his hundred followers, Boccaccio sums up the feelings on hearing each other's party and the roar of the crowd by using the simile of the hunter waiting for the lion. But the effect is deflating, not exalting: the hunter is so afraid, he wishes he had not spread his snares; as he waits, he wavers between being more and less terrified. So the young princes, facing their moment of truth, think better of their daring: "within their hearts they suddenly felt their desire become less heated." From this cynical, comic moment, Chaucer fabricates a perception of the teeth-gritting readiness for death that the professional warrior must take with him into battle. With this moment, we plumb the absolute depths of the Knight's vision of life as a deadly, and arbitrary, business. This sense underlies another wonderfully apt remark he makes just before the escaped Palamon discovers the disguised Arcite in the grove outside Athens:

No thyng ne knew he that it was Arcite;
God woot he wolde have trowed it ful lite.
But sooth is seyd, go sithen many yeres,
That 'feeld hath eyen and the wode hath eres.'
It is ful fair a man to bere hym evene,
For al day meeteth men at unset stevene.

Fortune, that is, will bring together men without an appointment, and the result may well be, as it is this time, that a fight will result. The warrior must live with one hand on the hilt of his sword; he cannot expect ample warning about when to use it. This fatalistic sense of life, quite amoral in its recognition of the uncontrollable element in human affairs, seems to me to lead the Knight toward two contrary sets of conclusions, reflected in his tale's ambivalence about the possibility of order in the world. First, by

stressing the arbitrariness of events, he succeeds in reducing all of his protagonists except Theseus to the level of playthings of large forces they cannot control. Palamon and Arcite are found by *pilours*, pillagers, in a heap of dead bodies on the field outside Thebes. "Out of the taas the pilours han hem torn," and this wrenching, almost Caesarean "birth" of the young heroes into the story, so different in tone from the courteous rescue afforded them by Teseo's men at this point in the *Teseida*, gives way inside three lines of verse to Theseus' decision to send them "to Atthenes, to dwellen in prisoun, / Perpetuelly" in a tower. The import of this brusque movement from *taas* to *tour*, with all Boccaccio's intervening civilities ruthlessly extirpated, is inescapable: life is a prison into which we are born as Fortune's minions. From this point of view, the rest of Palamon's and Arcite's life is a passage in and out of prison, with the differences between captivity and liberation so blurred that at one point Arcite can call his release from the tower through the intervention of Perotheus a sentence "to dwelle / Noght in purgatorie, but in helle", while prison, instead, is "paradys." Furthermore, the subsequent enclosures prepared for them by Theseus seem as imprisoning as the tower; even the lists, in this reading, render the young princes helpless before Saturn's whim, which is as arbitrary as Theseus' initial decision to imprison them, but more deadly. When Arcite is thrown from his horse, he is "korven out of his harneys" and carried off to die□a grim act of release that recalls his being torn out of the *taas*, and supports a dark view of life as a succession of equally brutal operations of imprisonment and release performed upon humanity by an indifferent or hostile universe.

The Knight, when he espouses this dark view, becomes practically as heedless of the feelings of his characters as is Saturn. He makes fun of the young lovers, and turns their heartfelt, Boethian complaints about the meaning of this cruel life into a *dubbio*, or love-problem game, at the end of Part One. He leers at Emelye as she performs her rites of purification before praying to Diana to remain a virgin (a prayer doomed to rejection), and, as we have seen, he leaves the wounded Arcite crying for Emelye while he recapitulates Theseus's diplomatic treatment of the rest of the tournament combatants. We are surely intended by Chaucer to blanch in horror at the grim levity with which the Knight ends his expert description of Arcite's mortal condition:

Nature hath now no dominacioun,
And certeinly, ther Nature wol not wirche,
Fare wel physik! go ber the man to chirche!

It is against this strand of professionallyinspired pessimism and stoicism that the image of Theseus the bringer of order must be placed□as the mouthpiece of a philosophical optimism that expresses the Knight's pulling back from the edge of the abyss to which his sense of death and fortune leads him. Like Statius so many centuries before him, the Knight needs Theseus, and at the ending of his tale allows Theseus' last diplomatic initiative complete success. Invoking the order of the universe to explain to the still grief-stricken Palamon and Emelye why they should no longer mourn for Arcite, Theseus counsels them "to maken vertu of necessitee," and "make of sorwes two / O parfit joye, lastynge everemo" by marrying. The rhetoric here is at least in part Boethian□ with, as critics have noted, some odd turns□but the strategy behind it is wholly political. Theseus

has been led to propose the marriage by his desire "to have with certeyn countrees alliaunce, / And have fully of Thebans obeisaunce." For him, this is a dynastic alliance, and thus another imposition of political order on human passions (here, grief). Because the Knight has given vent to his darker perceptions elsewhere in his Tale, however, we are allowed, nay, intended to take some of Theseus' philosophic justifications for his political initiative *cum grano salis.* We know by now how precarious and potentially ironic the Duke's structures of control can be, even if the Knight wishes to forget this.

Indeed, even here, the phrases from Theseus' speech about virtue and necessity, sorrow and joy, encourage us to detect someone's desperation whether Theseus' or the Knight's is not clear to find an alternative to the dark despair that flooded the poem with Arcite's death. The lingering influence of that despair inheres in Theseus' reference to "this foule prisoun of this lyf", a phrase ironically recalling the tower to which he condemned Palamon and Arcite early in the story, thus literally making their life a prison.

The secret of Chaucer's re-creation of the *Teseida* as the "Knight's Tale" lies, then, in his vivid and profound comprehension of the tensions that might well exist within the *Weltanschauung* of a late medieval mercenary warrior. Or perhaps he simply appreciated the contradictions in his society's concept of chivalry. The knight of Chaucer's day carried with him a very mixed baggage of Christian idealism, archaic and escapist codes of conduct, aesthetically attractive routines of pageantry, and a special function as the repository of skills and graces appropriate to the training of young aristocrats. In his famous "General Prologue" portrait, Chaucer's own knight possesses a high moral character of an archaic (if not totally imaginary) kind: "fro the time that he first began / To riden out, he loved chivalrie, / Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie". He combines this idealism of outlook and behavior ("he nevere yet no vileynie ne sayde / In al his lyf unto no maner wight") with a thoroughly professional mercenary career that has taken him to most of the places where the noble warrior's virtues and skills could be practiced during Chaucer's day. This synthetic phenomenon, the idealistic killer (he had "foughten for oure feith at Tramyssene / In lystes thries, and ay slayn his foo"), embodies in his person some but not all of the main strands of chivalry. His son, the Squire who accompanies him on the pilgrimage, supplements these by personifying the virtuosic and aesthetic side of late medieval chivalry: he sings, dances, loves hotly, and fights very little. Chaucer's splitting of the chivalric complex into two generationally distinct segments allowed him to isolate what seemed to him the real paradox of chivalry its imposition of moral idealism on a deadly, and therefore potentially nihilistic, profession for treatment in the "Knight's Tale," leaving its decorative aspects to be teased in the harmlessly inept story told (but not completed) by the Squire, himself an unfinished creature, when his turn comes on the road to Canterbury.

The "Knight's Tale," reflecting as it does the problematic view of life implicit in a code that seeks to moralize and dignify aggression, looks back across the centuries to enter into dialogue with the last book of Statius' *Thebaid*, as well as with Boccaccio's *Teseida*, on the question of what Charles Muscatine calls "the struggle between noble designs and chaos." Reading Chaucer's chivalric tale with its ancestry in mind heightens our appreciation of both the uniqueness of his art and the continuities of its tradition.

Source: Robert W. Hanning, "'The Struggle between Noble Designs and Chaos': The Literary Tradition of Chaucer's 'Knight's Tale,'" in *Literary Review*, Vol. 23, No. 4, Summer 1980, pp. 519-41.

Critical Essay #12

In the following essay, Harwood defends his assertion that "Chaucer was creating a human being" when constructing the character of the Wife of Bath.

The sad note some hear in the voice of the Wife of Bath can be interpreted as "die letzte Süsse in den schweren Wein," a hint of sourness showing that, with age, her deep enjoyments have begun to turn. From the viewpoint of those who understand the Wife as a stock character, this sad note, if not attributed to critical ingenuity, is assimilated to the Wife's type as a picturesque, individuating detail or as the bitter recognition, coming amidst our common celebration of the created world, that time holds us "green and dying." Her "allas!," then, would be "the song of the indestructibility of the people," "of the finite with the vulgar interstices and smells, which lies below all categories." However, to maintain that the "absurdity" of such characters as the Wife "inveigles us into . . . conspiring with them to make them real and lifelike," that she becomes lifelike by representing a class, and that Chaucer manipulates her "with an entire disregard for . . . psychological probability" seems to me to leave many parts of her performance in only the slightest connection with other parts. Assuming for the moment that the sad note is as close to her center as her willful gaiety and her insistence on fleshly enjoyment, I wish to throw in with those who believe that, in writing lines for the Wife, Chaucer was conceiving a human being. A denial that the Wife's "make-up . . . is subtle or complex" seems to me to encounter difficulty with the third line she speaks:

Experience, though noon auctoritee Were in this world, is right ynogh for me To speke of wo that is in mariage. This unhappiness in marriage is generally equated, *tout court*, with the defeats borne by her subjugated husbands. She does not need secondhand knowledge of this grief, she is taken to mean, because she knows it at first hand, having caused it. "These opening lines of the Wife's Prologue are actually an introduction not to the 'sermon,'" R. A. Pratt has maintained, "but to the account of woe in marriage," not, that is, to lines 9-162, based upon Jerome's *Epistola adversus Jovinianum*, but to the parts of her Prologue which follow the Pardoner's interruption and draw on Deschamps, Theophrastus, and Walter Map as well as Jerome.

In the first place, however, as her first line anticipates, she does in fact proceed to dispute authority□ principally the apostle Paul□although not about the misfortunes of milquetoasts. Secondly, it is not true that "the account of woe in marriage" begins only after the Pardoner intrudes. If "wo" and "tribulacion" mean the same thing, the mention of it seems to *cause* the Pardoner's interruption:

An housbonde I wol have, I wol nat lette,
Which shal be bothe my dettour and my thral,
And have his tribulacion withal
Upon his flessh, whil that I am his wyf.

No more than previously does she dispute Paul in these lines by misunderstanding the plain meaning of his words. With "wo" or "tribulacion" of the "flessh," she echoes 1

Corinthians 7:28 ("Si autem acceperis uxorem, non peccasti, et si nupserit virgo, non peccavit; tribulationem tamen carnis habebunt hujusmodi"), and she means, as Paul did, the painful test posed in marriage by the temptation to lubricity. As Augustine explains, "the Apostle . . . was unwilling to conceal the tribulation of the flesh springing from carnal emotions, from which the marriage of those who lack self-control can never be free. . ." In his comment on the same verse, Rabanus Maurus, having asked why tribulations of the flesh were greater for wedded folk than virgins, responds that these trials arise from the body itself, since these troubles were the satisfaction of the desires of the body. While the Parson will allow "that for thre thynges a man and his wyf flesshly mowen assemble," he knows that "scarsly may ther any of thise be withoute venial synne, for the corrupcion and for the delit." The tribulations, then, are the travail of continence, the efforts with which one controls the emotions that are "rebel to resoun and the body also"; further, they are the temporal punishment for the venial sin of incontinence in marriage.

But they are also the appetite and its satisfaction; and by a familiar trick of religious language, the Wife like the Apostle is using "wo" to mean sexual pleasure.

The context in which the Wife mentions the "tribulacion" of the flesh is her defense of sexuality in marriage: because man and wife maintain the other's honor by relinquishing power over the body to the other, the Wife will have a husband who will "be bothe my dettour and my thral." The context, then, has nothing to do with "tegumenta, . . . uxoris necessitas, mariti dominatio"□"tribulacion" belonging to "another tonne." Similarly with "dette."

Before the Pardoner interrupts, the Wife's husbands pay their "dette" by collaborating with her in sexual satisfaction. The sexual organs must have been created "for ese / Of engendrure," she argues: "Why sholde men elles in hir bookes sette / That man shal yelde to his wyf hire dette?" If she were describing herself here as a "whippe," her husband could not possibly love her "weel," as she approvingly quotes Paul as telling him to do. When the husband takes the initiative and wishes to "paye his dette," the Wife says she will use her "instrument . . . frely." Again, the Wife disagrees with Paul about the dangers of carnal pleasure; but she understands "dette" as he did: the spouse's usual obligation, spiritual cost notwithstanding, to give sexual relief and solace. Where she had promised "experience," the Wife's Prologue to this point is highly theoretical□that is, hypothetical. And there is simply no way to predict that "tribulacion" will mean quarreling, and debt and thralldom the plight of the man whose wife will not suffer his advances until he promises to buy her a present.

Before the Pardoner interrupts, then, we have three points which are evidently inconsistent: (1) "wo . . . in mariage" the Wife surely knows to be unpleasant for someone; (2) she insists she may lawfully marry for sexual fruition; and (3) "tribulacion," debt, and thralldom are sexual and participate in that fruition.

This apparent inconsistency is removed if all of the Wife's Prologue up to the Pardoner's intrusion is, as I think, an enormous red herring. This is something quite apart from the invalidity of her arguments, however telling that might be. She no sooner mentions her

five marriages to verify her knowledge of married "wo" than she uses the plurality of her marriages as a pivot on which to turn to a diversive defense, first of bigamy and then of carnal pleasure between husband and wife. The very argument for the lawfulness of this pleasure is irrelevant to the Wife, because nearly all of it, she goes on to recall, has been found *outside* her marriages. Even with Jankyn, fun in bed is explicitly part of that first phase of their marriage when he is "daungerous" to her; for after the night they "fille acorded," they "hadden never debaat." On their sexual relationship afterwards, she is significantly silent. There is no question of sexual pleasure with the first three mates. As opposed to the (carnal) love for a woman which the married state pardons and the Wife misleadingly defends, the "love" won by the Wife from her three husbands takes the form of "lond and . . . tresoor"; on the attempts at love-making she derisively exacts from them ("love" in the sense parallel to "tribulacion" in 1 Cor. 7:28), she places no value. In fact, as we shall observe, she may not ultimately use sex for pleasure at all. She holds marriage to be good as a natural context for propagation and pleasure. Yet she herself has had no "delit" in "bacon" and is evidently childless. She insists that she will devote the best of herself to "fruyt of mariage," yet there has been no fruit either in the sense of children or, in her first four marriages at least, sexual *fruitio.* To protest that she is innocent, she exonerates marriage, while the "wo" actually arises with the uses to which she has put marriage.

The Wife's discourse, taking off from the experience of woe into an argumentative evasion full of theological categories and putative pleasure, includes the Pauline (that is, the metaphoric) use of "tribulacion" and "dette." The redundancy of "bothe my dettour and my thral" may be suspiciously vehement, however; and confronted by this aggressive and sturdy matron, the delicately constituted Pardoner penetrates far into her history by archly misinterpreting "tribulacion" in a reductive and literal way: "What sholde I bye it on my flessh so deere?" Since "tribulacion" as the Wife had used it means the temptation to sinful coitus, the Pardoner's question changes the sense of "tribulacion" to agree with his obvious inability to exchange sexual (or at least heterosexual) pleasure. His incapacity may even remind the Wife of her first three husbands'. To this changed sense of "tribulacion," then, she responds with a vengeance, accommodating her own meaning to the Pardoner's: of *this* "tribulacion in mariage," she says, "myself have been the whippe." And she turns to the notable abuse actually visited upon her mates. The change in meaning is equally clear in her treatment of the marriage "dette": before the Pardoner interrupts, she says that she uses her "instrument . . . frely" whenever her hypothetical husband likes to "paye his dette." After the interruption, she records that, whenever one of her first three husbands was similarly inclined, he found that nothing was free; the "dette" has become quite literal and pecuniary.

The authorities assert that guilt□the arduous resistance to it, the consequences of it□is the "wo" in marriage. While the Wife contends otherwise, her own "experience" is conclusive. Anyone listening for the dominant's persistence in her narrative of married life will soon hear the language of the broker. The Pardoner sets the motif by speaking of buying marriage with his flesh, and the Pauline metaphors of "debt" and "payment" thereafter broaden into a whole vocabulary of commerce.

The Wife will trouble to be agreeable only if it is profitable: "What sholde I taken keep hem for to plese, / But it were for my profit and myn ese?" On the other hand, her ability to carp and nag is also lucrative; for to buy relief from it, her husbands hasten to bring her "gaye thynges fro the fayre." Since a husband is a practical necessity, she is careful to buy one against her future needs: she is "purveyed of a make." There is a quid pro quo even in harsh words: she never took criticism without paying her spouse back for it. Because her fourth husband has been particularly difficult, she holds back on the money for his tomb. She and her first three live by the "cheste," and she disposes of the fourth by cheaply burying him in his.

The commerce extends beyond this, for in marriage she approximates the condition of a prostitute. She imputes to the first three mates a statement that may apply to herself: an ugly woman, she makes them say, will covet every man that she may se, For as a spaynel she wol on hym lepe, Tyl that she fynde som man hire to chepe.

Alice is quite clear that she sells her favors: if one of her old husbands ever stinted on the fee, then at night, when she felt his arm come over her side, she would leave the bed "Til he had maad his raunson unto me." Her body is her equity and no husband will expropriate it: "Thou shalt nat bothe, thogh that thou were wood, / Be maister of my body and of my good." He can deal or not, as he likes, but one of them he must "forgo." Although the husband is a rapacious beast, she must trade with him for her profit:

With empty hand men may none haukes lure.
For wynnyng wolde I al his lust endure,
And make me a feyned appetit.

At forty-plus, this Mother Courage has to work harder at her business. One argument for marriage offered sardonically by Jerome is that it is preferable to be a prostitute for one man than for many. While the Wife overlooks it (pointedly, I am tempted to say), some allusion to her being literally a whore is inevitable: you're a lucky man that I'm faithful to you, she tells one or more of her old husbands, "For if I wolde selle my *bele chose*, / I koude walke as fressh as is a rose." She keeps a green memory of her youth, but here is the fruit of her age: "Wynne whoso may, for al is for to selle." The "sovereignty" and "mastery" that the Wife exercises over her fifth husband (and that the Loathly Lady reveals to be what women most desire) are commonly understood as the Wife's power to obtain such things as fine clothes, her husbands' flattery, and freedom to roam—all the things, in short, we have just heard her buying with her sexual acquiescence. If sovereignty be the sum of these wifely prerogatives, it is curious that they appear in the Tale only to be discarded as wrong answers and that the Loathly Lady takes pains to dissociate herself from them. Before encountering the hag, the rapist knight polls the ladies:

Somme seyde wommen loven best richesse,
Somme seyde honour, somme seyde jolynesse,
Somme riche array, somme seyden lust abedde.

These and others (flattery, gallivanting, and so on) are precisely the profits won by the Wife with her hard bargains. They are also short of the mark, for they are not sovereignty, unless that is only the power to obtain all of them—and this would seem a barren quibble. What appears most striking is that the Loathly Lady, who will enjoy "maistrie" over her own knight even as the Wife has "maistrie . . . [and] soveraynetee" over Jankyn, repudiates exactly the commerce already surveyed in some detail. The knight tries to get her secret with a bribe:

"Koude ye me wisse, I wolde wel quite youre hire," he says; but she will have no part of it. Constrained to marry her, the knight echoes exactly the commercial alternatives offered by the Wife: "Taak al my good, and lat my body go."

But the Lady refuses to negotiate:

"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."

Nor does the hag forgo wealth for sex, as the Wife tries to do with Jankyn. Neither before nor after her transformation does she exhibit a marked sexual interest in the knight; on the contrary, she knows what *he* likes and troubles to satisfy all his "worldly appetit."

For the moment I wish to put aside the question of the meaning of "sovereignty" in order to consider some of the effects of the Wife's having made her way by trading upon her youth and beauty. The basic consequence, of course, is guilt. "I koude pleyne," says the Wife, "and yit was in the gilt," and later: "be we never so vicious withinne, / We wol been holden wise and clene of synne." Hence her hatred of Jankyn's uncomplaisant book. Because "love" to her, when it is not income, is sexual fruition, it is found outside those marriages in which she must feign an interest in the "bacon." Love is "evere . . . synne" because for her it is either prostitution or adultery. Moreover, she seems to understand that sin, being unlovely, makes her unlovely, and that so far as she is not loved she is perceived as guilty. (In the Tale, conversely, the Loathly Lady takes the position that, if she is innocent, she is therefore lovable.) The revels of her fourth husband assume and reflect the very absence of virtue in her that she herself had to assume, from the age of twelve, in negotiating the price of her innocence. The "greet despit" in "herte" which he makes her feel is perhaps not merely sexual jealousy, but rather the suffering—an unredemptive "croce"—that comes from being perceived as unlovely; and the Wife brings death with her even from Jerusalem. Her own guiltiness being a kind of hell (women's love is "helle," she says at one point), and the fourth husband having shown it to her, he is made to share it: "in erthe I was his purgatorie." Because the husbands of her youth are old and thick with lust, the Wife overpowers and outwits them easily in driving her bargains. There are no sales, however, without buyers. And having conspired in the commerce, they share her guilt and take their punishment:

As help me God, I laughe whan I thynke How pitously a-nyght I made hem swynke! And, by my fey, I tolde of it no stoor. I sette hem so a-werke, by my fey, That many a nyght they songen "weilawey!"

After dishing out such a drubbing, she might say:

Goode lief, taak keep
How mekely looketh Wilkyn, oure sheep!
Com neer, my spouse, lat me ba thy cheke!
Ye sholde been al pacient and meke. . .
Suffreth alwey, syn ye so wel kan preche;
And but ye do, certein we shal yow teche
That it is fair to have a wyf in pees. . .
What eyleth yow to grucche thus and grone?
Is it for ye wolde have my queynte allone?
Wy, taak it al! lo, have it every deel!
Peter! I shrewe yow, but ye love it weel; . . .
But I wol kepe it for youre owene tooth.
Ye be to blame, by God! I sey yow sooth.

Despite a possible nuance of tormented motherhood (she offers the "queynte" as she might have offered the teat), the pervasive tone is fiercely and sardonically patronizing. She knows that she is "in the gilt" and yet knows also, I think, that in a sense he *is* "to blame." The Wife invents a dream about her bed's being full of blood□blood that actually symbolizes gold, she says. In the Tale, the knight rapes the maiden and tries to bribe the lady; in the Prologue the twelve-year-old girl is raped by *being* bribed. The "haukes" lured to her hand leave the bed bloody with nobles and shillings. That Alice shares the guilt does not lessen the dishonor. As the wife of Midas had to reveal her husband's "vice," Alice admits that she could not keep it a secret if her husbands ever pissed upon a wall, or did anything like that. They do, and she can't.

For the sexual appetite to be imaged as fire is usual enough: the Wife's "queynte" is a kind of lantern, and a little later she describes "wommenes love" as "wilde fyr; / The moore it brenneth, the moore it hath desir / To consume every thyng that brent wole be." More remarkable is the thirst that goes with it for the water that might quench the flame. Women's love is a waterless land. Midas's wife, "hir herte . . . a-fyre," rushes to the marsh and lays her mouth against the water. With her "likerous mouth" and "tayl," Alice thirsts, paradoxically, for the same sexual experience with which she burns. She wishes she might be "refresshed" just half so often as Solomon. Christ may be the "welle" of perfection, but like this woman from "biside Bathe," the Samaritan with her five husbands is linked with another "welle"□the image of the unsatisfied "queynte."

At bottom, the Wife thirsts for innocence, relief from the fact of guilt. Thanks to her nativity, she says,

I koude noght withdrawe
My chambre of Venus from a good felawe . . .

For God so wys be my savacioun,
I ne loved nevere by no discrecioun,
But evere folwede myn appetit,
Al were he short, or long, or blak, or whit;
I took no kep, so that he liked me,
How poore he was, ne eek of what degree.

"Just as long as he liked *me.*" Here is every nymphomaniac, whispering in the dark, "Love me a little." In the first phase of their marriage, Jankyn is such a "good felawe," periodically interrupting his clerical castigation of her to "glose" her into producing her "*bele chose*." Leading through infinite adultery, thus exacerbating the guilt ("Allas! allas! that evere love was synne!"), and revealing itself as basic to the Wife's sense of "wo" in marriage, this thirst is self-defeating: the more it burns, "the moore it hath desir / To consume every thyng that brent wole be." She attempts to quench it with the "queynte," which is fire itself. Not only the Pardoner has a deadly barrel thrust to his lips.

This "coltes tooth"□not merely undiminished sexual vigor, but, motivating it, a longing that the buried and dishonored child has never ceased to feel□leads on to her bad bargain with Jankyn of the well-turned legs. He entertains her with his pleasant anthology of authors who take her categorical imperatives of instability, violence, and lechery and give them the maddening amplitude and inevitability of history. What maddens her most may be its incompleteness. She has not, after all, done this to herself all by herself:

By God! if wommen hadde writen stories,
As clerkes han withinne hire oratories,
They wolde han writen of men moore wikkednesse
Than al the mark of Adam may redresse.

Holding the trump of sexual uninterest, Jankyn evens an old score by reciting at his leisure the same charges the Wife had imputed to her earlier husbands: the uxorious spouses doubtless knew that the charges were true, and yet knew as well that they had not made them. Therefore, obliged to confirm and deny at the same time, they were too weakened by desire and too confused to do either, and the Wife had swept the field. But Jankyn reads on implacably, overpowering her first in one way, then in another:

And whan I saugh he wolde nevere fyne
To reden on this cursed book al nyght,
Al sodeynly thre leves have I plyght
Out of his book, right as he radde, and eke
I with my fest so took hym on the cheke
That in oure fyr he fil bakward adoun.
And he up stirte as dooth a wood leoun,
And with his fest he smoot me on the heed,
That in the floor I lay as I were deed.
And whan he saugh how stille that I lay,

He was agast, and wolde han fled his way,
Til atte laste out of my swogh I breyde.

Leaving the Wife for a moment at the point of this utter and ludicrous defeat, we may revert briefly to the matter of sovereignty. In the Middle Ages, marriage was sometimes considered the *iurata fornicatio*, in which sexual pleasure was not something freely given, but encumbered and obligated. The thirsty Wife would invoke the *iurata fornicatio* (the "statut") with her Pauline "dettours." Each mate constrains the other, the only question being who gets to the mill first. The Wife believes that each old husband would lock her in his chest if he could or employ Argus as a "wardecors." Nevertheless, because "love"□that is, wealth□has been exacted from them, even a superfluity of it is valueless for her: "They loved me so wel, by God above, / That I ne tolde no deyntee of hir love!" In the Tale, the knight is "constreyned" to marry the Loathly Lady. The ability to constrain is power. In bartering with her first three husbands, the Wife pits one kind of power against another. The coolness of Jankyn and the blow which, permanently deafening the Wife, leaves her prostrate and stunned epitomize the Wife's married life to that point.

In reaction to the *iurata fornicatio*, there seems to have arisen, at least in twelfth-century France, an ethic of love beginning with generosity. In her beautiful softness, the woman is perceived to be the source of goodness, bestowing her gifts or not according to what she judges to be worthy. Outside the *iurata fornicatio*, power can do nothing but put itself at the service of goodness, and the woman remains free to be good. This giving without constraint is what the Loathly Lady means by "gentillesse." Henri Dupin distinguishes ten qualities signified by "gentillesse" or "courtoisie" as these synonymous terms occur in French poetry, "contes et . . . romans," and moral works of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; and elsewhere in Chaucer they have much of this complexity. The Loathly Lady's meaning, if vague, seems nevertheless reasonably simple: "gentil dedes" depend upon grace. This means, unless she is a heretic, that these must be deeds of charity, "heigh bountee." She distinguishes the uncanny and spontaneous nature of "gentillesse" from the natural functioning of fire: one can set a fire in an isolated house, vacate the house, and still the fire will do its "office natureel . . . til that it dye." It cannot stop burning of its own accord, and yet folk can cease to be generous. Here the grace to do a generous deed is exactly opposed to that fire which the poem identifies with the unquenchable "queynte."

Because the sense of "sovereignty" which comes all too readily to mind with the Wife fits the circumstances a little uneasily, we might consider the alternative. The name given by the man to the lady whom he serves because she is good is *domina.* Aurelius, for example, uses the convention when he tells Dorigen, "Nat that I chalange any thyng of right / Of yow, my sovereyn lady, but youre grace." A woman may well "desiren to have sovereynetee / As wel over hir housbond *as hir love*," because it is the hegemony of gracious liberality over legalized violence.

As the Wife bestirs herself from her swoon, she says,
O! hastow slayn me, false theef? . . .

And for my land thus hastow mordred me?
Er I be deed, yet wol I kisse thee.

Jankyn kneels down beside her and vows never to hit her again. He puts the bridle in her hand, as she says, and burns his book. Why does Jankyn cease to preach? To answer that the Wife has mastered him would be simply tautologous. It is equally futile to believe, as many readers do, that she tricks Jankyn into coming within range and overwhelms him with a dying slap. For this fails to explain not only why he puts a permanent end to his hitherto successful strategy but also why she then goes on to be kind to him where she had abused the others. If this is only a matter of his so satisfying her sexually that she never had cause to chide, it is odd we do not hear of her reveling in "a bath of blisse"; indeed, she recalled that he was "in oure bed . . . so fressh and gay" at the same point she was remembering him as "the mooste shrewe." By contrast, after she has got "the soveraynetee," she describes their emotional relationship as simply "kynde" and "trewe."

Jankyn burns the book because it no longer mirrors the Wife. Have you murdered me for my money? she asks. "Er I be deed, yet wol I kisse thee." The slap she actually gives him does not disconcert him and seems little more than the vestige of a habit dying hard□of always having "the bettre in ech degree" turned now from "substaunce into accident." She depicts it as a gallant effort and her surrender, therefore ("Now wol I dye, I may no lenger speke"), as pathetic. Nevertheless, rather than by a trick, she "masters" Jankyn by appearing in a new way. "Truth comes in blows." At the moment of ridiculous defeat, grace irrupts into her experience. With the offer of one kiss, for the first time in 800 lines she proffers something for nothing. In place of a kiss he gets the nominal slap. But kisses are cheap, the pay-off to a "good felawe," as no one knows better than she. Instead, where she had vowed she would "noght forbere hym in no cas," she does exactly that. By being good□having honor to keep□she is sovereign: Jankyn defers to her because of the way he perceives her. She has described forbearance in a kiss, and he forbears; then she forbears in substance. In recalling the episode, she uses her habitual words, "maistrie"and "soveraynetee," although their meaning has changed. After the arid restlessness of a youth in which everything was up for sale, she becomes another woman with this "gentil dede." And where, in her guilt, she had heaped excruciating abuse upon those who had conspired with her to suborn herself, she pours kindness and fidelity upon Jankyn while he lives and blessings upon him after he dies.

It will be enough simply to record the parallel with the Loathly Lady and the knight. Where the Wife had the grace to do a "gentil dede," the Loathly Lady knows not only *gentillesse* but what women desire and what men ought to desire. The knight's marriage to her can be constrained, but his love must be given. After her bolster sermon, in the dark, the only universe of which he is conscious is her voice, and the unmoved mover of *that* world is her vision of the good. He at last vents many sighs, but they perhaps arise from the kind of turmoil that might precede an act of faith; for it is to her knowledge of goodness that he finally defers: "Cheseth youreself which may be moost plesance, / And moost honour to yow and me also." He amends the dishonor to the maiden by submitting to the honor of the Lady.

Jankyn comes late in a life saturated with the experience of "wo . . . in mariage," and the Wife may well be less than fully conscious of why she blesses him. Except for the gracious interlude with Jankyn, her Prologue establishes the facts of guilt, of a nostalgia for a lost goodness, of factitious gaiety, and of perseverance, not toward a hint of light, but in the gathering darkness. The diminished categories of her realized thought are fairly indicated by the closing lines of her whole performance, in which she wishes for young husbands who are "fressh abedde" and scorns "olde and angry nygardes of dispence." Where the transformed Lady "obeyed" her husband "in every thyng," five lines later the Wife prays for "grace t'overbyde hem that we wedde." With a more conscious and far more sardonic example of the same kind of selfpunishing meiosis, the Pardoner, another guilty soul, will make his obscene pitch to Harry Bailley.

This notwithstanding, the Wife has made up a tale in which, without being altogether aware of doing so, perhaps, she submerges the fact of guilt within a dream of innocence. And we may conclude by having another look at the Tale.

In the Tale, the rapacity which the Wife imputes to friars with her triumphant joke anticipates the dishonor done a solitary girl, presumably of the lower class, by one of Arthur's knights: "By verray force, he rafte hire maydenhed." This rape appears in none of the analogues. As we have already noticed, the knight is doomed to rehabilitation: where force had destroyed the cleanness of virginity, it ends by putting itself at the service of virtue. We have not yet noticed, however, the simple and significant structure of the Tale.

Having been dishonored, the maiden becomes a hag. When honor is vested in her once more, she becomes a maiden again. Logic identifies the post hoc fallacy; poetry thrives on it. In the plot, the rape of the maiden is the way to the Loathly Lady; therefore, the rape of the maiden *causes* the Loathly Lady. Chaucer has not only added the rape to his sources; he has left out the motive for the Lady's ugliness found in the principal analogues. At bottom, the rapist is not simply□or perhaps not at all□a cut of red meat calculated to excite the Wife.

His "verray force" reintroduces all the violence done to her own innocence when she dangled it to lure the hawks. The passing years, the Wife declares in her Prologue, poison everything. But the years of the hag are the instant tetter of a poison which frustrates all refreshment, the guilt of married prostitution and the thirst for infinite adultery. Age and poverty, however wisely she will analyze them, are also a metaphor for her lost innocence; and thus the "leeve mooder" reintroduces to all *appearances* the salacious experience of Alice's own "dame." She is foul with all the jolly sins that buried the child.

In this dream, age and ugliness will drop away like rags, the child will stand revealed, because the knight will restore her honor by perceiving it; *you* are good, he will say, *you* decide. But since the Loathly Lady has minted a fortune in the nasty sty, it is she who in the same bed must cause the man to make the perception□to have him say, without the sexual inducement, that he liked her. The Wife dreams a second chance for her, in which she can ask, "What is my gilt?," and wait for an answer; for there in the dark she

can talk as if her chastity were still to be kept and there were yet "gentil dedes" to be done.

Tell me, says the Wife to the pilgrims. . . Tell me, says the hag to the knight, as she recites in the dark her implacable, inviolable praise of impossible virtue. . . Tell me I was a good girl once. And there in the dark, he does.

Source: Britton J. Harwood, "The Wife of Bath and the Dream of Innocence," in *Modern Language Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 3, September 1972, pp. 257-73.

Critical Essay #13

In the following essay, Lenaghan examines the "General Prologue" as a historical document, asserting that it offers "a richer sense of a civil servant's values than the usual documents afford."

The "General Prologue" is often called a picture of its age and, frequently in the next breath, a satire. In English Lit. this usually draws a stern lecture about confusing the distinction between literature and history, but in this essay, unobserved by my sophomores, I propose to talk about the "General Prologue" as a picture of its age and then, tentatively, about some uses such history might be put to by historians and literary students.

The "General Prologue" has an obvious historical interest as a series of discrete bits of information about dress, customs, etc.; but if it is to be considered as a more general historical formulation, there is a question of coherence. Is Chaucer's fictional society sufficiently coherent to warrant taking it seriously as fourteenth-century sociology? The best reason for an affirmative answer is rather vague. It is simply the strong sense most readers have that Chaucer is sampling, that his pilgrims are representatives. There are certainly omissions from his roll, but he does give good coverage to the middle segment of society. The nature he is imitating is social in a sense that is worthy of a sociologist's regard. To put it rather grandly, Chaucer's imitation has the same general ontological status as the sociologist's model; both are representative fictions. This analogy serves my purpose by temporarily converting the literary fiction into a series of hypothetical propositions which may be examined and defined before they are verified. What are the hypothetical patterns of social organization? Then, were they truly descriptive?

The "General Prologue" suggests at least three different ways of pinning down my general sense of coherence to a more specific pattern of social organization. One would be to invoke the widely familiar theory of the three estates. Chaucer's Knight, Parson, and Plowman do seem to exist as governing ideals, but the effort to classify the pilgrims in one or another of the estates makes it clear that this pattern has the same trouble with the world of the "General Prologue" as it has with the real one. It doesn't account for the complexities of commerce. The second way would be to follow up Chaucer's expressed intention to discuss each pilgrim's degree, but once again Chaucer's society is too complex for clear hierarchical classifications, as he himself suggests. The third, and I think the best, way of establishing a pattern of organization is to infer it from Chaucer's practice and say the obvious: he presents his pilgrims by occupational labels, he is concerned with what men do. In the "General Prologue," as elsewhere, what men do falls largely into the category of economics. There is certainly a generous provision of economic information in the description of the pilgrims, and although there is a good deal of other information as well, the economic information is sufficiently cohesive to justify taking it as the basic matter of my argument. This focus certainly places the discussion within the historian's purview, but it may seem rather less useful for literary study. However, the study of history can illuminate the norms that govern the irony of the "General Prologue," and defining that irony is very much a literary question.

Taking the economic information as basic, then, I shall consider the sources of livelihood for the pilgrims and ask how they lived, according to the information Chaucer gives. These sources fall into three large classes: land, the Church, and trade (understood to include everything not in the other two, manufacture, commerce, and services). My intention is not to treat the pilgrims as representatives of classified occupations but rather to regard them collectively and to infer patterns of life from their descriptions. I am not concerned to place the Miller either in land or in trade or to justify placing the Physician with the others in trade. I want to infer from the various descriptions information about the kind of life provided by land, the Church, and trade. For example, the Man of Law lives by his professional services and so I would classify him in trade, but I am mainly interested in some information his description gives about life based on land.

The descriptions of the Plowman, the Reeve, and the Franklin should provide detailed information about the economics of land, but except for the description of the Reeve the yield is slight. There is much detail about the Franklin but it has very little to do with economics. It shows more about spending than getting, a difference I shall come back to. The Reeve's description, however, tells a good deal more. The first point is obvious enough, his expertise is managerial. It is founded on practical agricultural knowledge in that he can calculate exactly the effect of the weather on yield, and it is founded on a practical knowledge of human nature in that he knows the tricks of all the bailiffs and herdsmen. The two kinds of practical knowledge add up to efficient operation of his lord's establishment, but not necessarily to his lord's profit.

The tight control he maintains over his operations stops with him; no one above him checks up on him as he checks up on those below him. As a result, "ful riche was he astored prively." This leads to a second and less obvious point, a role change. He uses his personal gains as a landholder's agent to establish himself as a landholder in his own right. That, I take it, is the meaning context indicates for the word *purchase:* "His wonyng was ful faire upon an heeth; / With grene trees yshadwed was his place. / He koude bettre than his lord purchase." What is interesting about this role change is the change in the Reeve's activities that it brings about. From hard-nosed managing, which causes him to be feared, he switches to giving and lending, which his lord mistakenly, or at least uncomprehendingly, regards as generous. From sharp practice to the image of generosity, the calculating agent has become a comfortably situated landholder.

This division of activities is significant in the world of the "General Prologue." It shows the social implication of the economic pattern for prosperity: the profits from efficient operation go into the purchase of land, that is, into capital expansion; profits are earned by "operators," the landholder is economically passive. This division of activity also brings into focus some pilgrims like the Franklin who are associated with land by their occupational designations but whose descriptions contain very little practical economic information. Pilgrims deriving their livelihood from land fall into two Chaucerian sub-classes: agents, who see to the operation and expansion of agricultural enterprises; and principals, the landholders. The agents are described by the work they do, the principals by less clearly economic or non-economic activities, by their social activities, their life style.

In addition to the Reeve's work there is another level of agency and another kind of agent's work. This is the legal work of control and capital expansion. In the Manciple's temple there are a dozen lawyers so expert that they are "Worthy to be stywardes of rente and lond. / Of any lord that is in Engelond." The agent's expertise is still managerial but now the basic knowledge is legal. Even on the Reeve's level the emphasis can be shifted from words like *bynne, yeldynge*, and *dayerye*, to words like *covenant*, *rekenynge*, and *arrerage* in order to show the lawyer's concern in stewardship of rent. Legal draughtsmanship is the crucial skill here. The Man of Law "koude endite, and make a thyng, / Ther koude no wight pynche at his writyng." The Man of Law was also expert in the second category of stewardship, land: "So greet a purchasour was nowher noon / Al was fee symple to hym in effect; / His purchasyng myghte nat been infect." Because of the contextual emphasis on legal skill I read *purchasour* as implying agency; the lawyer buys land for his client by removing the legal restrictions to make it as available as if it had been held in fee simple. Chaucer has given more information about farm management than about dirt farming, and as a consequence his agriculture seems rather bureaucratic. Different kinds of agents work at different levels of removal from the land, but socially the important point is that they all work.

The other class of pilgrims deriving their livelihood from land do not work, at least not directly for their own monetary gain. The Franklin's description dwells on the quantity and quality of his table with mention of its sources of supply in his pond and mew. Less noticed, because Chaucer emphasizes them less, are his public offices, which indicate significant service and a somewhat higher social station than he is often credited with. We have a landholder, then, who is defined not by the operation of his holdings but by his hospitality and public offices. The Knight and the Squire divide these tendencies, the Knight being defined by his service and the Squire by his style. The Monk, though not indicated as a landholder, enjoys the position of one. Hunting is expensive sport and he is a great hunter, presumably because he can command some of his monastery's wealth. The Prioress is a ladylike equivalent.

In the "General Prologue" landed wealth supports a variety of social activities. There are sports and entertainment, like the Monk's hunting and the Franklin's table. There are the Franklin's political service and the Knight's military service against the heathen. Somewhere between sport and service come the Squire's activities, ostensibly directed to entertainment but carrying enough suggestion of probationary regimen to indicate a *gentil* imperative. These activities, taken all together, do much to define the life style of gentlemen and ladies.

The supporting wealth comes obviously from agricultural operations and less obviously from capital expansion, and it is earned by the agents who work for the landholders. The two groups are defined by different activities; the agents get and the principals spend, the agents work and the principals amuse themselves and render public service. This is the central pattern of Chaucer's social structure.

This distinction between principals and agents disappears in the loosely assembled activities of commerce, manufacturing, and service that I have grouped together in trade. There, despite the wide social range from the Cook to the Merchant, each of

these pilgrims shares a common necessity to face the rigors of economic competition on his own. The Merchant buys and sells and dabbles in currency exchange. The Wife of Bath is a cloth maker. The Cook puts his culinary skill to hire. Yet somewhat surprisingly the yield of economic particulars is not great. Although we are not definitely told what the commerce of the merchant is, we are given an informal audit of his position, something none of his fellows could get. In other words, the thing that interests the narrator about the Merchant is his balance sheet. It is not perfectly clear whether or not the "dette" is ordinary commercial credit, "chevyssaunce."

It is clear, however, that the Merchant thinks his interest requires secrecy, implying an apprehension of vulnerability, insecurity. On a lower level, the Shipman's pilferage, the Miller's gold thumb and the Manciple's percentage show more directly predatory activities and indicate the rule of precarious individual interest. A more indirect suggestion of such a pattern of life occurs in the description of the guildsmen where the narrator's emphasis falls on their appearance, which is consonant with ceremonial dignity. Each of them was "a fair burgeys / To sitten in a yeldehall on a deys." That status is a reward is not especially illuminating, but the intensity of the competition for it does suggest sharp need and insecurity.

Everich, for the wisdom that he kan,
Was shaply for to been an alderman.
For catel hadde they ynogh and rente,
And eek hir wyves wolde it wel assente;
And elles certeyn were they to blame.
It is ful fair to been ycleped "madame,"
And goon to vigilies al bifore,
And have a mantel roialliche ybore.

Likewise the Wife of Bath:

In al the parisshe wif ne was ther noon
That to the offrynge bifore hire sholde goon;
And if ther dide, certeyn so wrooth was she,
That she was out of alle charitee.

In various ways, then, the descriptions of the pilgrims in trade betray an apprehensiveness. Their positions may deteriorate, and even those of high degree seem vulnerable to a greater extent than more or less equivalently placed pilgrims in the other categories.

Granting the fact of predatory competition and the implicit insecurity, one might still pause before characterizing Dame Alice as a neurotic status seeker. She may be sensitive about the due formalities of the offertory, but it is also true that "In felaweshipe wel koude she laugh and carpe." Her Rome and Jerusalem probably had quite a bit of Miami about them. Since the Miller is a "jangler and a goliardeys," the social life of at least some of the pilgrims in trade seems vigorous and uninhibited. The best sense of

this tavern *gemütlichkeit* is conveyed by the narrator's description of the Friar's social style.

His typet was ay farsed ful of knyves And pynnes, for to yeven faire wyves. And certeinly he hadde a murye note; Wel koude he synge and pleyen on a rote; Of yeddynges he baar outrely the pris. His nekke whit was as the flour-de-lys; Therto he strong was as a champioun. He knew the tavernes wel in every toun And everich hostiler and tappestere Bet than a lazar or a beggestere; The Host's primary qualification is that he is "myrie." The Merchant, the guildsmen, the Man of Law, and the Physician may be too far up the social ladder for this kind of fun; at any rate they are more sedate. Among the pilgrims who make their living in trade, at least for those on the lower social levels, the reward of their struggle is a free, sometimes boisterous conviviality.

Such blatantly materialistic self-interest would ideally set the churchmen on the pilgrimage apart from the rest, but it is perfectly clear from their descriptions that they are more of the world than they ought to be. The Parson, of course, is an ideal, and though he does move in the world, his sanctity sets him apart. However, even in the Parson's description two of the negative particulars indicate something of the practical economic operations of less saintly parsons who readily cursed for their tithes and would leave their parishes with curates to become chantry-priests or chaplains in London. There are churchmen who want to make money. In the descriptions of the Friar, the Summoner, and the Pardoner this materialistic drive is given sharp focus because, with allowance for institutional differences, they are all selling a service□the remission of sins. The Pardoner also sells fake relics as a sideline. The Friar had to pay for his begging territory, which, presumably, would also have been his confessional territory. The Summoner is an agent, working for the archdeacon's court. As a practical matter he took bribes, and so his remission of sins was simply escape from the archdeacon's jurisdiction. The Pardoner sold papal pardons, a practical short circuit of the sacrament of penance. Such churchmen seem to live lives like those of the Shipman, the Miller, and the Manciple. That is to say, they live by their wits under economic pressure, and furthermore the descriptions of the Friar and the Summoner indicate that the tavern is the scene of their social pleasures.

The Monk and the Prioress are hardly in this class but neither are they as saintly as the Parson. We learn a great deal about the style of their lives but nothing of the economic bases for such lives. The Monk is a great hunter and the Prioress is a refined and delicate lady, so their style is unmistakably *gentil.* Though the narrator says nothing of their economic arrangements, both are associated with landed establishments and presumably base their style of life on that kind of wealth. The social pattern discernible among the pilgrims with a livelihood from land seems applicable among the churchmen also. Landed wealth exempts the beneficiaries from the economic struggle that governs the lives of the others, lesser, churchmen. The churchmen divide socially into those who live on the income from a landed establishment and those who earn their living directly. Of the latter group, the obvious generalization is that the remission of sins has become a commercial transaction. A less obvious but more interesting one follows: this commerce was highly competitive, the competitors representing different ecclesiastical

institutions. It seems that Chaucer does not separate his churchmen into a special category. In other words, except for the saintly, ideal Parson, clerical occupations are social and economic indicators in the same way as lay occupations.

The basic fact of life in the society of the "General Prologue" is economic struggle. The pilgrims' occupational labels are obvious keys to their individual struggles or exemption from struggle and thus to their social position. But there is little value in learning that the Knight does not have to struggle like the Cook and that his degree is higher. The pilgrims' descriptions, however, do more; they imply a sharper general pattern for life in the world of the *"General Prologue."* This pattern is clearest among the pilgrims whose living comes from land. There the distinction between principals and agents marks a man as above the economic struggle or in the middle of it and consequently sets a *gentil* style of life apart from the others. Among the pilgrims making a living in trade the distinction does not appear because each one must struggle in his own interest. These pilgrims seem less secure and there is no *gentilesse*. Since the churchmen are not landholders, their case would seem to be similar; yet there is *gentilesse* among their number.

The social implications of the distinction between principals and agents reappears, and once again access to landed wealth is determinative. Pilgrims are what they do, and what most of them do primarily is work. They work competitively within the rules like the Man of Law or outside them like the Pardoner. This stress on hustle and competition creates a society quite different from that implicit in the pattern of the three estates with its stress on complementary self-subordination in a system of cooperation. To be sure, some of the pilgrims do transcend the common struggle. The exemplars of the three estates, the Knight, the Parson, and the Plowman, do so by a moral force unique to them; the Monk, the Prioress, and the Franklin do so because of economic advantage; their wealth is secure. If one can judge by the Merchant's position on Chaucer's roster of pilgrims, his degree is fairly high, but he does not transcend the struggle, perhaps because in the world of the "General Prologue" his wealth is not secure. At any rate his style of life is different from those who are above competition because he has to compete, as do most of his fellow pilgrims. This difference between landed wealth and other wealth can be clarified by another comparison. The Reeve's peculation links him with the Manciple and the Friar, and so my threefold division does not seem helpful here. If we move upward within the several groups, however, things look different in that the Merchant's description sets his position apart from that of the Knight or the Monk, who both have the use of landed wealth. The Reeve's switch in economic role and social style would seem to be possible only in land, because when the Reeve becomes a landholder in his own right he is more secure than the Merchant. Chaucer seems to hold with Fitzgerald against Hemingway; the rich, at least the landed rich, are different from the rest. Just how different they are can be seen in what we learn of their sexual habits. They transcend sexual as well as economic competition. Though there is much less about sex than money in the "General Prologue," there is a pattern to the relatively little we are told. We know nothing about the sex lives of the Knight and the Franklin, and we have only the slightest and most ambiguous hints about the Monk and the Prioress. In contrast, we do know something of the sexual activities and outlook of the Wife of Bath, the Friar and the Summoner. The Squire is the crucial case; he is a lover

and he draws his living from the land. But his love seems more a matter of regimen than of sex. There is only one reference to a girl, and the focus is much more on his chivalry than on any practical consequences of his lady's favor. In the "General Prologue," sex, like money, seems to be lower class.

So far I have been talking about fiction and hypotheses, Chaucer's imitation or model. There are still questions of fact. Historian's questions deserve historian's answers, which I shall not try seriously to provide. But one does not have to be a serious historian to question the general proposition that the landed classes were economically and sexually inactive, that there was a categorical distinction between most men who struggled to live and a smaller group of landholders who were above the struggle. Division of society into hustlers and gentlemen sounds questionable, and the Paston letters, to cite the most convenient text, clearly indicate that gentlemen were often effective hustlers.

In short, historians are more likely to hold with Hemingway on the subject of difference from the rich. Granting that the most general rule for life in the world of the "General Prologue" does not hold true outside it, and deferring the question of how a shrewd observer like Chaucer went wrong, the historian might still be interested in some of the less general rules for life. For example, was "agency" an avenue of social mobility? If it was, was it equally accessible at all points? Could the Reeve make the change from agent to landholder that he did? Could he move upward as easily at his level as the Man of Law at his? Could either one of them move upward as easily as the Pastons, smaller landholders serving as the agents of larger landholders?

Another focus of interest might be the status distinctions in "public service." Military and political offices went more or less naturally to the landed families, and in the cities a more limited range of offices also went naturally to the chief citizens, presumably because they represented important and separately identifiable interests. What were the status implications of public office? What were the status relations between men in public office because of an independent social and economic identification and those men who worked as career officials, the civil servants? Professor Thrupp has shown that at least some career civil servants were gentlemen *ex officio*. It does seem clear that the civil service was an avenue of social mobility and that it provided a range of acquaintance, but acquaintanceship with landed families might simply underscore differences in social and economic security and in the practical possibility of providing for the future of a family. These questions should give some idea of the historical uses of the "General Prologue." It is a credible fourteenth-century model of the middle range of English society; it sets questions for historical verification. The major literary use of this model is to fill out or elaborate a connection between Chaucer the man and Chaucer the pilgrim-narrator. The poetic manifestation of a writer's values is certainly an important literary question. Chaucer has been well served by Professor Donaldson, who has nicely described the narrative sympathies and ironies of the "General Prologue" in such a way as to clarify the fine combination of amiability and criticism that emanates from the narrator. The structure and descriptions of the "General Prologue" define the narrator's position; he is diffident but central. They also define his values. His representatives of the three estates are moral and social exemplars; the Knight, the

Parson, and the Plowman all strive but they do it selflessly rather than competitively. Less clearly, the two probationers, the Squire and the Clerk, are also selfless. The Monk, the Prioress, and the Franklin are hardly selfless but neither are they vigorously assertive of an economic or sexual interest.

Although they fall short of true *gentilesse*, their manners and their life style are *gentil* in a lesser but still valuable sense because they show none of the antagonism inherent in competition. This pattern of approbation implies precepts of orthodox charity and social conservatism. But there is nothing rigid or insensitive about this espousal of establishment values because it is winningly mollified by the suffused amiability of the narration. The pilgrim's tone is eminently charitable. No matter how antiseptic our critical practice is about separating narrator and author, the art work and life, we do look to an ultimate point of contact. Though Shakespeare's sonnets do not tell us anything conclusive about his sex life, the proliferation of their metaphors does tell us about his mental and emotional life. The practical charity, orthodoxy, and social conservatism evident in Chaucer's poetic narrative can likewise be referred to the poet.

The narrator-pilgrim's amiability and clarity of criticism are the poet's, but this connection is more interestingly elaborated by working in the opposite direction, from writer to narrator, to supply a deficiency in the scheme of the "General Prologue." Chaucer the pilgrim failed to provide for himself what he gave for all the other pilgrims□an occupational designation. If we give the poet's to the pilgrim and call him a civil servant, we have a supplementary and external definition of the narrator's position.

This embellishment is attractive because it sets the values of the "General Prologue" in precise historical relief. It refers them to a historically identifiable perspective. I deferred the puzzling question of how a shrewd observer like Chaucer could have been so wrong about his basic distinction between landholders and the rest of society. Landholders were economically and, presumably, sexually competitive, as anyone with a career like Chaucer's must have known. But to a civil servant their social position may well have looked far more secure than his own and their style far more negligent of practical economics than the evidence indicates. The civil servant's perspective would certainly be affected by the mobility aspirations associated with that social role and by the limits on the possibilities for fulfillment of those aspirations. In short, both the distortion and the accuracy of Chaucer's social description are plausible for a civil servant.

The details of Chaucer's observation vivify his use of the commonplace scheme of the three estates by giving the charity of its exemplars a fuller and more realistic setting. In other words, he has asserted orthodox values, spliced them with mobility aspirations, and adjusted them to reality. The same social perspective can be fixed in the literary work and in the real world of the fourteenth century. Chaucer the pilgrim talks like a civil servant and Chaucer the poet is a civil servant. The historian gains a richer sense of a civil servant's values than the usual documents afford, and the literary student gains a fuller sense of the social grounding of the norms that govern the irony of the "General Prologue."

Source: R. T. Lenaghan, "Chaucer's 'General Prologue' as History and Literature," in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 12, No. 1, January 1970, pp. 73-82.

Critical Essay #14

In the following essay, Rowland explores connections to the Mystery plays in "The Miller's Tale."

The last line of the Miller's "Prologue" has been variously interpreted as indicative of Chaucer's aesthetic intentions both in the tale itself and in his works as a whole. In it, the narrator, after warning his readers of the kind of tale to follow and disclaiming responsibility should any of them subsequently "chese amys," adds a final rider: "and eek men shal nat maken ernest of game." The phrase itself is sufficiently commonplace to be classified as proverbial, and variations of it occur four times elsewhere in the Tales: January finally settles on one delectable young girl as his bride "bitwixe ernest and game"; Griselda, bereft of her daughter, never mentions her name either "in ernest nor in game," and Walter, despite the murmurs of his subjects, continues to try his wife "for ernest ne for game"; the Host is relieved that wine can resolve the differences between the Cook and the Manciple and "turnen ernest into game." But in these instances the implied polarities are unequivocal. Only in the Miller's "Prologue" does the phrase seem to contain tantalizing ambiguities and to mean more than a prefunctory tag. Some critics differ on whether the narrator is advising the more squeamish of his readers to skip the tale for the immorality of its action, the vulgarity of its speech, or for both reasons. Others, inasmuch as they consider that Chaucer's "game" always has serious intent, appear to regard the statement as ironic.

The assumption in every case is that "game" has the meaning of gaiety or mirth for which numerous instances are cited in the *Middle English Dictionary*. The possibility arises, however, that Chaucer, in adumbrating a particular kind of tale to warn off those of his audience who preferred "storial thyng that toucheth gentilesse, / And eek moralitee and hoolynesse", was using "game" in a specific sense directly pertinent to the action which follows.

For game in this sense, the *Middle English Dictionary* cites only two examples, and the *New English Dictionary* alludes only to games in antiquity. Nevertheless "game" was a common term for the Mystery Drama, and appears in the *Promptorium Parvulorum* as the equivalent of "play" (*ludus*) as well as *iocus*. The matter has been well documented since Rossell Hope Robbins contended that "game" was an equivalent for dramatic performance to support his claim that a proclamation admonishing an audience to keep quiet and not interrupt the "game" was a fragment of a Mystery Play. As evidence, he cited references to "oure game" and "oure play" contained in another fragment, clearly an epilogue to a Mystery Play, and to the proclamation in the *Ludus Coventriae*□"Of holy wrytte þis game xal bene." He also showed similar usage in the earliest extant morality play, *The Pride of Life*, and in a sermon quoted by Owst. Its use in the two fragments, one ascribed to the thirteenth and the other to the sixteenth century, suggests currency over a long period, and apart from various town records concerning "game gear," "game-book," "game pleyers gownes and coats," the "Lopham game," the "Garblesham game," and the "Kenningale game," further evidence has accrued to show conclusively that "game" and "play" were used interchangeably.

If "game" has this specialized meaning in the Miller's "Prologue," "ernest" has a particular relevance. In its general combination with "game" or "play," "ernest" was simply an antonym meaning serious; used with reference to drama, it was reality in contrast to counterfeit. This distinction was made by the Wycliffite preacher to support the argument that the play marked an abstention from the true concerns of life. The meaning was even more strongly defined by Skelton, who took the view that the polarities were reconcilable and that truth could be presented under the guise of play: Take hede of this caytyfe that lyeth here on grounde;

Beholde, howe Fortune of hym hath frounde! For though we shewe you this in game and play, Yet it proueth eyrnest, ye may se, euery day. This kind of usage suggests that Chaucer, in juxtaposing "ernest" and "game," may have been making an antithesis meaningful within the terms of the contemporary Mystery play.

That the "Miller's Tale" contains a number of allusions to the Mystery plays has often been noted, and Harder suggested that the tale might be a parody of a particular cycle. Certain references enable us to be more specific and to find in the tale one of the principal themes of the Mystery plays. The carpenter about whom the Miller promises a "legende and a lyf" directly points to St. Joseph of the Holy Family. Probably because of the late development in the West of his cult as a saint, he was one of the most extensively and independently treated characters in medieval drama, often in a comic mode. Like "selig" John, he too was aged, married to a young wife, and fearful of being cuckolded. The momentous event with which he is associated becomes the pivot of the burlesque.

To confirm the various elements of the "game" Chaucer uses the structural pattern found in the Mystery plays themselves. The creators of these dramas passed over many Biblical stories which seem equal or even superior to those dramatized. The reason was that the form of the pageants was determined by traditional exegesis. The writers sought to impose order and meaning upon their material by stressing correspondences and prefigurings cited in the Biblical text and further developed by hermeneutical writers from Tertullian onwards. As Kolve has observed:

The dramatist simply took over certain significant patterns that had been long observed and studied in Biblical narrative, and by simplifying, abridging or neglecting entirely the mass of incident and detail that surrounds them, they produced a cycle sequence charged with theological meaning□strong, simple, and formally coherent.

Hence they included the story of Cain and Abel because it prefigured the death of Christ, and the play of Noah and the Flood because it prefigured Baptism, the Crucifixion and the end of the world. Similarly the story of Abraham and Isaac was important because it prefigured God's sacrifice of his own Son.

It is this kind of prefiguring, fundamental to the shaping and the interpretation of the Mystery Drama, that Chaucer observes in comic fashion. With audacious artistry he points up a comparable series of correspondences which are inherent in the central action. The initial event in his tale is a young man's salutation of a young woman. In

appearance Nicholas resembles the somewhat effeminate-looking angel of the Annunciation□"lyk a mayden meke for to see"; he also has the attribute for which Gabriel was especially renowned in the Mystery plays: he sings divinely□" ful often blessed was his myrie throte." But his role is confirmed by *what* he sings: *Angelus ad virginem*, the hymn of the Annunciation, and the *Kynges Noote*, whereby he reveals God's purpose.

The young woman, likened to the weasel, an animal traditionally compared to the Virgin because of the unnatural method of its conception, appears to play the complementary role. The travesty was probably not new to Chaucer's audience. Mary was supposed to have been abashed at the Annunciation because a young man had "made hym lyk an angyll" with the Devil's help and seduced maidens on pretext of a similar errand, and Boccaccio, in the second story of the fourth day, tells of a clerk who pretended to be Gabriel in order to seduce a young married woman.

Here, the *logos* which is whispered in Alison's ear is an immediate reminder of the contrasting prefiguration to which exegetists of the Annunciation almost invariably referred. Instantly superimposed on the scene of the Annunciation is that of the first Temptation. Eve replaces *Ave*, and the "sleigh and ful privee" young man is the Serpent himself.

The role of the rival lover, Absolon, is also clearly defined in the "game." Although his namesake never appears to have been included in the cycles, the parish priest is too important to the tale not to be drawn into the sphere of the Mystery play, albeit obliquely. Prefiguring his own climactic attempt at cauterization or curettage, he is assigned the part of the bombastic villain whose most spectacular appearance concerned the Slaughter of the Innocents. Like Herod, "wel koude he laten blood and clippe and shave," and there is little difference in their instruments: Herod is usually depicted with his curved falchion; Absolon has his coulter. Both of them finally betake themselves to Satan. In displaying his "maistrye," Absolon is, one suspects, showing not only his skill but his profession, his "mystery," which is to be responsible for the dénouement. As the plot develops, more correspondences become apparent. Essential to the central action is the story of Noah and the Flood, which dramatists treated as one of the most important prefigurations in the cycle. The aged Noah, a carpenter, singled out by God to be His servant and fulfill His purpose for humanity, was considered to prefigure Christ. But he was also the type of Joseph, similarily a carpenter, and chosen as the divine instrument.

John who, Nicholas implies, is also chosen by God, becomes the appropriate third correspondence. He, too, is an aged carpenter, *mal marié* if self-deceived, and like Noah he is subsequently to be mocked by his companions. Nicholas plays a similarly appropriate role: in some versions of the tale, God sends Gabriel or another angel to reveal His purpose to Noah. Moreover, inasmuch as the Flood was traditionally held to prefigure salvation through baptism, it is particularly apposite that Nicholas should regard the event as effecting his Salvation. Of even greater importance, however, is the role of the *uxor* in the episode. A popular development of the Noah episode in the Mystery cycles was the comic quarrel between Noah and his shrewish wife, which

turned upon her reluctance to cooperate with him and enter the ark. Such domestic discord prefigures that of Joseph, often depicted in the plays as another aged *mal marié*. Nicholas is forced to draw John's attention to "the sorwe of Noe with his felaweshipe, / Ere that he myghte gete his wyf to shipe" in order to provide a reason for the separate tubs. But the reference sets off yet another correspondence. In the widely diffused folktale, Noah's wife succumbed to the blandishments of the Devil, and in the Newcastle-on-Tyne "Noah's Ark," the Wife's recalcitrance is due to her collusion with the Evil One. In the "Miller's Tale," Alison behaves towards John as the meek wife of the Noah plays in the *Ludus Coventriae* and the French mystère, the wife who was said to prefigure the Virgin, but her involvement again looks back to that of the First Temptation which traditionally prefigured this episode.

The reception of the tale by the pilgrims shows that many interpretations are possible: "Diverse folk diversely they seyde, But for the moore part they loughe and pleyde." This interpretation emphasizes one strand of the humor: the comic travesty of the St. Joseph legend, with Nicholas as the Evil One and Alison as Eve. The ambiguities inherent in the narrator's warning remain unresolved but among the various components of this complex tale, this aspect of "game" appears to be undeniably present. It is clearly revealed in the typology of the protagonists, and, as in the Mystery plays, the link between one Fall and another is neatly and palpably established.

Source: Beryl B. Rowland, "The Play of the 'Miller's Tale': A Game within a Game," in *Chaucer Review*, Vol. 5, No. 2, Fall 1970, pp. 140-46.

Critical Essay #15

In the following essay, David examines various interpretations of the old man in "The Pardoner's Tale."

Probably the main trend in contemporary Chaucer criticism is to look for a symbolic level of meaning in a poet whom most of us were taught to regard as a supremely realistic recorder of medieval life. Of course, realism and symbolism are not necessarily antithetical modes of expression, and a lot of misunderstanding will be avoided if we recognize that the choice is not one of either-or, a realistic Chaucer or an allegorical one. It is rather that we are beginning to see another dimension in Chaucer, something that should not surprise us in a great poet. It goes without saying that symbolic interpretation is subject to abuse by the ingenious critic who can persuade himself and others to see the Emperor's clothes. Nevertheless, it can hardly be denied that we are in the midst of a reappraisal of Chaucer as an artist that is certain to influence the way in which he will be presented in the classroom. Instead of talking generally about the reasons for such a new appraisal and its theoretical justification, I would prefer to discuss a particular instance that may illustrate this trend□a case history in practical criticism□the interpretation of a passage that everyone who has ever taught Chaucer has almost certainly dealt with at one time or another. One may then draw one's own conclusions about the uses and abuses of modern critical theory in the teaching of Chaucer.

One of the great moments in Chaucer comes in the "Pardoner's Tale" when the three young rioters, seeking Death, are greeted by a povertystricken old man, muffled so that only his face is visible. One of the three rudely asks him why he has lived so long and receives this strange and moving reply:

"For I ne kan nat fynde
A man, though that I walked into Ynde,
Neither in citee ne in no village,
That wolde chaunge his youthe for myn age;
And therefore moot I han myn age stille,
As longe tyme as it is Goddes wille.
Ne Deeth, allas! ne wol nat han my lyf.
Thus walke I, lyk a resteless kaityf,
And on the ground, which is my moodres gate,
I knokke with my staf, bothe early and late,
And seye 'Leeve mooder, leet me in!'"

It is, of course, a passage that seems to demand a symbolic interpretation. One feels that there is a mystery about this old man, that something is being left unsaid. As I hope to make clear, however, our understanding of the symbol and how it works has changed over the years. Who is the old man? Professor Kittredge gave the answer that is probably the most familiar. "The aged wayfarer," Kittredge declared flatly, "is undoubtedly Death in person."

But why should Death be personified as an old man who himself wishes to die? Other scholars tried to uncover the old man's identity by seeking his antecedents in medieval literary history. According to one theory, Chaucer got his idea for the old man from the legend of the Wandering Jew, which first took shape in the thirteenth century. According to another theory, the old man is a personification of old age as one of the three messengers of death, a popular theme in late medieval poetry and sermons.

This is not the place to argue the individual merits of these theories, and scholarly speculations of this sort certainly have no place in the classroom. They are relevant for our purposes, however, because they suggest that the question of the old man's identity does not admit a simple, unambiguous, and definitive answer such as Death or Death's Messenger. In fact, it is doubtful whether Chaucer himself, if he were available to answer questions, could provide us with a ready answer. He has sketched the old man in a few strokes that, like shadows, suggest rather than define. We are given a muffled figure, a withered face, an impression of poverty and meekness, and the staff with which he taps the earth. Where does he come from and where is he going? Where is the chamber with the chest of possessions that he says he would exchange for a hair cloth? These are questions that it would be futile to try to answer. The power of the old man is the power of the symbol to suggest a range of meanings.

To say that the old man in many details resembles the Wandering Jew is, of course, not to say that he *is* the Wandering Jew. The legend of the Jew who struck Jesus (or, according to another version, drove him from his door) and who is condemned to roam the earth until the Second Coming contains one variant of the archetypal figure of the man cursed to wander forever without being able to die.

This eternal traveler is the type we may also recognize in Chaucer's old man as well as in the Ancient Mariner and in the Flying Dutchman. These figures are not identical□each is a development of a general type, but assumes a particular meaning in the context of the work in which he appears. Perhaps the mistaken notion that we are obliged to choose only one of several symbolic interpretations, none of them entirely satisfactory, led one critic to assert that "the old man is merely an old man" and that "The Pardoner's Tale" is thoroughly realistic. This interpretation implies that allegory and realism are alien and mutually exclusive forms□that the one contains personifications and the other actual people. On this assumption, we would have to insist that Kafka, Melville, and Dante are realists, as indeed in one sense they are. Certainly the old man in the "Pardoner's Tale" is first of all an old man, and the story contains elements of blood-curdling realism. We may read it at that level, but that does not preclude the possibility of other kinds of reading. If modern critical theories have one thing to teach us, it is that we need not read or teach literature in accordance with one narrow critical theory, including a narrow theory of realism.

Let me turn now to a more recent interpretation of the old man that illustrates the modern trend most clearly and that may be said to result from a new critical approach, imaginatively applied. According to this theory, most medieval literature, including Chaucer, is allegorical. A medieval tale is conceived of as a shell or a rind that contains a kernel of meaning, generally a Christian meaning. One way to get at this meaning is

to look in the story for allusions to Scripture and to trace these allusions back to their source in the Bible and to explication of these Biblical passages by the Church fathers and medieval commentators. Thus traditional interpretation of Scripture provides us with clues to the interpretation of literary texts. An excellent example of this approach is Robert P. Miller's interpretation of the old man in his article "Chaucer's Pardoner and the Scriptural Eunuch."

Mr. Miller's case is carefully reasoned and depends on a great deal of evidence that it will be impossible to summarize here. In essence, however, it links together the Pardoner's portrait, his prologue, and his tale into a unified whole that expresses a traditional Christian meaning through symbolic description and narrative.

The old man, according to Mr. Miller, corresponds to the old man St. Paul speaks of several times as a symbol of the flesh or that part of human nature that must die before the spirit may be reborn through the agency of the new man (or the young man) who is Christ. For example, in Fourth Ephesians Paul tells us "to put off . . . the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, . . ." and "to put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness." The old man, or the old Adam, to give him his popular name, points the way to death, not just to physical death but to the death of the soul, and this is exactly what the old man in the "Pardoner's Tale" does when he directs the three rioters up the "crooked way." The old man is ancient□he is born with sin and death□and he will roam the fallen world until the end of time.

It is difficult to do justice to such an interpretation in outline. Even so, it should be apparent that it does not cancel out other interpretations but instead synthesizes them within a broader context. As soon as we begin thinking about the "Pardoner's Tale" as a story not only about physical life and death but about spiritual life and death, many details, both about the tale and its teller, become meaningful. The difference between a symbolic interpretation such as this and one like Kittredge's is that the former depends on our understanding not of an isolated symbol, used for the immediate occasion, but on an understanding of the Pardoner's portrait and prologue and, indeed, of the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole; for the most interesting ramification of Mr. Miller's interpretation is that it involves the Pardoner himself, an impotent man who sells sterile pardons and who interacts with the other pilgrims on a journey that is not only realistic but symbolic. There is an implied analogy between the old man and the Pardoner. "He is," Mr. Miller argues, "that Old Man as he lives and exerts his influence in the great pilgrimage of life." Like the old man the Pardoner wanders ceaselessly through city and village, sending men up the "croked wey."

Mr. Miller's method could be viewed as a new and fascinating kind of source study, but the real support for his interpretation does not come from the Epistles and obscure medieval commentaries upon them. Like all source studies, his must stand or fall by the text, and he has given us a new key, not merely to one passage, but to the entire sequence formed by the Pardoner's portrait, prologue, and tale. A meaningful pattern that was only dimly felt before begins to emerge.

Suggestive as such an interpretation is, however, I think it would be going too far to maintain that St. Paul's old man contains the only key to the passage; one might even wonder whether Chaucer had this image in mind when he was composing the "Pardoner's Tale." However, the Scriptural metaphor remains relevant because Paul himself, in coining it, was following a natural symbolism that is as old as literature. Something that should be kept in mind whenever one tries to interpret a Scriptural image or allusion in a medieval literary text is the fact that the Bible itself contains literature and that Scriptural exegesis may involve some literary criticism. The fact that such exegesis may help us to understand a work of the imagination does not necessarily mean that the author consciously drew his meaning from Scriptural commentary alone.

Moreover, if we are to see a connection between the Pardoner and the Old Man in the tale, Mr. Miller's interpretation does not account for significant differences between them. He implies that both the Pardoner and his counterpart, the old man, are inveterately evil, and he concludes: ". . . the Old Man still goes wandering through the world, glaring with sterile lust out of his hare-like eyes." But the old man of the tale speaks meekly to the rioters and prays that God may save them. He sounds in every way like a humble pious old man and not a bit like the Pardoner□except for one brief but memorable passage at the end of his tale where the Pardoner addresses the pilgrims:

And lo, sires, thus I preche.
And Jhesu Crist, that is oure soules leche,
So graunte yow his pardoun to receyve,
For that is best; I wol yow nat deceyve.
This is the moment that Kittredge called "a paroxysm of agonized sincerity," and it echoes the old man's words to the three ruffians:
God save yow, that boghte agayn mankynde,
And yow amende!

Both instances are prayers of grace for others, and both, I feel, are sincere.

What I am suggesting is that the old man does indeed tell us something about the Pardoner but something more profound than the redundancy that the Pardoner is an evil man. The old man tells us something about the frustration, the suffering, and the self-destructiveness of evil. For evil may be both like a young man who defies death and like an old man whose only wish is to die.

We might say that the Pardoner has something in common with *both* the old and the young men in his tale, and we have been prepared for this by his portrait and prologue. One of Mr. Miller's most perceptive insights is the ironic fact that the Pardoner, who corresponds to the old man, affects an appearance of youth. He dresses somewhat flashily "al of the newe jet," rides bare-headed exposing his stringy yellow locks that hang down over his shoulders, proclaims his desire for wine and wenches, and impudently asks the Wife of Bath, in his interruption of her prologue, to "teche us yonge men of youre praktike." Although we are given no indication that he is an old man, he is

certainly past his prime. A guess might make him out to be about the same age as the Wife of Bath herself.

It requires only observation, not scholarship, to see what lies behind the pose of an ageing man who dresses like a young man and who affects an air of gay abandon, especially when we are told that he must have been "a geldying or a mare." The truth about the Pardoner is already hinted at very broadly in the description of his duet with "his freend and his compeer," the Summoner:

Ful loude he soong "Com hider, love, to me!"
This Somonour bar to hym a stif burdoun.

Two recent notes on this passage provide convincing evidence that the word "burdoun," which may mean both a musical bass and a pilgrim's staff, would have been recognized in the fourteenth century as an obscene pun that clearly implies that the friendship between the Pardoner and the Summoner is homosexual.

For Chaucer, however, the Pardoner's physical perversion is not the key to his character as it might be for a novelist today. The Pardoner's isolation from natural human love is rather the outward sign of a deeper alienation from divine love. It is a fact that has symbolic as well as realistic value. His disguises as a young man and as a Pardoner (for his role as Pardoner, too, is a kind of disguise) conceal a fascination with death that is projected powerfully into the macabre tale. The old man's death wish and the deaths of the three young men at each other's hands reveal the Pardoner's own preoccupation with death and violence.

The three villains are among the "yonge folk" who haunt the tavern. Their vices□drunkenness, blasphemy, and avarice□are those that the Pardoner boastfully claims as his own. Their quest to slay Death has an ironic resemblance to the mission the Pardoner abuses, that is to absolve men from the seven deadly sins. Their camaraderie suggests the sort of companionship that we have seen between the Pardoner and the Summoner. A sadistic element dominates the association of these three blood brothers and culminates when one of them is stabbed as he wrestles "in game" with one of the other two. There is a perverse gratification in the violence and the violent deaths of the young men.

But the Pardoner, much as he would like to conceal it by his dress and his forced jollity, is not one of the "yonge folk," nor is the pleasure he professes to find in vice a genuine pleasure. If we listen carefully to his Prologue, I think we may detect the false note of bravado and the sense of strain

I wol nat do no labour with myne handes,
Ne make baskettes, and lyve therby,
By cause I wol nat beggen ydelly.
I wol noon of the apostles countrefete;
I wol have moneie, wolle, chese, and whete,
Al were it yeven of the povereste page,

Or of the povereste wydwe in a village,
Al sholde hir children sterve for famyne.

There is something almost hysterical about the reiteration of "I wol" and "I wol not," like an angry child defying its parents. The Pardoner is, in short, a young-old man, and the confrontation between the three rioters and the old man in the tale brings to the surface a moral and psychological conflict that has been latent all along.

The old man's longing for death, his inability to find anyone who will exchange youth for his age—this expresses the other side of the Pardoner's nature. Perhaps St. Paul conceived of the old man not as Mr. Miller might have it, "glaring with sterile lust," but as weary unto death of his burden and seeking only to lay it down. The compulsive wish for the tavern life sought by the three young men is complemented by the old man's death wish. Through the old man Chaucer reveals the Pardoner's real secret, the joylessness of the life he professes to relish so much. And the old man enables us, in this most pitiless of the *Canterbury Tales*, to feel compassion not only for him but, by association, for the Pardoner, a compassion that is denied to none of the pilgrims.

As a final comment on the symbolism inherent in the old man and the Pardoner—for however one conceives of their relationship I feel they are inseparable— let me draw an analogy to a modern symbolic tale about death. Aboard the steamer carrying Gustave von Aschenbach to Venice, he is observing a boisterous group of young clerks on a holiday excursion:

One of the party, in a dandified buff suit, a rakish panama with a coloured scarf, and a red cravat, was loudest of the loud: he outcrowed all the rest. Aschenbach's eye dwelt on him, and he was shocked to see that the apparent youth was no youth at all. He was an old man, beyond a doubt, with wrinkles and crow's-feet round eyes and mouth; the dull carmine of the cheeks was rouge, the brown hair a wig. . . Aschenbach was moved to shudder as he watched the creature and his association with the rest of the group. Could they not see he was old, that he had no right to wear the clothes they wore or pretend to be one of them? But they were used to him, it seemed; they suffered him among them, they paid back his jokes in kind and the playful pokes in the ribs he gave them. This grotesque figure, as we come to realize, is the first apparition of Death in Venice, a moral death as well as a physical one that will swallow up Aschenbach and transform him at the end into the very image of the young-old man. In this story, too, a plague motivates the action and provides a unifying symbol of corruption.

I do not want to force an analogy between works as different as *Death in Venice* and the "Pardoner's Tale," yet I believe that the resemblance between them is not entirely fortuitous because the characters in both stories arise independently out of a basic, archetypal symbolism that is always available. It is a symbolism that is elusive and cannot be reduced to any single or simple meaning. The "Pardoner's Tale" is a story that can lend itself to a Freudian as well as to a Christian interpretation, neither of which would be exclusively right or totally wrong.

If a practical conclusion may be drawn from such a case history in criticism, perhaps it is that, as teachers, we should resist the natural tendency of critics and students to oversimplify symbols, to impose on them some definite meaning that will provide the stuff for an essay in a journal or in a bluebook. The different critical opinions I have cited all have something to contribute and do not cancel each other out. Kittredge was probably right after all□the old man is Death□but as I hope this analysis has shown, Death may assume many different guises and meanings.

Source: Alfred David, "Criticism and the Old Man in Chaucer's 'Pardoner's Tale,'" in *College English*, Vol. 27, No. 1, November 1965, pp. 39-44.

Critical Essay #16

In the following essay, Neuse explores the characters of the Knight and Theseus, and calls the "Knight's Tale" a "testimony to the insufficiency of human wisdom at the same time that it transcends it."

In recent years there seems to have been general agreement that the "Knight's Tale" is a "philosophical romance" which raises the problem of an apparently unjust and disorderly universe. By this reading the "Tale" emerges as a philosophic theodicy culminating in Theseus' speech on cosmic order.

The latter implicitly denies the final reality or rule of an arbitrary Fortune, but at the same time stoically accepts the inscrutable workings "in this wrecched world adoun" of an eternal cause. The "Tale" is thus seen as the Knight's□and Theseus'□ somewhat wistful "consolation of philosophy," the affirmation of an ultimate order that actual experience seems, often sadly, to deny.

Quite recently a study has suggested that the "Tale" "depicts its human world in a more critical light" than has hitherto been acknowledged. The author challenges the view that Theseus is the spokesman for the poem's concept of order by pointing to the problematic nature of Theseus' actions and to the inadequacies of his philosophic outlook. Nonetheless he continues to regard the "Tale's" central theme as the assertion of a divine order; but instead of finding this theme directly figured forth by Theseus, he sees it embodied in the symmetrical structure of the "Tale" itself. The poetic form is thought to be the vehicle for a philosophic idea.

At first glance, it seems surprising that either the Knight or Theseus, both successful men of action, should feel in need of philosophic consolation. Indeed, the "Tale" could be considered as Theseus' success story: it begins with his triumphant campaign and ends with his plan to have Palamon marry Emily brought to a successful conclusion.

It may be objected that Theseus is not the real focus of attention, and that the problem arises from the unequal fates of Palamon and Arcite. Again, however, the story begins with the rescue of these two from almost certain death□a stroke of singularly good fortune□and both get precisely what they asked for. Arcite has his victory and "finest hour"; Palamon and Emily live happily ever after.

What is left of the dark fatality that has been found lurking in the "Tale?" And what of the philosophical problem? With respect to Palamon and Arcite, it is contended, character-differentiation has been deliberately underplayed so that the question of justice in the world must be confronted:

when two equally deserving men strive for the same goal, why should one succeed while the other is killed?

"What is this world? What asketh men to have?" the dying Arcite is led to ask, and his question is indeed tragic in suggesting a fatal gap between human expectation and the apparently arbitrary ways of the world. Theseus' final oration only underscores this gap in terms of a theoretical reason and a practical unreason. As it images a world order governed by the Prime Mover, it holds out to man no more than the certainty of death. The human spirit has no discernible place in this cosmos, and yet it is subjected to the corruption of matter. If man is no longer the fool of fortune, he is the victim of necessity.

But Theseus here not only "fails to see the crux of the human situation" philosophically; he also appears as the spokesman and representative of a world-view which the entire narrative places in an ambiguous light. To show how this is so, I shall propose a different view of the *"Knight's Tale,"* with respect to the kind of poem it is, and its place in the scheme of the *Canterbury Tales,* both as the beginning of its human comedy and as the imaginative act of the Knight-narrator.

Like many of the other tales, the "Knight's Tale" reveals a teller self-consciously engaged in reshaping (and adapting) an "olde storie" for the audience and the occasion. This much is clear. But it does not seem to have been argued hitherto that the Knight's approach is basically comic and ironic. We see him in an unbuttoned, holiday mood. Repeatedly, he places his narrative and his audience in a comic light: interrupting his tale in the manner of the *demande d'amour:*

Yow loveres axe I now this questioun,
Who hath the worse, Arcite or Palamoun? . . .
delivering a witty comment on the situation in the grove when Palamon overhears Arcite, or on the behaviour of lovers:
Into a studie he [Arcite] fil sodeynly,
As doon thise loveres in hir queynte geres,
Now in the crope, now doun in the breres,
Now up, now doun, as boket in a welle . . .

At first glance, indeed, there seems to be an inconsistency between this playful narrator and the imposing figure of the "General Prologue" who is yet "as meeke as is a mayde." But we must not be misled by the method of the "General Prologue": there it is mainly external "identity" that counts. The pilgrims appear as self-sufficient "concrete universals" while their potentialities□the incompleteness of their natures□remain largely hidden until they enter upon the stage of action.

Accordingly, the "Prologue" gives us not so much an abstract chivalric ideal as clues for understanding a character conceived in its human complexity. "He loved chivalrie," we are told about the Knight; and this chivalry is intimately linked with the Christian faith, for all the Knight's campaigns involved the cause of religion. It has been plausibly suggested that "in his lordes werre" refers to his warfare in the service of God.

If it is scarcely surprising that the "Knight's Tale" deals with chivalry, it does seem significant that it deals with a chivalry lacking a Christian basis. Indeed, it is here that the "Tale's" central irony develops: a chivalric romance is placed within the framework of

the classical epic. The characters act by the conventions of courtly love and mediaeval chivalry, but over all preside the antique gods.

From the fusion of these two motifs, classical and mediaeval, there results the "Tale's" double view of pagan epic sans legendary heroes (if we discount "duc" Theseus) and mythic exploits; and of the chivalric romance shorn of its metaphysically inspired idealism. What the consequences of this central irony are, the following discussion hopes to make clear. At this point we may state by way of anticipation some of the Knight's concerns as they emerge from the "Tale." What, first, becomes of chivalry (and chivalric action) without its religious rationale? What of courtly love without the same transcendental dimension? What are these codes of conduct in themselves? Finally, what are the implications□humanly, socially, politically□ of a whole-hearted commitment to this world, to things as they are?

It is the specifically pagan elements that become the source of much of the poem's comedy. The Knight has his fun imagining Emily's rites in the temple of Diana, a matter he won't go into, "And yet it were a game to heeren al." There is the burlesque scene in which the wood-nymphs and other forest deities are unhoused and sent scurrying about when the trees of the grove are cut down for Arcite's pyre. And a kind of Homeric comedy plays around the epic machinery of the gods, whose role at times borders on farce.

As in the classical epic there is in the "Knight's Tale" a consistent counter-pointing of human and divine, earthly and celestial action. Human agents do and suffer in the consciousness or name of cosmic forces that further or thwart their desires, and the conflict of human passions finds its counterpart in the conflicting wills of the gods. Specifically, there are three deities that mirror the "Tale's" lovetriangle and, beyond that, figure forth its fictive macrocosm. These two functions can be seen fully conjoined in the central symbolic *locus* of the poem, the building of the lists and temples for the great tournament. The stadium is the artistic microcosm within which is to be performed the central ritual of chivalry, the tournament "for love and for increes of chivalrye." Surrounding the lists and defining in a precise way the limits of this little world are the temples of the gods.

The two-hundred-odd lines that describe the temples (and constitute a kind of epic catalogue) serve to extend the audience's awareness of the gods' significance in the poem. Encyclopaedic and monumental both in a rhetorical and substantive sense, this passage recreates the world as its inhabitants experience it. The baleful influence of the gods is much in evidence, confirming the pessimism voiced by most of the characters at some point in the story. The temple of Venus contains a good gloss on the love action. There "maystow se"

Wroght on the wal, ful pitous to biholde,
The broken slepes, and the sikes colde, . . .
The firy strokes of the desirynge
That loves servantz in this lyf enduren; . . .
Despense, Bisynesse, and Jalousye . . .

But the goddess's temple presents a mixture of love's pleasures and woes; thus it is not as bleak as that of Mars, which portrays every form of violence and brutality:

The crueel Ire, reed as any gleede; . . .
The smylere with the knyf under the cloke;
The shepne brennyng with the blake smoke . . .

At the same time, the gruesomeness is relieved by considerable comedy, as in the juxtaposition of epic catastrophes and trivial accidents; and in the deliberate anachronisms:

Depeynted was the slaughtre of Julius,
Of grete Nero, and of Antonius;
Al be that thilke tyme they were unborn,
Yet was hir deth depeynted ther-biforn.

In the temple of Diana there is a similarly jocular tone□as when the Knight carefully spells out the difference between Da(ph)ne and Diana□ though here again the disastrous and painful aspects of the goddess's domain are stressed.

In the first place, therefore, the gods stand for things as they are, *moira.* The artists who have adorned the temple walls see no chasm between earthly reality and the divinities that rule over it. Second, the divine presences sum up certain ways of life to which men dedicate themselves. In another sense, they have a *psychological* function: the god a person serves is his ruling passion. The gods are men's wills or appetites writ large.

It is the narrator himself who suggests this identification. "For certeinly," he says, oure appetites heer,

Be it of werre, or pees, or hate, or love,
Al is this reuled by the sighte above.
And he goes on to speak of Theseus, who
in his huntyng hath . . . swich delit
That it is al his joye and appetit
To been hymself the grete hertes bane,
For after Mars he serveth now Dyane.

Theseus successfully combines the service of Venus, Mars, and Diana, whereas Palamon, Arcite, and Emily are committed exclusively to one deity embodying their appetite and destiny. "I kepe noght of armes for to yelpe," says Palamon to Venus before the tournament, "Ne I ne axe nat tomorwe to have victorie,"

But I wolde have fully possessioun
Of Emelye, and dye in thy servyse.

Arcite, convinced that Emily is indifferent and must be conquered anyway, asks Mars for victory and promises to "ben thy trewe servant whil Ilyve." Emily prays in vain. She is a

pawn in the chivalric game of love, just as Diana must submit to the wills of her fellow deities.

Between the latter a "theomachia" breaks out, for in granting their votaries' prayers Venus and Mars have created a celestial impossibility. Jupiter, father of the gods, is helpless to settle their strife until grandfather Saturn intervenes, who, because of his age and experience, we are told, is well qualified to solve such conflicts of interest. "As sooth is seyd," the Knight observes with sublime irony, elde hath greet avantage;

In elde is bothe wisdom and usage;
Men may the olde atrenne, and noght atrede.

For to make peace—"Al be it that it is agayn his kynde"—Saturn delivers an idiotic speech to Venus that catalogues his "olde experience," a series of natural and historic disasters caused by his malign planetary influence. He concludes by reassuring her: "I am thyn aiel, redy at thy *wille;* / Weep now namoore, I wol thy lust fulfille."

The tournament on earth over, the celestial comedy resumes. Venus is disconsolate and weeps "for wantynge of hir *wille,* / Til that hir teeres in the lystes fille." Again Saturn consoles her:

Doghter, hoold thy pees!
Mars hath his *wille,* his knyght hath al his boone,
And, by myn heed, thow shalt been esed soone.

And his "solution" has the lack of subtlety we have come to expect from the "aiel" of the gods. The divine-human parallelism in the poem may be represented schematically:

Saturn Egeus
Jupiter Theseus
Mars—Venus—Diana Arcite—Palamon—Emily

It underscores the "Tale's" comic structure, which doubles the absurdity of the earthly action with that of the celestial. For the conduct of the two young knights is at bottom as laughable as that of their divine counter-parts. Similarly, Egeus' platitudinous garrulity follows in Saturn's rhetorical footsteps. His age and experience are also stressed, and they have led to no more than the Saturnian wisdom:

"Right as ther dyed nevere man," quod he,
"That he ne lyvede in erthe in some degree,
Right so ther lyvede never man," he seyde,
"In al this world, that som tyme he ne deyde . . ."
And over al this yet seyde he muchel moore
To this effect . . .

Like Jupiter, Theseus is momentarily helpless after Arcite's death, until Egeus' "consolation" brings him relief. After a gesture of mourning, Theseus becomes again the human figure in the Tale that most clearly resembles the Jupiter of his own speech, a

mover of the destiny of men and nations. He proceeds to order a burial for Arcite as sumptuous as had been the tournament. Finally, after the Greeks have stopped mourning, he convenes his parliament at Athens, on which occasion are discussed certain matters of Athenian foreign policy:

"To have with certein contrees alliaunce / And have fully of Thebans obeisaunce." Theseus knows exactly how to accomplish this submission for the sake of international "order":

For which this noble Theseus anon
Leet senden after gentil Palamon,
Unwist of hym what was the cause and why;
But in his blake clothes sorwefully
He cam at his commandement in hye.
Tho sente Theseus for Emelye.

With his hands firmly on the ropes, he goes on to employ his best oratorical skill:

Whan they were set, and hust was al the place,
And Theseus abiden had a space
Er any word cam fram his wise brest,
His eyen sette he ther as was his lest.
And with a sad visage he siked stille,
And after that right thus he seyde his wille.

Given this setting, should we still expect a statement of deeply considered conclusions? Mr. Underwood has noted that the human level is absent from Theseus' speech, without, however, drawing any conclusions from this for the rest of the speech. What, for instance, becomes of the "cheyne of love"? Divorced from its relevance to human beings, it assumes the scientific neutrality of gravitational force (note the wording). Even the rhetorical question,

What maketh this but Jupiter, the kyng,
That is prince and cause of alle thyng,
Convertynge al unto his propre welle
From which it is dirryved, sooth to telle?

views the first cause purely *sub specie naturae*. It does not lead to a spiritual vision but merely to the tyrant's plea, "To maken vertue of necessitee."

The fact is that Theseus does not need to relate the principle of a First Cause to the human realm simply because in this realm he *is* the "prime mover" responsible for almost all its weal and woe. For the successful prince, problems of responsibility, free will, or Fortune's cruelty never really arise. And his watchword is: politics as usual. Hence his philosophical reflections are enlisted rhetorically in the service of his marriage plans for Palamon and Emily. And he has his will with such promptness that the bereaved Palamon does not even have time to change his suit of mourning! Thus, far from being an account of Theseus' attempts to preserve or impose order in the face of

Fortune's chaos, the poem shows us a brilliant political opportunist who at the outset mounts to the pinnacle of success—in love and war—by one clean stroke. "He conquered al the regne of Femenye" literally and metaphorically: right after the conquest there ensues his marriage to Hippolyta.

There is an element of "wit" in such skill, and this is characteristic of the poem. Throughout, there are no half-measures, everything—events, situations, actions—being doubled or even tripled. And this massive coincidence (in every sense) is counterbalanced by rhetorical amplification and reduplication. A sense of friction between economy of action and verbal exuberance heightens the impression of a wilful incongruity between literary "form" and "content." The geometric design of the "Knight's Tale" functions more as a comic "mechanism" than as a means for expressing a concept of order.

At the same time the character of Theseus is consistently made to appear in a very ambiguous light. For example, when he discovers Palamon and Arcite duelling in the grove, his first reaction is to have them killed—until the ladies of the court intercede. But it is clear that his pity is no instinctive matter of the gentle heart. He enjoys feminine supplications; and he must *reason* his pity (in a kind of interior monologue):

first cause purely. . . although that his ire hir gilt accused,
Yet in his resoun he hem bothe excused,
As thus: he thoghte wel that every man
Wol helpe hymself in love, if that he kan,
And eek delivere hymself out of prisoun.
And eek his herte hadde compassioun
Of wommen, for *they wepen evere in oon;*
And in his gentil herte he thoughte anon,
And softe unto hymself he seyde, "Fy
Upon a lord that wol have no mercy,
But been a leon, bothe in word and dede,
As wel as to a proud despitous man
That wol mayntene that he first bigan.
That lord hath litel of *discrecioun*,
That in swich cas kan no divisioun,
But weyeth pride and humblesse after oon.

(my italics)

The irony here as elsewhere derives from the judicious blend of motives reconciled on the ground of reason—which is as much *raison d'état* (the lord's discretion) as a rather comical understanding of women's and love's irrational ways. Theseus proceeds to settle the lovers' destiny (in effect) by commanding a tournament for Emily's hand. His later decision to make it a bloodless tournament proves a move well calculated to gain the increased enthusiasm of the populace which has been pushing to see him "at a wyndow set, / Arrayed right as he were a god in throne."

And so, throughout the poem, Theseus fairly dazzles the beholder with his skill. Yet as we move back and forth from inner to outer man, the ironic disparity between the two ever obtrudes itself. In his world Theseus is a Jovian prime mover, with many of the characteristics of the Renaissance machiavel, as H.J. Webb's indictment of his conduct in the poem strongly suggests. If it is possible to sum up the mainspring of his actions, I would call it the will to power, the determination to "have his world as in his time."

Outwardly, indeed, it seems as though agents and events in the "Knight's Tale" are under the governance of supra-human forces. It has often been noted that the gods double as planets whose conjunctions form a web of astrological fate controlling the events of the "Tale." But despite appearances, it may be argued that the real causality of events lies in the human will or appetite. As we have seen, the gods ultimately function as metaphors of man's will, which (we conclude), instead of being powerless over against Fate, *is* his fate. Hence derives a major irony of the poem, an irony at once tragic and comic, namely that everyone gets precisely what he desires.

Confirmation of this point comes from the Miller, who tells his tale to "quite the Knyghtes tale," as he drunkenly proclaims. In the triangle of Nicholas, Absolon, and Alisoun, each likewise gets what he desires: Absolon his kiss, Nicholas the enjoyment of Alisoun, and John the carpenter gets at the least the cuckolding he expected. But in the *"Miller's Tale"* the conventions of courtly love that play such an important role in the "Knight's Tale" burst like a bubble as love is reduced to its most basic terms. Rhetoric, for Nicholas, comes after the act, instead of being a prologue or a substitute for it. And physical nearness is all, whereas in the "Knight's Tale" it counts for nothing. Hence "Absolon may blowe the bukkes horn" while Nicholas has his way.

Of course, Nicholas himself constructs a gigantic trick to achieve his desire. But here again the joke is on the "Knight's Tale" with its apparent suggestion that the planet-gods shape the outcome of events. Nicholas, we are told, is an expert in astrology, and he will *use* astrology to bring about the desired end. The carpenter, with the practical man's sense of superiority to "clerks," ridicules "astromye" but becomes himself the simple-witted dupe of Nicholas' fantastic astrological joke. He falls□in every sense□because of his belief in the stars, but by their means hende Nicholas achieves his will.

In this sense, the "Miller's Tale" is certainly a parody of the Knight's. It bluntly manifests desire or will as the source of action, which in the other tale seems to be concealed under the drift of events or happenstance. Just as the lovers of the "Knight's Tale" "suffer" their love, so they seem to be the passive agents of a superior destiny. Actually, however, the Tale constantly reveals that the Knight, though no reductionist like the Miller, has a perspective very similar to the Miller's.

The terminology of will and appetite in the "Knight's Tale" supports this idea. In Palamon's lament to the gods the will is linked with animal impulse in a way that foreshadows the Miller's use of animal imagery:

What is mankynde moore unto you holde
Than is the sheep that rouketh in the folde?

For slayn is man right as another beest,
And dwelleth eek in prison and arreest . . .
What governance is in this prescience,
That giltelees tormenteth innocence?
And yet encresseth this al my penaunce,
That man is bounden to his observaunce,
For Goddes sake, to letten of his wille,
Ther as a beest may al his lust fulfille.

The tragic element here is reduced by the terms of the lament and by the divorce between will and reason that it implies. Life, seen as a process of restless and blind willing, is felt to be dominated by an irrational fate. The pathos as well as the absurdity of Palamon and Arcite lies in their acceptance of the view that man is ruled by his animal will but at the same time bound to act by certain conventions.

Even love in the Tale is a blind appetite, though its formal expression is in the style of courtly love. The result is an essentially loveless lovestory. In the name of that love, the sworn blood-brotherhood of Palamon and Arcite is soon destroyed, and the theme of broken friendship and a disruptive Cupid runs through the poem. Shortly after the quarrel between the former friends, the audience is reminded of another kind of friendship more ideal and durable, the love between Theseus and Perotheus:

So wel they lovede, as olde bookes sayn,
That whan that oon was deed, soothly to telle,
His felawe wente and soughte hym doun in
helle,□
But of that storie list me nat to write.

This love is also a direct commentary on the following action. While Palamon remains in the hell of his prison tower, Arcite wanders about preoccupied with his own lot. In a later scene Palamon accuses Arcite of treachery for loving his lady, bejaping Theseus, and changing his name! He declares his mortal enmity, and, despite the violence of feeling, they arrange a duel for the next day. At the agreed time they fight like wild beasts, though they are careful to do it according to the book (of chivalry): "Everich of hem heelp for to armen oother / As freendly as he were his owene brother."

When Theseus arrives on the scene, Palamon (again) makes an immediate confession and asks for death. Moreover, he does not hesitate to reveal Arcite's identity and goes on to request that Arcite be executed first. There is a certain grim comedy in Palamon's wavering as to who should be killed first.

As has often been asserted, the reader's sympathies remain, at length, evenly divided between the two men. Both are seen to behave equally absurdly, badly, and nobly. The truth is that we are not permitted to care greatly about either, and this allows us to appreciate the comic element in the poetic justice meted out to Arcite. For even the "accident" that leads to his death was no divine or demonic "miracle," but rather his own fault. He wasn't looking where he was going:

This fiers Arcite hath of his helm ydon,
And on a courser, for to shewe his face,
He priketh endelong the large place
Lokynge upward upon this Emelye;
And she agayn hym caste a freendlich ye
(For wommen, as to speken in comune,
Thei folwen alle the favour of Fortune)
And was al his chiere, as in his herte.

With the co-operation of Emily and the jubilant applause of an equally fickle plebs ringing in his ears, Arcite's excitement sets the scene for a mishap that scarcely needs the *diabolus ex machina* of "a furie infernal." Despite the undeniable pathos of Arcite's death-bed lament, the Knight, who dislikes tragedy, consistently presents his story in such a way as to make genuine tragedy impossible. Similarly, Emily's character is hardly the kind to inspire a noble passion. She is lovely, no doubt, but not much more than that. This is not altogether her fault, since she is after all merely the prize for which men fight. But, as the tournament scene shows, she plays the part expected of her, and her passivity fits well with the passive role that the society assigns her.

Love in the "Tale" is an essentially amoral and self-regarding passion. Theseus views it chiefly as folly, though with a tolerant irony:

The god of love, a, *benedicite*!
How myghty and how greet a lord is he!
Ayens his myght ther gayneth none obstacles.
He may be cleped a god for his miracles;
For he kan maken, at his owene gyse,
Of everich herte as that hym list divyse.

He admires Cupid as an image of his own ideal of (complete) lordship. At the same time, Cupid's power illustrates for him the folly of letting passion triumph over reason. How could "love, maugree hir eyen two" lead Palamon and Arcite to risk death and fight over one totally ignorant of their existence?

After the latter have decided to duel to the death, the Knight is similarly prompted to exclaim:

O Cupide, out of alle charitee!
O regne, that wolt no felawe have with thee!
Ful sooth is seyd that love ne lordshipe
Wol noght, his thankes, have no felaweshipe.

But the difference in outlook here between the Knight and Theseus defines the distance between the teller and his tale. By paralleling love and lordship in this fashion, the Knight hints at the major themes of his unfolding Tale. This love is the disrupter of "felaweshipe" and also the will to sexual "lordshipe" analogous to the will to power or political lordship.

Finally, there is a punning comment on this kind of love in the Knight's exclamation. "Out of alle charitee" is first of all a colloquial tag; as such it is applied to the Wife of Bath in the "General Prologue", also in a mildly punning form. In addition, "charitee" denotes the religious *caritas* that in the Prologue is explicitly exemplified by the Plowman, and in a general way forms the backdrop (so to speak) against which are played the endless metamorphoses of human love that we find in the Canterbury pilgrims.

In the "General Prologue," that is, each pilgrim is ruled by a specific *eros* that defines the centre of his being. These loves vary from the most intense self-love to the most ideal and selfless, but they all (it seems to be suggested) participate, however obscurely, in the transcendent-immanent love of the Creator for his creation. At the least, each love is capable of conversion towards that which is at once the motive power and goal of the human pilgrimage. Hence the latter is not to eradicate the "love of the creature," but to purify it by showing its dependence upon the divine.

Put in another way, the comedy of the *Canterbury Tales* sees no real discontinuity between matter and spirit. The wind that "inspires" the "yonge croppes" also inspires folk to make their pilgrimages. It stirs to life the hidden seeds of perfection everywhere, so that the human desire for regeneration is an extension, as it were, of the miracle of spring, ascending by imperceptible degrees from vegetable to rational nature, from matter to spirit. By a happy etymological providence, "spirit" proceeds from "breath."

Man, though he has the freedom to pervert the natural intention (Boethius) of creation, still finds himself caught in its *élan vital.* Hence we discover in the pilgrims a group representative of the spectrum of human nature; saint-like and depraved, they combine to form a society moving towards a goal which, whether they are aware of it or not, represents the ultimate fulfilment of their earthly destiny.

This movement towards transcendence is not always apparent in the poem. Certain pilgrims with their full-blown individuality practically burst the bounds of their fictive-symbolic framework. Nor is it difficult to see in the "General Prologue" lineaments of a larger social order in crisis (as evidenced, for instance, by a thoroughly corrupt clergy), indices of that waning of the middle ages historians have taught us to look for.

Over against the symptoms of disorder, however, there emerges from the *Canterbury Tales* the idea of what I would call a "comic society," whose order is not so much conceptual as it is pragmatic, being rooted (as it were) in the nature of things. In such a society the control or order arises from below, we might say, because nature is a function of (the comic) spirit. Men have the freedom to follow their natural inclinations, because by doing so they imitate the inner drive in all things towards their full being or perfection. But in so far as they deviate drastically from the norms of a publicly defined good, they are exposed to the censorship of laughter.

The society that meets at the inn in Southwark is not so much a perfect counterpart as a prototype of the larger society from which it derives. The pilgrims re-enact the fundamental rite on which all community life is based: the being together of people in "sociability." The perfect setting for such sociability is the tavern, which, with the

fellowship engendered there by drinking together (*symposion*), has sometimes been thought to be the true place of origin of human society. Sociability, moreover, manifests itself in the sense of freedom and *play* which is so prominent in the *Canterbury Tales* that we might almost speak of the poem as viewing not only society but the world itself *sub specie ludi* (to adopt a phrase of Huizinga's).

The world of the *Canterbury Tales*, then, is in a constant process of becoming. The portrait "stills" of the "General Prologue" are a momentary illusion: their subjects are poised to leap out of their frames into a fuller existence, and the road to Canterbury is the stage on which the *dramatis personae* act out their natures. The tales themselves are part of the progressive unfolding of the pilgrims' selves, and thus a way to new insights and a means of communication strengthening the bonds of community implicit in the pilgrimage. Finally, the selfknowledge gained is a stage in the journey of self-transcendence, a step towards the perfection of the individual.

It is part of Chaucer's brilliant subtlety that the reader remains legitimately in doubt as to the Knight's full understanding of this basic motion toward a higher fulfilment. But it appears that as narrator the Knight becomes increasingly aware of the kind of world his story presents, so that the ambiguity of "Cupid, out of alle charitee!" serves as a reminder or invitation to judge this world by a standard that lies outside it and within the world of the pilgrims at whose head the Knight appears.

In a variety of ways, the Knight is able to suggest an alternative manner of looking at man and society, not least by the comedy of his "Tale." It is he rather than Theseus who resolves the problem of a seemingly unjust world by reminding his audience that Fortuna with her outrageous coincidences is both comic and subject to

The destinee, ministre general,
That executeth in the world over al
The purveiaunce that God hath seyn biforn,
So strong it is that, though the world had sworn
The contrarie of a thyng by ye or nay,
Yet somtyme it shal fallen on a day
That falleth nat eft withinne a thousand year.
For certeinly, oure appetites heer, . . .
Al is this reuled by the sighte above.

This conception differs crucially from Theseus'

First Mover, who
Hath stablissed in this wrecched world adoun
Certeyne dayes and duracioun
To al that is engendred in this place,
Over the whiche day they may nat pace,
Al mowe they yet tho dayes wel abregge.

And significantly, the Knight ends, not here, but with the wedding of Emily and Palamon, as well as a final ambiguity: "And God, that al this wyde world hath wroght, / Send hym his love that hath it deere aboght."

Palamon and Emily live happily ever after, and as the Knight steps out of their world into his wider world his optimism asserts itself triumphantly to encompass "al this faire compaignye." But it does so only after he has, through his "Tale," confronted some of life's baffling complexities. For the price of this comic outlook is a steady vigilance; in short, it requires the qualities that the Prologue tells us the Knight possesses: "And though that he were worthy, he was wys."

This wisdom involves a prudent circumspectness, keeping one's eyes open and being prepared for eventualities. For life always has more in store for man than he bargained for, so that it is likely to make him look foolish if not worse. And from this point of view the "heathens" and their gods in the "Tale" are after all metaphors for the human condition at large, in so far as we all share in that more than partial blindness of a Palamon and Arcite, and hence in their possibilities for appearing tragic, absurd, wicked, and innocent. That, it would seem, is one crux of the human situation. The other crux is perhaps that of action and commitment, in short, of being "worthy" as well as "wys." And here the missing transcendental link of the "Knight's Tale" is of crucial importance. This link is man himself in the cosmic "cheyne of love." For it is only by placing his actions and aspirations within that context, that man raises them above the level of mere Will and Self.

Is there an element of *paideia* in all this? We have noted that the "Tale" presents an image of different generations, and we can now add to our earlier scheme:

Saturn Egeus
Knight Jupiter Theseus
Squire Mars, etc. Arcite, etc.

Included in the Knight's audience is his son, the very type of a courtly lover. In the "General Prologue," moreover, their portraits suggest two stages of the chivalric life, the father furnishing the model for the "bachelour" who "carf biforn his fader at the table."

The "Tale," then, deals precisely with those themes that most nearly concern the Knight. Yet it appears that the latter casts an ironic eye at the relationship between the generations. Man in the "Tale" does not learn much by age and experience. What wisdom can the older transmit to the younger generation? The "Knight's Tale" is a testimony to the insufficiency of human wisdom at the same time that it transcends it.

Source: Richard Neuse, "The Knight: The First Mover in Chaucer's Human Comedy," in *University of Toronto Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 3, April 1962, pp. 299-315.

Critical Essay #17

In the following essay, Woolf comments on Chaucer's satire in the "General Prologue."

Many people nowadays acquire an early and excessive familiarity with the "General Prologue" to the *Canterbury Tales*, which later blunts their sharpness of perception. Since the "Prologue" is read at school, necessarily out of its literaryhistorical context, its methods of satire seem to have an inevitability and rightness which preclude either surprise or analysis. This natural tendency to remain uncritically appreciative of the "Prologue" has been partly confirmed by various works of criticism, which, though admirable in many ways, effusively reiterate that "here is God's plenty": they thus awaken an enthusiastic response to the vitality and variety of the characterisation in the "Prologue," at the cost of making the exact manner and tone of Chaucer's satire quite indistinct. Despite the bulk of Chaucerian criticism, there is still need for a detailed and disciplined examination of Chaucer's style and methods of satire, which would include a careful consideration of Chaucer's work against the background of classical and Medieval satire. Such a study would be of considerable scholarship and length: it is the purpose of this short article only to make a few general points about Chaucer's methods of satire.

It is sometimes taken for granted that the satirist speaks in his own voice, and that any reference to his opinions and feelings are a literal record of his experience. This assumption perhaps requires testing and reconsideration with reference to any satirist, but it is never more dangerous than when it is accepted without limitation about Chaucer. Chaucer was writing at a time when there was no tradition of personal poetry in a later Romantic sense: a poet never made his individual emotions the subject-matter of his poetry. Though the personal pronoun "I" is used frequently in Medieval narrative and lyric poetry, it is usually a dramatic "I," that is the "I" is a character in the poem, bearing no different relation to the poet from that of the other characters, or it expresses moral judgments or proper emotions which belong, or should belong, to everybody. Chaucer's use of an "I" character in his early poems belongs to the tradition of such characters in dream visions, but, with an ingenious variation that the character appears naive, well-meaning, and obtuse, and the joke thus depends on the discrepancy between this figure in the poetry and the poet of wit and intelligence who wrote the whole. Thus this treatment of the "I" character is new in that it pre-supposes the poet in a way that the other characters do not.

It is well-known that this character re-appears strikingly in the links of the *Canterbury Tales*, when he is rebuked for telling a dull story, but his presence in the "Prologue" has not been particularly stressed, yet it is through this character that both the apparently vivid individuality of the pilgrims and the satiric aim are achieved. Though there are various departures from consistency (to be noticed later), it is through the eyes of Chaucer the pilgrim, not Chaucer the poet, that the characters in the "Prologue" are chiefly presented. Obviously the choice of detail shows the sharp selectiveness of the satirist, but the friendly enthusiastic, unsophisticated, unjudging tone is that of Chaucer the pilgrim.

From this invention there result two important advantages. Firstly by his fiction of having been a close companion of his characters, Chaucer suggests their reality and individuality, an individuality which is largely an illusion brought about by poetic skill. Chaucer makes us feel that we know them as individuals, though often, apart from physical description, they are simply representative portraits of various groups in society□friars, monks, summoners, nuns, etc. The same details of their tastes and behaviour can be found in any Medieval moral denunciation of these people. Secondly, in his satiric character-sketches, Chaucer achieves a two-fold irony. He implies that most of the information which he gives us derives, not from a narrative-writer's omniscience, but from the characters' own conversation. In other words Chaucer unobtrusively uses a pointed satirical method, by which the characters are shown to have erred so far from the true moral order, that they are not ashamed to talk naturally and with self-satisfaction about their own inversion of a just and religiously ordered way of life. At the same time Chaucer makes his response to this that of a man who accepts and repeats with enthusiasm, and without criticism, whatever he is told. It has been observed before how often Chaucer implies or states explicitly that each of his characters is an outstanding person (although a distinction should be made here between the statement when made of a virtuous character, such as the parson, when it comes as the climax of a well-ordered enumeration of his virtues, and when it appears as a random remark in the sketches of the satirised characters). This has been explained as part of Chaucer's genial enthusiastic appreciation of all kinds of people or, in a manner less wildly wrong, as part of a literary convention of magnifying each character. But it is surely Chaucer the easily-impressed pilgrim who so indiscriminately praises the characters, sharing with them through an obtuse innocence the immoral premises from which they speak.

Chaucer the poet, for instance, must have shared the common knowledge and opinion in the late 14th century, that the friars, instead of serving all classes of men indifferently, though with a special tenderness for the poor who reflected the poverty of Christ, instead chiefly sought out the rich and those from whom they could make profit, and took the opportunity given by the privacy of the personal interview and confession for exploitation and unchastity. All this Chaucer could not have failed to have known to be an abuse, evil and widespread, of what had originally been a holy and noble conception. But Chaucer the character relates these details of his fellow pilgrims as though they were both inoffensive and idiosyncratic, and in this way both the satiric point and the illusion of individuality are achieved. Similarly it was a common accusation that daughters of aristocratic households, who entered a convent, often did not discard their former manners and affectations. Genteel table-manners, careful attention to dress, and a narrowly sentimental affection for pet-animals, might possibly in a noble household appear signs of a refined sensibility, but in a convent their worldliness would be plain. But of the distinction between the lady of the house and a nun Chaucer the pilgrim is ignorant, so he records all the details sweetly, as though there were no matter here for blame.

The clearest example, however, of this method is the account of the monk. Just as in the description of the friar Chaucer shows clearly by a sudden change to colloquial rhythms that he is ostensibly repeating the friar's own arguments for not caring for the

poor, "It is nat honest, it may nat avaunce .. .," so in the account of the monk Chaucer repeats the monk's arguments, and then even adds a reply, "And I seyde his opinion was good," supporting this by two foolish rhetorical questions and a blustering retort "Lat Austyn have his swynk to hym reserved." That Chaucer the poet would reject the authority of St Augustine is as manifestly untrue as that he had not the skill to tell an entertaining story. His protested sympathy with the monk is of the same kind as Juvenal's stated agreement ("you have just cause for bitterness") with the utterly debased and contemptible Naevolus in the ninth satire. To suppose that Chaucer's attitude here is ambivalent is to be deceived by the sweet blandness of Chaucer's mask, just as to search for historical prototypes of the characters is to be deceived by the brilliant accuracy of Chaucer's sleight of hand, whereby he suggests an individuality which is not there.

Amongst many other examples of the simplicity of Chaucer the pilgrim may be noticed the frequent device of giving a false explanation of a statement□the physician loved gold because it was of use in medicine□and the making of absurd judgments: the remark that the wives of the guildsmen would be to blame if they did not support and approve their husbands in their smug prosperity, or the query of whether it was not "by a full fair grace" that the maunciple was able to cheat and outwit his learned employers. It is in passages such as the latter that the ironic tone of Chaucer the satirist can be most clearly heard behind the blank wall of obtuseness of Chaucer the pilgrim. Illustrations of the naivete of Chaucer the character could be multiplied to the point of tediousness, and so too there could be laboured at length the demonstration that the substance of the description of each character consists solely of common Medieval observation about the group to which he belongs. It should be added, however, that the appearance of individuality is not achieved by the intimate tone of Chaucer the character alone: at least equally important is the style.

The neat grace of Chaucer's lines often deceptively suggests that he has made a sharp and lucid observation, when in fact it is but a commonplace, and the precision lies, not in its thought, but in the style. Thus his method of pretending that the generalisation about a group is the idiosyncracy of an individual is given persuasive force by his exact use of words and the shapeliness of his couplets. There is an interesting contrast to this in the undisguisedly generalised attack of Langland, the generality of which is driven home by his swift but sometimes indiscriminate use of forceful words, and his form of the alliterative metre, which has within the line a great strength and impressive rhythm, but no larger pattern, so that there seems to be no metrical reason why one line should not succeed another without end.

The question to what extent we are aware of Chaucer the poet in the "Prologue" is not easy to determine. Sometimes an example of obtrusive poetic skill draws attention to him: it is Chaucer the pilgrim who observes mildly of the unhealthy sore on the cook's leg that it was a pity, but the placing of this one line in the middle of the account of the fine dishes made by the cook exceeds the licence of poetic cleverness which may by convention be allowed to a dull character in poetry. Similarly the image which implies censure or ridicule is selfevidently the satirist's: the monk's bridle jingling like a chapel bell, the squire's coat so embroidered with flowers that it was like a meadow, the

snowstorm of food and drink in the franklin's house, the fiery-red cherubym's face of the summoner, all undisguidedly spring from the imagination of a satiric poet. Occasionally Chaucer even speaks outright in his own voice, making a pointed exposure of affection or self-deception, which is in a quite different style of satire, and provides an exception to the general truth that the characters are not the result of actual observation. A well-known example is the comment about the lawyer:

Nowher so bisy a man as he ther nas,
And yet he semed bisier than he was.

This kind of remark shows the same mocking penetration into the ridiculous complexities of human feeling and behaviour, as Chaucer had already displayed in *Troilus and Creseide*, from which one striking example may be quoted: it was a commonplace in Medieval descriptions of a lover that by pining he grew pale and thin; but in Chaucer's more subtle description, Troilus in the humourless self-absorption of his love *imagines* that he has grown so pale and thin that everybody notices and comments upon it. At first sight Chaucer seems to be an exception to the general rule of the classical period and 18th century that the satirist is to be feared. His disguise of Chaucer the pilgrim and elsewhere a sustained friendliness and moderation of tone imply that no man could be less alarming to those who knew him. But, whilst undoubtedly he was the less to be feared in that he did not make individual contemporaries the objects of his satire, as a century later Skelton was to do, yet only people free from all excesses of emotion and affectation could be sure that they would not be the source of some detail shrewdly observed in Chaucer's work.

Chaucer also speaks in his own voice in his occasional denunciation of evil in the descriptions of the Miller and the Pardoner, and, most effectively in his descriptions of the virtuous characters, one drawn from each order of society with the addition of the Clerk. In these Chaucer establishes the true moral standard by which the topsy-turvyness of the rest may be measured. It was a tradition of satire to provide an ideal standard: some earlier Medieval Latin satirists made use of the classical fable of the Golden Age, identifying it uneasily with the Garden of Eden: an example is the famous *de Contemptu Mundi* of Bernard of Cluny; Langland in a more complex and magnificent scheme makes his standard the pure charity of the Redemption of man by Christ. But Chaucer, lacking Langland's sublimity of imagination, but with a shrewd, clear thoughtfulness, gives a positive analysis of representative types of a well-ordered society, religious and secular. The detailed justice of these descriptions prevents the actual satire from seeming too mild or perhaps too pessimistic. Without them Chaucer's satire might seem to have too much detachment, too much ironic acquiescence. In Langland's angry denunciatory satire there is by implication a hope of reform; but in Chaucer's one feels the tone of a man, who, aware of the incongruity between the gravity of the abuse and his own inability to help, is moved to an ironic and superficially good-humoured laughter. The virtuous characters, however, by their very presence imply a censure of the rest, which dispels any impression of over-sophisticated aloofness. The idea that Chaucer loved his satirised characters despite or including their faults is of course false, and springs from an imprecise consideration of Chaucer's methods of satire.

To what extent Chaucer was influenced by classical and Medieval traditions of satire remains the final difficult but fascinating question. There is no incontrovertible evidence about his knowledge of classical satirists: Juvenal he quotes from and mentions by name, but the quotations he could very easily have gained at second hand; Horace he does not mention at all, but since, as other critics have pointed out, he does not mention Boccaccio either, this negative evidence is worthless. Juvenal had attacked with moral horror the widespread vices of his own time under the satiric disguise of describing historical personages of a previous age. This device was not imitated by the Fathers or the Medieval satirists who were influenced by him, and the writers of the Middle Ages with their preoccupation with what was common to all men rather than with what makes one man different from another, were not concerned to give any appearance of particularity to their satire. The result was either the blackened generalised picture of all men as totally corrupt, found in the *de Contemptu Mundi*, or the combination of allegory with satire, ingeniously used, though not invented, by Langland.

But though the aim of Chaucer's satire is, like Langland's, the distinctive vices of people in various orders and occupations throughout society, he does not generalise but, like Juvenal, reduces the generalisation to a description of particular characters. This, however, seems to be Chaucer's only resemblance to Juvenal, since self-evidently there could not be a greater difference of tone than there is between Juvenal's savage vehemence and Chaucer's specious mildness.

The resemblances between Chaucer and Horace are more subtle and more specific. The object of Horace's satire had been different from Juvenal's, in that Horace was chiefly concerned with those who disrupted the social harmony of life, the fool, the bore, the miser, and these he portrayed with a minute and particular observation of habit and conversation, which gives the impression that his description is of an individual, though by definition not unique, personality. His account, for instance, of the host who makes dinner intolerable for his guests by a tedious analysis of the sources and method of cooking of each dish, suggests a recognisable personality, not a moral generalisation about excessive eating and drinking. The tone of Horace's satire is not designed to arouse horror or anger, but amused contempt for something worthless. It is obvious that this satiric manner required a sophistication not usually possessed in the Middle Ages, and a point of view less easily identifiable with the Christian than that of Juvenal. For, though evil was seen as a fit object for laughter in the Middle Ages, it was a strong laughter at the ugly and grotesque□the devils in the mystery plays, for example□rather than the slight ironic smile of the civilised man at those who deviate from reason and intelligence.

Chaucer shares some characteristics with Horace, though there is no certainty whether by influence, or by coincidence and some affinity of temper. He has in common with Horace the easy tone of a man talking to friends who share his assumptions and sympathies, though usually with a deceptive twist: for when Horace meets the characters in his satires, he expects his audience to sympathise with his misery, whereas Chaucer, as we have already seen, pretends that the situation was delightful and the characters to be admired. He shares with Horace too some other characteristics already noticed, such as the use of comic images, and, above all, the quick observation

of human affectation, and the suggestion of a recognisable personality as in the lines quoted about the lawyer. Chaucer, however, extends Horatian ridicule to the kind of objects satirised in the Juvenalian tradition, and modifies it by the tone of pretended naivete, not found in Horace's style, but almost certainly learnt, at least in part, from Ovid, whose works Chaucer had undoubtedly read and who might indeed be called Chaucer's master.

The fact that it is relevant to ask the question, was Chaucer influenced by classical satirists, is in itself interesting, and throws light on Chaucer's distinctiveness. Though it cannot be answered definitely, his indebtedness to classical writers in general is indisputable, and is most interestingly noticeable in the fact that he thought of himself as a poet in a way that earlier Medieval writers seem not to have done. He is the first English medieval poet explicitly to accept the permanent value of his work, and hence to care about the unsettled state of the language and its dialectal variety, the first to see himself as of the same kind as the classical poets. The writers of medieval lyrics, romances, plays, etc., almost certainly had a workaday conception of themselves, and did not think of a poet as a man of particular perception and judgment, but as a man who wrote verse in a craftsmanlike way for specific use. But Chaucer sees himself as a poet in the classical tradition, and it is for this reason that, despite the fact that the substance of his satiric portraits are medieval commonplaces, and despite his usual disguise of Chaucer the pilgrim, behind this disguise, and sometimes heard openly, is the truly personal tone of the satirist, which is quite unmedieval.

Source: Rosemary Woolf, "Chaucer as Satirist in the 'General Prologue' to the *Canterbury Tales*," in *Critical Quarterly*, Vol. 1, 1959, pp. 150-57.

Critical Essay #18

In the following essay excerpt, Donaldson examines the role of rhetoric in "The Nun's Priest's Tale."

It is the nature of the beast fable, of which the "Nun's Priest's Tale" is an example, to make fun of human attitudes by assigning them to the lower animals. Perhaps no other form of satire has proved so charming throughout literary history. From Aesop's fables through the medieval French mock-epic *Reynard the Fox* (upon a version of which the "Nun's Priest's Tale" relies for its slight plot), down to La Fontaine and Br'er Rabbit, the beast who acts like a man has enjoyed general popularity. In the "Nun's Priest's Tale" one of the most charming of poets has given the genre a superbly comic expression. Yet much of the tale's humor lies neither in its plot nor in the equivalence of man and beast, but in the extraordinary dilation of the telling. For while Chaucer was endowing his feathered hero and heroine with many of the qualities of a courtly lover and his lady, he was also embellishing his tale with an ample selection of the rhetorical commonplaces of Western civilization. To analyze the effect these have on the story it is necessary to investigate briefly what rhetoric is.

The art of expressive speech and writing or, more narrowly, of persuasive speech is a fair enough definition of rhetoric. But considered as a set of formulas for expressing a recurrent idea or situation, rhetoric may amount to little more than cliché. It is also possible to think of rhetoric, as one frequently does today, as a kind of cosmetic art□ that of adorning bare facts. Yet something is lacking here. The rhetorical mode of expression may be said to consist in using language in such a way as to bring about certain preferred interpretations. Compare, for example, an apparently bare statement, "The sun sets," with the rhetorical statement, "The Sun drove his chariot beyond the waters of the western seas." To the ancient mind the last statement would suggest a particular kind of order and meaning in the universe□in other words, a cosmos. This piece of rhetoric was the ancient man's way of reassuring himself that chaos would not come again with the setting of the sun. Today we probably prefer the simplicity of the first statement. Yet "The sun sets" has its residue of rhetoric: we know that the sun does not set but only seems to. We accept this inaccurate and quite rhetorical statement because we are reluctant, even when we know better, to displace ourselves from our inherited position at the center of creation. Rhetoric still stands between us and the fear of something which, even if it is not chaos, is disconcerting. It follows that rhetoric in this sense is something more than language of adornment. It is, in fact, a powerful weapon of survival in a vast and alien universe. In our own time, as in the Middle Ages and in the Age of Homer, rhetoric has served to satisfy man's need for security and to provide a sense of the importance of his own existence and of the whole human enterprise. It is true that rhetoric, as it operates for persuasion and selfpersuasion, may become merely an instrument of deception, a matter of clichés and of superficial and contradictory thinking. One finds examples in advertising and political slogans and in the mutually inconsistent wisdom of proverbs. The excesses of rhetoric invite satire; regarded satirically, rhetoric may be taken as a kind of inadequate defense that man erects against an inscrutable reality. It is in this way that Chaucer is viewing it in the "Nun's

Priest's Tale." Most noticeably, of course, he employs the standard rhetoric of heroic poetry in order to give the utmost mock-significance to each of Chantecleer's actions. Even the best of epic heroes suffers from the handicap of being only one of an untold number of people who have lived on earth, and the fact that Achilles and Hector still have significance (if a fading one) is due to the gigantic rhetorical effort of Homer, who persuades his reader that these were the very best in their kind who ever lived. By a similar technique Chantecleer is made the best rooster that ever lived, so that his death amid the teeth of Dan Russel□if it had occurred□ could have provided a tragic episode every bit as significant to mankind as the death of Hector. Or so the Nun's Priest would have us believe, what with his epic manner and his full-dress similes, his references to the fall of Troy, the burning of Rome, the destruction of Carthage, to Sinon, Ganelon, and Judas Iscariot, to the awful problems of free will and foreordination. And, if this were not sufficient to persuade us of the importance of Chantecleer to the scheme of things, the divine powers take the trouble to send the rooster a monitory dream concerning his impending fate. The logic of the comedy is unexceptionable: these are the devices that made Hector and Achilles, and hence all men in their persons, significant; will not the devices do the same for Chantecleer?

While he deals largely in the rhetorical commonplaces appropriate to epic heroes, the Nun's Priest does not ignore commonplaces less exalted. The discussion of the significance of dreams reflects one of man's most enduring attempts to enhance his importance, and the basic disagreement between the cock and the hen regarding dreams is an embarrassing instance of the rhetorical tradition's having produced two entirely antipathetic answers to the same problem: Similarly, the age-old question of woman is answered□in one breath, as it were□by two equally valid if mutually exclusive commonplaces: woman is man's ruination and woman is all man's bliss. Especially prominent is the rhetoric of "authority," by which poets assure themselves that what they are doing is unexceptionable: when the rooster's singing is compared with the singing of mermaids, the expert on mermaids' singing is named□Physiologus, whose authority presumably makes the simile respectable. It is inevitable that the Friday on which Chantecleer's near-tragedy occurs should be castigated in the terms set by that most formidable and dullest of medieval rhetoricians, Geoffrey of Vinsauf, who carried almost to its ultimate point formalization of expression and stultification of thought.

The "Nun's Priest's Tale" is full of what seem to be backward references to the preceding tales, so that it is sometimes taken as a parody-summary of all that has gone before. The reason for this is probably less that Chaucer had the other tales in mind as he wrote (indeed, he could have written the "Nun's Priest's Tale" without having any thought of the others) than that in it he employs comically all the rhetorical devices that were a part of his own poetical inheritance. But with the "Monk's Tale," which immediately precedes, the Nun's Priest's does seem to have a more organic connection. The Monk had pitilessly labored the emasculated notion of tragedy current in the Middle Ages, with all its emphasis on the dominance of Fortune, viewed apart from human responsibility.

In taking by turns the attitude toward Chantecleer of the Monk ("Oh destiny that mayst not be eschewed") and the more ethical attitude that the cock was fondly overcome by

female charm (he "took his counsel of his wife, with sorrow"), Chaucer is comically exploiting a paradox the two ends of which are played against the poor narrator, caught in the middle and not knowing whether to blame fate or rooster and compromising by doing both by turns. Yet this elusive interaction between man's nature and his destiny is one of the concomitants of a far more profound kind of tragedy than anything the Monk's definition could produce: Macbeth also had his fatal influences and his deliberate wrongdoings. As a work of the intellect, even though it is wholly comic, the "Nun's Priest's Tale" is far more serious and mature than the Monk's. Its author might well have produced a Shakespearean tragedy□provided he could have stopped laughing.

The man who is able to maintain a satiric view toward rhetoric□the sum of the ideas by which people are helped to preserve their self-respect□is not apt to be popular with his victims. Inevitably, they will search him out to discover the pretensions under which he subsists. Aware that in the personality of the satirist will always exist grounds for rebutting the satire, Chaucer carefully gives us nothing to work on in the character of the Nun's Priest: there is no portrait of him in the "General Prologue," and the introduction to his tale reveals only the most inoffensive of men. But in one important respect he is very like his creator: he can survey the world as if he were no part of it, as if he were situated comfortably on the moon looking at a human race whom he knew and loved wholeheartedly but whose ills he was immune from. This is the same godlike detachment that characterizes the incident of the telling of *Sir Thopas* and also, in another way, *Troilus*. It is almost as if the Creator were watching with loving sympathy and humorous appreciation the solemn endeavors of His creatures to understand the situation in which He has placed them.

Source: E. Talbot Donaldson, "Commentary: The 'Nun's Priest's Tale,'" in *Chaucer Poetry*, selected and edited by Talbot Donaldson, Ronald Press Company, 1958, pp. 1104-08.

Critical Essay #19

In the following essay, Lumiansky contends that "The Nun's Priest's Tale" reveals the Nun's Priest to be "frail, timid, and humble."

Among the best liked and most widely known sections of *The Canterbury Tales* is the Nun's Priest's story of the regal Chanticleer and the lovely Dame Pertelote. For a long time critics have realized that this tale skilfully reflects facets of its teller's character, but only recently have detailed attempts been made to suggest just what sort of person Chaucer intended his audience to visualize as the Nun's Priest. Since Chaucer did not include in the "General Prologue" a portrait of this Pilgrim, whatever view one takes of the Nun's Priest must be based on the comments to and about him by the Host, on his own short comment to the Host, on the Narrator's brief remark about him, and on the superb tale which he relates to the company. This is to say that any acceptable portrait of Chaucer's Nun's Priest must of necessity derive primarily from the personal interplay during the Canterbury pilgrimage.

Recent criticism has presented the Nun's Priest to us as a brawny and vigorous man with stature and muscles which justify his serving for the duration of the pilgrimage as one of three bodyguards for the Prioress and the Second Nun. This view is based, first, on an acceptance as direct description of the Host's extreme comments in the Nun's Priest's Epilogue concerning the physical prowess of the priest; and, second, on the existence of documents which show that contemporary travel was particularly dangerous for women, even nuns□the assumption being that the Prioress and the Second Nun would therefore need husky bodyguards for protection. While the documents concerned are of great interest to anyone working with *The Canterbury Tales*, it is true of course that Chaucer was not always controlled in his writing by a desire for historical accuracy. Accordingly, even the presence of more numerous and apt documents of this nature than are available could not dictate a brawny physique for the Nun's Priest. And whatever the extent to which Chaucer may have had in mind the perils of the road when (and if) he wrote "preestes thre," he was sufficiently unmindful of those perils when he wrote the "Nun's Priest's Prologue" to reduce the Prioress and the Second Nun to one male attendant "*the* Nonnes Preest."

Where but one brief explicit statement is available□ and that one to the effect that this Pilgrim is "swete" and "goodly"□considerable difference of opinion concerning the Nun's Priest is at least permissible, if it can be supported. Thus, the purpose of this paper will be to maintain through a reexamination of the pertinent passages that the Nun's Priest is most convincingly visualized as an individual who is scrawny, humble, and timid, while at the same time highly intelligent, well educated, shrewd and witty. As an important part of this portrait, the Host's remarks in the "Nun's Priest's Epilogue" will be considered as broadly ironic, and Harry Bailly will assume a larger role in the dramatic interplay surrounding the Nun's Priest's performance than he has hitherto been granted by the commentators. Numerous suggestions made by other critics concerning this dramatic interplay□ most notably those by William W. Lawrence□will be used here. However, no one, so far as I can find, has previously called attention to the important

and easily acceptable function of the "Nun's Priest's Epilogue" when it is read as broad irony on the part of Harry Bailly. Such an interpretation of that Endlink serves as foundation for the argument presented here; and, as will appear at length below, it furnishes a reasonable explanation for the unanswerable question which arises if the "Nun's Priest's Epilogue" is taken as straightforward description: namely, why would the Host, who has prudently retreated before the Miller's impressive strength and the Shipman's evident hardihood, feel free to speak rudely and contemptuously to a large and muscular Nun's Priest? The supposition of a patronizing attitude on the part of the henpecked Host towards a man who is under the supervision of a woman, the Prioress, is simply not adequate explanation for the extreme rudeness and contempt of Harry's remarks to the Nun's Priest, if the latter is conceived of as possessing strength sufficient to make Harry fearful of physical violence.

The order to be used here for the fragments of *The Canterbury Tales* is that set forth recently and convincingly by R. A. Pratt, whereby Fragment VII comes immediately before Fragment III and after Fragment II. The Nun's Priest occupies the final position in Fragment VII, in many ways as carefully prepared a fragment of the Canterbury collection as is the first. The Host, up until the time that he calls upon the Nun's Priest for a story, has fared rather badly on the pilgrimage. After his success in the "General Prologue" and his pleasure arising from the "Knight's Tale," he was successfully challenged by the Miller, somewhat annoyed by the Reeve's "sermonyng," and shortly thereafter threatened by the Cook. Then his satisfaction with the Man of Law's performance was quickly dampened by the Shipman's revolt against his authority.

Though the latter's tale concerning the merchant of Saint Denis restored the Host's good spirits, he seemed not too pleased with the sobriety resulting from the miracle related by the Prioress. Next, his patience was strained beyond its limits by the Pilgrim Chaucer's "Sir Thopas," and he was moved to a lengthy recollection of his domestic woes by the "Melibeus." In the succeeding instance, he was offered no relief by the Monk, whose tragedies he found exceedingly boring. Finally, when the Monk haughtily refused to relate gayer material, Harry impolitely turned upon the Nun's Priest with a demand that this cleric "Telle us swich thyng as may oure hertes glade."

Looked at in this fashion, the sequence and the nature of the performances in Fragments I, II, and VII seem to have been considerably influenced by Chaucer's desire to represent a regular rise and fall in the Host's spirits, with the humorous deflating of the Host as a steady theme running through the three successive fragments. Though this surmise may be open to debate, the fact should be noted that in the course of the first three fragments, Harry plays an important role in connection with every Pilgrim's recital. The point is that through these three successive fragments the Host's reactions are a vital part of the drama surrounding the various Pilgrims' performances. We therefore may not be far wide of the mark if, in trying to derive an acceptable portrait of the Nun's Priest, we examine that Pilgrim and his tale as they reflect against and fit with the Host's recent behavior; and we should bear steadily in mind that in this section of *The Canterbury Tales* the continuity of very probably nine and certainly four of the preceding recitals is beyond dispute. Particularly important here are the Host's behavior before and reaction after the immediately preceding performance, that of the Monk.

From this line of reasoning□based upon consideration of relationships which Chaucer certainly must have been aware of as he wrote□the following view is deduced as a defensible statement concerning the character of the Nun's Priest and the function of his tale in their dramatic context. The Host is the central figure in the personal interchanges surrounding the Monk's and the Nun's Priest's performances. He addresses the physically impressive Monk with a lengthy sexual joke; the Monk, by means of his dull tragedies, then rebuffs the Host for the latter's disrespectful and vulgar jocularity towards him. The Host therefore gladly seconds the Knight's interruption of the Monk's series of tragedies, but is again left with injured feelings when the Monk refuses to comply with his demand for a merry tale about hunting. As a consequence, the Host quickly turns upon the feeble and timid Nun's Priest as a cleric upon whom he can *safely* vent the displeasure which the Monk has caused him. The Nun's Priest meekly accepts the Host's brusque orders for a merry tale, and then brilliantly carries them out. In the tale he even subtly challenges two of the Host's attackers: he offers direct rebuttal for the theme of the prose narrative told by the Pilgrim Chaucer, and he satirizes both the manner and the matter of the Monk's recital. Though the Host may not realize that he has thus acquired a defender brilliant though physically weak, the gaiety of this tale dissipates most of Harry's displeasure, which arose most recently from his treatment by the Monk. Then, in the "Epilogue" which follows the Nun's Priest's Tale, the Host completely regains his good spirits, for there he is able to use successfully, in a broadly ironic manner, something of the same sexual joke to which the Monk earlier took exception. The high comedy for the reader and for Chaucer the poet lies, of course, in the Host's missing the subtler points of the tale and holding up to ridicule the meek little priest who has superbly defended him.

The analysis to support the statement in the preceding paragraph should begin with the performance by the Pilgrim Chaucer. To dispel the sobriety that has fallen upon the company as a result of the Prioress' story, the Host begins to jest; then he calls upon Chaucer for a merry tale, after having poked fun at him for his large waistline and his quiet manner. Chaucer proceeds by means of the burlesque "Sir Thopas" and the moralistic "Melibeus" to repay the Host in two complementary ways for his mockery. First, the Host's disgust with the entertaining and skilful "Sir Thopas" and his hearty approval of the interminable "Melibeus" make humorously apparent Harry's sad lack of the literary critical ability upon which he prides himself. Second, Harry's approving the "Melibeus," which has as its theme female "maistrye," and his consequent lengthy account of the difficulties he suffers at home under his wife Goodelief's "maistrye," make him a laughing-stock, for he lacks the critical insight to note the very point of that story which his own marital experience puts him in a position to refute.

Following his revelations of the bitter life Goodelief leads him, the Host turns to the Monk: "My lord, the Monk . . . be myrie of cheere, / For ye shul telle a tale trewely." As has not, I think, been noted elsewhere, from the first of these lines one should perhaps understand that the Monk's facial expression and manner indicate considerable displeasure, for my lord the Monk certainly has no reason to be pleased with the treatment he has received on this pilgrimage. When, after the "Knight's Tale," the Host with due regard for "degre" called upon the Monk for a story, the drunken Miller rudely took over the Note the repetition here of the emphatic affirmative "yis" in place of the

usual "yes." Also, though it is true that for the Host to request a merry tale, or for another Pilgrim to promise one, is a frequent occurrence in *The Canterbury Tales*, a noteworthy part of the unction here may rest in the Nun's Priest's echoing the Host's earlier unsuccessful command to the Monk to be merry. The Nun's Priest thus may be saying, in effect, "Even though the Monk would not do as you told him, *I will*." If such a reading is defensible, then already we can see that the lowly Nun's Priest is unsympathetic towards his high-ranking fellow churchman. As will appear shortly, there is considerable evidence in the "Nun's Priest's Tale" of his lack of sympathy for the Monk. In any event, in his answer here, the Nun's Priest is running no risk of incurring the Host's wrath; and the Narrator's calling him "swete" and "goodly" serves to emphasize the accommodating haste with which he has just accepted Harry's orders.

But, though the Nun's Priest may be weak in body and fawning in manner, there is nothing wrong with his intellect and education. In complying with the Host's request, he relates what is in many ways the outstanding story in the whole collection. And in so doing he manages to include two clear implications which reveal his own point of view and which can also be taken as defenses of the Host. In the first place, the story presents a husband who is right and a wife who is wrong in the interpretation of Chanticleer's dream. Further, though the ostensible moral of the story is that one should not be so careless as to trust in flattery, the Nun's Priest slyly places greater emphasis upon another point:

Wommennes conseils been ful ofte colde;
Wommannes conseil broghte us first to wo,
And made Adam fro Paradys to go,
Ther as he was ful myrie and wel at ese.
But for I noot to whom it myght displese,
If I conseil of wommen wolde blame,
Passe over, for I seyde it in my game.
Rede auctours, where they trete of swich mateere,
And what they seyn of wommen ye may heere.
Thise been the cokkes wordes, and nat myne;
I kan noon harm of no womman divyne.

These antifeminist aspects of the tale represent the Nun's Priest's ways of hinting his dissatisfaction at being under the "petticoat rule" of the Prioress. But they also serve another important function: they are the Nun's Priest's efforts to comfort the Host, who at home must cope with the dictatorial Goodelief. Further, they furnish a direct answer to the theme of the prose tale told earlier by the Pilgrim Chaucer, wherein Melibeus was greatly aided by his wife's counsel. Though Harry Bailly□favorably impressed by the fact that Prudence advised Melibeus to avoid strife, while his own wife urges him to do violence upon both his serving boys and his neighbors□may have failed to notice any incongruity between his praise on the one hand of a story which preaches that a husband should accept his wife's advice, and on the other his unpleasant situation at home, the Nun's Priest quickly saw the point. Therefore, by means of his story, the brilliant gaiety of which contrasts sharply and perhaps purposefully with the lengthy and dull "Melibeus," he makes clear that a husband is not always wise in following his wife's

counsel. As J. B. Severs has shown, Chaucer's originality in the tale consists largely in his changes to emphasize just this point. Also, we should note that in the last lines of the passage quoted above, the Nun's Priest does not really withdraw his derogatory comments about women's counsel; rather, he furnishes authority for such views, for in suggesting that his listeners read the authors who treat such matters, he has in mind the same antifeminist writings from which Jankyn read to the Wife of Bath, writings which most certainly do not present a sympathetic view of women's counsel.

The second implication present in the tale is directed against the Monk, who, as we saw, completely discomfitted the Host. The Monk's confidence and general affluence are in as striking contrast with the Nun's Priest's timidity and poverty as is his fine palfrey with the latter's lean and foul nag; thus, it is not unnatural for the Nun's Priest to feel certain twinges of antagonistic jealousy toward his wealthy fellow churchman, and in his tale to hold up the Monk to subtle ridicule. The story of Croesus was one of the dull tragedies related by the Monk, and when Chanticleer refers to this story we are tempted to see a parallel between the strutting manner of both the outrider and the cock. Later, the Nun's Priest says:

For evere the latter ende of joye is wo.
God woot that worldly joye is soone ago;
And if a rethor koude faire endite,
He in a cronycle saufly myghte it write
As for a sovereyn notabilitee.

In connection with this passage we observe that this same commonplace idea of mutability was the central theme of the Monk's performance; and the Nun's Priest's calling such a routine concept a "sovereyn notabilitee" is almost certainly a thrust at the Monk's sententiousness and pomposity. One other passage by the Nun's Priest seems to apply unfavorably to the Monk. In his account of Samson, the Monk said:

Beth war by this ensample oold and playn
That no men telle hir conseil til hir wyves
Of swich thyng as they wolde han secree fayn,
If that it touche hir lymes or hir lyves.

Here, of course, is a typical antifeminist statement which a careful listener might well recall upon hearing the Nun's Priest's mock apology, quoted above, for speaking ill of "wommennes conseils." And the Nun's Priest seems eager to help his audience arrive at this connection when he shifts in his remarks from "reading" to "hearing" authors who have treated the woman question: "Read authors who treat such material, and you may hear what they say about women." Also, the Nun's Priest attributes the low opinion of women's counsel to Chanticleer, and thus once again equates the Monk with the cock, who, according to the Monk's words, should not have told Pertelote about his dream.

It seems clear, then, that in carrying out the Host's orders the Nun's Priest by the wonderful gaiety and charm of his story avoids any possible blame for not being merry, and that by the two implications present in his tale he goes further in his efforts to

please, defend, and comfort the Host. Whether or not Harry understood these implications is not clear, but certainly he seems considerably mollified when he addresses the Nun's Priest in the "Epilogue" to the latter's tale.

Before we examine that Endlink, however, what of the claim by various editors of *The Canterbury Tales* that Chaucer meant to cancel it? This claim has been supported by three factors: first, the Endlink does not appear in most of the manuscripts; second, certain lines in the Endlink repeat matters present in the Host's remarks to the Monk in the "Prologue" to the "Nun's Priest's Tale;" and, third, as Manly and Rickert felt, cancellation seems "to be supported by the fact that the Host's words to the Priest after the tale suggest a different type of person from that suggested by his words [before the tale]. . ." But, as Tatlock argued, the manuscript situation may well result from patchwork by the scribes, and for Chaucer repetition of an idea is not infrequent, especially when as here actual verbal repetition is extremely limited. Further, the seeming conflict in the Host's comments as to the type of person addressed is present only if the Endlink is taken as straightforward description. Consequently, the claim for cancellation is not convincing, and, as we shall see, to throw away this "Epilogue" would be to lose its possibly ironic function and thus to rule out what may be one of Chaucer's carefully developed high points in the dramatic interplay among the Pilgrims. The Endlink in question may be quoted in full:

"Sire Nonnes Preest," oure Hooste seide anoon,
"I blessed be thy breche, and every stoon!
This was a murie tale of Chauntecleer.
But by my trouthe, if thou were seculer,
Thou woldest ben a trede-foul aright.
For if thou have corage as thou hast myght,
Thee were nede of hennes, as I wene,
Ya, moo than seven tymes seventene.
See, whiche braunes hath this gentil preest,
So gret a nekke, and swich a large breest!
He loketh as a sperhauk with his yen;
Him nedeth nat his coulour for to dyen
With brasile, ne with greyn of Portyngale.
Now, sire, faire falle you for your tale!"
And after that he, with ful merie chere,
Seide unto another, as ye shuln heere.

We see here that as a result of the gaiety of the Nun's Priest's "murie tale of Chauntecleer," the Host has lost much of the pique which he earlier felt because of the Monk's outdoing him. He therefore compliments the Nun's Priest for his narrative ability. But Harry still has not forgotten the rebuff dealt him by the Monk. To wipe away the memory of this loss of dignity, and to reestablish himself in the eyes of the company, he now directs at the Nun's Priest something of the same sexual jest at which the Monk earlier took offense. In so doing, Harry continues to use the second person singular familiar pronouns, a device he would surely not have employed if his intent here were solely to praise the Nun's Priest. It seems much more likely that this time his jest is

ironically employed, in that the frail and timid Nun's Priest, of whom the Host feels not the least fear, lacks completely the appearance of vigorous manliness which Harry attributes to him in this "Epilogue." Thus the Host evens his score with the Monk, to his own satisfaction at least, at the expense of another churchman, and then condescends in the last line of his speech to address the Nun's Priest with a respectful "yow." Consequently, he is ready to call upon the next storyteller with his usual "ful merie chere." My main contention, then, is that the dramatic interplay surrounding the Nun's Priest's performance depends upon a conception of this Pilgrim as frail, timid, and humble. Further, the Host plays a vital and consistent role in the interchanges which accompany the narratives presented in Fragment VII. A Nun's Priest fit to serve as a muscular bodyguard for the Prioress and the Second Nun would hardly have meekly suffered Harry's contemptuous attitude in calling upon him, or the Host's leering insinuations in commenting upon his story. Nor, in view of that attitude and those insinuations, is it likely that the physically impressive Nun's Priest who emerges if the "Nun's Priest's Epilogue" is taken as actual description would have been sufficiently eager to please the Host as to furnish him with a gay tale including implications which almost certainly represent retorts to Harry's most recent attackers□the Pilgrim Chaucer and the Monk□ and which offer Harry some comfort for the female "maistrye" that he experiences at home. Finally, the interpretation set forth in this paper presents an explanation which in no way conflicts with Chaucer's usual method in handling his Pilgrims, and which accounts satisfactorily for the general similarity of the Host's remarks in the "Nun's Priest's Epilogue" and in his earlier address to the Monk.

Source: R. M. Lumiansky, "The Nun's Priest in *The Canterbury Tales*," in *P.M.L.A.*, Vol. 68, No. 4, September 1953, pp. 896-906.

Adaptations

2001 movie *A Knight's Tale*, starring Heath Ledger and Mark Addy, is only loosely based on the Knight in *The Canterbury Tales*: it concerns a young squire who meets Chaucer and enlists his help in becoming a full-fledged knight. It was written and directed by Brian Helgeland and is distributed by Columbia Tristar.

A compact disc of Trevor Eaton reading selections from *The Canterbury Tales* was released in 2000, marking the six hundredth anniversary of Chaucer's death. It is available from Pearl, of Sussex, England.

The Penguin Library edition of the *Canterbury Tales*, translated into modern English by Nevill Coghill, is available on six audiocassettes from Penguin. It was released in 1995 and again in 1999.

The Canterbury Tales were adapted to an opera, sung in English, available on two compact discs from Chandos Records of Colchester, England. The performers, recorded in 1996, include Yvonne Kenny, Robert Tear, Stephen Roberts, and the London Symphony Orchestra.

A 1995 audiocassette of *The Canterbury Tales* is available from Durkin Hayes of Niagara Falls, New York, with Fenella Fielding and Martin Starkie reading.

Recorded Books has a thirteen-hour recording on nine audiocassettes, edited and hosted by Michael Murphy of Brooklyn College.

A compact disc of songs that Chaucer mentioned or that were popular in his day was released in 2000. Recorded by Carol Wood, its title is *The Chaucer Songbook: Celtic Music and Early Music for Harp and Voice*.

Several of the *Canterbury Tales* can be found on a 1961 recording available from Caedmon on a 1988 audiocassette release. Dame Peggy Ashcroft reads "The Wife of Bath's Tale," and Stanley Holloway and Michael MacLiommoir read "The Miller's Tale" and "The Pardoner's Tale."

A feature film of *The Canterbury Tales* was made in Italy in 1971, starring Hugh Griffith, Franco Citti and Tom Baker, and it is available dubbed into English on both videodisc and videocassette from Image Entertainment of Chatsworth, CA.

A 1991 videocassette of the Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* is available from Educational Video Network of Huntsville, Texas.

A 1944 feature movie, entitled *A Canterbury Tale*, retells the story in an updated version, setting it in the same location during World War II. It stars John Sweet and Eric Portman, and it is available on videocassette from Public Media Incorporated.

Topics for Further Study

Have your own storytelling contest. Make sure that each participant tells two stories, since Chaucer originally intended each traveler to tell one story on the way to Canterbury and one on the way back home.

Assign people from your class to play the parts of storytellers from *The Canterbury Tales* and have them describe to one another an experience they have had in the twenty-first century. Vote on the stories that were the best and talk about why.

Find out what kind of food these pilgrims would have eaten when they stopped at inns on their trip, and try making some of it.

Using words found throughout the text of *The Canterbury Tales*, try to translate a favorite song into Middle English.

Write an essay explaining how these tales are or are not like the urban folk legends that are constantly circulated on the Internet.

What Do I Read Next?

One of the most famous writers living during Chaucer's lifetime was Giovanni Boccaccio. Boccaccio's most famous work, *The Decameron* (1350), was a collection of one hundred short tales that may have influenced the structure that Chaucer used. In addition, some of the stories Chaucer used in his work were taken from *The Decameron*.

The "Chaucer Metapage" is a project initiated in 1998 by the Thirty Third International Congress of Medieval Studies, aimed at coordinating all Chaucer sources on the internet. It can be located at http://www.unc.edu/depts/chaucer/ index.html (August 6, 2001).

The Canterbury Tales has been translated into Modern English by Nevill Coghill, whose translation was, in turn, adapted to a Broadway musical in 1968. This translation, from Penguin Classics, is considered to be the best of modern translations. Penguin USA published a recent edition in 2000.

Nevill Coghill also translated *Troilus and Criseyde* (1483), Chaucer's other famous work. It is also available from Penguin Classics.

Some of Chaucer's minor works have been compiled in a book from Penguin Classics called *Love Visions*. Included in the book are "The Book of the Duchess," "The House of Fame," "The Parliament of Birds," and "The Legend of Good Women." It was translated by Brian Stone and published by Viking Press in 1985.

Sir Edmund Spenser's epic poem *The Faerie Queen* was published two centuries after Chaucer in 1590, but it was an historic piece, looking back at a time of knights and medieval folklore, which is why it is often linked with *The Canterbury Tales*. Spenser's poem is available as a Penguin Classic from Viking Press, and a reissued edition was published in 1988.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a tale of chivalry that goes back before Chaucer's time, to the thirteenth century. It is available in a modern translation from 1925 by J. R. R. Tolkien, author of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. It was reissued by Ballantine Books in 1988.

One of the most influential poetic works ever written, *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri, concerns the author's journey through hell and purgatory and finally to heaven. It was published in 1321, and Chaucer would certainly have read it, as have millions of poetry lovers in the centuries since then.

Further Study

Cullen, Dolores L., *Chaucer's Host: Up-So-Doun*, Fithian Press, 1998.

Though many other books have been written about the other travelers, Cullen takes a rare book-length look at the Host of the trip, the innkeeper. Her study attempts to show him to be a Christ-like figure.

Lambdin, Laura C., ed., *Chaucer's Pilgrims: An Historical Guide to the Pilgrims in the "Canterbury Tales,"* Praeger Publishers, 1999.

This book assembles essays from experts in each field, explaining the social functions of the various pilgrims that Chaucer wrote about. Reading this book is a good way to get to know medieval England and *Canterbury Tales* at the same time.

Leiceister, H. Marshall, Jr., *The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the "Canterbury Tales,"* University of California Press, 1990.

Marshall examines the question of whether *Canterbury Tales* has an overall narrative structure or are a collection of related, but not entwined, objects. The book's scholarly tone might be difficult for some students.

Loomis, Roger Sherman, *A Mirror of Chaucer's World*, Princeton University Press, 1965.

This book tells the story of Chaucer, his age, and his acquaintances, making use of many illustrations to give readers a sense of what the land and life in general was like in the fourteenth century.

Patterson, Lee, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1991.

Patterson is one of the world's great medievalists (scholars of the medieval era). This study of the time as it is reflected in Chaucer's work is solid and complete.

Robinson, Ian, *Chaucer and the English Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, 1972.

Other studies show how English poetry evolved from Chaucer; this one puts his work into perspective with the works that were written before him and in his time. It also gives a good look at Chaucer's writings besides *The Canterbury Tales*.

Ruggiers, Paul G., *The Art of the "Canterbury Tales,"* The University of Wisconsin Press, 1965.

Ruggiers, a Guggenheim Fellow, divides the tales into two functions, "comedy and irony" and "romantic," and he examines each in its designated category.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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