

THE CANTERBURY TALES

THE CANTERBURY TALES contains a wide variety of subjects and literary genres, from racy fabliaux to sober tales of Christian suffering, in accents that range from the elegant opening sentence of the General Prologue to the thumping doggerel of Sir Thopas and the solemn prose of the Parson. The whole is lent coherence and verisimilitude by a framing narrative: a pilgrimage provides the occasion for gathering a broadly diverse group of characters to tell a series of tales intercalated with narrative links, in which the pilgrims argue, interrupt one another, or comment on the tales that have been told as they move through the fourteenth-century countryside to their common goal.

It is not known exactly when Chaucer began the *Tales*. The pilgrimage is traditionally dated 1387, but that date is based on a number of doubtful assumptions—that The Man of Law's Tale is told on the second day, that the pilgrimage could not have taken place in Holy Week, and, most important, that Chaucer must have had some specific year in mind. The composition of the *Tales* extended over a considerable length of time, and perhaps the idea of the *Tales* evolved rather than originated at a specific moment. Some of the tales—certainly the Knight's, the Second Nun's, probably the Monk's, and perhaps others—were in existence in some form before Chaucer conceived the idea of *The Canterbury Tales*. They show that he had been interested in short narrative for some time, and The Monk's Tale and *The Legend of Good Women* show a further interest in composing a collection of short narratives. Sometime in the late 1380s he hit upon the idea of a pilgrimage to Canterbury as a framework for his collection.

The use of a narrative framework for a collection of tales was as ancient as *The Thousand and One Nights* and as contemporary as the *Confessio amantis*, on which Chaucer's friend John Gower



was still working (it was completed, in its first form, in 1390). Chaucer doubtless knew Gower's work, as well as other collections such as *The Seven Sages of Rome*, but by far the most suggestive analogue to *The Canterbury Tales* is Boccaccio's *Decameron*.

There is no proof that Chaucer knew the *Decameron*. He never quotes it, and though he and Boccaccio narrate a number of similar tales, in no case has it been clearly demonstrated that Chaucer drew directly on Boccaccio's version. Yet Chaucer must have at least heard of the most famous prose work of his favorite Italian poet, even if he did not have a chance to read it or to acquire a copy of his own, and he most likely did receive from the *Decameron*, however indirectly, some suggestion that helped shape his own narrative framework.

If so, it was only a suggestion, for Chaucer's work differs greatly from Boccaccio's. In the *Decameron*, ten elegant young ladies and gentlemen, accompanied by their servants, journey from villa to villa through the countryside around Florence to avoid the plague then raging in the city. They amuse themselves by telling tales. Each in turn serves as leader for a day and sets the subject for that day's tales. After two weeks' sojourn and ten days of storytelling (Fridays and Saturdays being devoted to preparations for religious observance and other activities), exactly one hundred tales (ten *decades*, hence the title) have been told, and the party returns to Florence.

The resemblances between the *Tales* and the *Decameron* are obvious. Boccaccio, like Chaucer, uses a journey as the occasion for a collection of tales ostensibly told by the travelers (though the tales are told at the villas in which they stay, rather than on the road). The tales vary in tone and attitude, but the device of the leader's setting a common subject provides for their unity and lends each day's tales something of the

nature of a debate, like those that develop in Chaucer's work. Boccaccio's tellers, however, are all young aristocrats of the same age and social status, and though they are to some extent individualized, they form a homogeneous group of equals. Their servants provide comic interludes in the framing narrative, but none tells a tale; in the *Decameron*, telling tales is an elegant and well-ordered aristocratic pastime.

That may have been what Harry Bailly, the Host of the Tabard Inn, had in mind when he proposed the storytelling competition and appointed himself leader. Chaucer's pilgrims, however, represent a wide range of social levels, ages, and occupations, and they are apparently gathered not by prior agreement but by mere chance. They have little in common except the goal of their pilgrimage, and the comic disputes that Boccaccio had restricted to the servants in Chaucer break out among the tellers themselves. Despite the Host's attempts to control the situation, the storytelling seems often to develop of its own volition as the pilgrims squabble, interrupt one another, and tell tales that the author would prefer not to relate but that must be told, he helplessly protests, if he is to give a true report of what was actually said and done.

The Canterbury Tales has the air of actuality because it is based on actuality. A pilgrimage was one of the few occasions in medieval life when so diverse a group of people might have gathered on a basis of temporary equality and might have told tales to pass the time on their journey. Chaucer had no literary precedent for this (Ser-cambi's *Novelle*, once regarded as a possible model, was probably not written until after Chaucer's death), and the journey to Canterbury gains much of its realistic tone from the fact that it was modeled on life.

This is not to say that Chaucer attempts to represent an actual Canterbury pilgrimage. Since the pilgrims are on their way to give thanks for help "whan that they were seeke," we expect some of the jollity that the Wife of Bath associates with religious festivals and relatively little of those penitential aspects of pilgrimage of which the Parson later reminds us. Yet most of these characters seem pure holiday merry-makers. None goes "naked in pilgrimages, or bare-foot" (ParsT X.105), and even the Parson rides, lean though his nag may be. We are never told that the pilgrims attend Mass, even on the morning of their departure (in contrast to Boccaccio's characters, who scrupulously attend to their reli-

and women, the proper conduct of life—add reverberations of meaning and reference that extend beyond the limits of the individual tales and groups of tales and provide a sense of coherence and fulness for the whole work, despite the absence of a completed narrative framework.

For reasons unknown, Chaucer left *The Canterbury Tales* incomplete and without final revision. The work survives in ten fragments, labeled with Roman numerals in this edition (the alphabetical designations added in parentheses are those of the Chaucer Society, adopted by Skeat in his edition). These fragments are editorial units determined by the existence of internal signs of linkage—bits of conversation or narrative that explicitly refer to a tale just told or to one that immediately follows. There are no explicit connections between the fragments (save for IX-X and, in the tradition of the Ellesmere manuscript, IV-V) and, consequently, no explicit indication of the order in which Chaucer intended the fragments to be read. (Indeed, there is no explicit indication that he had made a final decision in this matter.) Consequently, modern editions differ in the order in which the tales are presented. Skeat's edition has them in the order followed by the Chaucer Society, with the "Bradshaw shift," whereby Fragment VII (B²) is printed following Fragment II (B), and with

Fragment VI following next, so that the complete arrangement is as follows: I (A), II (B), VII (B²), VI (C), III (D), IV (E), V (F), VIII (G), IX (H), X (I). Baugh and Pratt follow this order except for the position of Fragment VI, which they print following Fragment V. Donaldson and Fisher print the tales in the order followed here. Robinson chose that order even though he believed it probable that the "Bradshaw shift" was indeed what Chaucer intended; nevertheless, he wrote, "in the present edition the inconsistent arrangement of the best manuscripts" (by which he meant the Ellesmere and related manuscripts) "is followed and no attempt is made to correct discrepancies left standing by the author."

FRAGMENT I

General Prologue

The General Prologue was presumably written early in the Canterbury period, though it was not necessarily the first part of the *Tales* to be

composed and was probably revised from time to time. Some revisions remained to be made; neither the Second Nun nor the Nun's Priest is described, and it seems likely that Chaucer intended to add their portraits in a later revision.

For the General Prologue, as for the Canterbury pilgrimage itself, Chaucer had no exact literary model. The Prologue begins as if it were to be another of his dream visions, cast in the high style evoked by the learned allusions and elaborate syntax of the opening lines. The celebration of the return of spring recalls the opening of *The Romaunt of the Rose*. There the description of spring, with its suggestions of fertility and rebirth, leads to "Than yonge folk entenden ay/ Forto ben gay and amorous" (Rom 82-83). Here it leads to another kind of love: "Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages" (I.12). The narrator encounters not a Temple of Venus or a Garden of Love but a real tavern, the Tabard in Southwark, containing not a series of allegorical portraits but what seems a lively assembly of real people, gathered for an actual pilgrimage to Canterbury.

The portraits of Chaucer's pilgrims nevertheless owe a great deal to medieval traditions of literary portraiture, including the series of allegorical descriptions in *The Romaunt of the Rose*. The hypocritical friar, the hunting monk, the thieving miller and others are familiar types in medieval *estates satire*, in which representatives of various classes and occupations are portrayed with a satiric emphasis on the vices peculiar to their stations in life. Each of Chaucer's fully described characters represents a different occupation, and each is a paragon of his or her craft: "wel koude" and "verray parfit" echo throughout the General Prologue, as we are shown that each character well knows how to realize the potentialities of his or her occupation, whether for good or—far more often—for mischief. Much of this satire still strikes the mark, since Chaucer's characters represent more general types as well as their particular occupations. What John Dryden wrote in his *Preface to the Fables* (1700) remains true today:

We have our Fore-fathers and Great Grand-dames all before us, as they were in Chaucer's days; their general Characters are still remaining in Mankind, and even in England, though they are called by other names than those of Monks, and Friars, and Chanons and Lady Abbesses, and Nuns: For Mankind is ever the same, and nothing lost out of Nature, though every thing is alter'd.

Nevertheless, each of Chaucer's characters is vividly individualized. The Friar is a representative type of the unctuous hypocrisy one may still encounter in daily life and a clear example of the type of the *hypocritical friar* well known in medieval satire, but he is also a particular individual, with a specific name, Friar Huberd, with his peculiar habits, his lisp, and his own personal history. We even seem to hear the tone of his own voice in his indirectly quoted self-justifications (lines 227-34, 243-48). Likewise, the Knight is an idealized representative of chivalry, but one who has participated in real campaigns, most of them well known to Chaucer's audience, and the Miller is not only the traditional thieving miller, but Robin, with a wart on the end of his nose and the habit of breaking down doors with his head. We glimpse the Prioress weeping when her little dogs are beaten; we are told of the real places from which the pilgrims come; and in such touches as the Wife of Bath's deafness we see the present effects of what seem real past experiences.

It is therefore not disturbing to find among these literary creations the real people: Geoffrey Chaucer himself, the tavern-keeper Harry Bailly, the cook Roger de Ware, and possibly Thomas Pinchbeck, a prominent London lawyer whose name may be punningly revealed in the portrait of the Man of Law. Perhaps other portraits were also drawn from life, though clearly some of the pilgrims, such as the Parson and his brother the Plowman, are pure idealizations. Chaucer's artistic triumph is the easy intermingling of the actual and the ideal, with each lending its qualities to the other, so that the real Harry Bailly becomes a literary creation and the idealized Parson gains a measure of actuality.

The most fascinating of the pilgrims is Geoffrey Chaucer himself. He is never described, and we come to know him only indirectly, from the tone of his voice, his words and actions, and the comments of others. We know him thus only as a literary character—the pilgrim-narrator of the *Tales*, a cheerful and self-effacing fellow, filled with admiration for the others in the company. This is not necessarily a faithful self-portrait, and critics, disturbed by the apparent naïveté of a narrator who ignores the most obvious faults of most of the pilgrims, customarily distinguish between Chaucer the pilgrim and Chaucer the man. The pilgrim accepts the Prioress on her own terms and even admires her; the man could not have ignored her serious violations of reli-

gious rules. The pilgrim seems amused by the Shipman's villainies; the man would have condemned them as crimes. The distinction is useful, though Chaucer the man may have been more complex than this formulation makes him seem. Chaucer the man, the successful courtier and busy government official, could not have been naïve; George Lyman Kittridge long ago observed that a naïve Controller of Customs would be "monstrous." But a rigidly moralizing Controller of Customs, who had to deal every day with cunning merchants and thieving shipmen, would have been impossible, and a courtier unable to wink at others' faults and make the best of people as he found them would not have lasted long even in a court less embroiled in intrigues and jealousies than that of Chaucer-knew. Perhaps Chaucer the pilgrim—cheerful, tolerant, but no fool—is closer than has been thought to Chaucer the man, who may even have relished an occasional rascal.

Chaucer, however, eludes even such simple critical formulations as that. As both pilgrim and writer he remains discreetly in the background, allowing his characters to speak for themselves. In the foreground, directing the action, is not Chaucer but Harry Bailly; he proposes the game of storytelling, appoints himself leader, and arranges the draw that "by adventure, or sort, or cas" falls to the Knight.

The Knight's Tale

The Knight's Tale, though written before *The Canterbury Tales* was begun, has been adapted to the *Tales* (lines 875-92) and is well suited to its teller. It is a free adaptation of Boccaccio's *Teseida*. Chaucer greatly compresses his source, omitting all actions not necessary to the main story. Nevertheless, the elaborate descriptions and long speeches lend the narrative an air of stately and unhurried dignity, and the long Boethian passages that Chaucer adds to the tale—on destiny, on love, and most notably Theseus's great speech on the "First Moevere"—sound a meditative, philosophical tone quite foreign to Boccaccio's original. Most important, Chaucer casts the story of the *Teseida*, a classicized, epic narrative, into the form of a *romance*.

This was the dominant genre of long, serious fiction from the twelfth to at least the seventeenth century, and its influence on the *Tales* is apparent not only in Chaucer's chivalric ro-

mances (the Knight's and the Squire's tales) but also in the tales of the Wife of Bath, the Franklin, the Man of Law, and the Clerk, as well as Chaucer's own Tale of Sir Thopas. Romance is in many ways the exact opposite of its successor, the realistic novel of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (and just as impossible to define precisely): a romance purports to tell not something new, novel, but an old "story," a true history of events remote in time and often in place, which the romancer has learned from some reliable "auctor" or ancient tradition. The story itself is composed of traditional motifs and usually turns upon wonders, chance happenings, and sudden reversals of fortune. The romancer is consequently little concerned with providing realistic motivations for the actions; these are controlled by thematic necessity rather than a lifelike chain of causes and effects; they usually have less narrative importance than the emotions to which they give rise, and often add less to the advancement of the plot than to the creation of the balanced, symmetrical structures that inform the more sophisticated romances. There is little attempt at creating lifelike characters: the invariably noble heroes and heroines are more types than individuals, and their actions, manners, emotions, and speech represent an ideal of aristocratic conduct. The style is appropriately elaborate, often elevated and slow-moving. Some of the individual parts of romance may be realistic, direct representations of the actualities of chivalric life, but the effect at which the romance aims is not that of a convincing representation of life but rather of an ideal image of what life might be if all behaved as nobly as the heroes and heroines of the romance.

As a chivalric romance, The Knight's Tale is mainly concerned with love and arms. Chaucer, however, transformed every genre he used. The chance encounters and sudden reversals of fortune characteristic of romance are here used as occasions for philosophical reflections on human destiny, the inevitable alternation of joy and sorrow, and the divine order of the universe. The Knight's Tale is thus a uniquely philosophical romance. It is also a romance with a sharply contemporary flavor. Love and war are here potential sources of disorder held in check by elaborate ceremonials—state funerals, great tournaments, royal weddings—of the sort that were becoming ever more important in late fourteenth-century life, as the new courtly society was coming into existence and bringing

an increasing formality and ceremonialism to aristocratic life. The Knight's philosophical romance is to some extent a meditation upon the relation of these noble rites to the divine order and to aristocratic life as it appeared to Chaucer and his contemporaries.

It nevertheless remains a romance, with the happy ending characteristic of that genre. The Knight, as we later learn from his interruption of the Monk, prefers happy endings, and his tale suitably concludes with joy after sorrow in the blissful marriage of Palamoun and Emelye, to the delight of his hearers, "namely the gentils everichon."

The Miller's Prologue

Despite Harry Bailly's best efforts, Robin the Miller, so drunk he can hardly sit on his horse, insists that he be allowed to "quite" the Knight's tale, and the narrator elaborately apologizes for what he must now repeat. If you are easily shocked, he urges the reader, turn the page and choose another tale (advice, one suspects, that has seldom been taken); the Miller, the Reeve, and others are churls, and their tales are of "harlotrie."

Such tales are known to modern scholarship as *fabliaux*, a genre that flourished in thirteenth-century France and was, in the fourteenth century, replaced by the prose novella both in France and elsewhere in Europe. But it found vigorous new life in *The Canterbury Tales*, where the tales of the Miller, the Merchant, the Shipman, and the Manciple, as well as *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, all in varying degrees reflect its influence. A *fabliau* is a brief comic tale in verse, usually scurrilous and often scatological or obscene. The style is simple, vigorous, and straightforward; the time is the present, and the settings real, familiar places; the characters are ordinary sorts—tradesmen, peasants, priests, students, restless wives; the plots are realistically motivated tricks and ruses. The *fabliaux* thus present a lively image of everyday life among the middle and lower classes. Yet that representation only seems real; life did not run that high in actual fourteenth-century towns and villages—it never does—and the plots, convincing though they seem, frequently involve incredible degrees of gullibility in the victims and of ingenuity and sexual appetite in the trickster-heroes and -heroines.

The cuckoldings, beatings, and elaborate practical jokes that are the main concern of the fabliaux are distributed in accord with a code of "fabliau justice," which does not always coincide with conventional morality: greed, hypocrisy, and pride are invariably punished, but so too are old age, mere slow-wittedness, and, most frequently, the presumption of a husband, especially an old one, who attempts to guard his wife's chastity. The heroes and heroines, invariably witty and usually young, are those whom society ordinarily scorns—dispossessed intellectuals (lecherous priests, wayward monks, penniless students), clever peasants, and enthusiastically unchaste wives. Their victims are usually those whom society respects—prosperous merchants, hard-working tradesmen, women foolish enough to try to remain chaste. The fabliau, in short, is delightfully subversive—a light-hearted thumbing of the nose at the dictates of religion, the solid virtues of the citizenry, and the idealistic pretensions of the aristocracy and its courtly literature, which the fabliaux frequently parody, though just as frequently they parody lower-class attempts to adopt courtly behavior.

The Miller's Tale

Here Chaucer raises the fabliau to the level of high art; without sacrificing any of the characteristics of the genre, he expands the form, allowing for leisurely descriptions, elaborate dialogue, and the development of character far beyond that customary in his French antecedents. Chaucer also elaborates the plot. The French fabliau is characteristically simple in plot, with a single line of action. Chaucer combines two lines of action—that involving the motif of the "misdirected kiss" and that of the "second flood." The two converge at the moment when Nicholas is burned on the "route" and shouts for water; old John awakens, cuts the rope, and crashes to the floor, and the whole neighborhood hears the uproar and comes rushing in. It is, wrote E. M. W. Tillyard, sublime in its inevitability, "as if the heavens opened up and the gods looked down and laughed at these foolish mortals."

The heavens actually did open at the climax of The Knight's Tale, when Saturn intervened in the tournament. Neither Nicholas nor Theseus can fully control the chain of events each puts in motion. The Miller's Tale is carefully constructed not only to fit the vigorous nature of its

teller but also to "quite" the Knight's Tale. Chaucer fully exploits the parodic tendencies of the genre, and the careful reader will find a surprising number of parallels between the Knight's noble story and this churlish tale of "harlotrie," in which the world as the Knight views it is turned delightfully upside down. The animal impulses that are restrained and controlled by the noble ceremonialism of The Knight's Tale are here given their full play in a celebration of indecorous energy, physical pleasure, and riotous good humor. The Miller thus offers not merely a change in tone but what seems a positive alternative to the Knight's idealism, which fails to take account of a great deal in life, including a sense of fun.

The Reeve's Tale

The Reeve's Tale was probably based directly on a French fabliau, since two surviving fabliaux, both differing versions of the same story, offer a number of close parallels to Chaucer's work. The tale, however, has been carefully adapted to its teller and to the dramatic situation. None of the analogues offers any close parallels to "dey-nous Symkyn," who bears a considerable resemblance to the Miller on the pilgrimage, not to his proud wife and ugly daughter, who are a far cry from the village beauties in the analogues. Chaucer's masterful use of dialect—the first extensive literary representation of a dialect in English—is likewise without precedent.

Oswald the Reeve clearly "quites" Robin the Miller in this tale of a thieving miller who is beaten and cuckolded, has his daughter woefully "disparaged," and is deprived not only of his ill-gotten gains but even of the fee that was rightfully his for grinding the grain. He also "quites" The Miller's Tale itself. That rollicking celebration of animal high spirits had seemed to offer an alternative to the Knight's idealism. The Reeve's tale reminds us that the Miller's tale is as idealized as the Knight's. Country girls more often resemble Malyne than Alison, and illicit sex is seldom a matter of uncomplicated fun: it can be, as it is here, a tool to maintain the upper hand in a world populated not by compliant dupes with beautiful wives but by thieving millers with ugly daughters. In this tale, action matters more than talk; one clerk simply moves the crib, mechanically rearranging the physical space, and the other leaps upon the sleeping daughter, without bothering with Nicholas's

elaborate schemes or Absolon's bungling courtship. The Reeve's view of the world is much less joyful than the Miller's, though it may be closer to reality.

The tale, however, transcends the Reeve's vengeful purpose. Symkyn so obviously deserves his punishment and the two women so clearly enjoy the clerks' means of revenge that we cannot condemn Aleyn and John for what they do. Moreover, the slapstick comedy of the tale more than compensates for its lack of benevolent jollity; the climax, beginning with Aleyn's mistaken awakening of the sleeping miller, is a masterpiece of controlled confusion and farcical mayhem. Chaucer manages to infuse the tale with a sense of the Reeve's embittered view of life without sacrificing its comedy.

The Cook's Tale

The Cook's Tale has no known source. It promises to be another fabliau, even more scurrilous than those just told, and it seems to carry the downward movement of Fragment I to its furthest extreme. The Knight's Tale ended with Palamoun and Emelye united in a marriage that is happy forever after, undisturbed by jealousy or wrath. This was followed by the cheerful adultery of The Miller's Tale, which was followed by the relatively joyless cuckolding in The Reeve's Tale, and that, in its turn, is followed by this story of a gambler and thief who moves in with another whose wife is a whore "that heeld for contenance/ A shoppe, and swayed for hir sustenance" (I.4421-22). Whether or not Chaucer intended to finish The Cook's Tale, he chose an ideal couplet at which to stop. We have moved from the remoteness of ancient Athens to "oure citee," London, and from the idealized realm of romance to the sleaziest side of contemporary reality.

FRAGMENT II

Introduction to The Man of Law's Tale

The Host's complicated astronomical calculation (which would have required using a set of tables) fixes the time at exactly 10 A.M. on April 18; why Chaucer specifies this date and whether he intends it to be the first or second day of the journey are not known.

The Host, with an equally elaborate display of legal terminology, then asks for a tale from the

Man of Law, whose praise of Chaucer as a writer exclusively of tales of "good women" such as the story of Ceyns and Alcion (in *The Book of the Duchess*) and those in *The Legend of Good Women* gains piquancy from the fabliaux just told. Chaucer would never, the Man of Law says, write such "abhominacions" as the tales of Canacee and of Apollonius of Tyre. Both are tales of incest that appear in John Gower's *Confessio amantis*. The story of Custance, which the Man of Law now tells, is also in the *Confessio amantis*. Perhaps Chaucer is teasingly challenging his friend to a storytelling contest parallel to that in which the pilgrims are engaged; the Man of Law's, the Wife of Bath's, the Physician's, and the Manciple's tales are all based on stories that also appear in the *Confessio amantis*.

However, the reference to Gower is not certain, and the Man of Law's announcement that he will speak in prose shows that this prologue may have been written for some other tale, perhaps the Melibee. The usually accepted theory is that when Fragment VII was formed, late in the composition of the *Tales*, Chaucer reassigned the Melibee to himself and gave a new tale, the story of Custance, to the Man of Law, intending to remove the reference to prose in a later draft.

The Man of Law's Tale

The Man of Law's Tale is based on a story in the Anglo-Norman Chronicle of Nicholas Trivet and on Gower's version of Trivet's tale. The most significant difference between Chaucer's version and those of Trivet and Gower is the highly elaborated style in which the tale is told. Such a style is well suited to the Man of Law, who uses all the devices recommended by the medieval rhetoricians to move our pity for the heroine, almost as if he were pleading her case in a court of law.

Like the later tale of Griselda, the tale of Custance has been called a secular saint's life. But it is also a romance, though not a chivalric romance of the sort told by the Knight. It is a Christian romance based on the theme of exile and return: the protagonist encounters a series of adventures that test her worthiness of the high position in life that she loses with her exile and finally regains with her return to the imperial court and her son's accession to her father's throne. In broad outline this is the theme of many secular romances. As a Christian rather than a chivalric romance, however, this tale em-

phases the passive suffering of the protagonist rather than knightly achievements, and the virtues tested are Christian rather than chivalric—Patience in the acceptance of unmerited misfortunes and Fortitude in the constant faith that sustains the heroine and allows her finally to triumph.

Many medieval thinkers maintained that wonder, the emotion we feel when confronted with apparently inexplicable events, is an aid to philosophical and religious thought, since the mind is thus incited to seek out causes. In The Knight's Tale, Chaucer used the wonder arising from sudden reversals of fortune as occasions for philosophical meditation; here, Custance's miraculous adventures provide opportunities to offer religious explanations, and the role of Providence in human affairs, notably absent from the immediately preceding churls' tales, is emphatically reasserted. The Man of Law, like the Knight, is concerned with the problem of the alternation of joy and sorrow in human life, though here it is not a remote First Mover but "Jhesu Crist, that of his myght may sende/Joye after wo."

Epilogue to the Man of Law's Tale

In many, though not all, manuscripts, The Man of Law's Tale is joined to what follows by this lively epilogue. The pilgrim who interrupts the Parson is identified in most manuscripts as the Squire or the Summoner, and, in the great majority of manuscripts containing this Epilogue, The Squire's Tale follows. Yet the rudeness of the speaker hardly fits the character of the Squire, and his disclaimer of any knowledge of Latin does not fit the Summoner, who likes to show off his few Latin phrases when he is in his cups. One late manuscript identifies the speaker as the Shipman, and in that manuscript The Shipman's Tale follows.

The Epilogue probably attests to an early draft of the *Tales*, when the Man of Law told the Melibee—to which the references to Latin and to "philosophie," "phisias," and "termes quainte of lawe" seem more suitable than to the tale of Custance—and when the next tale following was that of the Wife of Bath, who in this early version apparently told the tale now assigned to the Shipman. The speaker's reference to "My joly body" (II.1185) seems more suitable to a woman such as the Wife than to a man, and The Shipman's Tale as it now stands con-

tains several references that indicate a feminine teller. When the Wife of Bath and the Man of Law were assigned new tales, the Epilogue was either canceled or set aside for a later revision that it never received.

FRAGMENT III

There is no link between Fragments II and III and no certainty that Chaucer meant The Wife of Bath's Prologue to follow The Man of Law's Tale. Yet his presentation of Custance as an ideal of womanhood—piously convinced that "Wommen are born to thralldom and penance,/And to been under mannes governance" (II.286-87)—must have set Alison's teeth on edge and would have been sufficient to account for her bursting out with her version of the "wo that is in marriage."

That subject is taken up again in the Clerk's and the Merchant's tales, which constitute Fragment IV, and in The Franklin's Tale, which concludes Fragment V. Many critics assume that these tales were intended as parts of a single unit, the *Marriage Group*. The subject is proposed by the Wife of Bath; after the interlude provided by the Friar's and the Summoner's tales, the topic is taken up by the Clerk in his tale and envoy, specifically addressed to the Wife, and again by the Merchant, who directly cites the Wife of Bath in his tale. After another interlude, The Squire's Tale, the debate concludes with The Franklin's Tale, which presents his solution to the problem of who should rule in marriage.

This set of tales is not alone in its concern with marriage and the relations between husbands and wives, which are among the subjects repeatedly explored in the *Tales*. Nor is marriage the only unifying theme in the seven tales of Fragments III through V. The Wife of Bath's Tale turns on the problem of *trouib*, keeping one's pledged word, which is an essential ingredient of the tales told by the Friar, the Summoner, the Clerk, and the Franklin, and is at least implied in the Squire's tale of the faithless tercel. The Wife of Bath's Tale likewise treats at length the problem of what constitutes *gentilisee*, and this is also a major concern of the Clerk's, the Merchant's, the Squire's, and the Franklin's tales. Yet, though the problem of marriage is not confined to the tales of these three fragments, and though the tales within these fragments are not restricted to that subject, the Merchant's and the

Clerk's specific references to the Wife of Bath and the Franklin's explicit concern with the proper relationship between husband and wife lend credence to the theory that Chaucer did intend these tales to constitute a kind of debate on the problem of marriage.

The Wife of Bath's Prologue

The Wife of Bath's Prologue has the form of a *literary confession*, a dramatic monologue in which the speaker explains, and often defends, his or her sinful way of life. Chaucer probably got the initial suggestion for The Wife of Bath's Prologue from the long monologue of La Vieille in the *Roman de la rose*, which is at once a literary confession and a lecture to a young woman on how to outwit men. The rich tradition of anti-feminine literature of the sort collected in Janekyn's "book of wicked wives" offered much similar material, however, and Alison is one of a long tradition of bawdy older women that extends from classical times to Juliet's nurse and beyond. Chaucer drew on his knowledge of life as well as his reading, and Alison of Bath transcends all her forebears. Her closest analogue, in La Vieille, is a retired prostitute, bitter in her old age; Alison is a defender of marriage, providing she rules, and, far from being bitter, she has an infectious optimism. "Welcome the sixte!" she cries, ready for yet another marriage and, though the "flour" be gone, determined to enjoy the "bren." Moreover, though most of her characteristics can be traced in anti-feminine satire and she herself embodies almost all the faults traditionally imputed to women (there are no volunteers when she announces her readiness for another marriage), her frankness, vigor, and good humor render her a zestful and engaging defender of life itself.

The Wife of Bath's Tale

The Wife of Bath's Tale is a brief romance, set in the days of King Arthur. It is a version of the tale of the loathly lady—the beautiful princess transformed into an ugly creature who can be released from her spell only by the kiss or embrace of the hero (the feminine version of the still popular fairy story "The Frog Prince"). The particular form of the tale used by Chaucer, with the transformation effected not by the hero's embrace but by his yielding sovereignty to the woman, appears in a number of brief romances

of Chaucer's time and in Gower's *Confessio amantii*. Chaucer's version differs from Gower's and most others in a number of important details. Gower's heroine, for example, has been transformed by a wicked stepmother; the Wife of Bath's heroine is mistress of her own destiny, able to effect her own transformation at will. In Gower's and most other versions the hero must choose whether to have his wife fair by day and foul by night or vice versa; the Wife of Bath, characteristically, makes her hero choose between having his wife ugly and faithful or fair and possibly faithless.

The tale obviously exemplifies the main theme of Alison's prologue, that women should be sovereign in marriage. That heretical doctrine is here combined with a completely orthodox doctrine of *gentilisee*, which the loathly lady defends with arguments often identical with those the Parson later uses in his discussion of the subject. From this standpoint, there are two transformations in the tale, that of the loathly lady and that of the hero. He begins proud of his gentle birth, though he has committed a churlish crime, rape. In the end the old hag convinces him that true *gentilisee* is a matter of deeds, and in this version of the tale, unlike the others, he is moved to address her as "My lady and my love, and wyf so deere" and to yield her sovereignty even before she is transformed. He becomes gentle in accord with the courtly dictum that love makes the lover virtuous, and she becomes beautiful in accordance with the doctrine that to the eyes of a true lover his lady is always beautiful.

The Friar's Tale

The Friar's Tale is based on the widespread story of the damnation of an unpopular official—a steward, a lawyer, or, as in this case, an ecclesiastical officer. In form it is an *exemplum*, a brief anecdote used by a preacher to illustrate a moral. Many exempla were collected into anthologies, such as Caesarius of Heisterbach's *Dialogue on Miracles*, which contains one of the closest analogues to The Friar's Tale. Chaucer's version is notable for its witty account of the corruption of the ecclesiastical courts, the deft characterization of the summoner and the devil, and the ironic reverberation of their dialogue.

The tale is admirably suited to the Friar, a preacher who deals in words, the efficacy of which he proves by making the summoner's

words the instrument of his own damnation, first by those he does speak, the truth he pledges to the devil, and then by those he does not, his refusal to repent. In the General Prologue even the usually tolerant narrator was shocked by the Summoner's belief that cursing has no effect; the Friar's exemplum shows how wrong he was.

The Summoner's Tale

The Summoner's Tale retaliates for the Friar's account of a summoner with a devastating portrait of an unctuous and hypocritical friar, who shoos away the cat to sit himself softly down, kisses the wife with more than fraternal enthusiasm, protests that his abstinence prevents his eating much and then orders a roasted pig's head for dinner, and preaches at length against the sin of Wrath, only to become so enraged that he can hardly speak when Thomas has finally given him the "gift" for which he begs.

The gift classifies this tale with other medieval jests and fabliaux involving a satiric legacy, but none of the other medieval examples are of this sort. It consists of sound and wind, the constituents of the words that are the preacher's stock in trade, and it is so exactly appropriate to the preaching friar that it seems most likely to have been Chaucer's own invention. Equally original is the problem the gift poses for the friar, who has pledged his truth that he will part it equally with his brethren. It presents, as the lord observes, a difficult scientific problem. The final humiliation for the friar, who takes pride in his advanced degree, is that a mere squire, no admirer of his sermons, solves the problem of "ars-metrike" in a manner worthy of Euclid or Ptolemy.

FRAGMENT IV

The Clerk's Prologue

When Harry Bailly turns to the Clerk, he fears this solemn scholar will be boring; he begs him not to preach and to speak in a simple style rather than the elaborate "heigh style, as when that men to kynges write." The Clerk agrees, and, though he tells a tale from the learned Petrarch, he maintains a markedly plain and straightforward style.

The subject of style recurs in the Prologue to The Franklin's Tale, in which the Franklin as-

pires his audience that he will eschew the "colours of rethoryk." The Merchant's and the Squire's tales, on the other hand, are among the most elaborately ornamented productions in the *Tales*, and the Franklin's comment on the Squire's performance rightly emphasizes its style rather than its content. This concern with style and its implications is never far below the surface throughout the *Tales*, but it becomes explicit in Fragments IV and V.

The Clerk's Tale

The Clerk's Tale is based on Petrarch's adaptation of the last tale in Boccaccio's *Decameron* and a French version of Petrarch's work. It is a Christian romance of the same sort as The Man of Law's Tale. It embodies the Cinderella theme, in which the protagonist rises from the lowest to the highest rank by proving her worthiness through a series of tests. In Griselda's case, they are tests of her patience and faithfulness to her pledge, her truth, that she will unquestioningly obey Walter's every command. She undergoes a series of increasingly cruel ordeals until her final triumph, whereupon she is welcomed back to Walter's arms with the assurance that her children live and that her son will succeed Walter as marquis.

Walter's unmotivated cruelty, what Boccaccio called his "mad bestiality," bothered almost every writer who told this tale. Modern scholars have explained this by assuming an ultimate debt to some folk tale of the Cupid and Psyche type (in which the bride of a supernatural creature must observe certain taboos). Petrarch, followed by the Clerk, provided a moral interpretation: the story is an exemplum, teaching patience not just to wives but to all. To reinforce this interpretation, Petrarch added a number of references to the Book of Job, which Chaucer further developed.

The tale of Griselda inevitably recalls that of Custance; both concern the sufferings of helpless women and both are cast in the rime royal stanza that Chaucer uses for most of his tales of pathos. In The Man of Law's Tale, however, the pathos is produced by a heavily rhetorical manner of telling, with elaborate appeals to the audience to have pity on the "Emperours doghter." The Clerk obeys Harry Bailly's injunction to avoid such a "heigh style." Griselda is a peasant girl and, in accord with medieval ideas of stylistic decorum (the "heigh style" for nobles, the

plain style for rustics), the Clerk tells her story in a manner as simple as her lowly station in life. Only after she has given final proof of her inner nobility does he allow his style to burst forth in an open appeal to the audience's emotions. The sudden release of Griselda's emotion at the climax, now weeping and swooning with joy at her reunion with her children, emphasizes the self-control she has maintained throughout her trials and confirms the recurring hints that her patience is produced by strength of character rather than mere submissiveness.

The Merchant's Tale

The Merchant's Tale was apparently composed as a companion piece to The Clerk's Tale, which it reflects in a number of details—the setting in Lombardy, the determination of the noble hero to marry as he chooses, his choice of a wife of lower birth than his own, and (here The Clerk's Tale is quoted) his belief that she will not once say "nay" when her husband says "ye" (IV.1345; cf. IV.355).

The plot of The Merchant's Tale, the pear tree episode, is common in fabliaux and popular tales, though no exact source for Chaucer's version has been found, and he may have drawn on some orally transmitted version. The opening debate on marriage, which draws on many of the same sources as The Wife of Bath's Prologue and in which she herself is cited as an "auditee," is obviously Chaucer's own invention. Though previous literature offers many examples of the *senex amans* (the aged lover), Chaucer's January is by far the most appalling, while May, who reads her lover's letters in the privacy, is equally original, a worthy mate for this quintessentially dirty old man.

The Merchant's Tale is basically a fabliau. It has the obligatory triangle—jealous old husband, restless young wife, lusty squire—and the inevitable act of adultery achieved through trickery. Chaucer, however, breaks all the other rules of the genre. The style is that of a courtly romance, and the description of January's wedding feast is one of the most ornate in *The Canterbury Tales*, laden with apostrophes, elaborate comparisons, and classical and biblical allusions.

The tale is built on the courtly dictum "Love is blind." Damyant, the young squire, suffers the pangs of love appropriate to a courtly hero. May purportedly decides to commit adultery because of the nobility of her sentiments, and we are told

this in words that echo The Knight's Tale—"Lo, pitee renneþ soon in gentil herre" (IV.1986; cf. I.1761). Pluto, like Saturn in The Knight's Tale, intervenes at the climax, though here Proserpina, his wife, also intervenes, apparently proving that women will have their way even among the gods. The elaborate style and courtly allusions cast an ironic reflection on the sordid action. The tale has more than a trace of the bitterness the Merchant apparently feels at his own recent unwise marriage. Yet the total effect is by no means repulsive, and the description of January's wedding night is one of the great comic scenes in Chaucer.

FRAGMENT V

The Introduction to the Squire's Tale

The Introduction to the Squire's Tale and the Epilogue to the Merchant's Tale are presented as one continuous speech in the manuscripts that have the fragments in the order printed here, and, though editors customarily observe the traditional division between IV and V, almost all scholars agree that they constitute a single unit.

The Squire's Tale

The Squire's Tale is a romance that promises fabulous wonder, high sentiment, and chivalric adventure. The fantastical variety of chivalric romance, quite different from the Knight's sober tale, was becoming fashionable, and in the fifteenth century it would flower in the great works of Boiardo and Ariosto. The Squire's taste in romance is as much in accord with the newest fashions as is his elegant dress. No source is known for the story, though Chaucer apparently drew upon contemporary travel literature, such as the book by the fictional Sir John Mandeville, for his account of the wonders in the court of Cambyuskan, Genghis Khan.

The tale is left unfinished, and though later writers, such as Spenser and John Lane, continued and concluded it, Chaucer most likely intended the tale to remain unfinished, at least once it had been assigned to the Squire. The narrative moves at so leisurely a pace that the story has hardly begun when it is broken off. Had the Squire told all that he promises, his tale would have run to at least four or five thousand lines (Lane's continuation has seven thousand), over twice as long as that told by his father and

can show the way to death. This impressive figure is not explained, and perhaps cannot be. He implies a mystery transcending the rioters' materialistic view of the world and the almost too smoothly functioning mechanism of the plot, in which each action is motivated in rational human terms—pride, revenge, greed—that we can easily understand. The three rioters, the mysterious figure seems to remind us, are engaged in a drama beyond their ken and ours.

It is a moving tale, and even the Pardoner seems moved, as he ends his sermon with the assurance that he will not deceive his fellow pilgrims. But then he apparently tries to do so by offering his admittedly fake relics to the Host, who retaliates brutally. At this point, the Knight must step in to save the situation; and he reconciles the Host and the Pardoner. George Lyman Kittredge famously characterized the Pardoner as the one lost soul on the pilgrimage. But the Host and Pardoner forgive one another; they exchange the Kiss of Peace, and the pilgrims move on to their common goal.

FRAGMENT VII

Fragment VII, the largest and most varied of the groups of tales, was apparently formed when the composition of *The Canterbury Tales* was well advanced, since it contains two tales, The Shipman's Tale and The Tale of Melibee, which were probably once assigned to other pilgrims. It obviously never received a final revision (The Shipman's Tale, as noted previously, still contains indications that its narrator is a woman) and perhaps a later revision would have clarified some theme that would account for the variety of tales and genres in this fragment. Recent critics have tended to regard the tales of Fragment VII as a *literary group*; they represent a wide variety of genres, two are interpreted on specifically literary grounds, and Sir Thopas and The Nun's Priest's Tale involve literary parody. However that may be, this fragment provides a broad sampling of Chaucer's literary interests.

The Shipman's Tale

The Shipman's Tale may be Chaucer's earliest fabliau, since it is, compared with the Miller's and the Reeve's tales, relatively simple in design and execution. It is nevertheless far more artful than any of its many analogues. The story is

provide a useful perspective on the tale that follows, and perhaps that is its function, a reminder that in The Physician's Tale we are shown how sin is publicly punished and in The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale how sin secretly punishes itself.

The Pardoner's Prologue

The Pardoner's Prologue, like the Wife of Bath's, has the form of a literary confession in which the speaker explains—here boasts of—his vices, and it, too, is based ultimately on the *Roman de la rose*, in this case on the confession of Fals-Semblant (see Rom 6082-7292). The Pardoner's tone, however, is much different from that of the jolly Wife. Though his description of the ruses he employs to extract money from his gullible hearers is amusing, the Pardoner, like all con men, feels only contempt for his dupes; he cares not though their souls go a-blackberrying. Hatred, he says, sometimes motivates his preaching—he tells how he stings his enemies with his "tonge smerre" and how he spits out his "venym under hewe/Of hoodynesse" (VI.413, 421-2). But his chief motivation is greed. With a willfulness underscored by the repeated "I wol," he rejects a life of monastic poverty, the "love celestial" that he should serve, and boasts that he will have wine and women in every town, though a poor widow's children should starve for it. He cynically proclaims his own viciousness; but, he boasts, vicious though he be, he can tell a moral tale.

The Pardoner's Tale

The Pardoner's Tale has some of the characteristics of a sermon, and the story of the three rioters is used as an exemplum to illustrate his theme, *Greed is the root of all evil*. The story is widespread in world literature, and Chaucer's version has many analogues, though none remotely approaches its artistry. The Pardoner skillfully combines a preacher's exhortations with sharply realized scenes and dialogues from tavern life.

In the smoothly functioning plot of his story, the three rioters, determined to find Death, do indeed find it in the form of gold. The story provides a forceful illustration of the Pardoner's theme as well as of the Physician's moral that sin punishes itself. Over all hovers the presence of the mysterious old man who cannot die but who

did the most "gentil dede"? The Franklin supplies no answer. Nor are all the problems of the Marriage Group resolved in this tale; they are concerns that reappear throughout *The Canterbury Tales*.

FRAGMENT VI

The Physician's Tale

The Physician's Tale is another of Chaucer's tales of domestic pathos. Chaucer was the first English poet to explore this source of the pathetic and the first for whom the relation of parent and child was a major theme. The tales of the Man of Law, the Clerk, and the Prioress and the Uggolino episode in The Monk's Tale are all characterized by affecting scenes of parents and children. The scene in which Virginia lays her arms about her father's neck, "as she was wont to do" (VI.231-36) is a good example of the way in which Chaucer uses sharply observed detail to render such scenes effective.

Chaucer reshaped the received story to emphasize its pathetic possibilities. It derives ultimately from the Roman history of Titus Livius, though Chaucer knew several other versions, including those in Gower's *Confessio amantis* and the *Roman de la rose*. The main focus in all these versions is the wickedness of the judge, and in none is Virginia characterized in any detail. Chaucer brings the victim to the center of the action. He adds the long description of Virginia; he domesticates the tragedy by moving the final interview between Virginia and her father from the courtroom to their home; and he adds the touching scene in which Virginia weeps, prays, and meekly begs her father to take her life. He also emphasizes the domestic horror of the tale; instead of stabbing his child in court, as in the other versions, the father decapitates Virginia in their home and carries her bleeding head to the judge.

The tale is not a success. The long digression on governesses may allude to some now forgotten scandal that lent it point in Chaucer's time, but it seems merely intrusive. The moral appended to the tale seems likewise inappropriate. The idea that sin is its own punishment, that though the wicked seem to prosper they are secretly punished from within, is sound Augustinian doctrine but hardly applies to Appius, who is publicly punished for his crime. It does

far out of proportion with the other tales. The squire's youthful enthusiasm for his subject is delightful, but had the tale continued it would soon have begun to pall. Many critics believe that the words of the Franklin to the Squire are intended as an interruption of the tale; if so, they come just in time.

The Franklin's Tale

The Franklin's Tale is, as the Franklin explains, a *Breton lay*, a variety of brief romance purportedly descending from the original Celtic inhabitants of Britain and usually dealing with love and the supernatural. Though the Franklin gives his tale an authentically Breton setting, it is an unusual Breton lay: it has no clear Celtic antecedents, the love involves marriage rather than only courtship, and the supernatural is of the explained variety, produced not by demonic powers but by the skill of a "philosopher." The story is a free adaptation of a tale told in Boccaccio's *Filocolo* as well as in his *Decamerone*, with details drawn from a variety of other sources, including The Merchant's Tale, which is echoed in the Franklin's description of marriage (V.803-6; cf. IV.1259-60).

The opening section of the tale offers a solution to the problem of sovereignty in marriage, one well suited to the character of the Franklin, who relishes domestic comfort and would probably prefer compromise to strife; it is also based on common sense, welcome after the extremes presented by the Wife of Bath, the Clerk, and the Merchant. Anger, sickness, the stars, wine, woe, or change of complexion, the Franklin warns, often cause one to act or speak amiss; perfection is impossible, and good will and patience are the first requirements in love.

The tale that follows tests this theory of marriage; whether it proves valid depends on what one makes of the climactic scene, in which Arveragus, in a manner suitable to a Walter, flatly orders Dorigen to keep her appointment with Aurelius, and she, like a new Griselda, humbly obeys. This tale, like that of the Wife of Bath and most of the others in Fragments III, IV, and V, turns on a problem of truth, the series of pledges that the characters make to one another. The problem is resolved when all generously forgo demanding their payment. This, the Franklin implies, is the way of true gentillesse, and he ends with a question: Which was the most "fre," who

based on a popular motif, still current in contemporary anecdote, known as the *lover's gift regained*: a man pays a woman for her sexual favors with money borrowed from her husband and then tells the husband he has given the repayment to the wife; it thus shows how a quick-witted man seduces an avaricious woman and then tricks her out of the promised payment. Chaucer adds an original conclusion: the wife proves herself as tricky as her lover, and, instead of meekly surrendering the money to her husband, she boldly asserts that she has spent it but will repay it in installments, with her body. The husband is both cuckolded and robbed, while the wife emerges unscathed and can now, in effect, force her husband to pay each time he claims his "marriage debt." No doubt the tale would have been suitable to the *Wife of Bath* as she was first imagined. However, as Chaucer developed her character she became too complicated for this simple equation of sex and money, and he provided her with a new tale and assigned this to the Shipman, a person well acquainted with merchants and their attitude toward money.

The Prioress's Tale

The Prioress's Tale is a *miracle of the Virgin*, a very popular genre of devotional literature, and the story that she tells was widespread in medieval Europe. Chaucer reproduces the outlines of the usual story with few changes. These, however, account for much of the charm of this tale. Chaucer emphasizes the pathos: the word "litle" rings through the opening stanzas, and Chaucer's "litle clergeoun" is only seven years old rather than ten or more as in the analogues. His telling his fellow of his determination to memorize "O Alma Redemptoris," though he be beaten for not learning his lessons, at once establishes his childish innocence and provides an amusing and convincing vignette of life in fourteenth-century schools. The Virgin's tender reassurance—"Be nat agast; I wol thee nat forsake" (VII.669)—has the eloquence of utter simplicity. One can understand why the tale appealed to Wordsworth, who translated it into modern English, and to Matthew Arnold, who used one of its stanzas (VII.649-55) to illustrate Chaucer's finest verse.

Yet this tender tale is also a story of violence; the Prioress seems to dwell on the sickening

details of the child's murder and to exult in the savage punishment meted out to his murderers. Though this is not to the modern taste, the late medieval interest in pathos frequently led to the yoking of such extremes, with an emphasis on the ethereal goodness of the victim and a sensational, often gruesome, depiction of the violence inflicted upon him. The religious art of the period offers many examples: The Physician's Tale is but one of many other literary instances.

Even more difficult for the modern reader is the anti-Semitism of the tale. In Chaucer's time there were almost no Jews in England; they had been banished a hundred years before. The tale is therefore set in far-off Asia, and its Jews are the stock boogymen of the fairy-tale-like miracles of the Virgin. The tale's anti-Semitism is thus somewhat different from modern varieties. It nevertheless inevitably discomfits twentieth-century readers; we are forced to recognize that Chaucer was a man of his time, sharing its faults as well as its virtues.

Prologue to Sir Thopas

To relieve the sober mood in which The Prioress's Tale has left even the most boisterous pilgrims, the Host turns to Chaucer himself. The reticence the Host here attributes to Chaucer seems hardly in keeping with the affability of the narrator of the General Prologue, who bustled about speaking to every one of the nine and twenty pilgrims and became "of hir felaweshipe anon" before the sun had gone to rest. Yet Chaucer's subdued demeanor and the Host's consequent expectation of "som deynyte thyng" is dramatically appropriate. It has been suggested that the tales of Fragment VII should be called the "surprise group," since so many of its tellers defy Harry Bailly's (and the reader's) expectations. That is clearly the case here when the timid "popet" (dolt) from whom Harry expects some delicate tale breaks into the crude and thumping meter of the popular minstrel romance.

Sir Thopas

Sir Thopas was probably written to be interrupted, and it is not therefore surprising that the story, such as it is, has no source. Nevertheless, almost every line has its parallel in one or another of the popular *minstrel romances*. Such

works are relatively brief narratives, designed for oral delivery, with frequent direct addresses to the audience and calls for attention at the fit divisions. Their verse is rough, their language characterized by a heavy use of formulas, and their emphasis is on adventurous action rather than the refined emotion of the more sophisticated romances of the time. Chaucer is unmerciful in his parody of this old-fashioned genre. Yet the parody seems affectionate, and Sir Thopas shows evidence of Chaucer's long and close acquaintance with these works.

The satire in Sir Thopas may be social as well as literary, since Thopas is something of a would-be gentleman, who works just a bit too hard at observing the proper forms of romance knight-hood, apparently in contemporary Flanders. He swears an oath on ale and bread (rather than on a swan or peacock), he sleeps in the fields, as knights errant once did, and, in imitation of Sir Perceval, he drinks water from a well.

The Tale of Melibee

"The Host styneth Chaucer of his Tale of Thopas" at just this point, and The Tale of Melibee has seemed to some critics Geoffrey's revenge on Harry Bailly for interrupting him. Judging from the Host's reaction to the tale, however, he greatly appreciated it. So did many others of the time; Albertanus of Brescia's *Liber consolatorii et consilii*, the ultimate source of this tale, was translated into a half dozen vernacular languages in the later Middle Ages. A French version by Renaud de Louens provided Chaucer with his source.

The prose here and in The Parson's Tale is workmanlike but uninspired, perhaps because in both cases Chaucer was translating. Partly because of its style, but mostly because of its allegory, moralizing, and long catalogues of proverbs, the Melibee is not often admired by modern readers. Nevertheless, Chaucer chose to tell this tale in his own person, and the sympathetic reader will find that the topics discussed by Melibee and Prudence have interest even today. They are problems of war and peace, of the maintenance of national honor and its relation to a policy of pacific disarmament, of how policy is made and of the proper roles of legislatures and advisers in formulating that policy. Because of its allegorical abstraction, the situation that Prudence and Melibee discuss fits our time as

well as Chaucer's; the issues still concern us, and though we conduct our political discussions without long lists of "auctorities" and sententiae, we have our own clichés, equally boring and much less learned.

The Melibee also touches on matters that concern other pilgrims. The debate on the proper use of advisers echoes the situation at the beginning of The Merchant's Tale, with which it shares a number of lines (e.g., IV.1362-74, VII.1098-1101). Likewise, the proper role of women in marriage is debated by Prudence and Melibee, who cites some of the same authorities as appear in The Wife of Bath's Prologue, and the problem of sovereignty in their marriage is resolved in a manner of which Alison would approve, when Melibee agrees to be completely guided by his wife's advice. Finally, the tale concerns the problem of how one reconciles a noble concern for honor with the Christian duty of forgiveness, and it thus takes up another aspect of the proper conduct of the noble life that had been considered in The Knight's Tale. In recent years the reputation of the Melibee has risen, and some critics now consider it an essential structural unit in the *Tales*.

The Monk's Tale

The Monk's Tale was probably written before *The Canterbury Tales* were begun (and the "Modern Instances," the four contemporary tragedies, added when the work was put in the *Tales*). It may thus represent Chaucer's first experiment with a collection of brief narratives. Boccaccio's *De casibus virorum illustrium* (*Concerning the Falls of Illustrious Men*), cited in the subtitle, supplied the basic idea of the collection and some of the details of the narratives, with Boccaccio's companion volume, *De claris mulieribus* (*Concerning Famous Women*), providing information on the tragedy of Zenobia. Chaucer drew on Dante for the account of Ugolino of Pisa and on his own knowledge of contemporary events for the accounts of the two Peters and Bernabò of Milan.

The conception of tragedy that appears here is not the Aristotelian idea of tragedy as a product of some tragic flaw in the protagonist's character but the medieval idea that the protagonist is a victim rather than a hero, raised up and then cast down by the workings of Fortune. This medieval idea of tragedy is not restricted to

drama and applies to works we would assign to other genres (such as the *Aeneid* and Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*). Tragedy in this view is a universal concomitant of good fortune and prosperity, for all are subject to Fortune save for those who turn aside from this world, scorn its comforts, and place their faith in a higher power.

The world as it appears in The Monk's Tale is a grim and discouraging place in which happiness is to be avoided since it inevitably leads to tragic misery. Such a view fits well with the Monk's profession; it embodies the monastic imperative to flee this miserable world and seek God in the security of the cloister. Chaucer's hearers, and Chaucer himself, were probably more sympathetic to this idea than are many modern readers. Moreover, the brief narratives that compose the tale are vigorous and to the point, and the account of Ugolino of Pisa is worthy of its source in Dante. However, the prospect of hearing many more such tragedies is daunting (the Monk has said he has a hundred of them in his cell); no one objects when the Knight prevents him from continuing.

The Nun's Priest's Tale

The Nun's Priest is not described—is barely mentioned, if at all—in the General Prologue, but the brilliance of his performance is such that it seems to imply a vividly characterized narrator, an accomplished preacher and a man of learning and wit. He accepts with equanimity his humble position, emblematized by the poor horse that the Prioress has provided him, though his tale itself may be a wittily muted protest. His poor state contrasts sharply with that of the handsomely mounted Monk, and his tale of the near-tragic fall of Chauntecleer, with its fireworks of learning and optimistic view of life, is a welcome response to the Monk's grim viewpoint.

This tale belongs to the genre of *best fable*, handed down from Aesop (the medieval Isopet) and popular throughout the Middle Ages. The story that Chaucer uses is found in brief fables, such as Marie de France's version, and in the beast-epic *Roman de Renart*, a thirteenth-century French work (with versions in many other languages) that recounts the adventures of Reynard the Fox in a world of talking animals whose words and deeds often provide satirical comment on the world of humans. The version

The Nun's Priest ends his tale with a whole cluster of morals drawn by Chauntecleer, the fox, and the narrator, and then, for good measure, adds an invitation to his hearers to find yet another moral—"Takeh the moralite, goode men." Perhaps this solemn assurance that the tale is more than just a "foiye,/As of a fox, or of a cok and hen" is but one more literary joke in a tale rich in joking allusions to literature, including to *The Canterbury Tales* itself.

FRAGMENT VIII

The Second Nun's Prologue and Tale were apparently written for some other occasion and taken into the *Tales* with little or no adaptation; the reference to "unworthy sone of Eve" seems to indicate a masculine narrator (VIII.62), and the attribution to the Second Nun occurs only in the rubrics. It seems probable, given the aside to "worshipful chonons religious" (VIII.992), that The Canon's Yeoman's Tale was also written, at least in part, for another occasion, though the Prologue was clearly composed for the *Tales*. Yet, as will be noted below, recent criticism has found significant relations between the two tales.

The Prologue of the Second Nun's Tale

The Prologue of the Second Nun's Tale consists of three parts: four stanzas on idleness that introduce the importance of "leueful bysnesse" exemplified in Cecilia's life; the Invocation to Mary, based on Dante; and the "Interpretation of the name Cecilia which Brother Jacob of Genoa put in his legend." This last consists of a series of invented etymologies derived from extremely far-fetched verbal resemblances. It is a good example of a medieval method of interpretation that adds rather than discovers meaning; it aims not for one but for a variety of interpretations, all of which are right and none of which excludes the others, so that the object of interpretation, here the name Cecilia, gains in richness of meaning and range of reference.

The Second Nun's Tale

The Second Nun's Tale is a *saint's life*, a brief biography setting forth the life, miracles, and martyrdom of the saint. It was the most popular genre of medieval devotional literature, and col-

lections of saints' lives were common in the later Middle Ages. The most widely known of these collections was the *Golden Legend* (*Legenda aurea*) of Jacob of Genoa (Jacobus de Voragine), whose interpretation of the name of Cecilia Chaucer adopted, though he may have used some other source for the tale itself.

Since martyrdom is involved in this saint's life, one might have expected Chaucer to have emphasized the pathetic aspects of the tale, with Cecilia yet another example of passively suffering womanhood. Instead, Cecilia is a powerfully active character, the only "good woman" in the *Tales*, aside from the allegorical Prudence in the Melibee, who acts to control and shape not only her own life but the lives of those around her. Though he closely adheres to the received story of "busy" Cecilia, Chaucer adds his own emphases: Cecilia's appearance before Almachius becomes more clearly a confrontation between her simple faith and the ultimately foolish learning of one who styles himself a philosopher yet worships a stone. Chaucer likewise emphasizes the contrasts between Cecilia's successful conversion of her husband and his brother "al in another kynde" and Almachius's inability, despite the "bath of flambes," even to transform Cecilia from life to death; finally, Chaucer's decision to link this tale with that of the Canon's Yeoman subtly shapes our understanding of both tales. In the light of what follows, the imagery of conversion and transformation in the Life of St. Cecilia acquires an alchemical dimension, and the theme of the vanity of worldly learning, exemplified by the "philosopher" Almachius in the saint's life, provides a clear standard by which to judge the vain attempts of the "philosophers" in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale to transform base metals "al in another kynde."

The Canon's Yeoman's Prologue

The sudden appearance of the Canon and his Yeoman and the Canon's subsequent flight change the character of the pilgrimage, heretofore a closed world of its own, and critics are not agreed on what this means nor on whether Chaucer planned from the beginning this introduction of the Canon's Yeoman into the *Tales*. It is, in any case, a suitably lively introduction for one of Chaucer's most lifelike characters. The form of the Prologue is that of the literary confession, of the sort Chaucer used in the pro-

logues of the Pardoner's and the Wife of Bath's tales. It is used here with great dramatic skill: we see the Canon's Yeoman's character develop before our eyes as, guided by Harry Bailly's questions, he moves from serving as the Canon's accomplice, boasting of his master's power, to admitting that the Canon misuses his intellect, to announcing, in the moment when he breaks completely with the Canon, that he will reveal his former master's rascality.

The Canon's Yeoman's Tale

The Canon's Yeoman's Tale consists of two parts, which together present a portrait of professional trickery in somewhat the same way as *The Friar's Tale* portrays the workings of ecclesiastical courts or *The Summoner's Tale* shows the malefactions of friars. It is, like those tales, a kind of occupational satire. The first part has the general form of a literary confession but is an account of the workings of an alchemist's laboratory, with unending experiments that prove the same point as Cecilia's interview with Almachius: "He that semeth the wiseste, by Jhesus, is moost fool, when it cometh to the preef." The second part tells of a dishonest canon (not his master, the Yeoman says) who dupes a greedy priest with a series of sleight-of-hand tricks.

For those earlier occupational satires Chaucer had a rich literary tradition on which to draw. Alchemy was relatively new in Chaucer's time, and alchemists had not previously appeared in literature. Chaucer had to draw on his own reading and knowledge. His tale shows that he was well acquainted with the literature of alchemy, and the first trick played by the alchemist on the priest shows that Chaucer also had some practical knowledge of chemistry: he knew that mercury would vaporize at a high temperature and thus leave no trace when the silver replaced it in the crucible.

It has been theorized that Chaucer's knowledge of alchemy and of the trickery of dishonest alchemists came from personal experience, that he had been victimized by some fake alchemist, but there is no basis for this assumption. Indeed, the tale is most interesting not for its account of how the dishonest alchemist tricks the priest but for its portrayal of how the honest alchemist tricks himself—how, despite repeated failures, he is drawn on by the "slidyng science," vainly seeking the goal that ever eludes him. Chaucer

manages to catch both the demonic aspects of the laboratory—with its fires, vile smells, and sweating practitioners—and the fascination that the craft held for its devotees. The final advice to abjure "multiplying" is offered not because the quest for the philosopher's stone is impossible or absurd but because alchemy is an attempt to pry into God's "privetee." In *Fragment VIII*, science in this tale and philosophy in *The Second Nun's Tale*—important concerns to the author of the *Treatise on the Asinolabe* and the translator of Boethius—are rejected in favor of Faith.

FRAGMENT IX

Fragments IX and X are a single unit, linked by the first line in the Parson's Prologue, "By that the Maunciple hadde his tale al ended." In the Hengwrt manuscript, however, "Maunciple" appears as a correction, and earlier editors held that "Maunciple" could not have been Chaucer's intention, since the Manciple's Prologue is set in the morning (IX.116) and the Parson's at four in the afternoon (X.5) and that the brief Manciple's Tale could not have filled so long a space of time. Consequently, editors customarily follow the practice established by these scholars and divide the Manciple's and the Parson's prologues and tales into two distinct fragments.

The Manciple's Prologue

It is not clear why Harry Bailly now calls on the Cook for a second tale. Roger has already told one (incomplete) tale, and though the original plan called for two tales from each pilgrim on the way to Canterbury (and two on the way back), no other pilgrim is asked for a second tale. This may be due to the incomplete state of *The Canterbury Tales*, or perhaps Harry is merely teasing, since the monumentally besotted Cook is incapable of speech.

The Manciple's Tale

The story of the tell-tale bird was current in many versions, a number of which may have been known to Chaucer. However, Chaucer's tale is based primarily on that in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, possibly as it appears in the *Ovide moralisé*, with perhaps some hints from those (also based on Ovid) in Gower's *Confessio amantis* and Machaut's *Leivre de Voir Dit*. To the Ovidian tale Chaucer adds the digression on language, Phoe-

bue's elaborate rhetorical lament, an emphasis on Phoebus's music, and the Manciple's moralization. Moreover, in Chaucer's version the crow sings beautifully as well as talks, and Phoebus is explicitly a master of song and minstrelsy. In his rage Phoebus breaks not only his bows and arrows, as in the other versions, but "his mynstralcie,/Boithe harpe, and lute, and gyterne, and sautrie" (IX.267-68). The music of Phoebus is silent, and the crow is deprived of both words and song.

The Manciple's moral is a warning against telling tales: "Be noon auctour newe of tidynges, whether they been false or trewe." Chaucer elsewhere uses the word *auctour* only for great poets. He may not have planned *The Manciple's Tale* to be the last of the fables in the *Tales*, but it provides a fitting introduction to the Parson, who leaves fabling and poetry behind.

FRAGMENT X

The Parson's Prologue

Whether or not Chaucer ever intended to expand his work to the dimensions Harry Bailly's original plan implied—four tales from each pilgrim—by the time he wrote this prologue he had clearly decided he would end his work with the words of the Parson, with the pilgrims at "a thropes ende," still moving toward a destination they never reach. There is a powerful sense of an ending in this final prologue; the Canterbury pilgrimage began in the early morning, and it ends as evening is coming on.

Only now are we reminded that this is a pilgrimage rather than a mere holiday outing. The Parson brushes aside the Host's rude demand for a fable. Instead he offers "a myrte tale in prose"—merry indeed to one for whom the Gospel is good news—"to knyghte up al this feeste" and to show the pilgrims the way to that "parfit glorious pilgrymage that highte Jerusalem celestial." Even Harry is sobered by the thought; he addresses the Parson respectfully for the first time in a polite request that he tell his "meditacioun," and he asserts his authority for the last time only in urging haste, for the sun is about to set on the pilgrims forever.

The Parson's Tale

The Parson's Tale is a tract on penance. This was a common form of didactic literature, and Chau-

cer drew principally on two well-known handbooks, a treatise on penance by Raymond of Pennaforte and a treatise on the Deadly Sins by William Peraldus. He used the anonymous *Summa virtutum et remedie anime* for the "remedies," as well as a number of other minor sources. It is possible that Chaucer translated all of this directly from some lost source, perhaps in French; it is also possible that Chaucer himself compiled and translated the works that form the basis of *The Parson's Tale*. The composition of such a treatise by a layman was not unusual in the fourteenth century, a time of greatly increased lay piety. Henry of Lancaster, the father of the duchess memorialized in *The Book of the Duchess*, composed such a treatise (*Le livre de saintz medecins*), and Chaucer's contemporary, Sir John Clanvowe, author of *The Boke of Cupyde* (an imitation of Chaucer), composed a devotional treatise, *The Two Ways*.

The Parson's Tale is not actually a tale nor even a sermon. The language is vigorous and thus suited to the Parson, who would "snybben sharply" the wrongdoers of his parish, and the subject and its treatment are appropriate to his character. But beyond that the tale has no dramatic or even fictional qualities, and if (as is possible) it was written for some purpose other than inclusion in the *Tales*, it shows no signs of adaptation to the larger work beyond the opening paragraph.

Yet it does in some ways fit well with what precedes, and it seems likely that the biblical text with which the Parson introduces his treatise is intended to refer to the preceding tales: "Stondeth upon the weyes, and seeth and axeth of olde pathes (that is to seyn, of olde sentences) which is the goodde wey, and walketh in that wey, and ye shal fynde refresshyng for youre soules." Chaucer's travelers have been considering a variety of ways ("that is to seyn, of olde sentences") without reaching a conclusion about what is best. The Parson seems now to show them.

His review of the Seven Deadly Sins reminds us of many of the pilgrims, and some of their characteristics that seemed attractive in the General Prologue, such as the Squire's love of fine clothing or the Franklin's devotion to good food, are now re-examined in a colder light. Likewise, many of the problems that have concerned them—such as gentleness and marriage—are here resolved by orthodox Christian doctrine. To many critics, *The Parson's Tale* seems

a particularly suitable conclusion to *The Canterbury Tales*.

Yet any review of the Seven Deadly Sins is in effect a review of society, as is *The Canterbury Tales*; the apparent echoes in The Parson's Tale of the characters and themes of the preceding tales are perhaps inevitable and may be unintentional. The Parson's Tale is concerned not with literature but with souls, and he ends with an uncompromising call for repentance. One who heeds the call is Geoffrey Chaucer himself.

Chaucer's Retraction

Chaucer's Retraction is in the tradition of the medieval *palinode*, like the conclusion to *Troilus*, though here the author retracts not a single work but a whole lifetime of writing. Many have wished that Chaucer had been more modern than he was, or at least more in accord with their own ideas about literature and the world, and some have even questioned the authenticity or sincerity of the Retraction. Yet Chaucer had

ample precedent; he was neither the first nor the last great writer to conclude that literature is finally less important than salvation.

Among the works Chaucer retracts, "the tales of Caunterbury, thilke that sownen into synne," receive no special emphasis; they neither begin nor end the list but stand merely as one of a whole series of works the poet now regrets having written. It has been inferred that the Retraction was not intended for inclusion in the *Tales* but for some other occasion, perhaps the death-bed repentance attributed to Chaucer in the fifteenth century. Yet the textual tradition links the Retraction firmly with The Parson's Tale and The Parson's Tale just as firmly with the rest of the *Tales*.

The Retraction leaves us in no doubt that, unfinished, unpolished, and incomplete as *The Canterbury Tales* may be, Chaucer is finished with it. One wonders if a more finished, more nearly perfect version could have been any more satisfying.

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