A DISTINCTION OF STORIES
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The Medieval Unity of Chaucer’s
Fair Chain of Narratives
for Canterbury

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for Jacqueline Hewitt Allen
and Albert Frank Moritz

This love halt togidres peples
joyned with an holy boond, and
knytteth sacrement of mariages
of chaste loves; and love enditeth
lawes to trewe felawes.
# CONTENTS

**Preface**

**PART I: DEFINITIONS AND STRUCTURES**

- Chapter 1: Axioms of Unity and Their Consequences  3
- Chapter 2: Medieval Notions of Story  45
- Chapter 3: Medieval Notions of Structure  85

**PART II: A READING OF THE TALES**

- Chapter 4: The Natural Group  119
- Chapter 5: The Tales of Magic  137
- Chapter 6: The Moral Group  177
- Chapter 7: The Varieties of Interpretation  211

- Epilogue  233
- Bibliography  243
- Index  255
Collaboration is rare in literary criticism; whether because of the vanity of critics or the confidentiality of poetry, we cannot say. When it does happen, there is usually some easy division of credits. In our case, this division is quite impossible. Our collaboration is the result of a discovery, made at the beginning of a number of years of talk about Chaucer, that we were finishing each other’s sentences, and finding both pleasure and profit in so doing.

In its present form, our reading of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* is new in three ways. In the first place, we go beyond the truism of criticism that Chaucer was fond of Ovid to find in medieval analyses of the form of the *Metamorphoses* as a collection basic guidance for our understanding of the form of Chaucer’s own collection of tales. In the second place, and under this guidance, we propose a new order for the tales, based neither on the witness of some single “good” manuscript or group of manuscripts, nor on the geography between London and Canterbury. This order, indeed, is not the result or conclusion of any study of merely internal evidence; rather, it is a heuristic proposal guided by the external evidence of *Metamorphoses* commentary, and of other commentaries and manuals which define medieval procedures of literary organization. That this order, in the use of it, greatly facilitated our reading is gratifying. Nevertheless, what we wish ultimately to claim is not that our ordering is the only correct one, but rather that our method of reading, which takes the tales as an ordered series and reads them in terms of each other, is both medieval and permanently profitable. *Dispositio*, for the medieval sensibility, was a rhetorical strategy with discursive ends. Its purpose was to
evoke in the reader or hearer that understanding of analogies existing between part and part which a heightened sense of the order of the parts produces. Hence the medieval emphasis on artificial orders; only for the most elementary of writers and speakers was the basis of dispositio required to be anything, such as geography, merely natural to the material being treated.

In the third place, we are quite conscious that Chaucer's stories, as we read them, have turned out to be not quite the same things as had been conventionally thought. In medieval terms, their quidditas is different. For us Chaucer's stories are not, except trivially, speeches or dramatic monologues. Neither are they, essentially, narrative plots, though most of them do, as stories, contain descriptions of completed actions. Rather, under the guidance of medieval critics and their theories, we have been led to see Chaucer's stories as examples—exempla. Seeing thus, we are obviously led to the thematic question, Examples of what? In answer to this question, we make a reading which is in part overtly thematic and find that Chaucer is, among other things, a superb political scientist. But we are also led to another and more subtle question: Examples in what way? An example is always properly particular; that which it exemplifies is universal or general. We thus confront the problem of the relation between universal and particular, under the mode of exemplification, in a way which permits value to be given to fictions, and which, in an age which some Chaucer critics accuse of being skeptically nominalist, permits us to discuss with some confidence both Chaucer's belief in definition and his method of making one. In this discussion we are interested both in method and in theme—or, in medieval terms, both in modus and in sententia. But we put modus first, and with a confidence authorized by the medieval critics, who made forma tractatus dependent on forma tractandi. Thus we have relatively more to say about relationships among stories, or among parts of stories, and relatively less to say about the thematic topics traditional among Chaucer critics as occasion for set-piece display. Respectful of Kittredge and Donaldson, for instance, we essay no effictio of the Wife of Bath. But we believe that we have made both clear and important a number of features of Chaucer's art whose existence has been previously obscured by too modern critical expectations.

What Chaucer is doing, we think, is making a normative definition of human society. Central to this definition is the structure of marriage. By the power of his strategy of exemplification, he uses this structure of marriage paradigmatically rather than merely as an exer-
cise of sociological or psychological realism. In architectonically repeated stories of various marriages, Chaucer defines the norms of all types of properly conducted human relationships. In working to explain this definition, and Chaucer's concerns with it, we are perforce expressing concerns which are broadly ethical and political rather than narrowly aesthetic or literary. In this we have no discomfort, because here again we act under the authority of the medieval critics. Further, and in universal human terms, we hope also to affirm that great literature can be rhetorical in the classical moral sense without having any of its essential greatness compromised.

As is customary, we are happy to acknowledge our debt to previous critics, whose specifics are recorded in our notes. Especially where we differ or diverge from precedent, we are conscious of the great extent to which precedent permits us to take another step. Among these critics, however, we should take special note of some whose work cannot here be fully or even adequately acknowledged—the medieval authors of commentaries, glosses, manuals, and outlines, still largely unpublished, on whose work we ground our a priori assumptions. Full treatment of this material is another book, and cannot be included in this one. We cite sufficient preliminary studies of this material to make our presumptions clear, if not yet unarguable. At the same time we know that the true value of an apriority is its usefulness, not merely its historicity. Of that value we here make Chaucer's Canterbury Tales the judge.

In addition, we are happy to thank a number of friends and colleagues, who have read our work at some stage or other in its making, for their suggestions and criticism: John Alford, John McCabe, Charles Owen, Rossell Hope Robbins, R. A. Shoaf, and Paul Theiner. They have moderated our excesses, labeled our digressions, saved us from errors of fact and style, even while they encouraged us to believe that we were right about important matters. For the making of the bibliography, we thank Carol Briggs; for verification, proofreading, and the index, Judith Jablonski. Carol S. Sykes, of the Ohio State University Press, has transformed manuscript into book with an ideally helpful rigor. Finally, in our dedication we not only obey the preoccupation of the Canterbury Tales, but also honor and appreciate two particular people with whom, in the living form of our marriages, we discover our truth.