PART ONE

Definitions and Structures
Axioms of Unity and Their Consequences

In the beginning of his *Les mots et les choses*, Michel Foucault quotes a cautionary joke which might well be recommended as the proper place of beginning for any critic who seeks to understand the literature of the past. The quotation is of Borges's encyclopedic Chinese classification of animals: belonging to the emperor, embalmed, tame, sucking pigs, sirens, fabulous, stray dogs, included in the present classifications, frenzied, innumerable, drawn with a very fine camel-hair brush, et cetera, having just broken the water pitcher, and that from a long way off look like flies. It is a classification which, to Western minds, and perhaps to real Eastern ones as well, makes very little sense. Still, its matter-of-fact presentation makes a claim to truth which, even as it amuses us by its incongruity, also causes us to reexamine our cherished modes of formulating and classifying reality. Every system is equally arbitrary, until one considers what each is for; Borges’s Chinese encyclopedia makes us realize how largely it is habit which accustoms us to find one such system a natural deposit from the way the world actually is, and another the fantasy of deluded persons made foreign to us by time, space, genius, or all three.

The problem to which Borges’s irony addresses itself is peculiarly vivid for the literary critic because the critic’s business is to account for something at once alien and contemporary. We deal with poems and stories which must be classified, analyzed, and assimilated as if they were a part of our own world, as indeed they are. At the same time we know that they survive from a possibly inscrutable past, and curiosity if not academic responsibility ensures that we try to
deal with them in their own terms, even if those terms turn out to be as strange as Borges's classification of animals.

We have a number of methods for classifying the materials contained in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. References to times and places in the links suggest that Chaucer would have arranged tales and interludes of conversation according to the geography of the pilgrimage route. The Parson's objections to storytelling, and the matter of his sermon, have led us to find in him a dramatic reversal of the worldly wandering represented by the story contest and its participants. Other methods for drawing together the diverse contents of the text have also been proposed. For example, the stories provide a representative collection of literary genres, from epic (at least in the opinion of some readers) to romance to fabliau to sermon. On the other hand, one may find in the poem descriptions of a number of fascinating people—some of them the pilgrims themselves, others characters in the tales which the pilgrims tell. Again, it is obvious that tales have tellers, and therefore the dramatic principle has concentrated on the psychological revelations of the pilgrims, whether in telling a tale or in talking together, as the unifying interest in all that Chaucer included in the poem. Finally, from manuscript evidence we have the witness of Chaucer's near contemporaries that the stories were arranged in groups, and these groups presented in a variety of orders.

All of these methods, with the exception of the last, are modern attempts to reconstruct Chaucer's irretrievably lost plan for the poem. The witness of manuscripts, which we preserve in editing the text, is still suspected of obscuring, rather than illuminating, authorial intentions. Using modern methods for classifying the contents of the poem, we have found much of interest in Chaucer, but the unity of his great collection eludes us. Nevertheless, there is a good deal of critical talk about the unity of the *Canterbury Tales*, which, although it is more often frustrated than not, does claim that we find the subject important, and that at an as yet inarticulate level we find a satisfaction in the poem, answering to our sense of the wholeness of things.

What we need is the right Chinese encyclopedia, that is, a naming of the poem's parts which not only identifies them properly as individual objects of interest but also reveals their character as units of an ordered, coherent presentation of a subject. We have determined to raise again the troublesome problem of the unity of the *Canterbury Tales* because our researches into medieval poetics and the medieval literary form, the story collection, have convinced us that organiza-
tional principles recognized and used in the Middle Ages have not
been taken into account in modern efforts to understand the plan of
Chaucer's story array. It seems surprising that, after thirty years and
more of historical criticism, an aspect of medieval thought, especially
one which we wish to argue is fundamental for understanding much
of that age's poetry, should have eluded scholarly notice. We can only
suggest that the range of historical method has been limited both by
its own nature, as a fact-gathering procedure, and by an unwillingness
to ask questions which cast doubt upon the preconceptions with which
twentieth century readers approach the material.

The problem with historical criticism is that it has not yet gone
far enough. Thus far, in our attempt to understand Chaucer's world
and work, we have done extremely well in assembling the great body
of facts which is the context of that world and its attitudes. We know
a great deal about astrology and theology and mythology and medicine
and many other things. We know the salient facts about most of the
wars and diplomatic marriages, many of the crimes, and a fair num­
ber of the people, important and not so important. We know what
books were available and where, and in many cases who read which
ones. We have ourselves read a great many of these books and have
puzzled over the fact that many of the ones which were most popular
then are most boring now, even while we correlated the doctrinal or
taxonomic facts which those books contained with the more allusive
versions of the facts as found in our medieval poems. All of these
things, which we have researched thoroughly and well, have to do
with those aspects of the medieval culture which, from the modern
point of view, we could call facts. We must be grateful for knowing
them; our understanding of medieval art would be far poorer if we
lacked them.

In the long run, however, facts are worse than useless if we do not
know their proper relationships. It is a presumption of historical criti­
cism that, since it is especially qualified to discover and establish the
existence of facts, there will indeed be facts, and that facts can pro­
erly be the basis of profitable analysis. At one level, this is simply a
truism. But it conceals a subtle danger of error. Critical history de­
pends on verification, and is more interested in what can be verified;
therefore, it is most concerned necessarily with concrete entities—
rather than, or at least prior to, the organizing relationships which
obtained among those entities. Facts are facts, delimited, separable,
and whole. A battle is a battle, a manuscript is a manuscript, a state­
ment of doctrine is there in a datable text. Either may have causes, or
results, or both, and since we are a priori interested in causes and results, we will probably relate our facts in terms of them.\textsuperscript{2} Thus, though we can record Laurence de Premierfais’s statement that the \textit{Divine Comedy}, like the \textit{Romance of the Rose}, was a “vraye mappemonde,”\textsuperscript{3} we tend to be disqualified from following de Premierfais’s example to make similar analogies between medieval books on our own. We need a new method which aims at classifying facts and discovering the structures which relate them meaningfully to one another.

As our starting point, then, we have assumed that all the materials which Chaucer left behind to be included in the \textit{Canterbury Tales} must be taken seriously as functioning elements in his final design. Because they have played so small a part in previous explanations of the poem’s structure, we have paid special attention to the tales. We have attempted to discover medieval literary theory, or practice, which might suggest the manner in which Chaucer expected all the various parts of the poem to work together. The search for medieval presumptions about how literary works were to be organized has led us to the age's assumptions about where the divisions and classifications of the world are to be made and what relations exist among those divisions once they are made.\textsuperscript{4} The ordering principles which we will recommend attempt to take advantage of such medieval habits of mind as analogy and allegory, the \textit{distinctio}, the use of exempla, and the willingness to consider important such questions as the reality of universals. Even though to do so feels at first as strange as repeating the classes of Borges's Chinese animals with a sincere attempt at conviction, we have attempted to follow medieval practice in trusting to the wholeness of the picture composed by the tales.

Previous efforts to explain the poem's unity are unsatisfactory for two reasons. First, they do not make all the pieces of Chaucer's grand project, particularly the tales, fit comfortably together; and, second, the unifying principles they propose are not well attuned to the medieval character of the work. Robert Jordan's proposal, which is the most rigorously medieval in its reference to "homologous parts and parts of parts," has been helpful in arguing against a dramatic reading of a linearly structured journey to Canterbury. But the nonorganic relationship among the parts of the poem he describes comes close to meaning nothing more than nonrelational.\textsuperscript{5} Though he insists on the division of the text into parts, Jordan provides no convincing explanation for why these particular parts have been brought together into a single work. Other critics dealing with the subject have, in one way or
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another, begun by proposing a principle of unity they believe to be universally valid, under which they have tried to fit the Canterbury Tales. Two such organizing principles have tended to dominate—the first is Aristotelian plot, and the second the drama of the human comedy, with its implied procedures of character analysis and the treatment of the tales as speeches. Neither of them is medieval; nevertheless, because they are true of large tracts of human experience, they have given many helpful, if only partial, insights into Chaucer.

Some critics have found a plot for the poem in the action of the Canterbury journey; others have looked to the thematic significance of a spiritual pilgrimage in order to discover the plan of the poem. On the one hand, the actual pilgrimage to Canterbury is seen as something which begins in London, goes along the way in the middle, and ends in Canterbury—or alternatively, and with more correctness, back in London again. Such a plot is founded on the progress of the pilgrims, taking into account allusions to the familiar stopping points on the road to Canterbury; but the events outside the flow of time are more difficult to place inside the structure. They remain an unexplained middle suspended between the clear-cut beginning set forth in the General Prologue and the apparent conclusion provided by the Parson's Prologue. The other, more popular plot joins the end of the pilgrimage in Canterbury with the thematic climax of the Parson's Tale and structures the plot in terms of a journey from London to, or toward, heaven. The most significant study of this spiritual pilgrimage is Ralph Baldwin's, whose initial presentation was taken up by many other critics. Interpretations of the spiritual pilgrimage attempt to establish a structure which is worked out not only in the physical details of the journey but also in the thematic development of the alternative values for life expressed by the pilgrims, climaxing in the judgment of the Parson.

The axiom of these plot approaches to the Canterbury Tales is, of course, Aristotelian. The analysis of narratives in terms of beginnings, middles, and ends is a commonplace of modern criticism. In the Middle Ages, however, both theory and practice call this axiom of plot into question. The Averroistic version in which medieval critics knew Aristotle's Poetics makes it quite clear that the beginnings, middles, and ends of which poetry was to be composed were discursive or logical features, and not causally ordered narrative ones; and Chaucer's rhetorical strategy with the Parson's Tale in fact probably undercuts the sense of climax which its final place encourages us to
see in it. Medieval treatments of \textit{dispositio} have a far better developed doctrine of beginnings than of endings, and it is probably safe to presume that medieval sensibility would therefore expect the most important element in any writing to come first, rather than last.

The human comedy approach to the \textit{Canterbury Tales} prizes the poem for its faithfulness to individualizing details of description and its accurate reflections of real life. Homage to Chaucer’s camera eye has even prompted researches into possible originals of the fictional pilgrims among the artist’s acquaintances. The modern impulse to empirical realism has led critics to suppose that the surface of Chaucer’s poem glitters with the unadorned face of the poet’s time; by logical extension, Chaucer becomes for many no more than the man who holds the mirror. His self-portrait as a well-meaning but innocent reporter of his age has been taken seriously. Within the last twenty years, students of medieval learning have offered valuable correctives to the excesses of this reverence for Chaucer’s unsullied realism by showing how habitually medieval people saw in the real world forms and processes defined by traditional ideas rather than close personal observation. For medieval art particular representational figures tended regularly to be exemplars of typical ideas or states; golden ribbons of written speech connected painted figures with their message; this connection with the typical or allegorical persisted, even heightened, as verisimilitude reached virtuoso levels in late medieval and Renaissance painting in Flanders. One may properly generalize from Averroes’s remark about the poetry of praise to all art: “Tragedia etenim non est ars representativa ipsorummet hominum prout sunt individua cadentia in sensum, sed est representativa consuetudinum eorum honestarum et actionum laudabilia et credulitatum beatificantium ... et ars scientialis que montrat [sic] sive docet ex quibus et qualiter componuntur poemata principalior et perfection est quam ipsa operatio poematum.” This is not of course to say that particulars occurring in medieval art should be reduced to, or dismissed in favor of, the general or the typical, after the fashion recommended by critics who allegorize in the manner of C. S. Lewis. It is to say that overtones of widely accepted definitions of the human condition are an element in all of Chaucer’s very particular figures, such as the Wife of Bath or the Tabard’s Host. Behind the concrete details of story always stood the \textit{consuetudines} and \textit{credulitates} whose truth or moral value remained of primary value and interest. Throughout the Middle Ages the fit relationship between such general truths and their physical, particular counterparts was discussed.
We shall return to these discussions when we consider Chaucer's attitudes on the authority of poetry; it is enough to say here that as a poet of the later Middle Ages, Chaucer’s belief in these traditional associations was refined by his awareness of growing challenges, in an era not fully confident of analogy, to its philosophical validity.

Formulations of the marriage group are an important corollary of the human comedy view. It might be objected that Kittredge’s proposal should not be grouped with human comedy readings because it is aimed at defining something typical in the poem, that is, the institution of marriage. But Kittredge’s article, as well as most work of this kind, falls short precisely because of the same assumptions we characterized as basic to the human comedy approach. These critics evaluate the pilgrims as realistically drawn characters, with limited points of view and personal prejudices interesting in themselves, and not existing as typical of anything. Critics of the marriage group are really claiming that the discussion is not so much of marriage as of marriages—of personal options open to real people, modern as well as medieval (with Archie Bunker’s and Andy Capp’s wives as reasonable modern analogues). Such common ground as critics find in the marriage group as a whole tends to be dramatic rather than typical—dictated by the interaction of the pilgrims more than by the interaction of themes. Because the critics are concerned above all with people, in all their bare forked variety, they tend to minimize the importance of what these people say as having any validity beyond the immediate and psychological. The marriage group is an important test case for our hypothesis that, for Chaucer as for the Middle Ages, particular figures were offered as exemplary of general truths. Medieval marriage evokes a wide-ranging series of associations with other relationships, including that of Christ and the church, of the higher and lower reason, of the mind and body, and of ruler and subjects. Robertsonian formulations push this evocation too far, by tending to take the allegory and leave the letter. But most critics who discuss the marriage group do so literally, and lose the full and proper medieval context by presuming that the stories involved are merely realistic in the nineteenth-century sense and contain nothing but the ordinary human behavior they recount. They ignore the allegorical dimension—admittedly in proper opposition to letting it displace, or replace, the story—but in so doing they fail to appreciate how the allegorical overtones of stories containing marriages satisfy the medieval fondness for the typical. A notable instance of this problem is in readings of the Clerk’s Tale. Efforts to explain the tale’s plot in terms
of dramatic and personal principles, such as Walter's hubris, cannot account for the complex game Chaucer plays with the literal and allegorical levels of this traditional exemplum of Christian patience. Without taking into account the extended senses of marriage, with which the Middle Ages was accustomed to invest its literal occurrence, Chaucer's manipulation of his source in order to heighten the issue of Griselda's obedience and his subsequent ironic commentary in the Envoi are lost, and the tale threatens to become, for the modern reader, a scandalous proof of the need for women's liberation. We will deal with these matters, in focus on the *Clerk's Tale*, later. What is important here is that discussions of the marriage group, and other analogous discussions of Chaucer's characters as merely charming, real people, leave out half of what Chaucer wrote. What is lacking is awareness of the tendency of medieval particulars toward dependable associations—which can be trusted as the ground of structure in which those particulars relate to meaning and to each other. This lack of interest, as we have implied, is axiomatically based; it results from too univocal an interest in something else—in this case, people, in all their simple humanity.

Recently, however, a growing number of critics seem to be seeing that no univocal approach will work with Chaucer; they have therefore been able to discover richer and richer ironies in his work. The basic ground of their work is still the presumption that the plot which leads to heaven and the people whose particular individuality seems so obvious actually exist, but now both instead of one, side by side in the *Canterbury Tales*. The point of their existence, however, is not ultimate but instrumental; Chaucer is not choosing between them or commenting on one by subtly preferring the other, but rather is indulging in a "double vision," which is the "ironical essence" of his art. Arthur W. Hoffman puts the polarities involved in this fashion: "The Prologue begins, then, by presenting a double view of the Canterbury pilgrims: the pilgrimage is one tiny manifestation of a huge tide of life, but then, too, the tide of life ebbs and flows in response to the power which the pilgrimage acknowledges, the power symbolized by 'the hooly blisful martir.'" An analogous doubleness, that between the typical and the individual, is proposed by Jill Mann as the basis for Chaucer's moral ambiguity.

The doubleness is certainly there—between earth and heaven, between Chaucer the pilgrim and Chaucer the poet (though this one probably has been overdone), between the particular and the typical, between the literal and the allegorical, between the thing and the
word that names it. To call this an ironic vision suggests to the modern reader that Chaucer has decided wisely not to choose between two aspects of life, but simply to hold them in suspension as both truly present in man. But irony, for the Middle Ages, is simply one of the forms of allegory, that is, not a denial of meaning but an affirmation of it. This double vision is structurally persistent in Chaucer’s collection because he proposes to gauge the relationship between these two components of life and establish from these elements a coherent picture of the human condition. The medieval strategy of assimilatio is an alternative to the crucial Aristotelian term mimesis. The Canterbury Tales is constructed from contradictory materials of life, not in order to witness to a confusion beyond human understanding, but rather to draw the contradictions into a pattern revealing their true harmony.

We have said that the various unifying principles surveyed here are nonmedieval and have suggested briefly how they have obscured, or distorted, our understanding of what they were intended to explain. One aspect of the modern search for the poem’s unity deserves special comment. With few exceptions, critics treat the tales and the links in different ways; the stories are read individually or in small groups, whereas the links are treated as if they constituted a dramatic whole, a continuous narrative of character development and interaction. The “real life” of the pilgrims is distinguished from the “fictions” they present. Modern readers interested in plot and characterization have found the links susceptible to analysis in such terms; they have presumed that Chaucer, too, was more interested in, or more willing to trust the reality of, the “real life” of the frame than the “fictions” it encloses. As a result, the stories are subordinated to their tellers, and in explanations of the poem’s design, are treated either as “beautiful lies” which are exposed by the truth of life or as dramatic monologues in which the pilgrims expose their own psychological complexities.

This dramatic principle is so powerful in the minds of modern critics that it operates, not just as a conscious tool of criticism, but as an unconscious axiom determining what the critic might expect as he begins his work. Because it is thus so insidious, it needs especially to be put down, lest in the rest of the book we be misunderstood as failing to say what we never intended to say, or as saying badly in dramatic terms what in fact we are saying well in medieval ones.

The most significant effect of post-Cartesian philosophy has been to focus attention on epistemology rather than metaphysics; by now this attention has generated a host of attitudes and cultural interests,
all presuming, in one way or another, individual point of view as a point of departure for knowledge and action. The dramatic monologues of Browning, the subtle treatment of point of view by Henry James, the structuralist surrender to individual acts of reading, phenomenologist thinking, the theory of relativity, the Heisenberg principle of indeterminacy, and even opinion-poll evidence—all trace to the essentially modern conviction that statements are relative to their speakers, experiences to their sufferers or enjoyers. Nothing is except as it is witnessed or endured. Thus our modern critical interest in Chaucer's tales as dramatic utterances, and in him as a layered series of personae beneath which the "real" author—civil servant, himself a point of view, ironically hides himself, is ultimately more an interest in ourselves and our own phenomenological predicament than it is in anything authentically medieval or Chaucerian.

Both drama and testimony existed in the Middle Ages, of course, and considerable attention was paid to distinctions among roles. But these facts give no special support to the dramatic principle as modern critics of Chaucer have practiced it. Literary criticism produced in the Middle Ages provides us with slight evidence bearing on point of view; such as there is, when properly understood, leads us more toward a taxonomy of types than to an epistemology of individualized witnesses. Chaucer's northern dialect students in the *Reeve's Tale* are, according to John Fisher, the first in English literature;\(^{32}\) as a kind of ethnic humor, this usage obviously shows no respect for an individual point of view, but just the reverse, as opponents of ethnic slurs have always known. It reduces the individual to something merely typical. A gloss on the speech of Tideus in book 2 of the *Thebiad* evaluates this kind of "realistic" writing with the proper medieval emphasis: "Nota Stacium valde rethoricum in hac oratione esse, cum non faciat Tideum loqui rethorice. Digna est enim persona tali locutione."\(^{33}\) Statius, in making Tideus speak as Tideus should, underlines not Tideus but his own rhetorical presence as author. Ultimately, and by analogy, Chaucer is the only speaker in the *Canterbury Tales*; his rhetoric tells it all.\(^{34}\) What makes even this persuasive, however, is not Chaucer's personal witness as author or speaker—not his speech as his—but his speech as speech. The dramatic principle does indeed hold for law oratory, but it is not properly exercised in poetry: "Argumentatio seu probatio rectitudinis credulitatis aut operationis non per sermonem persuasivum (hoc enim non pertinet huic arti neque est conveniens ei) sed per sermonem representativum... ideoque non utitur carmen laudativum arte gesticulationis neque vul-
What this *sermo representativus* presents may indeed be personae, but they are made credible by it, and not it by them. Thus Thomas Waleys, commenting on Boethius's *Consolation*, says: "Causa autem formalis tractandi est modus agendi Boetii, et est dialogus, idest sermo duorum. Introducit enim Boetius in hoc libro duas personas, scilicet seipsum suam miseriam deplangentem, et philosophiam sibi condolentem, et ipsum super suam miseriam consolantem." What is fundamental here is the form, dialogue. The personae are the result of the existence of this genre, not its cause. Both philosophy and the persona of Boethius are aspects of that temporarily depressed instance of *humanitas* named Boethius, who must achieve his true selfhood in the knowledge of the highest good. There is nothing here that is even remotely phenomenological; the psychomachic dialogue does not constitute an individual so much as deliver a self from its improper individuality. What is true of these Platonist personifications of Boethius is equally true, mutatis mutandis, of Chaucer's nominalist exempla. In fit array they may exemplify the truth, but their witness does not constitute it. The fact that Chaucer's collection is divisible into frame and stories was probably less vivid to Chaucer than it is to us. Commentaries on the *Metamorphoses* contemporary with Chaucer, for example, ignore distinctions between framelike stories and enclosed stories; instead, they allegorize them all alike, as a collection of morally instructive exemplary actions. Furthermore, when Chaucer introduces the question of the relative authority of art and life, or experience and authority, he comes to conclusions opposite to those most twentieth-century readers have attributed to him. Chaucer and his first audiences regarded the *Canterbury Tales* as at least as interesting and significant as the Canterbury journey during which they were told. With all this in mind, we are convinced that an avenue of approach to the text, via the tales rather than the links, remains unexplored. It is there that we propose to begin.

The most promising place to look in a piece of writing for clues to its unity, from the medieval point of view, is its beginning; if clues are not unambiguously clear at this level, then the second most promising place to look is in analogous cases—sources or models to which one's book can be unquestionably related. Of the many things we learn from Chaucer's beginning, the most emphatic is that the Knight and his tale have unusual authority. The Knight is the first pilgrim described; his tale is the first tale. Rank tells, and the dramatic device of submitting to the luck of the draw only reinforces the inevitability of
the Knight's position. The easiest next step is to suppose that the General Prologue will define the order of all that is to follow—but this is not true. Neither the Host nor the Miller wants to hear the Squire speak after his father. In terms of ordering, then, the Prologue predicts only the Knight's Tale, and otherwise contributes to the wholeness of the poem in different ways, as we shall later suggest.

Empirically, and without recourse to theory, it is obvious that the tales of the first fragment are unified. They present a complex and witty interweaving of characters and ideas; they all treat the same basic love triangle; and they show a common concern for order and justice, even though each tale's action is more vulgar and disorderly than the one before. One might therefore suppose that this kind of unity, defined by the precedent and example of the first and most carefully worked out fragment, might operate throughout the whole. Yet this promise of order also seems to break down, following the Cook's Tale, much as the arrangements the General Prologue seems to promise, whether in its list of pilgrims or in the casting of lots, collapse after the Knight's Tale. Discoveries of analogous interrelationships among other small groups of tales indicate that the unity of the first fragment may not be coincidental, but no overall scheme of this type has been expanded to include the entire collection.

The only unambiguous certainty in Chaucer's beginning is the Knight's Tale. Given the Prologue and the Miller's interruption, which are structurally contradictory, we have in the emphatic and defining position as prescribed by medieval manuals only the Knight's Tale. It is a tale weighty in matter and rich in "solaas," whose subject matter of young love and brotherly combat seems to echo throughout the remaining stories. As the first tale it is in this collection more determinative a prologue than all the mere transitions which come later and which, for medieval sensibilities, must be taken more as gloss than as determining frame. Therefore, both because of pride of place and because of significance of content, the Knight's Tale should be expected to forecast an orderly unity for the collection it introduces. In order to explain how the tale functions in this way, we must see it in terms of correctly medieval structuring principles. For these we need the guidance of Chaucer's models.

The search for a medieval precedent to explain Chaucer's method and interest in story collections has extended beyond Boccaccio and Sercambi, even as far as Mandeville and de Guileville, but with results that are at best unprofitable and often misleading. In fact, the precedent for Chaucer's collection of tales in a frame is one which is most
prominent in medieval culture, most widely known and respected, as itself a morally normative array of tales, that is, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Ovid's possible or probable influence on Chaucer in this regard has been often enough noticed. But the investigation of Ovid, and even of Ovid as he was known in the Middle Ages, has lacked proper grounding in the medieval commentaries and has therefore failed to understand the *Metamorphoses* in a way which makes sense of Chaucer. This we propose to do.

In absolute terms, it might well be fair to say that we are not so much drawing a parallel between Chaucer's *Tales* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as between the tales and a body of medieval commentary on stories, which in the Middle Ages circulated with the *Metamorphoses* without saying anything much of permanent interest about Ovid's poem. We do indeed depend for our guidance in reading Chaucer as much on commentaries as on the Ovidian text itself, if not more. Since these commentaries are neither widely known nor indeed more than very partially published, we are very conscious that this relation which we intend to argue between Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and a very medievalized understanding of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is far more self-evident to us than it is to readers who know both poems entirely or substantially by virtue of having read them for themselves, in modern editions and translations, as literature. We are not claiming that the medieval commentators were right about the *Metamorphoses*, but only that they wrote what they wrote, and that Chaucer read it and found it fitting. Obviously we are not claiming that sensitive readers of Ovid have been perversely blind for nearly five hundred years in failing to see that the *Canterbury Tales* and the *Metamorphoses* were identical to one another. Unless read through a certain medieval filter of commentary, they are not. A sensitive modern reader of Ovid might well find, as John Fyler does, that the greatest similarity between the two poets was a certain ironic tone. In seeing this similarity, the modern reader has correctly noticed certain features of the experience of reading these poems. But it is crucial to realize that he is set up to do so—that he is also reading through a filter. Modern readers are interested in point of view. Because we are incorrigibly self-conscious, we are persistently curious about, and sensitive to, the self-consciousness of others. Further, we have learned from Wayne Booth, if not from Conrad's Marlow, to expect, and to appreciate with understanding, a certain irony as the ground of our relation with the authors we read.

We must put aside for the moment all these attitudes, if we are to
appreciate, under the guidance of the medieval commentaries, that Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is the formal precedent for Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. The analogy which makes this precedent true is, admittedly, a difficult one—one in which the "alterity" of medieval literature is especially insistent. The disappearance of the commentary of Peter Lavinius from editions of the *Metamorphoses* after about 1530 is evidence that this analogy might already have been less than obvious in the Renaissance. But what we are attempting in this book is historical criticism, against which no modern or merely synchronic attitude is privileged. In historical terms, the only Ovid that matters to Chaucer is the medieval Ovid, and for that one, given the passage of time, we must perforce trust the medieval commentators even more than our own reading of the book they glossed.

We have already mentioned Laurence de Premierfait's willingness to equate the *Romance of the Rose* and the *Divine Comedy* as examples of a "vraye mappemond"; his analogy is very much the kind we are making between Ovid and Chaucer. It is not an analogy based on style, tone, or plot; rather, it is an analogy based on a medieval sense of the logic, meaning, and application possible in a text which is an assembly of stories. It is an analogy which is only possible for us because the medieval text of Ovid survived with commentary.

There is not room in this book to include another book on the literary theory of the medieval commentators. Some things must therefore be merely asserted here, in confidence that they have been proved elsewhere. As far as commentary on the *Metamorphoses* is concerned, the edited texts which we cite do fairly represent the character, if not all the variation of detail, of what manuscripts preserve. With regard to the strategy of classification of metamorphoses, in terms of which Ovid commentary is specifically relevant to Chaucer, we are necessarily concerned with full detail, and so we quote from manuscripts as well as from edited commentary texts. To be convinced that this commentary material would have been unavoidable, one has only to look randomly at any dozen manuscripts of the *Metamorphoses* early enough to have been used by Chaucer. Fully blank margins and flyleaves are rare.

Once one is willing to trust the medieval commentators, including those whose texts are still unedited, one cannot avoid seeing that the *Metamorphoses* provides not only the obvious precedent for the genre of the framed story collection but also, and more important, the implicit explanation of the unity of any such collection. The commentaries make all this explicit. They preserve elaborate medieval analysis
of structural and classificatory principles and categories which name parts and in so doing define wholes. These principles tend to occur most explicitly in the commentary accessus which circulated with the Metamorphoses. Of these commentaries, the one by Arnulf of Orleans, with its variants, was the most influential. But substantial evidence also comes from incidental glosses, divisiones, and allegories on specific tales. From this evidence several generalizations are possible.

First, the commentaries conventionally identify the material of the Metamorphoses as changes whose purpose is to exemplify the range of possibilities of moral action. Second, this material—changes—is classified into a few major types according to one or another of two complementary systems. Third, in the actual process of glossing, no distinction is made between frame and framed—the Minyades are allegorized in their turn, in a series with the stories they tell.

The ethical interpretation of the Metamorphoses is to be expected. Arnulf's language, however, deserves to be examined in some detail:

Intencio est de mutacione dicere, ut non intelligamus de mutacione que fit extrinsecus tantum in rebus corporeis bonis vel malis sed etiam de mutacione que fit intrinsecus ut in anima, ut reductac nos ab errore ad cognitionem veri creatoris. Duo sunt motus in anima unus rationalis alter irrationalis: rationalis est qui imitatur motum firmamenti, qui fit ab oriente in occidentem, et e contrario irrationalis est qui imitatur motum planetarum qui moventur contra firmamentum. Dedit enim deus anime rationem per quam reprimetur sensualitatem, sicut motus irrationalis VII planetarum per motum firmamenti reprimitur. Nos vero rationabilem motum more planetarum negligentes contra creatorem nostrum rapimur. Quod Ovidius videns vult nobis ostendere per fabulosam narrationem motum anime qui fit intrinsecus. Ideo dicitur Yo mutata in vaccam quia corruit in vicia, ideo pristinam formam dicitur recepisse quod emersit a viciis. Vel intencio sua est nos ab amore temporalium immoderato revocare et adhortari ad unicum cultum nostri creatoris, ostendendo stabilitatem celestium et varietatem temporalium. Ethice supponitur quia docet nos ista temporalia, que transitoria et mutabilia, contemnere, quod pertinet ad moralitatem.

The most significant feature of this piece of literary criticism, which continued to be copied into the fifteenth century, is its trust of analogical thinking. Stories of corporeal changes parallel cosmic motions, in two opposite ways. Both of the rival cosmic motions, and analogously both of the rival psychic motions, are part of the same system—one "reprimitur" by the other. Throughout, the critic's presumption that his material will be of some practical ethical use is obvious. Understanding, then, comes as a result of the fit perception of parallels and, when it is achieved, makes possible an improved state of the ethical
self. The structure of parallelism internal to the work must also be understood to be rhetorical; it includes the reader, who is supposed to inform his own life by the experience of the book.

We know that this particular sense of the formal structure of ethical behavior is really intended because in another place the commentator specified the four kinds of *mutationes* as from animate to inanimate, from inanimate to animate, from animate to animate, and from inanimate to inanimate. Since this same fourfold schema is also used from Donatus to John Balbus as the classification of the kinds of metaphor, it is obvious that for these critics the formalities of metaphor and the formalities of ethics were the same. That is, the same relationship which obtains between tenor and vehicle, or between the two halves of a simile in the operation of *assimilatio*, also obtains between *quidam homo* and the example, rule, divine command, or human counsel by which he orders his ethical behavior. Therefore, for this reason also, the reader of any given piece becomes, as we shall see in chapter 2 more fully, that piece's tropological level—parallel to it, its rhetorical object, and its ethical result.

This analysis in terms of changes from animate to inanimate, and so on, is one of the two systems the commentaries use. Its primary critical use, as far as we are concerned, is to demonstrate the real analogy that informs the operation of poetry and ethics as parallel systems. The second system, on the other hand, will prove of more use as we seek to rationalize the coherence and unity of specific medieval poems such as the *Canterbury Tales*.

This second system has been less than clear because the printed evidence is misleading. Ghisalberti's editions of the *accessus* of both Arnulf of Orleans and Giovanni del Virgilio present texts in which the kinds of metamorphoses are specified as natural, magical, and spiritual. The commentary of William of Theigii, preserved in MS Paris, B.M. lat. 8010, agrees; after listing and illustrating them, he says, "Istis tribus modis dicitur mutatio, et non pluribus" ("Change is defined in these three modes, and not in more"). But in the same *accessus* he also gives an alternate version: "Sciendum est quod quadruplex assignatur mutatio scilicet naturalis, moralis, spiritualis et magica. Naturalis quam actor innuit in divisione elementorum, moralis que attenditur in Lycaone mutato in lupum, et ideo dicitur quia prius benignus postea factus predo et improbus. Spiritualis sicut de Agave que primo discreta mutata fuit in insanam. Magica est de ymagine Pymalionis in virginem mutata, et est magica sicut apparat in Circc que per incantacionem mutabat homines in porcos." Other
manuscripts tend to confirm the tradition as one wavering between three and four changes. MS B.N. lat. 15136, a thirteenth-century book from St. Victor, specifies three, but a different set: "Videndum est quot sint modi mutationis tres scilicet. Est enim ethica mutatio et theorica et magica. Ethica de animali rationali ad irrationale [sic] ut mutatio licaonis in lupum. Theorica est spiritualis ut deificatio herculis. Magica ut de re inanimata ad rem inanimata [sic] sicut mutatio ymaginis quam fecit prometheus" (fol. 198r). ("What may be the modes of change must be specified—they are three. For there is ethical change and theoretical and magical. The ethical, from a rational animal to an irrational, such as the change of Lycaon into a wolf. The theoretical is spiritual, such as the deification of Hercules. The magical, from an inanimate thing to an animate [cod. inanimate], such as the change of the image which Prometheus made.") Still another set of three, the artificial, the natural, and the "mistica et magica," occurs in a fourteenth-century French manuscript, now MS Vat. lat. 1479.52 Otherwise, in the Arnulf-Giovanni tradition, the three specified omit the ethical, even though in Giovanni's commentary interpretations for Hermaphroditus are specified as both "naturaliter" and "moraliter."53 The mutatio of the person turned to stone in book 10 is similarly labeled in MS Vat. lat. 1598: "Item moralis est ista mutatio. Allegoria talis est. Philosophus quidam fuit qui cognita subtilitate herculis qui docuit terram esse tripartitam quam dedit intelligi per cerberum. Unde fingitur cerberum traxisse ab inferis desperavit post herculem nichil philosophicum dicere et stupore percussus destitit a sensu. Unde in lapidem fingitur esse mutatus" (fol. 101r). ("This change is moral. Its allegory is thus: he was a certain philosopher who understood the subtlety of Hercules (Hercules taught that the earth was tripartite and let this be understood by Cerberus, and so it is imagined that he dragged Cerberus out of Hell) and after Hercules despaired of saying anything philosophical and became depressed and out of touch with reality. When it is imagined that he was changed into a stone.") It is probably only natural, therefore, that the list triplex—natural, magical, and spiritual—should have often become the list quadruplex. The fullest explanation of this scheme we have encountered is in MS Vat. lat. 2781:

In nova fert animus: Notandum est quod quadruplex est mutatio, scilicet naturalis, moralis, magica et spiritualis. Naturalis est que fit per contextionem elementorum. Vel retexionem vel mediante semine vel sine. Per contextionem enim conveniunt elementa. Ut cum de spermate nascitur puer, et de ovo pullus, et de semine herba vel arbor et sic de similibus, et
A Distinction of Stories

According to at least some authorities, therefore, the Ovidian changes which inform right human behavior are classified as natural, moral, magical, and spiritual. By medieval standards we should expect that this schema would have some rightness of its own, independent of or prior to an empirical examination of the *Metamorphoses*; medieval schemata of classification, of which the most famous is the four causes, tend to be imposed from authority rather than discovered in the course of investigation. This habit, of course, is natural to an age which believed seriously in the possibility of definition and therefore in practice tended to adapt existing forms and procedures rather than to invent new ones.

There are in fact other fourfold schemata which are closely analogous to this Ovidian one and inform it in ways which sharpen, refine, and make more effective its usefulness as an instrument of Chaucer criticism. These analogous systems occur in discussions of hell and classify the kinds of descent into hell, which, apparently, could cover all cases. The schemata occur in the commentary of Bernardus Sylvesteris on the *Aeneid*, the commentary of Dante’s son on the *Commedia*, and the *De laboribus Herculis* of Coluccio Salutati. In these classifications terminology is not absolutely consistent, but the illus-
trations and definitions which go with the terms make it clear that all
three authors are fundamentally talking about the same thing.

For Bernardus, "descensus autem ad inferos quadrifarius est: est
autem unus naturae, alius virtutis, tertius vitii, quartus artificii" ("the
descent into hell is fourfold, for there is one of nature, another of
virtue, a third of vice, and a fourth of artifice"). One descends naturally
by being born into a human condition which has hell as its possible
future and vice its possible present. One descends virtuously by notic­
ing how fragile and unworthy the things of this world are. One de­
scends viciously by being totally preoccupied with "temporalia." One
descends artificially by necromancy.56 All of these descents are figura­
tive, or symbolic. All of them are moral. For one of them, the virtuous,
Bernardus's explanation repeats much the same medieval com­
monplace which Arnulf uses to justify attention to the material and
temporal "changes" of the Ovidian story: "Est autem alius virtutis qui
fit dum sapiens aliquis ad mundana per considerationem descendit,
non ut in eis intentionem ponat sed ut eorum cognita fragilitate eis
abiectis ad invisibilia penitus se convertat et creaturarum cognitione
creatorem evidentius agnoscat."57 The artificial, from Bernardus's
comment, is obviously the same as the Ovidian "magical."

In the commentary of Dante's son, Pietro, the descent is also "qua­
druplex ... scilicet, naturalis, virtuosus, vitiosus, artificialis et nig­
romanticus" ("fourfold ... that is, natural, virtuous, vicious, artificial
and black magical"). "Artificialis" and "nigromanticus" are apparently
synonyms. Otherwise, the categories are the same as those of Bernar­
dus. Pietro illustrates the descent of vice with the victims of Circe who
were companions of Ulysses and Aeneas, and who in the Ovidian
tradition were the subjects of magical change.58

Salutati's treatment is the longest and most elegant, but it amounts
to much the same thing. The natural descent is "anime rationalis
descensum in corpora" ("the descent of the rational soul into bodies").
The magical is accomplished by the invocation of spirits or demons, or
by the shedding of human blood, or by diabolic arts. The descent of
vice is made by those "qui relictis celestibus in terrena descenderint"
("who having left celestial things descend into earthly"). The moral
and virtuous descent is made "cum ad mundana ista et ad ipsorum
falsitatem contemplandam descendimus ... ut superiora melius per
hec intelligenda cognoscat, et ad illa desideranda per hec animetur
intellectus" ("when we descend into these worldly matters and into the
contemplation of their falsity ... that by this understanding the in-
tellect may better understand higher things, and be animated to desire them"). Richard Green explains this fourth descent in a most illuminating way: “It is the imaginary journey into the underworld to contemplate the consequences of vice in order to ascend again to the practice of virtue. Some variation of this mode of interpretation was applied to the fables of Orpheus, Theseus, Amphiarius, Hercules, and Aeneas. And it was used by Dante’s commentators to explain the pilgrim’s journey through hell as the necessary condition of his ascent to Paradise.”

Because this scheme defined by natural, magical, moral, and spiritual has four parts, and because we propose to use it to interpret the Canterbury Tales, it may seem obligatory that we relate it to that fourfold system of analysis by which medieval biblical interpretations were classified. Two parallels are obvious: the natural with the literal, and the moral with the tropological. We can easily go further, and say that anagogy is the category under which the earthly is interpreted as a way of understanding and loving the spiritual. Allegory, on the other hand, is not magical, since allegorical meanings of the Bible usually have to do with Christ, and magic is the category for false miracles, false appearances, and deceptions. If there is a relationship here, it is a relationship between opposites.

These relationships are far from perfect and consistent; we suspect they are merely accidental and insignificant. If there is a significant relation, it arises out of the fact that the four-level system of biblical meaning defines, in general terms, a semiotic array of the ways in which a given text or deed or word may be meaningful. In practice the exegetes found meanings which were Christian in content, as of course they should. But if one analyzes the structure of their interpreting, one finds meaning in four, and only four, significant kinds, which as kinds define the medieval semiotic possibilities for texts which have no necessarily Christian meaning. Thus a given story may illustrate some abstract universal, such as justice; it may inspire us to some specific moral act; or it may be, in addition to an actual report of an event, a text which we may receive epideictically as symbol or myth. These possibilities may, from time to time, occur for the natural, magical, moral, or spiritual metamorphoses of Ovid, or the tales of Chaucer; when they do, there is obviously a relation between the fact that some tale has a particular kind of meaning and the scheme of possible meanings, but this relation is neither mechanical nor dependent upon the fact that both the scheme for classifying tales and the scheme for classifying meanings have four parts.
The crucial difference between the fourfold method of the exegetes and the fourfold scheme of categories which we propose here is that in any given instance the exegete has only one text or story and up to four meanings for it, whereas we have many stories, all different from one another, which we classify into four categories in order to see that they present different aspects of some single subject. Classifying the tales thus, we can define among them a unity of moral purpose and of general subject, which fits because it has, as such, a variety of parts, subtopics, and themes which corresponds to the tales as arrayed. Thus, a classification which names exhaustively the parts of a subject is transferred to a literary classification, which names kinds of stories treating of the subject in all its parts. For the Metamorphoses, the subject of the work is defined as changes, both in matter and in men, and the moral purpose is to reveal the varieties of ethical behavior which these changes exemplify. The four kinds of changes often used for classification are simple or natural actions; apparent changes in the natural order achieved by deception or magic; moral actions, in which man consciously attempts to live up to the truth which he should exemplify; and spiritual or anagogic or virtuous actions, by which the correct, heaven-centered sense of life is brought into contact with the world and the world below. These changes become the means of distinguishing between the various kinds of tales in the collection, as they treat the different kinds of changes possible. The value of such a method of discussing stories is that it enables the reader to relate them in a number of ways, through the moral lesson they teach or through the subject they have in common, while remaining sensitive to the differences which distinguish them from each other, especially details of situation and character, and to the individual contributions they make to the whole of the work's statement.

Such a classification enables the commentator to explain why the work's parts go together, in the sense that they relate to a common subject. But it does not specify an arrangement of the parts necessary to a proper exposition. In fact, medieval commentators on Ovid explain the parts of the work in two ways: one is the classification according to the parts of the work's subject which we have been discussing, and the other is in terms of organization, both into books and also as a progression in chronological order, from creation to Ovid's time. Whereas modern readers seize on a familiar structural device for narrative, such as chronology, in order to explain the structure of the Metamorphoses, the medieval practice was to mention such a progres-
sion and then to concentrate, instead, on the stories as they related to their common subject, and the parts of that subject. A similar logic is at work in biblical exegesis; the book is sacred history and encompasses a movement in time, but time is often ignored in explaining the true sense of an event. Time is drawn together in the single defining moment of Christ, and in him all events become repetitions of a single subject, salvation. The *Biblia Pauperum* is an example of a literary arrangement which accommodates, in its structure, both the principle of chronology and also a principle of arrangement, the grouping of New Testament events with their Old Testament parallels, dictated by the parts of the subject. We shall return in chapter 3 to consider medieval ideas of structure more thoroughly. Before discussing the organization of the *Knight's Tale*, in the terminology of changes we have derived from Ovidian commentary, however, it was necessary to make clear the important distinction between a unity by subject and a unity by arrangement.

The reading of the *Knight's Tale* which follows attempts to practice a medieval procedure for discovering the unity of a story, by defining, first, its subject, and then the parts of that subject. The classification into parts which we apply to the tale, and will go on to apply to the entire collection, is the division of changes into natural, magical, moral, and spiritual, the division we have analyzed at work in commentaries of the *Metamorphoses*. In following such a procedure, we are suggesting that Chaucer may have developed a method of composition from a medieval way of reading. There is, of course, no way of verifying this, nor do we intend to commit the intentional fallacy. The suggestion that a poet would learn how to write from the way he had learned how to read is not so strange, however, for an age whose commentators regularly did commit the intentional fallacy, claiming in every allegorization that they were presenting the author's true meaning. The practice is certainly questionable, but it would lend itself readily to taking the commentaries as lessons in writing as well as in reading. By adapting the medieval methods of reading Ovid to reading Chaucer, however, we do not claim to find a uniformity of meaning or method between the two writers. The congruence between the parts of Ovid's subject and the parts of Chaucer's is not perfect; but the similarity is strong enough, we believe, to justify using the categories of Ovidian changes, natural, magical, moral, and spiritual, as a starting point for defining the unity of the tales in the Canterbury collection. Our test case is the tale in the defining first position, the *Knight's Tale*. 
The *Knight’s Tale* presents Theseus’s successful efforts to maintain the peace of Athens. The disturbance which receives most attention is the tangled romantic triangle of the warring brothers-in-arms Palamon and Arcite and the unwilling Emelye. However, Theseus’s part in this personal struggle, as the guardian of Emelye, and the emblematic significance of the three lovers’ places of birth invest the love problem with implications for the order of family, society, and even man’s place in creation. The many-layered significance of the tale’s events has been noted often enough, but the weight that Chaucer gives the story, as a situation which encompasses the essential problem of human existence, merits further consideration. Leaving aside the particulars of the struggle for a moment, we find in the four parts of the poem four ways of attempting to deal with a problem. In part 1 Theseus’s force of arms establishes order from chaos—included in that order, however, is the unhappy pair of former comrades, Palamon and Arcite, neither of whom has any hopes of winning Emelye; in the second part both young men, by changes in their situation caused by their love, are free in Athens and at the point of fighting to the death; in part 3 the lovers’ requests to the gods lead to a solution of the dilemma that their contrary desires have established; and in part 4 the foregone conclusion is made visible to human eyes. The four parts, in some ways, answer to the modern sense of dramatic action, in that they follow a series of struggles for a particular goal, which is finally won. But they also isolate from the ongoing progress of seeking a goal four particular moments as especially significant; they are moments in which changes, created by force or love or prayer, have introduced new possibilities for action. The four kinds of changes into which Chaucer divides his subject have much in common with the four changes identified in Ovidian commentary.

The first kind of change, exemplified by part 1 of the tale, is the simple or natural action, controlled by human effort. The *Knight’s Tale* begins with an achieved order. Theseus has married the Amazon Hippolyta, has made Emelye his ward, and is returning home in triumph. In his progress he meets the ladies of Thebes. The scene is very like the one in which Dante idealizes Trajan as an exemplum of royal humility, and there is every likelihood that Chaucer meant the compliment, since the pagan Theseus is so perfectly a model ruler. In being presented with the problem of Thebes, Theseus meets the supreme test. Thebes is, for the Middle Ages, the generic bad city, as the Rome of Aeneas is the generic good city. Thebes is the city of patricide, bad marriage, fratricide, civil war, and sacrilege; from the
example of Thebes mankind is instructed in every possible disorder. Theseus apparently meets the test, as he and his army conquer Thebes, permit the obsequies of the dead, and arrange for the custody of Palamon and Arcite. Thus, as ruler of Athens, husband of Hippolyta, and conqueror of Thebes, Theseus has ordered his world. His situation has been allegorized as the achievement of a fit relation between the rational soul (Theseus in Athens), the concupiscible soul (his marriage), and the irascible soul (Thebes). As long as we do not lose Theseus himself, Athens, Thebes, or the two ladies in all this, such analogy-making is both permissible and informative; Plato's Republic, which the Middle Ages knew indirectly through the Timaeus, is powerfully based on just such an analogical instrument of analysis. Theseus is at peace in his family, in his kingdom, and in himself; such orders are properly mutual and mutually reinforcing; and as king, husband, and human being, Theseus has done as well as a mortal can be expected to do. Aegidius Romanus, in fact, in his De regimine principum, analyzes the nature and duty of the sovereign in terms of right rule of himself, his family, and his realm, and Chaucer, in including the elements of the story as he did, could not but underline the typical and definitional force of this king of Athens.

Both Emelye and the two Theban princes, however, are principles of disorder. Emelye is an unwed virgin and an Amazon. Unmarried, she represents all those problems which Theseus solved, at another level, by conquering and marrying Hippolyta. Even more, Palamon and Arcite are a problem, which Theseus recognizes by condemning them to eternal imprisonment. In a manner, all these people can be seen as emblematic and, as such, unavoidable. Every city, every civilization, faced the temptation to become a Thebes. John Lydgate saw this very clearly, when he inserted his story of Thebes as another, and final, Canterbury tale. He reminds us that Thebes will not go away but must be dealt with, even though, as Theseus finds, the children of its sisters must be imprisoned within one's own society. In his additional Canterbury tale, Lydgate analyzes troth, marriage, and true and false rule in a manner profoundly relevant to Chaucer's great themes. The whole matter deserves additional and separate study; here it is sufficient to note that, in the Middle Ages, an addition to an inherited story is the profoundest kind of interpretation, and that the addition of Thebes confirms the focus on civil and familial strife with which Chaucer lets his Knight begin.

Although the complications of life may be unavoidable, for Theseus, the lesson must be learned. Under the appearance of his
total victories—first, the wedding of Hippolyta, and second, the con­quest of Thebes—there remain the disorderly elements of Amazonian independence and Theban fraternal discord which Theseus has taken into his kingdom, unreconstructed, in the persons of Emelye, Palamon, and Arcite. The three young people form a romantic triangle, whose sorting out promises to be no easy matter. A sworn virgin is the unknowing object of the fierce longing—rendered by Chaucer here, ironically, as courtly love—\textsuperscript{71} of two young men, whose brotherly accord is turned by rivalry in love into a bitter hatred. Eventually the whole city will be concerned with the love affair’s resolution. For Theseus the struggles faced in the external world of war must be faced again, in his own city and his own household.\textsuperscript{72} Here in part 1, however, we see only the beginnings of this struggle with disorder. Emelye remains unaware of what her mere existence as an un­awarded virgin is doing to the two aging young men; and their rivalry in love, though sufficiently bitter at one level fitly to evoke the rivalry of Eteocles and Polynices, is comically futile and completely harm­less.\textsuperscript{73} Even when Arcite is delivered from prison and sent home, exiled from a lady love whom he has presumably never once met, order is preserved, and Chaucer underlines the comic security of the situation by posing, in formal courtly fashion, the lovers’ question, “Who hath the worse, Arcite or Palamoun?” (I [A] 1348).

In terms of the four-part distinctio of metamorphoses which Ovidian commentary defines for us, this first part of the \textit{Knight’s Tale} presents the order of the natural. In the Ovidian tradition, natural changes were those resulting “per contextionem elementorum.” In the descent-into-hell tradition, the natural descent meant being involved in the normal human condition, whose possible future is hell and whose possible present is vice. Adapting and combining, we have the first part of the \textit{Knight’s Tale} as the level of the normally human—the best that can be done with the natural man. Order exists, but in the presence of potential for disorder; Theseus rules, but his subjects include Palamon, Arcite, and Emelye. Order exists, but it is an order which has not yet been tested by all the various changes which the world may bring against it.

The second part of the \textit{Knight’s Tale} begins with what can only be called a magical metamorphosis, in which a person changes his appearance but remains really the same, this time under the influence of love. The action is dictated by a reversal of the natural order of the human sexual hierarchy; while Theseus has achieved domestic order and civil peace in conquering Hippolyta, Palamon and Arcite remain
in the disorderly chaos of allowing themselves to be ruled by Emelye. In this section the advice of women (as opposed to their supplication) is given and heeded, and on the key issue of allowing the knights to contend for Emelye—in the medieval tradition, of course, such advice traces to Eve and is frequently an invitation to disaster. The events of this section, in Theseus's own judgment, are the "myracles" of the god of love (I [A] 1788). As such, they obey no law but love's; they are, for the government of Theseus, intrusive chaos. The whole section is full of disguises, deceptions, changes of identity; the most persistent imagery of animals as descriptions of human actions is in part 2. This is the most disorderly section of the whole tale.  

The third section is the moral one—in terms of the descent-into-hell tradition, the descent into vice. Here devotion to the things of this world is most elaborately and devoutly professed, with all the trappings of shrines and pagan gods. Here, in ritual lists which underline their exemplary quality, are the deeds and fortunes of worldly men. The atmosphere throughout is one of calamity, framed by the sovereignty of rival and malevolent gods. The fact that Palamon, Arcite, and Emelye express, in this section and to these gods, what they desire of the world underlines the worldliness of their desire. Chaucer does not, like Lydgate, call these devotions pagan or devilish, but his presentation has similar overtones. Most of the exempla—Ydelnesse, Narcissus, Salamon, Ercules, or, more impersonally, "the smylere with the knyf under the cloke" (I [A] 1099) or "the stranglyng and hangyng by the throte" (I [A] 2458)—are clear enough. One, however, deserves a pause, because it is an implicit evaluation of one of Chaucer's characters, and because it underlines the atmosphere of worldliness appropriate to the mode, which is merely moral.

Among other things, Saturn says, "I slow Sampson, shakynge the piler" (I [A] 2466), less than fifty lines after Arcite, praying to Mars, offers in exchange for victory the sacrifice of

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{My beerd, myn heer, that hongeth long adoun,} \\
\text{That nevere yet ne felte offensioun} \\
\text{Of rasour nor of shere.}
\end{align*}
\]

(I [A] 2415–17)

In general, in the exegetes, the loss of Samson's hair figures a commitment to carnality. Bersuire's statement is the clearest, and the nearest to Chaucer:

\[
\text{Hic habetur quod postquam Samson mediante mala muliere Dalila fuit caesarie tonsus, et per consequens fortitudine privatus, statim Philistaei}
\]
Arcite puts himself in Samson’s place, and has by this time already paid Samson’s allegorical penalty literally, to be compelled “ad mundi labores et negotia circumire.” And his ultimate deprivation, of Emelye and of life, is as pathetic and hopeless as anything in Chaucer.

The last section of the Knight’s Tale represents the spiritual mode. Explicitly, it corresponds most closely to the mode of the virtuous, as defined in the descent-into-hell tradition, which is made “cum ad mundana ista et ad ipsorum falsitatem contemplandam descendimus . . . ut superiora melius per hec intelligenda cognoscat” (“when we descend into these worldly matters and into the contemplation of their falsity . . . that by this understanding [the intellect] may better understand higher things”). But just as clearly it depends on the whole enterprise of Ovidian commentary, whose existence affirms that these stories are of use only if and as they are properly understood, by seeing in their real surfaces the veritatem which they contain and represent. As the third section treats human efforts to arrange their own destinies, in consort with the gods who symbolize the forces of merely human and natural energy and calamity—love, hate, selfish self-preoccupation, and chaos—so the fourth deals with what actually happens when those arrangements go awry. The unexpected irony involved in the fact that both combatants, Palamon and Arcite, actually get what they have prayed for only underscores the point that merely human wisdom is not enough, and that finally there must come a Boethian recognition that within and beneath the events which fortune brings to pass there is truth not of human making.

The action of the Knight’s Tale, then, part by part as Chaucer has divided it for us, is structured in terms of four great modes of order-
ing: the initial achievement of merely natural order in the givenness of the human condition; the intrusion of disorder, deception, and chaos; the human attempt to achieve order in terms of private wishes and worldly struggles; and the final reassertion of order based on the right interpretation of such events as have, under Providence or Fortune, actually occurred. The tale is a moderately hopeful definition of human experience as the achievement of actions which are in harmony with the purposes of the universe, even if man’s intentions for what he does prove to be in error. The parts of the tale divide human activity into four kinds; although the arrangement of these parts corresponds, in some ways, to the logic of a plot, the parts are also offered as a number of alternative activities simultaneously present and being done by men. The story’s arrangement answers more than the needs of a dramatic action. In addition, the historical sequence is adorned and clarified by structuring the poem in order to reveal the parallelism and mutual completion achieved by the four parts. Charles Muscatine characterized the structure of the Knight’s Tale as a pageant, ordered in symmetrical harmony, rather than as a linear plot. The pattern unifying the four parts has been suggested in previous analyses of the poem’s formal elements. The four parts might be imagined as being arranged in a square, with parts 1 and 2 the upper quadrants and parts 3 and 4 placed below them. In this way, the various parallelisms established by similar events in different parts of the poem would be clarified: for example, parts 2 and 4 both end with combats for Emelye, which are concluded by surprising reversals, in part 2 by Theseus’s promise that one of them may wed Emelye, and in part 4 by the overturning of the apparent decision of the combat. At the same time, parts 1 and 4 and parts 2 and 3 also share important actions: in part 1 a royal wedding is followed by a bloody combat involving Palamon and Arcite, and in part 4 their confrontation is followed by another royal wedding. The harmony of four parts, maintaining one another in a balance requiring the interaction of all the parts on each other, is a structural feature of the poem intimately related to the divisions of its subject matter. It is an echo of that “fair cheyne of love” which Theseus discerns as the sustainer of the universe and uses to bind up the confusion in his realm.

The Knight’s Tale begins the Canterbury collection by defining the kinds of human experience and promising that man may find among them a way of life which harmonizes with the providential order of creation. The tale’s arrangement forecasts the relationships which Chaucer will use to bind together the many stories he tells; it is an
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arrangement which reflects the dual aspects of the order of history, both sequential and yet simultaneously present in the single event of Christ. But the Knight's Tale is only the beginning; like any one part of itself, it is not all the truth of the whole of which it is a part. The challenges which will assault the integrity of Theseus's discovery of universal harmony begin immediately. The happy ending of the struggle to wed is overturned, not only in the Miller's Tale but throughout the collection, with stories of unhappy marriage. Doing what comes naturally, the highest goal of the Golden Age in which Theseus lives, is suddenly revealed to be insufficient as, in the Miller's Tale, we enter the time after Christ. In order to understand how the Knight's Tale functions as one of the many parts of the story collection, and how that collection, together, presents a unified picture of the human condition, it will be necessary to inquire, first, how the Middle Ages understood the category "fiction" and, second, how medieval poets adapted from their materials the techniques of arrangement which unified their works. Once these questions of the nature of fiction and the proper disposition of its parts are answered, we can begin to read the Canterbury Tales.

4. We acknowledge a similar interest in Foucault's The Order of Things. See the discussion of medieval language theory, pp. 17-42.
6. The Ellesmere Order continues to be used by many scholars as the most authoritative sequence for the tales and, therefore, the logical starting place for studying the relationships among the parts of the poem. For recent discussions of the order, see Donald Howard, The Idea of the Canterbury Tales (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1976), pp. 210-16; and E. Talbot Donaldson, "The Ordering of the Canterbury Tales," in Medieval Literature and Folklore
7. The Middle Ages read Aristotle’s *Poetics* in the version of Averroes, which substituted for Aristotle’s doctrine of beginning, middle, and end a doctrine of rhetorical length. See W. F. Boggess, “Averrois Cordubensis Commentarium Medium in Aristotelis Poetriam” (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina, 1965), pp. 24–26. The medieval parameters within which it is possible to continue to believe in the human comedy have been brilliantly defined by Jill Mann in *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire* (Cambridge, 1973), though her conclusion permits more individuality to survive the Chaucerian irony than we think her evidence really allows. The reader reactions to which she permits the perceptions of individuals rather than types are those of modern readers, whose attitudes to apparent moral ambivalence would be far more nominalist, or relativist, than any in a medieval audience.

8. Judson Allen must here recant having presumed the axiom of plot himself; he used the fact that the pilgrimage is planned to end in London, with “a banquet in Harry Bailey’s public house,” to defend the human comedy view, and thus committed both axiomatic sins at once. See his *The Friar as Critic: Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages* (Nashville, 1971), p. 129.

9. At the most literal level, the pilgrimage plot results in geography-based recommendations of an order for the tales, most notably the Bradshaw Shift. See Robert A. Pratt, “The Order of the Canterbury Tales,” *PMLA* 66 (1951): 1141–67. The Six-Text Edition follows the proposal that the tales from the Shipman through the Nun’s Priest, group B₂, move to a position immediately after the *Man of Law’s Tale*. See below in chapter 3 for a discussion of the appropriateness of trusting to the geographical signposts given in the links as key evidence for Chaucer’s final design. Proposals for reconstructing a two-way journey from the tales have been made by several scholars, most recently by Charles A. Owen, Jr., *Pilgrimage and Storytelling in the Canterbury Tales: The Dialectic of “Ernest” and “Game”* (Norman, Okla., 1977). This study includes a bibliography of other writings in which Owen proposed and defended his scheme for the two-way journey.

10. Some scholars have attempted to treat the stories as literary objects by classifying them according to genre, style, or tone. Paul Ruggiers distinguishes between “prevailing comic” and “prevailing romantic” tales, suspended between the principal tales of the Knight and the Parson, in *The Art of the Canterbury Tales* (Madison, 1965), p. 10. Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1966), also classifies the tales in literary terms (p. 171).


12. For an extended presentation of the evidence on which these generalizations are based, see Judson B. Allen, “The Old Way and the Parson’s Way:

13. Baldwin notes these doctrines of the manuals but is still fundamentally dominated by modern notions of narrative; in the same paragraph he says that the conclusion “should summarize or reflect aphoristically the word at hand,” and that “it is fitting for Chaucer in this climactic place in the story, in the pilgrimage, to make the Parson the spokesman, the mediator, the scourge, and the ender of it all” (*The Unity of the Canterbury Tales*, pp. 89–90).

14. The psychological authenticity of Chaucer's creation is vital to many studies; perhaps the most elaborate working out of the theory of the tales as character revelation is in R. M. Lumiansky, *Of Sondry Folk: The Dramatic Principle in the Canterbury Tales* (Austin, 1955).

15. In this tradition are John M. Manly's *Some New Light on Chaucer* (New York, 1926) and Muriel Bowden's *A Commentary on the General Prologue of the Canterbury Tales* (New York, 1948).

16. The spiritual pilgrimage approach is a result of the growing appreciation of the importance in medieval art of its Christian cultural values. As we shall see in discussing the faults of a dramatically constituted Marriage Group, the allegorical dimensions of marriage, which contemporary evidence suggests would have been in Chaucer's mind when writing a tale like the Clerk's, are lost in the psychological combat proposed by G. L. Kittredge. Martin Stevens, in “Chaucer and Modernism: An Essay in Criticism,” published in *Chaucer at Albany*, ed. Rossell Hope Robbins (Albany, 1975), pp. 193–216, argues that D. W. Robertson's allegorical method was formulated in opposition to critical “realism.” Stevens goes on to question the relevance of Robertson's position to contemporary criticism. On Robertson, see n. 20 below.

17. Boggess, “Averrois Cordubensis,” pp. 20, 23. “Tragedy indeed [and by extension poetry] is not an art representative of men themselves, just as they are, as individual things falling into perception, but it is the art representative of virtuous customs and praiseworthy actions and beliefs of holy people... and the art of understanding, which shows or teaches from which things and how poems are composed, is more important and more perfect than the composition of poems itself.” This and all other translations from Latin are our own.


20. Robertson offers as proof that marriage is the theme of all the tales that the allegorical dimensions of marriage were in fact the subject, whether the
story itself treated real human marriage, the Christian's relationship with God, or the priest's particular status as bride of Christ. Robertson's work has been an immense contribution to literary medieval studies, but more in spite of than because of the creedal orthodoxy which he attempts to impose. Both the exegetical tradition and the related analogizing through which physical and moral facts were viewed have left for us a body of evidence whose importance he rightly defends, and about which he has published much pioneering and useful information. However, since our use of some of this evidence may suggest the too hasty conclusion that we are "Robertsonian," we would like to state bluntly and categorically that we are not. The enterprise of this book is to value Chaucer's literal sense, his fictions themselves, and in them the sublimely lively and subtly moral facts which idealists might label "merely" human. Chaucer knew about allegory and commentaries and glossing with a comfortable familiarity which permitted him to play games with them and use them for his own ironic high comedy. If we follow his ironies for the moment into Latin, even the glosa, it is only in order to return more convinced than ever that it is the fiction that is true, the act that generates the definition.


22. See below, in chapter 6's treatment of the tale.

23. Eventually we wish to use, instead of the word association, an array of the medieval words associated with allegory—especially typology. But these words are still widely misunderstood and will be used only after they have been properly defined.

24. E. Talbot Donaldson, “Chaucer the Pilgrim,” *PMLA* 69 (1954): 933. We must here acknowledge a very great debt to Professor Donaldson, even though we disagree with a few of his conclusions and more of his emphases, because in his wit and in the affectionate irony which he addresses to his subject, he more resembles Chaucer than does any other practicing critic. One of the things that makes our new critical enterprise necessary is that he has in many areas, such as “Chaucer the Pilgrim,” said so well the last word.


29. Isidore of Seville *Etymologiarum* 1. 37. 22. It is more than coincidental, we think, that Wayne C. Booth's theory of irony, whose fundamental focus is with much more modern literature, recognizes as one of the chief features of irony that it presumes, and creates, sympathies and, ideally, unities between properly disparate elements. That is, when irony is properly understood, an intimacy is created between the ironist and his audience which overcomes the otherwise literal meaning of the communication. This sympathy or unity is in modern times largely a feature of subjectivity; the relationship between medieval irony and medieval allegory implies that then it was more largely influential and related things and events as well as subjectivities. Cf. Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago, 1974).

30. This point will be discussed more elaborately below. See also Judson B. Allen, "Hermann the German's Averroistic Aristotle and Medieval Poetic Theory," *Mosaic* 9 (Spring 1976): 67-81.

31. Frederick Tupper's classification of tales and tellers by means of the seven deadly sins has the flavor of Jordan's juxtaposition of the Parson's Tale to the remainder of the poem and has been taken into the construct of the spiritual pilgrimage as an expression of the doctrinal answer to the pilgrims' excesses, which may cure their failings. See his "Chaucer and the Seven Deadly Sins," *PMLA* 29 (1914): pp. 93-128. Interest in the tales as psychological self-revelations is best exemplified by the scholarship of the Pardoner's Tale. See the summary offered in John Halverson, "Chaucer's Pardoner and the Progress of Criticism," *Chaucer Review* 4 (1970): 184-202.


33. Oxford University, Magdalen College Library MS lat. 18, fol. 16v. "Note that Statius is very rhetorical in this speech, when he lets Tideus speak without using rhetoric. Such speech is appropriate to his character."

34. This rhetorical principle does not deny, of course, that legitimate insight may be gained from comparing or contrasting the character of any given Canterbury pilgrim with an associated tale, or with any other pilgrim or tale. Whether positively or ironically, such an analogy can have a good deal of medieval force and significance; many such analogies will be dealt with in part 2. The undoubted practical success of some modern criticism which presumes the dramatic principle traces to this medieval practice of multiple exemplification; comparisons between teller and tale are informative as comparisons, even when our motivation for making them is nonmedieval.

35. Boggess, "Averrois cordubensis," p. 23. "Argument or proof of the correctness of belief or practice is not [achieved] by persuasive speech (for this kind of speech does not pertain to the art of poetry nor does it suit it) but by description... and therefore poetry does not use the art of gestures nor of facial expressiveness as rhetoric does." This passage is a part of Averroes's definition of *consideratio*, a term which displaces, but is not equivalent to, the genuine Aristotelian "spectacle." It is an extremely complex concept, for which the best single English equivalent is probably "credibility." For a discussion of this important text, and a justification of less literal elements of this translation, see Judson B. Allen, "Hermann the German's Averroistic Aristotle."
36. *Boetius de consolatione...* novissime cum Sancti Thomae philosophi profundissimi commentariis (Venice, 1524), fol. bb5v. "The formal cause of the treatment is Boethius’s manner of doing [i.e. genre], and this is dialogue, that is, the speech of two. For Boethius introduces in this book two characters, himself complaining of his misery, and Philosophy sympathizing with him, and by consolation helping him overcome his misery." The attribution of this commentary to Thomas Aquinas is mistaken.


40. This is not to say that among these authors there are not helpful indications of the tradition of framing story collections which might have influenced Chaucer’s design of the *Canterbury Tales*. Robert A. Pratt and Karl Young attach much importance in their article "The Literary Framework of the Canterbury Tales," in *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales*, ed. W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster (London, 1941; reissued 1958), pp. 1–81, to the similarity between Chaucer’s frame and the frame journey in Sercambi’s collection. Kean presents an excellent summary of sources for the frame journey; she rightly expands the search for sources beyond story collections whose frame is a journey of a large group of storytellers to consider the possible influence of such allegorical journeys as are found in de Guileville
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and Mandeville, as well as in Dante. See *Chaucer and the Making of English Poetry*, 2:72. But the fact that Chaucer resembles Sercambi does not of itself explain the unity of either work, and the journey motif inevitably makes the frame too important at the expense of the tales themselves.


44. For full treatment of this theory, see Judson B. Allen, *The Ethical Poetic of the Later Middle Ages: A Decorum of Convenient Distinction* (forthcoming).


46. Arnulf of Orleans, in Fausto Ghisalberti, "Arnolfo d’Orléans, un cultore di Ovidio nel secolo XII," *Memorie del Reale Istituto Lombardo di Scienze e Lettere*, Classe di Lettere, science morali et storiche, vol. 24 (15 of series 3), fasc. 4 (Milan, 1932), p. 181. "Ovid’s intention is to deal with change, not chiefly that we might understand the extrinsic changes which affect physical things, good or bad, but more importantly that we might understand intrinsic changes, such as those which affect the soul, so that he might lead us from error toward knowledge of the true creator. There are two motions in the soul, one rational, the other irrational. Rational is that which imitates the motion of the heavens, which go from east to west, and on the other hand the irrational is that which imitates the motion of the planets, which move against the heavens. For God gave the soul reason through which it might restrain sensuality, just as the irrational motion of the seven planets is restrained through the motion of the firmament. But we, neglecting rational motion in the manner of the planets, are led away from our creator. Ovid, seeing this, wishes to show us through the narration of the fables the motion of the soul, which is within. Therefore it is said that Io was changed into a cow because she fell into vice, and that she regained her lovely human form because she put away vice. Or, Ovid’s intention is to call us back from an immoderate love of temporal things and to urge us to the single devotion of our creator, by showing the stability of the heavens and the variation of temporal things. It is classified as ethics because it teaches us to hate those temporal things, which are passing and changing, because this belongs to morality."

47. Ibid.

49. For a further discussion of this extremely rich term, Averroes's substitution of Aristotle's term *mimesis*, see Judson B. Allen, "Hermann the German's Averroistic Aristotle," pp. 75-79.


51. William is quoted by Fausto Ghisalberti, in "Medieval Biographies of Ovid," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 9 (1946): 55. "It should be known that change is considered fourfold, that is, natural, moral, spiritual, and magical. The natural change is implied when the author discusses the division of the elements [in Creation]; the moral change is the one we see when Lycaon is changed into a wolf—it is a moral change because Lycaon, who was at first a gracious man, became a robber and a scoundrel. Spiritual—as in the case of Agave, who was at first dignified and then went insane. The magical change happened to the statue of Pygmalion, which was changed into a maiden; another example of magical change occurs in connection with Circe, who by spells changed men into pigs." Ghisalberti prints two more accessus bearing on this problem. From the fourteenth-century MS Paris B.M. lat. 8253: "Plures enim mutationes esse assignantur. Est autem mutatio naturalis sicut illa de elementis... Et est mutatio spiritualis sicuti fuit de Agave que facta est insana. Et est mutatio moralis et magica mutatio sicuti de Pigmalione qui fecit virginem" (p. 52). "Several changes are to be marked out, for there is natural change such as that having to do with elements... And there is spiritual change such as happened to Agave who became insane. And there is moral change and magical change such as of Pygmalion who made a virgin."


54. "My mind is turned to new forms: It should be noted that change is fourfold, that is, natural, moral, magic and spiritual. That change is natural which happens through the combination of the elements. Or the dissolution, either with seed bringing the change about or without. For the elements come together through combination. As when a boy is born from sperm, and a chicken from an egg, or plants or a tree from seed and thus various things from similar sources, with seed bringing the change about. But dissolution happens through separation as in any body, in this without seed, and these things happen for the elements and for hyle. Hyle is the most ancient face of nature, the untiring power of generation, the first laying under of forms, the matter of bodies, the foundation of substance. It makes the elements as when earth thins into water, water lightens into air, air is dispersed into the ether. Then the ether is thickened into air, air is made heavier into water, and water is formed into earth. And thus it is natural change concerning which Pythagoras makes mention: 'The eternal world contains four elemental substances, etc.' That change is moral which takes notice concerning customs or
morals, that is, when customs are changed. As indeed they say from Lycaon into a wolf, from good into harsh or in the other way, and into a plunderer or in the other way, and thus concerning similar things which concern customs. Then, the magic change is the one which concerns the magic art. And it occurs in the body when magicians make something appear of a different essence than it is through magic art, as in the case of the companions of Ulysses changed into pigs by Circe. However, this art occurred once in magic power. Spiritual change is that which is observed in the spirit and the body, that is when a healthy body is made ill, and thus the spirit is troubled, so that the spirit, equally with the body, is changed. And this appears in those who have acute fevers, indeed as he becomes infirm from healthy, thus insane in the spirit, just as it is read concerning Orestes and concerning Agave who maimed her own son, so also it seems daily in those suffering people who would slay father, mother, and others unless they be freed from their sickness. The author writes concerning such men in this work." The list quadruplex also occurs in MS Ambrosiana 18 inf. (ca. 1420), fol. (iii)v.


57. Ibid., p. 30. "Another is the descent of virtue, which happens when someone wise descends to earthly things through thought, not so that he may place his intention in them but so that, with their fragility known and earthly things put aside, he may convert himself inwardly to invisible things and may know the creator more fully through the knowledge of creatures."


61. More work remains to be done both on the historical development of the exegetical method and of its relationship to secular schemata resembling it, such as those we have singled out here for comment. On the history of biblical exegesis, see Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, 2d ed. (Notre Dame, 1964), pp. 1–36; on the background of the four-part explanation of the descent into hell, see Green, "Classical Fable and English Poetry in the Fourteenth Century," p. 127. Because we ourselves are singling out one particular pattern of explication, a four-part schema, from a tradition which included other patterns as well, it is worthwhile to note that the four-part allegorization of Scripture, although widespread, was by no means the only system of allegorical levels in use during the Middle Ages, nor was its use in the hands of all commentators uniform. See Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, pp. 97–105, on Hugh of St. Victor.

63. Cf. above, notes 46, 51, 54, for instances of medieval commentaries on Ovid. Allegorizations of Scripture took many forms, of course, ranging from the verse-by-verse gloss, in which each line of the text might be given a four-level reading, to sermons or expositions developing particular levels for a brief text. See Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, pp. 281-307.

64. Medieval commentators conventionally relate a work's division into books and parts to its *forma tractatus*. Giovanni del Virgilio, commenting on the *forma tractatus* of the *Metamorphoses*, says, "Forma tractatus est compositio et ordinatio 15 librorum in hoc volume et capitulorum in dictos libros et partium in capitulis descensendo usque ad partes minutus que per se sententiam aliquam important" (Ghisalberti, "Giovanni," p. 18). "The *forma tractatus* is the composition and ordering of the fifteen books in this volume, and of the chapters in the said books, and of the parts in the chapters, descending to the smallest parts which contain distinct meanings." "Ordinatio" is corrected from Oxford, Bodleian MS 457, fol. 2r. Another commentator on Ovid, whose work is preserved in a thirteenth-century French manuscript, makes the chronological point: "Videndum est qualiter agat. Agit enim heroyco metro collagens mutationes diversas a prima creacione mundi usque ad suum tempus, quod signat sua invocatio ubi dicit *primaque ab origine mundi*" (Leiden University Library, MS BPL 95, fol. 1v). "We must see what is the genre of the book. Generically, it is in the heroic meter; it is a collection of diverse changes from the first creation of the world up to its own time. This its invocation indicates where it says 'and first from the origin of the world.'"

65. Brooks Otis, in *Ovid as an Epic Poet* (Cambridge, 1970), acknowledges the presence in the poem of a chronological motion but finds the fundamental principle operating in the poem's structure to be not chronology but rather the grouping of stories according to thematic links. For a fuller discussion, see chapter 3 below.

66. The medieval formula for talking about the meaning of a passage in the *Metamorphoses* is, apparently, "*vult Ovidius." For a discussion, see Allen, *The Friar as Critic*, pp. 59-60.

67. The *House of Fame* is sufficient witness that Chaucer knew the *Commedia*; the story also occurs in the *Legenda Aurea*, in the life of St. Gregory. Such resemblances as this between Theseus and Trajan, both of whom stop in the midst of triumph to deal with suppliants, the medieval critics would have taken most seriously.


69. Chaucer makes no special point of the fact that Emelye is an Amazon, and he permits her desire to remain unmarried an overtone of virtue which his own very different Christian world had to be alert to see as ironic. But the ironies are unavoidable, and they lead us to the conclusion that, in a manner, Theseus has brought his troubles on himself. The problem of Emelye is
perhaps the most striking image in the collection of the observation, developed at length below, that the events of married life grow directly from the manner in which marriage is first constituted. This element of irony has, however, gone largely unnoticed among the critics; for reasons different from ours, Frederick Turner has seen that Emelye is a problem. See his “A Structural Analysis of the Knight’s Tale,” Chaucer Review 8 (1973): 279-96.

70. Lydgate’s Canterbury story might be analyzed profitably for information on a variety of questions: his testimony on the plan of the Canterbury journey, which he assumes to have reached Canterbury and to be on the point of return, has rarely been taken into account by modern critics of the poem’s geography (on this point, the Tale of Beryn might also be consulted); his poem is a major document on the medieval understanding of Thebes and suggests that Lydgate saw the theme of this disorderly city as central to the Canterbury material; and his reintroduction of the Theban history points to the poem’s beginning, rather than its pietistic ending, as the core of its statement.


72. Chaucer begins his story with Theseus’s principal, personal victory already achieved; he stands as the conqueror of the Amazons and the husband of their queen. Yet, paradoxically, his troubles have only just begun. John Halverson, “Aspects of Order in the Knight’s Tale,” Studies in Philology 57 (1960): 620, describes the tale as a “progress from disorder to order,” the disorder stemming from Theseus’s admission into his home of the refugees from the Amazons and from Thebes.

73. Hermann the German defines comedy as the “ars vituperandi” and tragedy as the “ars laudandi.” What he has done, of course, is to mistake Aristotle’s higher and lower than ourselves as designations of moral quality, rather than of status, but his connection of blame with comedy is, for Chaucer, precisely right in all senses. The fit condition of evil is to be futile, helpless, inferior, and laughable; comic distance for Chaucer is far more often a moral posture than an existential refuge. Cf. Boggess, “Averrois Cordubensis,” pp. 19-20.

74. F. N. Robinson, ed. The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, 2d ed. (Boston, 1957), p. 675, notes that in introducing the queen’s request to spare the lovers, Chaucer has departed from his source in Boccaccio. The rule of woman as a symbol of social disorder is echoed in the dominance of Emelye and, more closely in the court of Arthur, described in the Wife of Bath’s Tale, when the ladies arrange for the knight-rapist’s quest (III [D] 894-97).

75. The prayers of Oedipus, in the Siege of Thebes, are to a statue of Apollo, which had “with-In a spirit / ful unclene” and which answered questions “be fraude only / and fals collusioun.” It spoke to Oedipus as “the fend anon / with-Innen Invisyble, with a vois dredful and horrible” (Lydgate’s Siege of Thebes, ed. Axel Erdmann, Early English Text Society, ES 108 [London, 1911], pp. 24-25 [lines 532-54]).

76. Pierre Bersuire, Reductorium morale super totam Bibliam, in Opera Omnia totam sacrae scripturae, morum, naturae historiam complectentia (Cologne, 1631),
p. 90. "Thus it happened that after Samson, through the bad woman Dalilah, was deprived of his hair, and as a result deprived of his strength, immediately the Philistines captured him, and blinded the captive, and put the blind man in jail, and made the jailed man to work in the mill and to play the fool before them, but nevertheless, after this happened, Samson, blinded by the Philistines who blinded him, all at once in the palace made a ruin of their dwelling, over himself, and all perished. Thus truly when Samson, some strong and virtuous man, through a bad woman—that is, his own flesh—lost his hair—his virtue—and as a result his strength against temptation, immediately, he was captured by the Philistines, that is, by devils through diverse sins, and was deprived of the eyes of discretion, and so blinded, held, and made weak, he is placed in the prison of bad habit, and further compelled to work the mill, that is, to go about on the works and businesses of the world, and he is forced to play the fool and to make games of various sins before the Philistines, that is, forced to obey the will of demons. Finally, in their gathering, that is, in hell, one with them he dies and is damned. Thus a man through the evil of a woman whom he loved, that is his own flesh, is not only blinded, but also deprived of eternal and spiritual life."


78. See, for example, Jordan, *Chaucer and the Shape of Creation*, pp. 169–78; and Turner, "A Structuralist Analysis," passim.

79. We have suggested already, and will consider in the next chapter, a variety of classification systems for things, both literary and natural, which are grouped in fours. Some of these systems bear directly on the four-part structure which we find underlying Chaucer's selection and distribution of his stories. Others are only peripherally related. An example of such peripheral connection would be the plan of fourfold biblical exegesis, which may represent a parallel phenomenon to the system of Ovidian classification but does not seem to bear directly on Chaucer's selection of a four-part structure. We have shown, on the other hand, that the classification of changes in Ovid probably influenced Chaucer's schema. Another group of four parts which seems to bear directly on the form and the meaning of the Canterbury collection is suggested in Theseus's speech: "For with that faire cheyne of love he bond / The fyr, the eyr, the water, and the lond / In certeyn boundes, that they may nat flee" (I [A] 2991–93). The harmony of the elements, bound up in a golden chain, which held in perfect balance the tensions and oppositions among the four members of the group, was an image of the natural order of the universe. By winding this golden chain of order about his tales, Chaucer identifies his subject as the world and its proper functioning; he directs his attention to "natural man" in his day-to-day existence, rather than to his heavenly destiny. For the Middle Ages the most significant treatment of number theory, and consequently of the golden chain as a harmony of four, was Macrobius (*Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, trans. William Harris Stahl [New York, 1952], pp. 104–6). For a treatment of the golden chain and its significance for medieval understandings of the world's order, see Bernard McGinn, *The Golden Chain: A Study in the Theological Anthropology of Isaac of Stella* (Washington, D.C., 1972), pp. 61–102. The importance of four, and its centrality to enumerations of the world's parts, is
perhaps most evident in the works of John Scotus Eriugena, whose desire to
discover the world's shape led him to postulate a wide range of classifications
for its elements, especially in groups of four. For a treatment of the number
as a basis for both imagery and narrative organization, see Alastair Fowler,
*Spenser and the Numbers of Time* (London, 1964), pp. 24-33. Fowler's study is an
excellent example of a properly balanced evaluation of the place of number
theory in poetry; his work on Renaissance poets, especially Spenser, might be
profitably adapted to medieval writers. By placing such special emphasis on
the range of meanings associated with the number four, we are not suggesting
that every group of things in the tales must number four, nor that Chaucer
had forced an artificial scheme on his material; further, we believe that the
evidence of Chaucer's poem shows that we are not forcing an artificial scheme
on his material, either. Rather, it is helpful to consider the backgrounds of
such ordering schemes as the four elements in analyzing the art of an era such
as the Middle Ages, whose belief in world order caused men to place greater
trust than our own times might in such systems of classification.