In the most obvious and literal sense, the *Canterbury Tales* is the record of a storytelling contest. The question which the work intends to pose and answer is not any question of salvation after Canterbury. Rather, a judgment is promised, which will specify the best story and honor its teller at a feast. Chaucer never dramatizes the expected judgment, because his own project is not to single out one story but to use many. Rather he uses this contest, within the drama of his competing pilgrim raconteurs, to conduct a serious and quite conclusive discussion of the nature and value of story—of the quality of exemplary fiction which makes it for him a trustworthy and significant medium for expressing his ideas.

Chaucer’s discussion of his art of story is complicated both by the fact that it is dramatic—that is, its text consists of an array of speeches—and by the fact that it consists both logically and by rubrication of prologues. Its dramatic character requires us to read through it to its definition with a certain allowance for irony and dramatic relativity; its quality as prologue material requires us to read it with a confident expectation of logical procedure in discursive statement, and further requires us to take it as introductory to the stories, and therefore as dependent on them rather than as the enclosure on which they depend. These qualities might seem to contradict one another, in that on the one hand there is the uncertainty of shifting points of view and the dramatic possession of tale by teller, and on the other both the ultimate certainty and the discursive organization of extended statements whose essential character is logical and exposi-
In taking the frame of the *Canterbury Tales* as Chaucer's discussion of the art of story, we do not in any sense intend to claim that Chaucer is, after the modern fashion, merely writing poetry about poetry. The text which he makes is an expository text, a discursive text. It is formally and rhetorically very complex, but its complexity is not what its author substitutes for meaning; rather, it is the strategy which permits him to be both clear and definite. Chaucer is, of course, an artist, as his work attests, and one may find in many places in his work expression of quite conscious concern for the craft of words as such, the value of literary precedent, the strategy of symbol. But there is a difference between discussion of verbal art and discussion of some valid result of its use. What we intend in this chapter is an exposition of Chaucer's sense of proper use—specifically, of Chaucer's notion of the relation between telling a story and telling the truth. Our discussion deals with two complementary kinds of evidence: Chaucer's own explanation of storytelling, conducted in the prologues which his pilgrims speak, and the definitions stated in, and implied by, the literary commentaries and manuals known in his time. On the basis of these two kinds of evidence, we can know clearly the theoretical possibilities within which Chaucer's stories exist.

We begin by examining Chaucer's prologues as his dramatization of the human difficulties with which storytellers must cope as they try to understand and appreciate the fiction they present. At the same time, we admit the logical and rhetorical force of the word *prologue* and argue that the drama does not exist for its own sake, but merely as an unusually subtle expression of something discursive. Essentially, the prologue material is Chaucer's introduction to his discourse in story; seen as such, the prologue material tells us what kind of discourse to expect, as well as what material will be discussed, and thus defines for us Chaucer's doctrine of story.

We then go to external evidence—to medieval literary commentary and to manuals related to poetry—and find there both confirmation and elaboration of the definitions which Chaucer implies for himself. In all this we establish clearly Chaucer's sense of priorities. We establish, as it were, the logic of a discourse which takes the form of general prologue, prologues, and tales. On the basis of this logical expectation, we then know what to read first, what to take most literally, and what to take as properly conclusive. Reading thus, we see that logical discourse and storytelling are for Chaucer the same thing, under an
identity which in no way compromises either the validity of discourse or the art of fiction. Then we can see that his doctrine of story is a vital, indeed a fundamental, element in his description of a perfected way of life, in which honest speech and properly made promises form the basis of a good human society.

Once again we must enter the historian's caveat. Chaucer's doctrine of story is a medieval doctrine, not the modern Aristotelian one rooted in notions of plot. As we shall show, Chaucer's doctrine is one under which his tales have, as a collection, both moral and architectonic beauty—under which, in fact, his tales have with even greater clarity and attractiveness most of the beauties which we have seen in some fashion in the light of other theories and other approaches. If we seem to be getting to these beauties by a strange route—that is, by means of a doctrine of story as something exemplary, expository, and discursive rather than as something plotted—it is because only by such medieval means will some values be reached at all.

Both in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and in the larger presumptions of the medieval critics in general, the distinction between prologue and what follows is partly logical and partly rhetorical—logical in that prologues introduce or summarize, often, what the subsequent treatise discusses at length; and rhetorical in that prologues are supposed to get readers, or hearers, in a mood to be persuaded by what follows. Prologues are not, to modern taste, literary at all—one of the first rules of modern fiction is that necessary exposition must be sugarcoated by action, so that right from the beginning one is showing rather than telling. But for Chaucer prologues are logical, rhetorical, and literary.\(^3\) They serve the usual discursive purposes, and in addition they demarcate the preliminary ground which the reader must pass through in order to enter the world of fiction from that world of fiction proper. Given the modern sensibility, it is curious that the word *prologue*, which is constantly on the lips of Chaucer teachers and in the running heads of their editions, should have been repeated so often without giving offense for its blatantly logical and rhetorical, or in a sense antiliterary, connotations. We have indeed correctly labeled our material. But we have been quick to go off and talk of other things—of characterization, of dramatic interest or propriety, or of geographical allusions on the London-Canterbury road. Chaucer's transformation of the framing events from an artificial excuse for storytelling, its conventional use in the medieval genre, to a vital element in his poem has convinced many readers that the prologues, as a representation of reality, interest Chaucer more than the tales, even
to the extreme that the Parson's condemnation of all storytelling is taken seriously.

All the materials from which readers of the poem have tended to build a realistic portrayal of Chaucer's time—the descriptions of the pilgrims and their "condiciouns"—along with the exemplary anecdotes and proverbs which introduce particular tales are, in medieval terms, prologues. That is, they introduce the tales to which they are attached. Their relationship to the stories and to each other is determined by the rhetoric of fiction, rather than by the logic of real life. Chaucer ironically invites his readers, and has convinced many of them, to read this relationship between story and life backwards, both by the vividness of the prologue action and also by allowing his storytellers to suggest and demonstrate many wrong ways to present and interpret fiction. Guided by the dramatic principle, modern readers have concluded that the uses to which the pilgrims put their stories, as escape or insult or weapon, are for Chaucer either legitimate or, as the Parson suggests, the best that can be expected of fiction, and, further, that such uses exhaust the significance of the tales.

The classification of the *Canterbury Tales* into prologues and tales, on the other hand, unifies the poem in the service of the tales; it enables us to preserve and appreciate the real charm of the prologues while we discover in the frame of the stories a preparation for reading which praises, rather than discredits, fiction. A reevaluation of the prologue material, beginning with the assumption that the prologues serve the tales as helpful introductions, will affect both our understanding of the general concerns which unite all the prologues—that is, the idea of pilgrimage, the storytelling contest, the debates and rivalries of the pilgrims—and also our analysis of specific prologue-tale pairs. Guided by the example of Ovidian commentary, we intend to read the prologues in series with the tales they introduce, as exemplary units in Chaucer's story collection, rather than relating the prologues primarily to one another, as if they composed together a continuous narrative action. Not only what the storyteller actually says about his tale but also what the prologue says, whether discursively or dramatically, prepares the way for the tale. An example for this procedure, which we will follow in our reading of the tales below, may be seen in the Miller's Prologue and *Tale*. What are they about? Literally, and also sententiously, the prologue is about a drunken man who disobeys the rules to take another man's place and to perform another man's function. From the Miller-Reeve controversy, we might con-
clude that the usurpation is punished, but not very severely, and
certainly not in terms which relate the punishment to the intrusion.
Considered in the same general terms, the *Miller's Tale* is about a
clever man who disobeys the rules to take another man's place and to
perform another man's function and who, because he is not alone in
this wicked kind of disobedience, is punished for what he does. In the
prologue the rules being violated are the Host's rules for a storytelling
contest, and in the tale they are the rules of matrimony, but this is a
difference at the level of the merely particular. Both the exemplum of
the prologue, in which the Miller intrudes himself as storyteller, and
the exemplum of the tale, in which "hende" Nicholas intrudes himself
as bedpartner, illustrate the typical or sententious pattern of action
which can be labeled intrusion against the rule. We shall define this
sort of pattern later in the chapter by using the medieval term *con­
suetudo*; both Chaucer's prologues and his fictions define such *con­
suetudines*. In the Miller's Prologue and Tale, the same *consuetudo* is
presented twice—once as an introduction, within the rules of an ad
hoc and temporary social cosmos constituted in order to organize
storytelling; once substantially, within the rules of a real social cosmos
whose rules define marriage. The prologue is an unresolved illustra­
tion, in that it does not answer the moral question of the proper
punishment of intruders against the rule; both the tale and the array
of material which follows provide resolution of the question and thus
fulfill the promise of the prologue.

The prologues are related not only to their specific tales but also to
each other. They define the framing situation in which the stories are
told, they share a group of characters, and they treat a number of
general subjects. First, as Jill Mann has shown, they are a satire on the
estates of society, presented with a rhetorical ambivalence which casts
real doubts upon the proper moral response of the audience. Second,
they are frequently preoccupied with sex, and with estimates of sexual
potency. The first of these subjects is not limited to the prologues, but
rather is to be found in links and tales alike. The prologue combat
among representatives of rival occupations and ways of life
exemplifies Chaucer's pervasive concern with the typical features of
the human condition, and with the relations which he can, in his array
of fictions, construct between human particulars and typical princi­
ples which, in medieval terms, grant particulars true existence. The
second subject, sexuality, is at one level too obvious to require
comment—there has rarely been great art which did not reflect this
aspect of life, from the Canticle of Canticles to Freud. But the sexual
preoccupations of Chaucer's pilgrims specifically function to relate their conversations to their tales, which, following the example of the Knight's Tale, treat courtship and marriage more than any other subjects. The pilgrims' exuberant interest in sex probably also echoes the complex symbolism of sexual fecundity that reached Chaucer from Alanus de Insulis, by way of a wonderful detour through the Romance of the Rose, and so faults them for their failure to perceive behind the natural goodness of sexuality its spiritual dimensions, particularly as a visible symbol of productivity in virtue and good works.

A third subject the prologues share is the nature and proper use of fiction. Although the links say many specific things directed to the reasons for telling stories and the ways to appreciate them, the nature of fiction has not been identified as the focus of these remarks, because they have been either treated as locally dramatic events involving pilgrims' personality clashes or dismissed as morally empty because of the Parson's attack on fiction. It is certainly true that most of what the pilgrims say about stories is wrong, limited, harmful; but the doctrines they present ironically direct us to a proper respect for the materials of fiction. Once the errors of storytelling are defined, the reason for Chaucer's juxtaposition of the pilgrimage with his story collection may be reconsidered, in order to show how the idea of the journey, expressed in the links, functions, along with all the prologue material, to introduce and prepare us properly for the stories.

The ways of telling and interpreting stories offered in the links may be categorized according to whether they treat stories as "earnest" or "game," a proverbial contrast mentioned frequently by the pilgrims. The Host's definition of the prize-winning tale, as "of best sentence and moost solaas," assigns stories to neither category, as earnest or game alone, but suggests that the best stories partake of both moral seriousness and delight. Throughout his administration of the storytelling contest, the Host remains the champion of the game and a searcher after moral lessons in the tales which he can apply to his personal life. Still his principles fail him continually: he neither maintains the peace and good humor of the game against drunkards and quitters nor allegorizes very acutely. More than this, he sets the storytelling contest against the pilgrimage journey, characterizing the stories as fun and the pilgrimage as spiritually efficacious but dull.

Ye goon to Caunterbury—God yow speede,
The blisful martir quite yow youre meede!
And wel I woot, as ye goon by the weye,
Ye shapen yow to talen and to plye;
For trewely, confort ne myrthe is noon
To ride by the weye doumb as a stoon;
And therfore wol I maken yow disport,
As I sayde erst, and doon yow som confort.
And if yow liketh alle by oon assent
For to stonden at my juggement,
And for to werken as I shal yow seye,
To-morwe, when ye ridden by the weye,
Now, by my fader soule that is deed,
But ye be myrie, I wol yeve yow myn heed!

(I [A] 769–82)

Although he demands stories of “best sentence” and often finds moral truths in the tales, as they are presented, still he perceives no connection between this earnest dimension of the tales and the earnest significance of the pilgrimage. He establishes a distinction between the spiritual goals of the pilgrims, an earnest intent, and the immediate desire for entertainment of the contest, a game. In doing this he prepares the way for the Parson’s attack on fiction, Chaucer’s Retraction, and the modern conviction that the stories are morally inferior. We believe that the Host has committed an error in critical judgment, which functions, along with all the other critical errors in the links, ironically to place stories beyond the control of men too foolish to perceive their integrity and to reveal the power of fiction, even if we see this power wasted by the pilgrims. To suggest that the Retraction and the Parson’s Prologue share the shortcomings of the prologue material is a controversial proposal which requires careful explanation; as a preparation for this, we will consider more clear-cut examples of faulty literary judgment in the links.

Most of the pilgrims fail to appreciate stories because they cannot preserve the game in their desire to discover an “earnest” value in fiction which they may use for their own purposes. The most striking example of such a misappropriation of story is the Pardoner. The Pardoner’s intention for his story is to deceive—he conceals his own avaricious reasons for preaching behind an attack on the avarice of his listeners. He is so confident in his control over the story that he reveals the apparatus of his illusion to the other pilgrims:

Thus kan I preche agayn that same vice
Which that I use, and that is avarice.
But though myself be gilty in that synne,
Yet kan I maken oother folk to twynne
From avarice, and soore to repente.

(VI [C] 427–31)
The Pardoner fails to impress his pilgrim audience—and Chaucer, by the dramatic interplay between the Host and the Pardoner, underlines this failure. Yet the pilgrims outsmart themselves by supposing that when they see through the Pardoner’s trick, they also understand the story; modern audiences outsmart themselves in much the same way, by supposing that the story is important only as the tool of the Pardoner’s intended deception and, dramatically, the occasion of his self-revelation. What pilgrims and many readers fail to realize is that the story, no matter what the Pardoner thinks of it, is a consummate production and a powerful teacher of the dangers of avarice. The Knight’s suggestion that the game of the pilgrimage be restored repudiates the Pardoner’s effort to manipulate his fellow travelers and the Host’s rude objections to being duped:

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

(VI [C] 962–67)

But it also directs us back to the storytelling contest, the game in search of tales “of best sentence and moost solaas,” in which the Pardoner’s Tale is one of the most distinguished entries. The controversy between the Pardoner and the Host, and his plan to dupe the pilgrims, is an important element of the poem, but it is more properly read, when we realize that it ironically calls attention to the story’s particular power and significance, by showing how the pilgrims fail to benefit from it.

Many pilgrims lose the stories in their pursuit of other pleasures, including drink and exchange of insults. Their uses of stories, as dirty jokes or character assassinations, do not exhaust the significance of the stories, although this fact is sometimes lost in the appreciation of the quarrels in the links. The Miller’s Tale, and the Reeve’s, for that matter, are respected as literary creations, with their own internal logic, when they are read independently; this respect for them often is forgotten, however, when the relationship between the tales and their tellers is discussed, because of the long-standing fascination with the drama of the pilgrims. Jordan rightly says of the quitting storytellers: “The Reeve’s impulse and violent protest against what he takes to be public charges of cuckoldry and adultery reveals his own churlish
inability to distinguish between actual instance and fictional generalization. In this exchange the Miller gains superiority not through his knowledge of the Reeve’s past experience of matrimony—as maintained by dramatically oriented criticism—but by the immediate demonstration of a higher quality of mind.”

Even the Host, who on most occasions objects to the disruptions of the quiter—he asks the Friar, for example, not to insult the Summoner (III [D] 1286–89)—yields to the temptation to make cruel fun, within the relaxation of formality permitted by the contest, and receives, in return, a quiting tale from the Cook about an innkeeper. Chaucer phrases the Host’s defense of such insults in the terms of earnest and game, for the Host excuses his ridicule of the Cook by saying that even the truth is permitted, when stated playfully. “But yet I pray thee, be nat wroth for game;/A man may seye ful sooth in game and pley” (I [A] 4354–55). By naming this kind of speech “sooth,” Chaucer calls to mind other sorts of truth that tales may tell and underscores the inadequacy of the pilgrims’ expectations for their game of stories.

Chaucer’s attitude toward the drunkards and the quiter is expressed through the Host’s invocation to Bacchus as an appropriate god for the pilgrimage; the Host’s optimistic assertion that drink will bind the wounds of the pilgrims’ disputes is disappointed in the conduct of the pilgrims who disrupt the contest while they are drunk. In the Manciple’s Prologue the Host praises Bacchus: “O thou Bacus, yblessed be thy name,/That so kanst turnen ernest into game!” (IX [H] 99–100). Previously he has said,

“I se wel it is necessarie,
Where that we goon, good drynke with us carie;
For that wol turne rancour and disese
T’acord and love, and many a wrong apese.”

(IX [H] 95–98)

He makes this statement at the end of a scene in which the Cook’s drunkenness has made him unfit for storytelling, the game which is, after all, the focus of the Host’s efforts; the Cook and Manciple have quarreled over the Cook’s incapacity; and the Host himself pronounces on the debilitating effects of drink. The praise of drink here, as necessary to the good-humored conduct of the journey, is contradicted by the Host’s angry reaction to the Miller’s drunken interruption of the contest in order to tell his story. Of course, the pilgrims have also raised friendly glasses together. The journey begins with a toast to confirm the Host as leader of the contest. The Host’s invoca-
tion of "merry" Bacchus implicitly rebukes the pilgrims who allow drink to turn the contest into an earnest argument.

Chaucer's allusion to Bacchus, especially because it appears in the prologue of the tale he borrows from the *Metamorphoses*, calls to mind another aspect of the god's activity, relevant not only to those who drink but also to those who tell stories. The Host invokes a friendly god of mirth, but Bacchus, in book 4 of the *Metamorphoses*, is the "new" god of madness and violence, who punishes all those who will not accept his authority. Among these are the Minyades, who reject the new festival of Bacchus and stay at their work. Like the Canterbury pilgrims, they agree to tell stories as a diversion:

\begin{quote}
\begin{align*}
\text{utile opus manuum vario sermone levemus} \\
\text{perque vices aliquid, quod tempora longa videri} \\
\text{non sinat, in medium vacuas referamus ad aures.}
\end{align*}
\end{quote}

(4. 39-41)\(^9\)

For their irreverence Bacchus transforms their weaving into vine and ivy, and the sisters themselves into bats. With this punishment of stories which insult his dignity, Bacchus becomes the god of all quitters. Bacchus's anger is repeated in the fury of the Reeve and the Summoner, who forget the pleasure of the storytelling because they think it is somehow directed against their dignity. According to Arnulf of Orleans, these storytelling defiers of the powers of Bacchus are alcoholics, whose wasteful indulgence finally ruins them.\(^10\) The *Ovide moralisé* repeats this interpretation and adds two more, which complicate our response to the Ovidian context in just the right ways. In *malo*, the three sisters are "trois diversitez de pechiez," specifically, "charnel concupissance," "concupissance d'ieulz," and "orgeulz de vie" (4. 2532-44). In *bono*, they are "trois estas de perfection," "continence," "l'ordre de mariage," and "l'estas de prelacion" (4. 2634-2703). The storytellers of Ovid are allegorized in formulas which comprehend the human condition: sin is divided according to the domains in which it may occur—lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, and pride of life—and perfection is named not by virtues but by conditions within which virtuous behavior is possible. Chaucer's evocation of the Minyades' disastrous storytelling contest is intended, in the case of the angry, spiteful, or drunken storytellers, to link them with the destructive, and undesirable, aspects of Bacchus. More generally, because the pilgrims resemble the Minyades in many ways—both groups are telling stories in a context of religious observance, which they put aside for the sake of other interests—they may be
identified with the sort of treatment the Minyades received in commentaries. That is, they are characters who exist, *in bono* and *in malo*, to exemplify the sins and states which constitute society. They become, in sum, humanity, sponsoring stories which, although their value is complex and often ambivalent, are socially exemplary.

Thus, the stories exist separate from the uses the pilgrims would make of them and tend to rebuke the foolishness of selfish preachers, crude drunkards, and spiteful rivals, who suppose they control the tales that they hurl at one another. The errors of the pilgrims are often interpreted as allowing themselves to have too much morally irresponsible fun in the contest; in fact, they are not having the game that the stories themselves would have provided them at all. Their willingness to take a meaning, or reason, for the story as its significance, and to let the story go, is also the fundamental attitude of Chaucer the pilgrim—not only in the Retraction, but also throughout the book. The Retraction is read by many critics, as we shall see, as Chaucer's literal last word as author; Chaucer is supposed to be retracting all those stories which do not actually enforce a good moral. It would be more precisely accurate to say that Chaucer is really retracting those stories which are really about some sinful or bawdy action, or which contain gross language, and that in so doing he falls into the eternally persisting error of taking content for meaning. It is true, after all, that some of Chaucer's bawdiest stories do punish the guilty parties and so suggest the danger of their errors. Though they sound like sin, they actually reprove it.

To take the Retraction seriously, as the last word of Chaucer the civil servant, moralist, and human being with a soul to save, violates the integrity of the work in which it is dramatically integral and ignores the fact that Chaucer the pilgrim has been making statements of a similar character throughout his work. Chaucer the pilgrim is concerned for the actual content of his stories. He defends himself from charges of immorality or poor writing on the grounds that he is reporting accurately what really happened:

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For this ye knowen al so wel as I,
Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,
He moot reherce as ny as evere he kan
Everich a word, if it be in his charge,
Al speke he never so rudeliche and large,
Or ellis he moot telle his tale untrewe,
Of feyne thyng, or fynde wordes newe.
He may nat spare, althogh he were his brother;
```
He moot as wel seye o word as another.
Crist spak hymself ful brode in hooly writ,
And wel ye woot no vileyne is it.
Eek Plato seith, whoso that kan hym rede,
The wordes moote be cosyn to the dede.
Also I prey yow to foryeve it me,
Al have I nat set folk in hir degree
Heere in this tale, as that they sholde stonde.
My wit is short, ye may wel understande.

(I [A] 730-46)

Chaucer the pilgrim finds the same virtue of accuracy a sufficient defense for any immorality or bad language his tales report, in the Miller's Prologue.

For Goddes love, demeth nat that I seye
Of yvel entente, but for I moot reheerce
Hir tales alle, be they bettre or ware,
Or elles falsen som of my mateere.
And therfore, whoso list it nat yheere,
Turne over the leef and chese another tale;
For he shal fynde ynowe, grete and smale,
Of storial thyng that toucheth gentillesse,
And eek moralitee and hoolynesse.
Blameth nat me if that ye chese amys.
The Millere is a cherl, ye knowe wel this;
So was the Reve eek and othere mo,
And harlotrie they tolden bothe two.
Avyseth yow, and put me out of blame;
And eek men shal nat maken ernest of game.

(I [A] 3172–86)

The Retraction's advice to disregard all the tales that "sownen into synne," for the sake of those with holy subjects, resembles the Miller's Prologue passage closely. Both manuscript and internal evidence demand that we take the Retraction as an integral part of the whole, and not as a death bed testament.13

When the Retraction is drawn firmly into the remainder of the poem and identified as the statement of a character in that poem, it becomes possible to explain its puzzling aspects—the apparent contradiction it offers to the remainder of the poem, and its curiously ambiguous explanation of why Chaucer decided to take back as many of his works as he says he must. Olive Sayce, in an article on the medieval literary tradition of closing apologies, demonstrates that
Chaucer's Retraction, as an avowal of sinfulness and a request to be excused for scandalous works, draws on the traditional vocabulary of medieval conclusions. This is "the part of the work when apparently autobiographical statements are most likely to occur. It must be remembered, however, that the reason for their introduction is not personal but aesthetic." Sayce convincingly argues that the personal note struck in the Retraction does not require that Chaucer the author be speaking in his own voice. The conventionality of the terms used, the faithfulness to medieval formulas, suggest, rather, that the passage should be attributed to Chaucer the pilgrim.

The Retraction is ambiguous, as well. Chaucer first seems to argue that all he wrote was written to a good end; he echoes Saint Paul's statement that "al that is writen is writen for oure doctrine" and explicitly assures us that he has followed this rule. Then he decides that some things could not have been written "to oure doctrine," because they literally "sownen into synne." The error that the Retraction makes resembles the mistaken defenses of art that Chaucer the pilgrim offers both in the General Prologue and the Miller's Prologue. There, Chaucer the pilgrim has defined the truth of stories to be the accuracy with which they report an actual event; the artist is excused from moral responsibility because he did not commit the sins he reports, but only records them. The Retraction does not permit this defense; Chaucer the pilgrim, undoubtedly swayed by the Parson's grim rejection of the redeeming "solaas" of stories, decides that the record of an immorality is an immorality. Again, an "earnest" value of story, which does not perceive fiction as "game," fails to distinguish between life and its representation in fiction, and so loses the aspect of story which gives it authority to teach. The Averroistic poetics of Aristotle speaks to this point when it repeats the commonplace that "homo inter cetera animalia delectatur in assimilacione rerum quas iam in sensu percepit et in earum representatione seu imitatione. Et signum huius scilicet quod homo naturaliter letatur et gaudet ex assimilacione est quod delectamur et gaudemus in representatione aliquarum rerum in quarum sensu non delectamur." In fact, the moral nature of poetry requires that its material "assumitur interdum ad ostensionem decentie valde exprimendo ipsam et interdum permutatur ad ostensionem alicuius turpitudinis similiter valde exprimendo illam." Consonant with this doctrine, Sayce concludes about Chaucer that the ambiguity of the Retraction does permit one to value poetry, but only by recognizing the shallowness of the pilgrim's apologies. The ethical measure of a story is not to be taken
solely from the incidence of words or actions that would be called
good or bad when performed in real life; rather, the stories that do
not “sownen into synne” do so precisely because whether describing
good men or bad they draw ethically appropriate conclusions about
human life and exercise their rhetorical power toward convincing
men to behave well.

But these two critical positions—that stories can be reduced to dra­
matic insults, and that their moral value equals the moral character of
the specific incidents they contain—are not the only positions that
Chaucer defines and defends in his prologue material. More impor­
tant than these explicit mistakes is the pervasive implicit attitude that
fiction is different from experience in some way, that it is game, that it
is “solaas.” This attitude is clear in a number of passing comments,
concentrated in the prologue material, in which several of the pil­
grims affirm the value and importance of fiction and recognize its
place in the cultural tradition of the Middle Ages.

The majority of the pilgrims are concerned that they may not be
equal to the task of telling a story well. In the dialectic of the work as
such, they are of course right, because, as pilgrim storytellers, they are
not stories but prologues. Their own lives are a boring pilgrimage,
which they agree must be enlivened with stories. In other terms, the
pilgrims are lesser fictions who frame further and greater fictions,
which are rhetorically, as things framed, more fictional than the pil­
grims. They achieve story by telling stories, more than by enacting
one; thus they are outside story, and therefore by definition in­
adquate to story.¹⁹ Their game with story too often reduces itself to a
too easy and too trivial earnest; their morality oscillates between an
impossible penitential rejection of the world they are (for the nonce)
given and a too easy acceptance of its simply drunken aspects.

First of all, then, the pilgrims confess various insecurities in the face
of fiction. The Man of Law rehearses Chaucer’s work, saying that
there is no story remaining for him to tell, and incidentally betraying
his ignorance of the medieval fact that stories are to be repeated, or
recelebrated, rather than invented ex nihilo. He says that he fears the
fate of the Pierides, the sisters of the Metamorphoses who challenge the
Muses to a singing contest and lose, becoming magpies because of
their impudence and impiety:

“Me were looth be likned, doutelees,
To Muses that men clepe Pierides—
Methamorphosios woot what I mene;
.................................
I speke in prose, and lat him rymes make.”

(II [B'] 91–93, 96)

The Franklin apologizes for his lack of rhetorical skill:

But, sires, by cause I am a burel man,
At my bigynnyng first I yow biseche,
Have me excused of my rude speche.

(V [F] 716–18)

The Prioress fears that she will be unequal to her task of telling a holy story, and prays:

My konnyng is so wayk, o blisful Queene,
For to declare thy grete worthynesse
That I ne may the weighte nat susteene.

(VII 481–83 [B² 1671–73])

The Monk apologizes for his problems of organization:

"Though I by ordre telle nat thise thynges,
But tellen hem som bifore and som bihynde,
As it now comth unto my remembraunce,
Have me escused of myn ignoraunce."

(VII 1985, 1988–90 [B² 3175, 3178–80])

Others, by referring to the tradition and learning of the Middle Ages, establish the fundamental importance for fiction of its ties to authorities. Even the Wife of Bath, who claims that experience is a sufficient teacher, trusts a good deal to biblical authorities as she tries to prove her skill as an exegete. The Clerk offers a story he learned from

Fraunceys Petrak, the lauriat poete,
Highte this clerk, whos rethorike sweete
Enlumyned al Ytaille of poetrie,

(IV [E] 31–33)

and Chaucer the pilgrim likens his own efforts in telling a new story of the Melibeus to the work of the Evangelists:

For somme of hem seyn moore, and somme seyn lesse,
Whan they his pitous passioun expresse—
I meene of Mark, Mathew, Luc, and John—
But doutelees hir sentence is al oon.

(VII 949–52 [B² 2139–42])
The Pardoner's sincerest reverence is for the technique of performance and practical rhetoric:

I payne me to han an hauteyn speche,
    And rynge it out as round as gooth a belle,
    For I kan al by rote that I telle.

(VI [C] 330-32)

Still others, with timely interruptions, bring telling commentary to bear on tales that are disorderly, dreary, or bumbling. The Franklin interrupts the Squire with flattery, saying

"In feith, Squier, thow hast thee wel yquit
And gentilly. I preise wel thy wit,
So feelyngly thou spekest, sire, I allow the!"

(V [F] 673-74, 676)

The Host interrupts the tale of Sir Thopas:

... thou makest me
    So wery of thy verray lewednesse
    That, also wisly God my soule blesse,
    Myne eres aken of thy drasty speche.

(VII 920-23 [B² 2110-13])

The continually repeated emphasis here is on learning and skill—the faults are those of rudeness, uncunning, drastiness of speech, ignorance. Three principles of criticism emerge here, all calculated to affirm the importance and value of the stories which the pilgrims introduce. First, the storyteller is necessarily humble before his material, which requires excellence in presentation to fulfill its potential. Second, it is recognized that stories participate in the tradition of learning which the Middle Ages so much respected—they are auctori­tates. Third, it is dramatically affirmed that bad stories should be challenged or stopped. It is important to notice that nothing in these principles depends either on the good intentions of the pilgrims or on the moral weight of the events in their stories. Rather, there is "re­thorike sweete." The respect of the pilgrims points to the integrity of stories. Chaucer effectively cuts off the possibility of valuing his fictions as jokes, insults, or sermons only, and yet leaves us with the stories, somehow both instructive and entertaining, standing solidly in the realm of truth and high seriousness and yet in sympathy with the world of mistake and error which men inhabit.

Of all the members of the party, the Knight comes closest to read-
ing a story correctly. The Knight, who is the character most in harmony with the poem's largest patterns of meaning and who, throughout the links, defends the principle of the contest as a game, is given the task of questioning the Monk's array of tragedies as being out of harmony with fiction, not because it is too serious for the "game" of stories, which is the Host's objection, but because it has not fulfilled its serious obligations to make sense and order from life.\(^{20}\) The Host rejects a repetition of these tragic instances, because the task is of no use:

\[
\begin{align*}
\ldots \text{and pardee, no remedie} \\
\text{It is for to biwaille ne compleyne} \\
\text{That that is doon.}
\end{align*}
\]

(VII 2784-86 [B² 3974-76])

Ironically he opposes here the medieval reverence for exempla, particularly the tragic tales of falls from fortune, as valued teachers of man's true place in creation. The Knight recognizes the exemplary tone of the Monk's tragedies, because he sees that their force is directed at his own particular experience.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{I seye for me, it is a greet disese,} \\
\text{ Whereas men han been in greet welthe and ese,} \\
\text{To heeren of hire sodeyn fal, allass!} \\
\text{And the contrarie is joye and greet solas,} \\
\text{As whan a man hath been in povre estaat,} \\
\text{And clymbeth up and wexeth fortunat,} \\
\text{And there abideth in prosperitee.}
\end{align*}
\]

(VII 2771-77 [B² 3961-67])

The Knight reveals his own limitation as a critic, a dislike for sad endings, especially ones that come close to home, but he has read the story in appreciation of its sententious character and with the courage to apply its lesson to himself.\(^{21}\) Among the pilgrims, who tend either to the quieters' error of reacting angrily to tales they imagine insult them or to the Host's smug application of moralizations to the faults of others, the Knight reads the story for what it may teach him.

Chaucer permits such a careful reading of the Monk's Tale, perhaps, because it is, like his own Tales, a collection rather than a single story. He suggests that for life to be captured in a manner suited to his own age a poem must encompass the multiplicity of experience; the Monk's Tale does so and is the tale whose separate treatment may come closest to the type of reading which Chaucer finds appropriate to poetry.

In sum, the prologues portray the pilgrims as storytellers,
Chaucer's *auctoritates*, whose comments on fiction present an elaborate *sic et non* on the validity of fictional communication. The answers they come up with are faulty, but their stories are not. The "earnest" and "game" they find in the journey's events, and in the uses they have for their tales, are not the "best sentence and moost solaas" the Host promises the best stories will provide. This is intentional, we think, because Chaucer places the true blending of earnest and game where he believes it to exist, in the stories themselves. And our appreciation for the individual tales is proof that the stories do have validity and impact beyond the distortions the pilgrims attempt to practice on them.

The relationship between the ideal of pilgrimage and the storytelling contest is not the easy distinction between earnest and game which the Host or the Parson would make, because the stories demonstrate throughout a capacity for speaking the true, the "best sentence," even while they entertain and delight. Chaucer's framing definitions of the stories, the pilgrimage, and the contest rather function together: the *Canterbury Tales* is both Chaucer's truth about life and the entertainment he offers to his readers. By turning attention away from the journey's end to its progress along the way, Chaucer identifies the subject of his work as this life, and the morality appropriate to its conduct. The Host is fit patron and guide for such a journey, because he is the director of the homeless, men in a state of transition. The pilgrims' decision to accept his direction affirms their concern for this life. The Host is the *viaticum* of this community, but he conducts the pilgrims along no heavenly way. Yet the stories, to which he would direct our attention, are Chaucer's Eucharist, in which the flesh of life is transfigured by the truth which it should exemplify. This life, by means of the tales, makes contact with other times and even with eternity, not only as an eventual end but also as a saving grace continually present. The transcendent truth, which the Parson presumes to hold in his sermon, and which the repentant Chaucer the pilgrim thinks about only in the shadow of Canterbury, Chaucer places in our hands, in his story of the tales told on the way.

In all this we have attempted to establish that the prologues, and all the linking material, are to be considered as prologues in fact as well as in name, and that they depend on, and logically derive from, the fictions they introduce. We have offered an approximate definition of story, as a combination of "earnest" and "game," derived from Chaucer's prologues. But since Chaucer's introductory techniques involve elements of irony, and since the traditions of Chaucer criticism
with which our work must exist have not put the stories first, we cannot presume too easily that we know what stories are. There have been radical changes in literary definition since the Middle Ages—changes which the critic is often, axiomatically and unconsciously, tempted to ignore by dealing with "literature" in the absolute sense. We must therefore be very careful in this enterprise of definition, first by seeing that we do not presume about the Middle Ages anything which in fact is not there, and second by coming to terms with the external evidence surviving from the Middle Ages, other than stories themselves, which points to definition.

At the outset we are faced with the puzzling problem of classification. As modern critics, we tend to value very much the distinction between art and experience, and to make of art something very special and unique. Such a distinction is puzzlingly unimportant, as we shall see, to medieval critics. We know perfectly well what we mean when we make a category that includes the Divine Comedy, the Canterbury Tales, the Beowulf, a number of canonical lyrics and romances, and perhaps the Consolation of Philosophy. We are equally clear in presuming that this category does not include the Summa Theologiae, the Historica Scholastica, the Etymologies of Isidore, or (except for utterly unreconstructed philologists) the Ancrene Riwle. Medieval critics would probably not understand these presumptions—the precise category which we mean by literature, or belles lettres, did not exist for them. The Middle Ages did have classes for such verbal things as auctores, or the tripartite historia, fabula, argumentum, mentioned in various commentaries, but none of these exactly corresponds. It simply will not do, in any critically responsible historical sense, to import and impose the modern word literature, without very careful qualification, on the array of material constituted by the books medieval people read. But it is no real loss to give up the word literature. Dante's Divine Comedy, no matter what word we use to name its category, continues to have a self-authenticating power which we gratefully acknowledge and to which we submit in reading it, and Chaucer remains as wise an observer of human nature as he ever was. In giving up, for the moment, the word literature, we indulge the expectation that the medieval categories and definitions, once we understand them, will enhance and enrich our appropriation of these texts in ways beyond the power of our modern category.

The word literature, in modern usage, presumes for poetry two characteristics which we must be very careful not to impose on medieval literature—careful primarily because they are characteristics so
deeply rooted in our axiom system as to be almost unavoidable. The first of these has to do with the definition of poetic sentences; the second with epistemology. The debate over the fit definition of poetic sentences has vexed medieval studies primarily since the advent of D. W. Robertson’s “historical” criticism, which, though it suggests quite properly that a number of formerly neglected medieval Latin texts were obligatory scholarly reading, seeks to impose on medieval poems a far from medieval structure of symbolic sentence construction. There has, thus, been much controversy over whether or not Beowulf “is” Christ, or the Wife of Bath “is” a grotesque figure of Luxuria, or the Pearl-maiden “is” spiritual dryness, or Jean de Meun’s Rose “is” “le bien infini et vraye gloire celeste.”

All the arguments, it seems, seek to establish whether or not the term on the left-hand side of these phrases in fact does or does not symbolize the term on the right-hand side. Common to all debaters is the presumption that such sentences are symbolic, and so describe mental operations seeking insight.

The sentence “Beowulf is Christ” is clearly not empirical or tautological; it must be symbolic. Some critics find it of no use at all in understanding Beowulf, or satisfy themselves that the Beowulf poet was discussing Beowulf only, and not Christ in a cryptic manner. Others, for what they consider good reasons, find that using Beowulf as a symbolic word referring to Christ is a fit thing to do, and call the sentence true.

What has gone wrong here is that critics on both sides of the argument share, at the level of uncritical presumption, an essentially eighteenth-century theory of language, utterly alien to the etymology-trusting, Logos-and-creation-based theory of language of the Middle Ages. Allegorical statements in the Middle Ages were not, in our terms, either referential or symbolic, even though the forms of the sentences in which they expressed their allegories are the same as those which we now understand as symbolic. Therefore the array of terms, usually religious, which tended frequently to appear on the right-hand side of their allegorical statements were not by their location endorsed as “right meanings.” Much more than this, these statements were simple descriptions, all participating hierarchically in a class of statements whose highest members were probably “This is my body” and “The Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit are one.” The whole class of statements depended, as descriptions, on the presumption of a relationship of analogous parallelism between the level of reality to which the left-hand term belonged and that to which the right-hand term belonged. Allegorical statements in the Middle Ages
were not so much referential, or even linguistic, as cosmological. They presumed and reflected and constituted by their existence a particular classification and relational arrangement of all that was. Further, because medieval language regularly presumed so, the cosmos which it described was presumed literally to include realities which we would now call mental, and therefore by our terms positivistically unreal. Our importing of modern presumptions about language into our discussion of medieval sentences and possible sentences has, in short, gone wrong about what the Middle Ages meant because we forgot to begin by asking how they meant—or whether meaning as such was a category appropriate to the medieval sensibility at all.

A further presumption which we must avoid is rooted in the very method of historical criticism itself. It traces to our quite valid suspicion that medieval people were not quite like ourselves—the axiom of cultural relativism is the axiom which makes critical historical studies both necessary and possible. But to be interested in defining the point of view of people of the past tempts us to presume that naturally they had a point of view, and then by natural leaps to presume that they were therefore capable of mental states which we define by such terms as phenomenology and subject-object relationship. A world which could take the notion of the unity of the intellect seriously, however, or which continued to debate the question of nominalism and by its very debating admitted that there could be two sides to the question, would have great difficulties conceiving the phenomenological and existential relativisms which ground our sense of point of view and impel us to allow for it by being critical of our histories. Thus, when we analyze the confession of the Pardoner or the persona of Chaucer the poet, we must take care to recognize that the first is more akin to the Vices of Prudentius than to Holden Caulfield and Jean Genet, and the second more in keeping with the fit behavior of a bishop than with the poses of a modern actor. There are indeed ironies in Chaucer, and they are based, as are all ironies, on the disparity between appearance and reality, but appearance is not necessarily the same as pose, nor reality the same as sincerity. A "sincere" human being may well be, in medieval terms, a mere pose or parody of truth, and reality is always something grounded in philosophical or theological, rather than personalist, definition.

The starting point of our investigation must be, then, a new way of framing the question of the nature of story, or, begging no questions, poetry, which would be acceptable to medieval commentators, writers, and readers. Medieval critics put the question by asking, To what part
of philosophy does the text under discussion belong? The answer, with a few exceptions which only prove the rule, is, uniformly, ethics. The formula of the commentaries is, "Ethica subponitur quia de moribus tractat." What this formula means, we think, is not that medieval critics had a merely pedestrian and moralizing use for poetry, but rather that the category they called ethics and the category we call literature are remarkably similar, indeed congruent. Life becomes ethical as it rises to decorums which one finds most clearly in story; story therefore is naturally and necessarily ethics.

If literature is to be classified as a part of ethics, then its own parts and features must obviously be ones which can fitly constitute, or reflect, an ethical system. The medieval analysis in which this fitness is most clearly and elaborately expressed is the Averroistic Poetics of Aristotle, as translated into Latin by Hermann the German. A full treatment of the doctrine of this treatise, and its substantial agreement with what is otherwise known about late medieval literary theory, is beyond the scope of this book. In the first place, Averroes defines poetry not as making, nor tragedy (and comedy) as imitations of action. Rather, tragedy is *ars laudandi*, and comedy is *ars vituperandi*. In the second place, Averroes substitutes for Aristotle's plot and character, in the six parts of tragedy, much more abstract entities, which he designates *credulitates* and *consuetudines*. Praise and blame, obviously, are activities which lead to essentially ethical conclusions; *credulitates* and *consuetudines* are abstractions to which individual persons are referred in ethical descriptions.

Averroes's discussion of the six parts of tragedy is quite complex. There are two lists of the parts in his own text, which do not absolutely correspond with each other and correspond even less clearly to the authentic Aristotelian six. It is clear at least that Averroes's fundamental distinction is between matter and means: three of the six parts—customs, beliefs, and meanings—are represented by the other three—description, verbal formalism, and expressive power. This distinction reflects the customary medieval procedure, in rhetoric, of assuming a material to be treated, and an array of rhetorical resources by means of which treatment can be accomplished.

The material to be treated is ethical—in Averroes's terms, it is *credulitates* and *consuetudines*. An accessus on Ovid's *Heroides*, probably from the fourteenth century, puts the matter more concretely: "Materia libri sunt mores et vicia dominarum"; it then goes on to say that one of the features which makes the book worth reading is the "pulchritudo conditionum que sunt in hoc libro." Conditio is a rea-
sonable equivalent of the sum of *consuetudo* and *credulitas*. It is also the fundamental and initial concern of Chaucer’s art, in his picture gallery of pilgrims:

Me thynketh it acordaunt to resoun
To telle yow al the condicioun
Of ech of hem, so as it semed me.

(I [A] 37–39)

That it is *conditiones*, and not pilgrims as existential individuals merely, from which Chaucer derives this prologue, Jill Mann has demonstrated with great learning and convincing detail. Moreover, she accounts for Chaucer’s apparent realism in moral terms which precisely reflect Averroes’s concern for the *artes laudandi vituperandi*: “Chaucer’s general aim of complicating the reader’s emotional responses . . . is more comprehensive as a development from *descriptio* when described in medieval terms ‘for praise or blame’ than when it is anachronistically analysed in terms of the ‘artificial’ and the ‘real.’”36 The same concern for the general or universal instead of the particular also appears in Dante’s theory of language, as Dragonetti explains it in connection with a discussion of the myth of Babel.37 By the time of Malory this polarity between the typical and the individual had become a conscious moral problem, instead of an epistemological one, and received explicit thematic emphasis.38 Averroes’s emphasis on *consuetudo* and *credulitas*, thus, finds reflection in the implicit and explicit concerns of both commentators and poets.

Of what, then, does medieval poetry consist? According to Averroes it consists of manners and customs, presented in mannered verbal descriptions which have the power to move and convince the hearer. In any given poem, therefore, we must expect an array of examples of behavior and concomitant belief, which can be taken in sum as a normative array corresponding to some “signatio rationis Universalis”39 in the reader or hearer who is the appropriate audience. Poetry, that is, is “about” exempla of ethical existence: its rhetorical effect is achieved by its being taken as analogous to its audience, and the unity and coherence of its particulars, that is, its exempla, both among themselves and in their rhetorical effect, are based on those relationships that exist between the individual and the typical.

The full meaning of these abstract statements will only be made clear by the elaborate practical analysis of the *Canterbury Tales* which follows. Here, however, it may help to pause for the sake of contrasting this medieval Aristotelian (and, to some extent, nominalist) defini-
tion of the content of poetry with the Platonist definition current in the twelfth century and before. Winthrop Wetherbee, in his definitive study of this theory, distinguishes between a rationalist and a symbolist use of the concrete particulars of this world, but in both cases the object and ultimate content of poetry are God, transcendence, and (particularly for the symbolist) a reality ultimately and essentially ineffable and beyond poetry altogether. There is therefore in twelfth-century poetry much use of figures of prosopopoeia, of descriptions of astronomical ascent, of discussion of ideas and ideals whose existence is philosophical or theological. By contrast, in later poetry we find La Vielle, the Wife of Bath, and the “faire feeld ful of folke.” But this is no transition from dull allegory to the predecessors of Hemingway. The central philosophical problem of the Middle Ages, whether one was realist, conceptualist, or nominalist, was the problem of universals, and the central theological problem, after such obviously crucial personal matters as sin and salvation had been seen to, was the nature of valid language purporting to describe the deity. It is possible to speculate that the difference between the poetry of Alanus de Insulis and the poetry of Chaucer, to which we now refer by talking about Chaucer’s “realism,” is simply the difference between a philosophically realist willingness to reify theological universals by means of prosopopoeia and a nominalist desire to exemplify ethical ones by means of particulars. Until we know more about the writings of late medieval nominalists, and particularly about those among their casual and practical writings which might especially betray their philosophical posture, as distinguished from their philosophical doctrine, such speculation must remain unverified. But it should at least be beyond question that Averroes’s emphasis on manners and customs, on the one hand, and on language which is explicitly both mannered and rhetorically effective, on the other, betrays a focus of interest on a kind of poetry different both in manner and in ultimate content from that of the twelfth century. It is therefore inappropriate to expect, in late medieval poetry, the same kind of referential energy, requiring allegorical readings in terms of divine truths, which is normal in the twelfth century. The energy of late medieval poetry is exerted, not between the letter of the poem and the transcendent to which it, and the reader, aspire, but rather within the narrower world of ethics, which encompasses an array of particulars, including the reader or hearer, who relate to each other in terms of some typical but still human set of definitions. Thus the actual words of Dante’s Comedy describe heaven, but this anagogy is about “homo prout merendo et
And the referential energy of his poem, which in Alanus would be exerted toward pointing to the ineffable transcendent, is in Dante directed to the architectonic relationships of parallel incident which compose the poem. Thus the *Canterbury Tales* is about the *conditiones* of men; as an array, the poem contains “God’s plenty” and is sufficient. The effect of this dialectic between the particular and the typical, however, is just the opposite of what we perceive in the eighteenth-century comedy of manners. There, the manners ironically collapse when confronted by some incorruptibly true particular—in the presence of the finally revealed innocence and purity of the ingenue, all mere rakes, fops, and sophisticates stand convicted of having been mannered rather than real. In Chaucer, on the other hand, failed particulars, in sum, exist themselves ironically, and the cumulative power of the ironies, operating in the sum, deposits a definition around which, as failed or fallible or mortal, they cluster.

Particular exempla of *consuetudines* and *credulitates*, then, are the matter of late medieval poetry: they and ethics, in sum, are what late medieval poetry is about. Already, in talking of normative arrays of exempla, we have implied in this discussion of the nature and content of story certain formal definitions. An array has a form, or structure; its best presentation tends to be a series in parallel, and not something so linear and sequential as, in modern terms, a plot. The whole of the next chapter will be devoted to an analysis of those aspects of medieval doctrines of structure and ordering which particularly illuminate the *Canterbury Tales*. But, though form does mean arrangement, it also is defined by the whole constructed by the sum of an arranged set of parts. One may discuss form by discussing possible arrangements of parts, as we shall do in the next chapter. But one must also consider what whole, or wholes, certain kinds of formal procedures are capable of constructing. With this consideration we conclude our medieval definition of story.

Theorists such as Geoffrey of Vinsauf recommend a rhetorical organization for poetry, and commentators reflect this recommendation when they divide their poems into *prohemium* and *tractatus*. But organization is not quite the same as form; modern critics have been misled in trying to deduce formal principles of coherence and unity from recommendations of rhetorical organization, which presume a material already unified on its own formal grounds, and therefore capable of being presented artificially by means of beginnings in medias res and digressions to parts not in the natural order. Organisms...
zation is not, therefore, the same as form or unity, but often exists in counterpoint to it. Form itself medieval critics discussed in their commentary accessus under the topic of formal cause. The subject has been dealt with extensively elsewhere; here we summarize only as much material as will make clear the critical point.44

Medieval accessus occur in two primary forms: an earlier one, deriving from Servius, in which such subjects as title, author, purpose, and so on are discussed, and a later one in which most of the same subjects were included under schemata derived from the four Aristotelian causes. One Servian topic was the modus agendi; in the Aristotelian accessus the equivalent is the forma tractandi, one of the two subheads under formal cause. It is here that late medieval critics defined their doctrine of literary form. Conventionally, formal cause included two subtopics, the forma tractatus and the forma tractandi, sometimes explicitly equated with the modus agendi. The forma tractatus was usually explained as the formal divisions of the work under consideration—for Ovid’s Metamorphoses, the forma tractatus would be the division of the work into fifteen books, and within them into the mutationes which were the concern of individual stories.45 The forma tractandi was conventionally defined in terms of five modi, with which modern scholarship is chiefly familiar because of the listing of them in Dante’s letter to Can Grande (along with another anomalous group of five). They are as follows: “definitivus, divisivus, probativus, improbativus, et exemplorum positivus.”46 This list of five modi occurs over and over again. Even where there is variation, it is often more terminological than substantial, as when collectivus or inferential is substituted for probativus and improbativus.47

What this analysis means is that medieval commentators understood poetry in essentially discursive terms. The definition in terms of hypothetical verbal constructs with which modern criticism is familiar would not have made sense to them. The words of poetry, like all other words, conveyed information related to truth, and the formalities which defined their integrity were the same ones which defined the valid discourse of logic. The metaphors and comparisons and analogous or associative relationships which poetry has always asserted, therefore, must not have been seen as anything special, or foreign to the normal operations of reality; this terminology of the commentators makes clear that these features, which we would call the habits of poetry, were received, like everything else in what was read, as the conveyors of information, as descriptions of what was.

If poetry is a valid discursive description of the real world, capable
of being received as proof, refutation, division, definition, and example, then obviously the world which it describes is not the same as ours. The chief differences have been defined in many ways, all tending toward the same meaning—for our purposes here, we define them as, for the Middle Ages, a fundamental trust of analogy as an organizing principle for reality, and a willingness to believe that the material facts of things are ontologically implicated in the intentionalities of God and man, and therefore operate rhetorically as well as in themselves.

According to Sheila Delany, the medieval trust of analogy came under substantial attack in the fourteenth century. This is certainly true, both from the standpoint of professional philosophy and as a characteristic of polemic, willing to use whatever weapon came to hand. Nevertheless, the presentation of an array of conflicting authorities, arguments, or examples is not necessarily an admission that there is no possibility of judgment among them. Taken ironically, such an array may well define by analogy profound and seriously held doctrine. Robert Holkot, certainly a skeptic and by most accounts some kind of nominalist, nevertheless depends constantly on the kind of analogizing which trusts exempla, and even allegorizes them, as a way of making a point both clear and admissible. In her analysis of the problem, Delany is dealing basically with professed doctrine, and rather advanced doctrine at that, whereas we are trying to deal with the more fundamental level of posture or habit of mind. Thus medieval philosophers who believe themselves opposed to analogical thinking—and indeed by twelfth-century standards believe so correctly—nevertheless still make analogies far more readily and trustingly than we do now.

This habit of mind can be broadly defined by an example. The Vita Edwardi Secundi, a typical aristocratic chronicle, ignores a clearly causal pattern of explanation for a historical event in favor of an analogy-based one: "Perhaps a hidden cause, not immediate but remote, punished the earl. The Earl of Lancaster at one time bore off the head of Peter of Gaveston, and now by the command of the king, the Earl of Lancaster has lost his head. Thus, perhaps not unjustly, the Earl received measure for measure, as it is written in Holy Scripture: 'For with the same measure that yet mete withal it shall be measured to you again.' Thus Abner killed Asahel, striking him under the fifth rib, but Abner did not escape, for he afterwards perished by a similar wound." English history, in short, operates as it does in this case because there exists an ethical pattern, defining mea-
sures meted and received, which events can be expected to fit. One proves the fit by citing an analogous case, and such citing is a sufficient explanation of “causality.” William J. Brandt explains the procedure in this way: “History, for the author of the Vita, provided not examples but analogies of a most elementary sort. The link between the historical incident and the one being commented upon was some sort of aphorism at loose in the world and prior to both of them. Hence meaning was not implicit in an action sequence, it was implicit in the relationship between one sort of incident and another.”

Trust of analogies of this kind is obvious in Chaucer, as in his use of the Midas story as a comment on the Wife of Bath, Pygmalion and Jephthah as analogies to the predicament of Virginia, and Echo as conclusion to the Clerk’s Tale. Chaucer’s case is complicated by the frequent trust of medieval glosses to govern the full ironic significance of his analogizing exempla—we shall return to this feature of his work in some detail later. Here it is sufficient to note the simple fact of analogy itself—which persisted, of course, to validate the double plots of Renaissance drama.

A slightly more complex example is Gawain and the Green Knight, where the fact that Sir Bercilak and the Green Knight are the same person asserts within the poem a fundamental analogy, from which further analogies develop which interpret the poem’s structure and meaning. Formally, the basic analogy is exactly like the complex resonating relationship established and defined by biblical exegesis; the only difference between its operation in exegesis and its operation in the Gawain is that the primary relational energy is contained within the poem itself, whereas in exegesis only the allegorical level, which focuses upon Christ, stays within Holy Writ, and the other two—the tropology and the anagogy—assert relationships outside the text, with its hearer and with his potential and proper spiritual destination.

Exegesis, then, defines the sort of relationship which gives fundamental coherence to events and objects in the real universe, and therefore naturally to the parts and particulars of the fictional ones in poems. Generically, it is a relationship of analogy; specifically, as defined by the practice of medieval Bible study, it is a relationship operating on only certain kinds of particulars and within a certain classification of levels. Exegesis, and its derived structural principles, are not simply naively pious parallel-mongering, nor the result of the willingness to find religious meaning everywhere. The Middle Ages did so, and thus tempt those who read exegetical texts for their meanings instead of the forms of their procedure to find similar pieties.
over again. But the system as such requires no such results. In order to see it properly, as the general formal understanding which can permit us to find a medieval unity in the weltering and apparently incoherent parts of medieval poems, finished and unfinished, we must understand that, though medieval habits of reasoning from analogy often generated explicitly Christian meanings, they could generate other kinds of meanings as well. In the largest sense, analogical thinking simply presumes that full explanation of any given subject is accomplished in terms of an ordered array of parallel narratives and figures and propositions, each resonating in terms of all the others, and all properly dealt with and analyzed by a conscious elaboration of one-to-one parallels. Full explanation is achieved by assent to the asserted parallels. It is historically true, of course, that medieval thinkers elaborated these parallels most fully as they explained the Bible. But the same procedures worked in other contexts: none of the parallel narratives, propositions, or figures is required, formally, to be Christian. Structurally, it is the relationship which matters: structurally and formally, the relation between the Green Knight and Sir Bercilak, or between (for instance) the Wife of Bath and the loathly lady, or between Constance, Griselda, and May, can be best understood by knowing the form and character of the typological relation between David and Christ—not for the sake of Christ, but merely because this was the normal medieval illustration or defining example of the procedure. In other words, typology can generate relationships without also being required to generate pregiven meanings.

In summary, then, poetry is ethics, its parts are customs and beliefs and the examples which define them, its formal principles are the same as those of all valid discourse, and its relational principles are based on the great structural system of typology. This is a set of definitions which has no need for the validation of aesthetics, though it has a certain profound beauty of its own. It is a set of definitions which probably would yield interesting results if applied to any literature, and not just the medieval—its probable ability to make sense of such disparate writers as Faulkner, Joyce, and Durrell is a fascinating speculation. But its best power lies in its own time, because it can define for us the coherence of works like the Canterbury Tales, which have no satisfactory unity except a medieval one.

It is in the light of these definitions that we are able to claim for Chaucer's stories, and for the doctrine of story which they exemplify, such a high place. The prologue and link material of the Canterbury Tales frames fiction with a discussion of stories—of their possible ethi-
cal application, of their rhetorical quality, of their sources and authority, of their local and universal fitness. This discussion, though it is persistently ironic, and carried on by imperfect voices, invokes as a whole the high doctrine of fiction as ethical exemplar, and, even though ironic, permits an understanding of true doctrine. Behind it all is the concept of spiritual pilgrimage, which is itself ironically misappropriated, but which nevertheless is necessary to the enterprise as an informing presence, because it is ultimately that pilgrimage which Chaucer's stories of human truth will constitute, define, and make possible. Just as Dante's characters, in Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven, get to be for all eternity what their stories on earth achieved of definition, so Chaucer's stories, in accumulating sum, define a human condition subject both to spiritual definition and to spiritual destiny. To say this, however, is not in any sense to admit that we are trying to reach Baldwin's conclusion by a different route. We do not insist on the ethical character of stories, so that Chaucer's tales may serve as the signposts of the Parson's journey to heaven. Rather, we note the heavenly background, in order to add ultimate weight to our claim that the stories themselves are important. Chaucer's purpose is not to affirm the heavenly destination of mankind—rather, he assumes it, and having done so, he turns to the enterprise of defining in ethical and very specific terms his norms for the good human society.

To return to the *Knight's Tale*, which we have offered as Chaucer's central statement both of structure and of subject, we find that the central interest of the *Canterbury Tales* is defined there in human terms. The *Knight's Tale* is outside the New Testament dispensation. By choosing a story of pagan antiquity, Chaucer makes his purpose clear: he is concerned above all with earthly conduct. Fundamentally, the *Knight's Tale* is about three things: the efforts of Theseus to bring order to Thebes, to settle the struggle between Palamon and Arcite by the fit awarding of Emelye, and to reconcile himself through an act of understanding to the ironic but orderly ending of his problem, which is furnished him by the action of Saturn. In brief, the *Knight's Tale* is about order—order in the kingdom, in the family, and in the person. More than anything else, it is this ordering, on its parallel and mutually interpreting levels, which is the central subject and material of the *Canterbury Tales*. The human condition as something at once personal and social, and when social, both marital and civic, and under all conditions as something capable of being blessed by definition—this is Chaucer's subject. The *Knight's Tale* defines the climax of human experience in Theseus's arrival at a human understanding of events;
by implication, we expect that the *Canterbury Tales* as well, in its final act, will infer God's truth, but from a position which is in this world and this world alone.

The subject of the *Canterbury Tales*, then, is not a theological subject, really. At any rate, it is certainly not the pious subject which the dramatic speaker of the Retraction had in mind. *The Canterbury Tales* is a worldly collection, in the best sense of that word—its tales focus the attention of a profound moralist upon the world in which morals and mores are enacted. As we shall see, Chaucer's view of society is one which bases itself on marriage—real marriage, and not the disposable verbal integument of Bernard's meditations, though the allegorical overtones of marriage are admitted to enrich, or comment upon, its literal existence as the central structure of society. When interpreted by the focus of attention of the stories told, the pilgrimage is not really on its way to heaven—even though some of its members will doubtless eventually get there. Even the Parson's recommendations are fundamentally a way of dealing with the events of this worldly life—his negations are pointed to and focused upon this life.\(^{56}\)

If Chaucer's framing of ethical standards has overtones of theological terminology, it is because his culture provided only one context in which definitions of the human condition could be stated seriously, that is, a Christian one. The context of definition in which he places his tales draws on the assumptions about the order of the universe which Christian philosophy had taught him. The definition he achieves is not by overt statement, and above all not by some reductionist departure, on the wings of allegory, from any discardable letter of story or experience. Rather, he adopts the exemplary language of storytelling, in which the dialectic between ideal and real, definition and fact, role and person, intention and act, are embraced and appreciated, as well as resolved. The theological flavor of his ultimate reference points does not make him unusually pious, but rather a man of his own time. The evidence of his life and works really implies that he was happily skeptical, possessed of a faith which is partly worldly wisdom and partly the sophisticated invulnerability of one not easily committed or involved.

At the same time, he was a man who still held out hope that truth could be spoken with some exactness. Chaucer's strategy is nominalist, not Platonist, as would be expected of a person of his time and nation, but it is still capable of achieving reasonable certainty, and it certainly must not be mistaken for too open-ended a skepticism.\(^{57}\) The irony of this life for Chaucer holds the promise of the ideal truth of the next;
the relentless exposure of the hollow promises and foolish actions which fail to organize men into proper hierarchies and orders suggests his belief that such hierarchies must be discovered and adopted. Moreover, the range and variety of his exempla of comic failure and occasional saintly or exemplary success suggest that behind these particulars there can be found the universal that is true. The discovery of that universal awaits, now, the principle on which his particular cases are to be related to one another. This is the subject of the next chapter.

1. Chaucer's medieval self-consciousness as an artist is obscured for us by our own various modern notions of art and the aesthetic, and especially by some critics' desire to read all poetry as essentially about poetry. These critics, in an atmosphere of uncertainty about the meaning and ground of discourse as such, take all poetry as in a sense only about itself, engaged ultimately in that deconstructive autonomy which is its only possible validation. Such thoroughgoing pessimism is not to be found in Chaucer, not even in the House of Fame; nor is it to be found in medieval nominalism. A failure to be Platonist is not necessarily a surrender to nihilism, nor even, in any radical sense, skepticism. Gabriel Josipovici's essay "Chaucer: The Teller and the Tale," in his The World and the Book: A Study of Modern Fiction (Stanford, 1971), pp. 52–99, is, we think, the most brilliant appropriation of Chaucer for the modern poetic that has been written to date; its instructiveness exists in a mode to which its historical incorrectness does not relate. But the possibility that such an essay can be written makes historically responsible description of Chaucer's medieval sense of himself as a poet extremely difficult. Aspects of this description are achieved by Eugene Vance in "Marvelous Signals: Poetics, Sign Theory, and Politics in Chaucer's Troilus," New Literary History 10 (Winter 1979): 293–337, paradoxically in the context of relating medieval literature to contemporary literary theory. The best full study of Chaucer's theoretical attitude toward poetry is a dissertation by R. A. Shoaf, Mutatio Amoris: Revision and Penitence in Chaucer's The Book of the Duchess, (Cornell University, 1977), but it deals more with the poetic that Chaucer rejects than with the one he achieves.

2. Because our focus is on Chaucer and on the statement which his story collection achieves, we have no scope for treating any but the nearest of his antecedents. On the relation between fiction and truth we must at least cite Wesley Trimpi's closely reasoned and already classic studies "The Ancient Hypothesis of Fiction: An Essay on the Origins of Literary Theory," Traditio 27 (1971): 1–78, and "The Quality of Fiction: The Rhetorical Transmission of Literary Theory," Traditio 30 (1974): 1–118. Chaucer's literary attitudes fall near the end, but definitely within, the rhetorical tradition that Trimpi defines.
3. The strength of the medieval belief in prologues, as something as obviously a proper part of literary discourse as, today, lead paragraphs are of the writings of journalists, is proved by Chaucer's medieval editors. J. S. P. Tatlock, in "The Canterbury Tales in 1400," PMLA 50 (1935): 119, notes that the text is more complete in presenting prologues for the tales than in providing endlinks. The first editors of the poem, in providing spurious materials intended to disguise the incompleteness of Chaucer's work, regularly added prologues. Their practice with endings is less attentive and reflects medieval rhetorical manuals, whose doctrines of conclusion were brief and inconclusive—one finished a work by stopping.

4. Chaucer's own conclusion agrees with the consensus of criticism in finding the ending of the Miller's Tale an ostentatious example of poetic and real justice. Neither Chaucer nor modern critics seem disturbed by the fact Aliosoun gets off scot free, though she has presumably been as much enveloped in sin as Nicholas. Aliosoun functions more as occasion than person, as do the other "awardable" women in the first fragment; the failure of novelistic realism which this function enacts is concealed by Chaucer's exuberantly circumstantial narrative, but it is a failure nevertheless. We should probably take it as evidence that Chaucer was interested in something else—in this case, in rules and intrusions against them. His focus is therefore on the intrusive male and his supposedly sovereign adversary, and the story is, as an example, discursively complete, even if we have a character left over. Cf. Morton W. Bloomfield, "The Miller’s Tale—An UnBoethian Interpretation," Medieval Literature and Folklore Studies: Essays in Honor of Francis Lee Utley, pp. 205-11.

5. Just what constitutes the "ernest" and the "game" of the pilgrimage and of the tales has been discussed recently by a number of scholars: Owen, Pilgrimage and Storytelling in the Canterbury Tales, pp. 3-6; Joseph, "Chaucerian 'Game'—'Earnest' and the 'Argument of Herbergage' in the Canterbury Tales," pp. 83-96; and William J. Brown, "Chaucer's Double Apology for the Miller's Tale," University of Colorado Studies: Series in Language and Literature 10 (1966): 15-22. The issue of earnest-game is related by Owen, in particular, to the general question of Chaucer's attitude toward poetry, as recorded in the Parson's Tale and Retraction; it is linked, as well, to the specific defense of poetry as accurate reporting, to be found in the General Prologue and the Miller's Prologue, by Brown.

6. But not his later scholarly ones, as all who have seen in him a "momentary conversion" betray. See the survey of criticism offered by Halverson, "Chaucer's Pardoner," pp. 184-202.

7. Chaucer and the Shape of Creation, p. 127.

8. "... and thus by oon assent/We been acorded to his juggement./And thereupon the wyn was fet anon;/We dronken, and to reste went echen" (I [A] 817-20). The Host also confirms his authority by a kind of oath on drink: "As evere mote I drynke wyn or ale,/Whoso be rebel to my juggement" (I [A] 832-33).

9. "Let us lighten the useful work of our hands by varied speech and let us in turn say something for our empty ears, in order that the time does not seem long."
10. "re vera fuerunt [Mineides] optime potatrices, que spernebant Bachum dicentes Bachum minime posse nocere. Unde Bachus contemptus telas earum in vineas id est pro vino et vineis vendi fecit. Vel quia hedere ad modum vinearum serpunt, dicuntur mutate esse in hederas. Ipse vero in aves, quia venditis omnibus que habeant, a patria sua exulantes auffugerunt. Sed in vespertilionibus pocius quam in alias aves mutate sunt quia de nocte pocius quam de die vacatur potationi, sicut et aves ille pocius de nocte quam de die volant" (Ghisalberti, “Arnolfo,” p. 211). “ Truly the Minyades were above all drunkards, who spurned Bacchus, saying Bacchus was wholly powerless to be harmful. Wherefore Bacchus, contemptuous, made their weaving into vines, that is, to be sold for wine and vines. Or since ivy creeps in the manner of vines, the Minyades are said to be changed into ivy. But they, changed into birds, since all the things they had were sold, and exiled from their own country, fled. But they were changed into bats rather than other birds because in the night rather than the day they are given up to drink, so also those birds fly in the night rather than in the day.” Bersuire and Giovanni del Virgilio have substantially the same interpretation.

11. "Selonc que la fable devise/M'est avis que Bacchus despriso/Cil qui vins boit outre mesure / Et cil qui dou boivre n'a cure. / Ces trois serours le desprisoient. / Quar a outrage le buvoient” (4. 2488-53) (Ovide moralisé, ed. C. De Boer, [rpt., Wiesbaden, 1966], 2:63-69).

12. This obligation to verbatim reporting of one’s materia, of course, is not to be found in medieval manuals of poetic, nor in Chaucer’s handling of his own known sources. To profess it is merely one more profession of dependence on individualized exempla, whose eventual complex interrelationships, and not their actual language or intentions, will define the truth. Cf. Brown, “Chaucer’s Double Apology for the Miller’s Tale,” pp. 15-19, which links the appeal to accuracy with the statements on poetry’s value in the Retraction, particularly with the phrase, “al that is writen is writen for oure doctrine,” from St. Paul. See below, note 15. Chaucer makes use of this argument from verbatim reporting in the Manciple’s Tale, as well; the place of the question in the tale is discussed by Britton J. Harwood, “Language and the Real: Chaucer’s Manciple,” Chaucer Review 6 (1972): 268-79.


14. Olive Sayce, “Chaucer’s ‘Retracciouns’: The Conclusion of the Canterbury Tales and Its Place in Literary Tradition,” Medium Aevum 40 (1971): 235. Judson B. Allen, in “The Old Way and the Parson’s Way,” pp. 255-71, also suggests the Retraction’s conventionality and the necessity for its dramatic inclusion in the Tales, and further undercuts the Baldwin position by suggesting that Chaucer intended ironic overtones for the Parson’s suggestion of penance as the right end of pilgrimage. R. K. Root, in “Chaucer and the Decameron,” English Studies 44 (1912): 1-7, rightly notes that both Boccaccio and Chaucer offer comparable apologies for coarse tales, while justifying them on the grounds of their admissibility in a game. Most important, however, Root identifies the Retraction and the prologue of the Miller’s Tale as two presentations of the same “formal apology.” See also W. H. Clawson, “The Framework of the Canterbury Tales,” in Wagenknecht, ed., Chaucer, pp. 3-23; and Hubertis M. Cummings, The Indebtedness of Chaucer’s Works to the
Italian Works of Boccaccio (1916; rpt., New York, 1965), pp. 177-178. Of course, the argument that the Retraction is an integral part of the Canterbury Tales does not end in itself the controversy over the rejection of Chaucer’s art which the brief conclusion provides. Some scholars have argued that it is, indeed, conceived as an integral part of the Canterbury Tales, and a judgment offered on its artistic merits. This is true of Owen, Pilgrimage and Storytelling in the Canterbury Tales, p. 6; Alfred David, The Strumpet Muse: Art and Morals in Chaucer’s Poetry (Bloomington, 1976), p. 240; and others.

15. Caxton, one of Chaucer’s first editors, echoes this phrase, in a reference to a specifically literary product, in his preface to Malory’s Le Morte Darthur. See The Works of Thomas Malory, ed. Eugene Vinaver (London, New York, Toronto, 1954), p. xvii: “But al is wryton for our doctryne, and for to beware that we falle not to vice ...” We find the phrase as well, of course, in the Nun’s Priest’s Tale (VII 3442 [B² 4632]). For a discussion of Chaucer’s understanding of the phrase, see Brown, “Chaucer’s Double Apology for the Miller’s Tale,” pp. 21-22; and Paul Ruggiers, “Some Theoretical Considerations of Comedy in the Middle Ages,” in his Versions of Medieval Comedy (Norman, Okla., 1977), p. 15.

16. Boggess, “Averrois Cordubensis,” p. 11. “Man among the other animals is delighted in the understanding of things which he perceives now in the senses and also in their representation or imitation. And the sign of this, that is, that man is naturally pleased and delights in this understanding, is that we are delighted and we rejoice in the representation of some things in whose sense impression we are not delighted.”

17. Ibid., p. 9. “... is sometimes chosen to present the decent, expressing it strongly, and sometimes it is changed so as to present something shameful, similarly expressing it strongly.”


19. This is the reason why the “dramatic principle” yields limited and misleading results. The dramatic principle makes the stories relative to the speakers, rather than the speakers relative to the stories, less real than the stories and under the judgment of the stories. Thus the dramatic principle reads the Canterbury Tales backwards, as one might do who relished ice cream cones but threw the ice cream away.

20. The best full presentation of this point of view is R. E. Kaske, “The Knight’s Interruption of the Monk’s Tale,” ELH 24 (1957): 249-68. He pairs the knight and the monk, and shows how the Monk’s Tale is “philosophically incomplete” (p. 261) in the light of a proper understanding of Boethian fortune. In comparing the Canterbury Tales with the Monk’s Tale as tale collections, we presume substantially the incompleteness which Kaske argues.

21. The Knight seems to have a taste for comedy, that is, stories of rising fortune that end in success and happiness; it is a taste appropriate, of course, to the Canterbury Tales. On the medieval categories of comedy and tragedy, see Ruggiers, “Some Theoretical Considerations of Comedy in the Middle Ages,” pp. 2-5; and the discussion that follows below, in this chapter.

22. We are happy to thank John Leyerle for this notion, as developed in a seminar meeting at Yale University, and later presented in a paper, “Some
'Subtile Knyttynges' in the *Canterbury Tales,*" at the Chaucer session of the Medieval Academy, 11 May 1974. The Eucharistic overtones that this identification gives to the supper that the pilgrims eat together, in preparation for pilgrimage, suggest that Chaucer may have had in mind a parallel between his pilgrimage and one of the most important pilgrimage paradigms in medieval art, the story of the disciples traveling to Emmaus. For the history of the story and its impact on medieval religious drama, see F. C. Gardiner, *The Pilgrimage of Desire: A Study of Theme and Genre in Medieval Literature* (Leiden, 1971).

23. For the Middle Ages the *auctores* were the books of pagan antiquity recognized as culturally valid and, by derivation, medieval books other than the Bible and theology, narrowly conceived, which had authority. They are not the equivalent of what we call literature because, though most of them are by our terms literary, their medieval validation is different from the aesthetic one we would recognize and validates, in sum, a different array of books.

24. The classical source is probably Servius: "Et scieendum est, inter fabulam et argumentum, hoc est historiam, hoc interesse, quod fabula est dicta res contra naturam, sive facta sive non facta, ut de Pasiphae, historia est quicquid secundum naturam dicitur, sive factum sive non factum, ut de Phaedra," commenting on *Aen.* 1. 235; see G. Thilo and H. Hagen, eds., *Servii Grammatici qui feruntur in Vergilii Carmina Commentarii* (Leipzig, 1881), 1:89. "It must be understood that the difference between fable and argument, that is, history, is that fable is called a thing contrary to nature, whether it happened or not, such as the story of Pasiphae, [and] history is anything according to nature, whether it happened or not, such as the story of Phaedra." A French fourteenth-century commentary on the *Metamorphoses* elaborates: "Differencia est inter argumentum et historiam, fabulum et comediam. Argumentum est quando nos loquimur de veritate sub specie falsitatis ut appareat in denominatione athenarum, fabula quando nos loquimur de falsitate sub specie falsitatis ut per totum hunc librum appareat. Hystoria de veritate sub specie veritatis ut per evangelia et ecclesiasticum. Comedia de falsitate sub specie veritatis ut de mutatione nabugudonosor et Yo" (Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana MS Vat. lat. 1479, fol. 96). "There is a difference among argument and history, fable and comedy. Argument exists when we speak of truth under the appearance of the false, as appears in the naming of Athens; fable, when we speak of the false under the appearance of the false, as appears in this whole book. History [presents] the true under the appearance of the true, as in the Gospels and Ecclesiasticus. Comedy [presents] the false under the appearance of the true, as in the transformation of Nebuchadnezzar and Io."


27. In making this generalization, we mean in no way to slight or ignore the late medieval development of nominalism, which denies, in various ways, the real existence of these mental "things." At the same time, it is most important to note that, in the whole history of philosophy, the playing field does not always remain in the same place. In a period such as our own, when metaphysics has been seriously out of fashion for some time, it helps to remember that we are not covering the whole field, and that therefore the
whole range of medieval argument, realist or nominalist, exists from our point of view in an area of philosophy more "realist" than ours. In a word, the modern existentialist is far more nominalist than any medieval nominalist. Robert Holkot would consider himself very far from being a Platonist, in his own times and terms, but he would almost certainly find himself saying rather Platonist things if he were called upon to deal with Jean-Paul Sartre.

28. This was one of the Averroistic doctrines condemned by Bishop Stephen Tempier in 1270. The fact that it was eventually judged heretical should not mislead us; it is not the conclusion, but the more fundamental fact that the question was debated, that betrays the parameters within which the medieval point of view must be defined.

29. For illustrations of this commonplace, see Allen, *The Friar as Critic*, pp. 40–41.


31. The classic description of this life of high-style decorum is, of course, John Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (London, 1924).


33. Such a study is presently in progress. For a preliminary treatment, see Allen, "Hermann the German's Averroistic Aristotle," pp. 67–81.

34. Geoffrey assumes that a poet's materia will have its own order, which the artist may rearrange. Cf. Faral, *Les arts poétiques*, lines 87–100, p. 200; and Nims, *Poetria Nova*, pp. 18–19.

35. Assisi Bib. Com. MS 302, fol. 138v. "The behavior and vices of ladies are the material of the book"; "the beauty of the conditions [of humanity] which are in the book." For the full text of this accessus, with more extended analysis, see Allen, "Hermann the German's Averroistic Aristotle."

36. Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire*, p. 184. That "science deals with the universal and the necessary" is an Aristotelian commonplace (Etienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* [New York, 1955], p. 502); the significance of this commonplace for poetic theory needs emphasis, lest it be ignored by modernists on the one hand and abused by allegorical reductionists on the other.


38. This point is made with a correctly nuanced allowance for medieval sensibility by Elizabeth T. Pochoda in *Arthurian Propaganda: "Le Mort Darthur" as an Historical Ideal of Life* (Chapel Hill, 1971), pp. 28–29 and passim.
39. This phrase is from Aegidius Romanus, who uses it to account for the possibility of having *scientia* from the particulars treated in the Bible. See his *In epistolam B. Pauli Apostoli ad Romanos commentarii* (Rome, 1555), fol. Ir.


41. It is therefore most appropriate that one of the very few commentaries which assigns a medieval poem to some part of philosophy other than ethics should be that made by Robert of Sorbona on the *Anticlaudianus* of Alanus de Insulis: “Nota quod liber iste supponitur toti philosophie et non alci parti per se quia communiter agit de septem artibus liberalibus. Modus agendi triplex est: aliquando procedit rationaliter scilicet quantum ad naturalem proprie dictam et trivium, quandoque disciplinaliter quantum ad quadrivium, quandoque intelligibiliter quantum ad metaphysicam” (Bibliothèque Nationale, MS lat. 8300, fol. 9v). “Note that this book is classified under all philosophy and not under any part as such, because it deals commonly with the seven liberal arts. Its mode of procedure is threefold: sometimes it proceeds rationally with regard to the natural properly so called and the trivium, sometimes in terms of the disciplines in dealing with the quadrivium, and sometimes cognitively with regard to metaphysics.”

42. Epistola X (to Can Grande) in *Dantis Alagherii Epistolae*, ed. Paget Toynbee with C. G. Hardie, 2d ed. (Oxford, 1966), p. 174 (“man, according as he is liable to the reward and punishment of justice through free will in deserving and being guilty”).

43. The question is discussed by Robert Jordan, both in the book-length study *Chaucer and the Shape of Creation*, mentioned above, and in “The Question of Genre: Five Chaucerian Romances,” in *Chaucer at Albany*, pp. 77–79; and by Donald Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales*, especially pp. 1–20 and 210–26. We would distinguish between their comments and our own discussion primarily by our efforts to go outside the area of specifically “formal” or “technical” aspects of composition to search out principles of artistic organization and unity drawn from the artist’s perception of the coherence of his subject matter.


45. This is, in fact, the manner in which Ovidian commentators treated the poem, honoring the book divisions and then treating each separate *mutatio* in order.

46. Epistola X. *Dantis Alagherii Epistolae*, p. 175 (“defining, dividing, proving, disproving, and giving examples”).
47. Where there is variation, the conventionality of the list is proved by the commentator's reference to it, as in an Ovid commentary in Florence: "Causa formalis est duplex, forma tractatus et forma tractandi. Est autem modus quintuplex, scilicet divisivus [cod. divisius, and similarly for the other schemata] diffinitivus, exemplorum positivus, probativus, et reprehensivus et collectivus. In hoc libro triplex, scilicet divisivus, diffinitivus, et exemplativus" (Biblioteca Laurenziana MS Plut. 36.3, fol. 11r). "The formal cause is double, the form of the treatise and the form of the treatment. This is a fivefold mode: dividing, defining, giving examples, proving, disproving, and inferring. In this book it is threefold: dividing, defining, and giving examples." Thomas Waley's Boethius commentary is similar; after elaborately defining the form of the Consolation in terms of dialogue, Thomas says: "Vel potest dici secundum communiter loquentes, quod causa formalis tractandi est quintuplex: diffinitiva, divisiva, probativa, improbativa, exemplorum positiva, sicut videbitur in libro" (Boetius de consolatione, fol. bb5v). "Or one can say following convention that the formal cause of the treatment is fivefold: defining, dividing, proving, disproving, giving examples, as will be seen in the book."

48. Emphasis upon division betrays a medieval habit of mind which is often satisfied, for a definition of something, with the enumeration of its parts. This satisfaction even affects medieval usage—"dividere" may mean the same thing as "tractare," as when Bartholomew of Bruges, in his commentary on the Averroistic Poetics, says "primo dividit contextionem poeticam penes finem eius, secundo penes formam" (Paris, MS B.N. lat. 16089, fol. 146v; emphasis ours). "First he divides poetic composition with regard to its end, second with regard to its form."


52. Quoted in Brandt, The Shape of Medieval History, pp. 102-3.

53. Ibid., p. 102.

54. This interpretation is worked out in some detail in Allen, The Friar as Critic, pp. 145-49.

55. For the opposite enterprise, rooted in structuralism and its continuings, see Gabriel Josipovici, The World and the Book.


57. For a brief statement of the difference between Chaucer's nominalism and the skepticism which the modern critic is tempted to read into it, see the review of Robert Burlin's Chaucerian Fiction by Judson B. Allen, Speculum 54 (January 1979): 116-18.