Medieval Notions of Structure

The manuscripts which Chaucer's medieval audiences read and collected were very different from our own books; they always lacked title pages, sometimes were without date and attribution, and frequently seem to us to have no coherence other than that of a very loose anthology. The rule would almost seem to be that whatever is put together, belongs together, even if its arrangement and organization seem to have been determined only by the availability of exemplars or by the changing interests of the man making or ordering the volume. The extreme situation is met in the manuscript in which one man or a group of men over a span of years recorded treatises, poems, documents, even personal notes which were important to them. Unless we recognize that medieval principles of organization are different from our own, however, some medieval works planned as unified and organized statements might look to us like such random collections of materials drawn together only by the author's interest. Treatises collecting exempla, word lists presenting the various scriptural uses of a particular image, bestiaries, letter collections, even romance cycles—all have rules of selection which may not be evident immediately to the modern reader schooled by novels and the scientific method. The medieval fondness for collections, of all sorts, must be examined and appreciated in dealing with Chaucer's collection of stories, because the Canterbury Tales has at least as much in common with a distinctio or the Golden Legend as it does with either novels or a modern book of travels.

Collections usually have, either stated explicitly or concealed in their preparation, an idea or theme that the author uses as his stan-
A Distinction of Stories

The medieval principle of typology, for example, permits a number of different things, such as historical events or saints’ legends, to be collected in order to assert that in fact they resemble and interpret one central fact or idea. The normative array or *distinctio* is essentially the same, but procedurally just the opposite; under this principle a single idea or thing is examined by subdividing it into its kinds, or parts, presumably exhaustively. Both typology and the *distinctio* are associative in their logic, and each tends to generate the other. A group of typologically related things, once related and named, forms a *distinctio*; the parts of a *distinctio*, once assembled and listed, are very often typologically related. Whether we are furnished with the governing rule for the collection or must discover it by naming the common denominator for the materials collected, still the work itself is unified by the author’s effort to gather a set of significant cases, exemplifying some general idea. The unity of such a work depends not only on structure or arrangement, but also on the principle of selection which guided the author’s choice of materials.

Actual commentaries have very little to say about unity as such, not because no such thing existed, but rather because it was so obvious that it could be presumed. They are always quite able to name the *materia* of the work under discussion, and its end or purpose, as single or very closely related multiple things. The *materia* exists; what may vary is the treatment. The subject matter gives the work the unity which we have described above as relating, not to arrangement, but rather to the author’s selection of his material. In his treatment of that material, a poet might introduce artificialities in the form of manipulated beginnings, fit digressions, and all the ornaments of grammar and rhetoric, but these artificialities are not the essence of the piece; instead they are strategies with a rhetorical function, which can be used at all only because the material on which they are imposed is definite and clear enough to sustain a dialectic with them. The medieval poet’s first technique for creating a unified work of art was to treat his *materia* fully, because, in this way, he ensured that the unity of the *materia* would be reproduced in his poem.

We shall see, in examining some medieval poems, that searching for the presumed unity brought to the work by its subject matter is very helpful. In itself, however, this sort of unity does not explain the relationship of the work’s parts to one another, either in terms of arrangement or in the sense of logical connections between them. On the first point, arrangement, medieval poetic manuals are not very
helpful. They provide us with the principle of beginning, middle, and end, but in a conventional and rhetorically oriented manner with expectations far different from modern concerns for dramatic exposition. One may begin at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end, and one may in addition do any of these things in combination with a proverb or exemplum—altogether, there are nine ways to begin, eight of which are artificial and therefore preferable. Past this point one is left rather on one's own—one may condense or amplify, but the material itself is itself, and has its own natural coherence. From dictamen, and ultimately from the Rhetorica ad Herennium, we have the outline of exordium, narratio, conclusio. But here, as well, we are thrown back upon the material itself, which, being a discursive thing, constitutes the entire content of the work—thus, its narratio—and leaves the other two parts of the work only the task of introducing and summarizing, rather than treating some essential part of the work's content. Both these divisions, therefore, represent an artistic and rhetorical adornment directed at engaging and convincing an audience, of a material with its own parts and its own logic of connection between those parts.

Medieval commentaries usually mention the parts of a work in their analysis, but go on from the enumeration to discuss each part individually. They seem to presume that the wholeness of the material is explained fully by their explanations of all the individual parts. The kinds of connections which we would call image patterns, relating and enriching the meaning of various details of the poem, exist and may be explained in terms of a variety of relational strategies, irony, or other conventional allegorical patterns of association. In order to understand this process of association, we must examine it at work. Still, commentaries, in their discussion of introductory material, shed some light on the medieval sense of the way parts related to one another, although their primary focus was on the rhetoric of audience response.

The commentary analysis of beginnings is conventional. A particularly elaborate version of this convention occurs in a Venice commentary on Statius:

dicturus est. Ibi attentos, ubi invocat, benivolos. Nam tunc quoddammodo manifestatur modus tractandi, et in modo tractandi sunt semper lectores benivoli. In narratione vero dociles.6

Giovanni del Virgilio says more simply: “Hiis visis veniamus breviter ad libri divisionem. Dico ergo quod liber iste more poetico dividitur in partes tres, quia primo proponit, secundo invocat, tercio narrat.”7

Another Statius commentary explicitly uses the word prologue:

Unde sciedendum est quod auctor iste more poetarum facit prologus in quo proponit et materiam dicendorum [sic]. Secundo invocat et auctor, primo in generali ibi Unde iubetis ire dee, secundo specialiter ibi Quem prius heroum clia dabis. In invocatione generali movet duas questiones sive interrogationes: prima est an debeat incipere a remotis antecesoribus [sic] Thebanorum et primis fundatoribus enumerando antiquas antiquitates que precesserant propositum quod intendit describere, et hanc solvit ibi longa retro series. Secunda questio est a quo debet incipere. Multi fuerunt proximi et confines huic materie an debeat incipere a pio an a crudeli et hanc solvens incipit ab impio scilicet Edipo idest a domo et familia Edipi.8

The invocation, as the commentator makes clear, is more than simply a request for aid of the inspiring gods; rather, it is a request for aid in a project which is explicitly defined, or (as here) for which alternative definitions are given. Thus the invocation functions as summary exposition and would naturally render the audience “attentos.”

The prologue is further defined in a commentary on the Poetria Nova of Geoffrey of Vinsauf, now in Assisi.9

Dividitur ergo liber iste prima divisione in duas partes, scilicet in prologum et tractatum, quia incipit si quis habet fundare domum, et quia in prologis solent poete invocare et proponere, in tractatu vero narrare quod intendunt. Ideo prologus iste dividitur in duas partes. Et nota proprie dixi in prologum et non in prohennium et tractatum quia sicut dicit Aristoteles 3o Rhetoricorum prohennium est principium orationis sicut in poesi prologus et in fistulationem preludium, ex quo patet quod cum autor iste determinet de poesi sive de arte poetica et utamur poemate pro illo quod premit tit proprie debet dici prologus quamvis etiam communiter loquendo possit dici prohennium quia hec idem sunt substantia et non differunt nisi ratione.10

Generic distinctions, in other words, are not substantial but merely analytical. There is a terminology appropriate to each of the various kinds of act which relate performer or communicator to audience, but the kinds themselves are substantially the same. In each case there is a beginning, which introduces rather than causes; a middle, which treats or narrates or presents rather than continues; and a conclusion, which stops or summarizes rather than provides a climax. All this is
implied in the rhetorical basis of medieval organizations of communication.

We have already seen that the links collectively are about storytelling and the proper and improper uses of fiction. In addition, of course, they are opinions, and therefore necessarily opinions of people. In order fully to understand what Chaucer means by giving us this kind of prologue for his Tales, and in what way he intends to render us attentive, docile, and benevolent, we must consider the General Prologue from the viewpoint of its rhetorical, rather than its sententious, function.

In 1970, at the Modern Language Association convention, Donald R. Howard made the brilliant suggestion that the General Prologue was a memory system in which the pilgrim portraits correspond to the grotesque images in places of classical theory, and the exemplary ones of medieval practice. In this light, the seemingly haphazard materials of the General Prologue make ordered sense:

If you take the description of the Prioress and her followers and that of the Guildsmen and their cook as single descriptions (which they are), and if you count the description of the Host, the portraits of the General Prologue can then be seen arranged symmetrically into three groups of seven, each headed by an ideal portrait:

Knight: Squire, Yeoman, Prioress, Monk, Friar, Merchant
Clerk: Man of Law, Franklyn, Guildsmen, Shipman, Physician, Wife
Parson & Plowman: Miller, Manciple, Reve, Summoner, Pardoner, Host

Howard goes on to admire the "mixture of particularities and abstractions" in the General Prologue and relates these to the emblematic or typical significance of the characters, as well as to their individuality. The General Prologue then, "is not just the beginning of the work, but its heart or backbone."

Howard does not develop the emblematic or abstraction-oriented implications of his insight. It is, however, both possible and instructive to do so, as a way of seeing just what the General Prologue is about, and therefore as a way of discovering just what and how it introduces. In the first place, all these people are estates, or types, even though their portraits are individualized into a certain moral ambiguity and the point of the usual satire is blunted. Second, the groups, which we think Howard has correctly identified, can be usefully distinguished. The three ideal types—Knight, Clerk, and Parson-Plowman—are ideal for slightly different reasons: the Knight for what he is, the Clerk for what he knows, and the Parson and Plowman for what they do. The same distinction can be applied to the groups these ideal
The effectiveness of Chaucer's catalogue of pilgrims used to be attributed to his keen "camera eye"; more recently we have praised his deftness in choosing descriptive details which conjure up, à la Dickens, the wealth of human types. But Chaucer's directory of pilgrims, both its individual entries and in its schema of categories, gains especially from Chaucer's evident skill in the medieval art of list-making. The multitude of lists that come down to us from the period include many that call to mind Borges's Chinese encyclopedia: they are offered to us as normative and complete, yet the principle of their coherence eludes us and they may appear simply arbitrary. There are the obvious seven sins and seven virtues, five joys, four levels of meaning—but far beyond this it is impossible to avoid noticing the habit, probably homiletic, of casting one's outlines and one's discussions into this form. In its most elaborate manifestation, which occurs in the context of allegorical exegesis, this habit of schematization through lists produces the distinctio.¹³ The distinctio, most simply, is a list of the allegorical meanings of a thing. More elaborately, it is a list of the characteristics of a thing whose allegorical meanings all refer to the same object. Most broadly, in the use reflected in the practice of Hugh of St. Cher, the distinctio becomes any classification of kinds considered as a meaningful and normative array. Though of course most lists are never complete in the absolute sense, medieval distinctiones indulge a rhetoric of completeness. Things exist in bono three ways, in malo five. God rules in seven ways; there are five kinds of sleep, six fears, and three obediences.

It is by analogy with the distinctio that the list of pilgrims in Chaucer's Canterbury prologue can be understood most profitably. These people are a normative array, sufficient for the definition of the category "man." Men can be distinguished in three ways—according to their types, according to their learning, and according to their actions of stewardship. More simply and obviously, man is soul,¹⁴ mind, and body. The types of men are seven: knight, squire, yeoman,
and so forth. The types of learning are also seven: five in *bono* and two in *malo*. The good ones are logical, legal, manual, geographical, and medicinal; the bad ones are gluttony and lust. The men of action are more simply various; what makes them a normative array, sufficient for definition, is that each of them, whether honest or dishonest, does his work in stewardship, and thus by responsibility to other people implies the social interconnections which constitute human society in its wholeness. The list is framed, ironically enough, by the pastor of the church and the *viaticum* of the pilgrimage, the one responsible for the cure of souls and the other responsible for the care of bored souls.

It is this normative array of human beings, who are the *auctoritates* of Chaucer's *summa narrativa* and at the same time the prologue exempla, who, sometimes with and sometimes without proverbs as well, introduce Chaucer's tales individually and collectively. To call them this, and to classify them in terms of abstractions, should in no way imply that they are not particulars. In this nominalist world they must be that, of course. We mean merely to claim that additively they can constitute universals as well as exist in themselves. In this function they are different both from the poetic figures which preceded them, who tended to evoke universals by their individual power as constructed allegorical figures, and from later figures such as Hamlet and—at the other extreme—Gatsby, who claim universality by the very virtue of their particular concreteness.

Chaucer's own beginning, for the whole book, is a proverb, or rather, a variant of a proverb. In its usual form, it is "In the spring, a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love." Chaucer's variant, in the spring "than longen folke to goon on pilgrimage," is complexly ironic. The Easter evocations which Baldwin finds in this passage are there, but only in absence. The fact is that these pilgrims are not penitential, not serious, not even very religious—pilgrimaging, more than Canterbury, is their goal. Proverb plus pilgrims gives us a world very much in medias res, and determined to stay that way. This world, as prologue, introduces a collection of stories which comment on, evaluate, and give ethical definition to those middle things, those things of this life, with which the estates satire types of the prologue have, as we first meet them, such a morally ambivalent relation. In a way, Chaucer gives us not six characters in search of an author but thirty plus in search of definition, fortunately at a time and place where story, as such, had the power to furnish such a definition, because both story and definition had been at that time and place so fortunately understood.
We have thus far explained how various medieval formal principles—the principle of prologue and narration, the principle of the *distinctio* or normative array, and the specific principle of fourfold classification (itself a kind of *distinctio*) defined by the usage of Ovid and descent-into-hell stories—are medieval principles of literary criticism suitable for application to Chaucer. It remains to try to define the connectedness itself. That is, once we know where, by medieval standards, to define the borders between the parts of Chaucer’s work, and once we know how to classify these parts by fit medieval categories, it remains to define the principle by which these parts, as such, can be presumed to be related into a whole. That principle, in the broadest terms, is analogy. The parts of a whole signify their common and single theme by being, in some way, like that theme, and therefore also like one another. The most complex and most influential example of this analogical unity which the parts of a text may achieve is, of course, the unity for the Bible achieved by typological exegesis. By the end of the Middle Ages, typological exegesis had engendered habits of reading and writing which achieved this same kind of unity for most texts and even most events, even for materials which signified no explicitly Christian theme, or which had no actual Christ at their centers. We have already alluded to the suggestion that the relation between the Green Knight and Sir Bercilak, which we mean when we say that the one “is” the other, is a typological relationship—that is, an analogical, allegorically one-to-one relationship between two independently existing entities of the sort defined by a thousand years of biblical exegesis. The same analogizing relationship seems to obtain quite generally in late medieval structures.

Of literary examples, Dante’s *Commedia* is the one most notably exegetical. In the letter to Can Grande, Dante himself claims for his poem a typological organization.¹⁶ Much of the burden of Charles Singleton’s great work on the *Commedia* has concerned itself with elucidating relationships and meanings which are typological,¹⁷ and he himself argues specifically to this point in “The Irreducible Dove,” claiming that the fiction of the poem is that it is not a fiction.¹⁸ Robert Hollander, in *Allegory in Dante’s Commedia*, not only defends the typological approach theoretically but, more important still, exemplifies it by showing how much of Dante’s meaning is carried by patterns of recurring figures, whose relationship to another and to the contexts in which they occur is figural. He speaks, for instance, of the “extraordinary use of figural techniques that intertwine through the discussions of love, the dreams, and the encounters with Matelda
and Beatrice in the *Purgatorio*." He goes on to discuss the various voyage images which Dante draws together: "Historically, the images make an imposing string: the ill-fated ships in *Aeneid* I, which are answered by the shipwrecked but safe Aeneas; the damned voyage of Ulysses; the voyage that is Dante's poem; the pilgrim ship that arrives safely at the shores of Purgatory, an angel on its poop; and now also on a poop, Admiral Beatrice, who is Supreme Commander of the fleet of which Dante's bark is one."

Ovid uses parallel stories and figures to construct, by simple analogy, a pattern of meaning which evaluates and relates the respective divinities and men; his patterns are of course not typological, though the medieval commentators eventually claimed that they were. For Dante, on the other hand, the long tradition of biblical exegesis gave rich definition to his method. Hollander puts it precisely: "The function of the allegorical sense [what we are calling typological] is to relate two historical events or things or persons, each of which has a discrete and particular historical reality in time, so that the relationship between them may express spiritual significance." Hollander finds that Dante wishes the incidents of his poem to function in a similar way with other parts of the work. Thus, the various voyages he mentions above are all linked together, all sharing a spiritual significance. Noting that Dante's poem includes figures from both the mythological history of pagan antiquity and the biblical history of Christianity, Hollander argues that Dante may have believed both to operate on a historical plane, which the text of his own poem may also reach. "All that must be understood is that for Dante the events recorded in the literature of pagan antiquity have, for the purposes of his fiction, as much historical validity as do the events recorded in the Bible. The latter may be more "true" in his eyes, but the situations of Aeneas or Jason are as significant for Dante's theory of the "true lie"... Again Charles Singleton’s phrase comes to mind: the fiction of the *Divine Comedy* is that it is not fiction. I believe Dante treats other poems, myths, and stories in the same way in the *Commedia*." Thus, the people and places mentioned in the *Commedia*, whether they come from myths, from the Bible or from Dante's own contemporary situation, all share a unity as part of "universal history" and so are all interrelated, and meaningfully connected with one another. "Seen with the eye of historical figuralism, each act in universal history has its part or future counterparts in other facts. It allows a polysemous interpretation that is both multitudinous and precise." Dante's literary application of biblical typology, of course, is Chris-
tian. This is natural, since the desire to find ties which unite disparate parts relates naturally to the great providential desire which has already related all parts of creation, in ideal at least, to the fact of Incarnation, which is the center and consummation of creation. Thus writing about the world, and even the world of fiction, may be a celebration of God's plan, in a world already too well informed to need simple explanation. The fondness of the Middle Ages for elaborate and repetitious exempla is an implicit testimony of their belief in the unity grounded in the underlying presence of God. In Dante this testimony is explicit in his story, as well as implicit in the forms and structures by which he gave his multifarious story its divine unity.

But the same structures may be formally present without at the same time containing the explicitly Christian content. We have already analyzed the exegetical four levels as a purely formal principle; it remains here to see how this formal principle—the principle of unity through resonating parallelism between two or more already existing and organized things—may operate to unify books, and traditions of books, whose subject is something other than Christ or the creed or the Christian life as such. In order to make clear both this formal principle and the unity it achieves, we must conduct, under medieval rules, a thematic analysis. The rest of this chapter will be devoted primarily to setting up this analysis for the case of the Canterbury Tales. Before doing so, however, we think it instructive to mention briefly a few other examples.

Gower’s Confessio Amantis is an obvious instance. The eight books are arrayed under the titles of the seven capital sins, to which is added, in seventh place, the education of the prince; in each book the collection of stories told is coherent because all the stories share a thematic likeness. It is not always easy to explain precisely and simply the relevance of a given story to its asserted theme, but this critical problem only proves that an analogy may be powerful without being univocal or simple.

A more complex example is the Romance of the Rose, whose unity is founded on both internal and external analogies. The Romance, like the Canterbury Tales and the Metamorphoses, contains an assembly of storytellers who tell a great many tales, digressively strung on an inconsequential plot. Internally, tales actually repeated or repeatedly evoked, or tales placed in ostentatious parallel, are the key to the Romance’s thematic structure. Thus Narcissus parallels Pygmalion, and there is repeated reference to the Golden Age, the castration of Saturn, the birth of Venus, and the adultery of Mars and Venus.
Externally, and in a way which gives explicit thematic definition, the Romance mirrors, in combination, the Consolation of Philosophy and the Complaint of Nature.

The precise nature of the reflection has not been properly appreciated because it is negative and ironic. Thus critics have been misled into looking for things that the Romance of the Rose did say, which were clearly borrowed or adapted from the Consolation or the Complaint, rather than looking for the things which the Romance did not say, or got wrong, which one might expect Jean de Meun to correct had he wished to. Once we see that he must have made these errors and omissions deliberately, and that we therefore must expect the parallel between the Romance and its predecessors to explicate ironically or inversely, everything becomes much clearer.

Two facts are immediately obvious. One is that Jean de Meun has taken over all the sexuality of the Complaint, has made it the basis of his plot as well as the content of a good deal of discourse, and has at the same time explicitly denied to this sexuality the allegorical reference to ethical and philosophical truths which are, in the Complaint, its reason for being. The second point is that, though Jean includes in his poem the central character of the Consolation, Reason herself, and though in his part of the poem he discusses most of the various topics of the Consolation, from the goods of fortune analyzed by Reason to the problem of predestination and free will analyzed by Nature, he nowhere includes the great climactic doctrine of the meter, “O qui perpetua.” For this crucial middle point, on which the whole doctrine of the Consolation depends, Jean substitutes the ironic middle of more and more cynical advice from Friend, False-Seeming, and the Vekke.

In order to begin to read the Romance correctly, we must trust this external analogy and see the poem as one which advertises itself as having omitted something—as having omitted the climactic doctrine which would make Reason worth listening to, and having omitted the allegorical reference which would make what the Lover does, in the end, worth doing. This seen, we know what the poem is—not a narrative of a love story wildly padded out with digressions, but a coherent series of six discourses, each containing an array of exemplary stories, delivered by Reason and Friend, False-Seeming and the Vekke, and Nature and Genius. The frame—the love story allegory—is not the cause or structure of these discourses, but rather their result. Amant takes all the advice given him (Reason, after all, sends him to Friend by defining her highest potential self as a friend) and, as a result, goes, not from good to bad, but from bad to worse. His progress
exemplifies what the discourses, with great subtlety and ironic clarity, define.

In order to appreciate this clarity, this coherence, and this definition, we must as it were invert the poem—put aside the plot, take the digressions as the essence, and read in obedience to the logic of analogically ordered discourse rather than the logic of causally ordered action. In just this way, we propose, one understands the Canterbury Tales by inverting it, by putting aside the plot in order to read an array of stories. Our reading is made easier because for Chaucer, as for the Romance, we have external evidence—we have an informing analogy. It is, as we have repeatedly said, Ovid's Metamorphoses.

The medieval critics clearly saw Ovid's work as a story collection which could be taken as coherent on the basis of precisely this analogizing, thematic analysis which we have been defining here. In our own day, their understanding has received powerful confirmation by the reading of Brooks Otis, who has made what can justly be called independent modern discovery of precisely the same character for the poem. Otis recognizes, of course, the pattern which the critical tradition has always found—that of a chronological carmen perpetuum, extending from creation to the emperor, offering a miscellany of stories intended to praise the emperor. But in addition to, and more important than, this pattern, Otis describes the Metamorphoses as just that: an intricate series of transformations, arranged into four great parts, each with a central panel story surrounded by other similar stories which repeat with significant variation what they frame. These parts move from an exclusive concern with the gods to an ever-increasing and finally almost exclusive concern with men; the transformations move from the arbitrary and often comically undignified tricks of the immortal gods to the tragic calamities of men, with the transformation often acting as a literally enacted metaphor. Between the first and second editions of his book, Otis changed his mind about the ultimate meaning of the Metamorphoses and decided that the praise of the emperor was ironic or satiric rather than serious. But his view of the method remained the same. The essence of the Metamorphoses is not chronology, or praise, or frame, but stories—stories of transformation. As a concatenated series, they accumulate a meaning which is a definition of the nobility of human nature, and of the relation between the gods, men, and nature. They do so by an intricate and long-sustained pattern of parallelism and repetition, with incremental variations, clustered around the four great stories which constitute the centers of the four great sections of the poem.27
What Brooks Otis does for our day the medieval commentators did for theirs. They properly said that the material of the *Metamorphoses* was changes (mutationes); they divided the poem for purposes of analysis into separate stories of changes, without regard for levels of frame story and included story; and they analyzed the whole in terms of large categories of changes, all directed at a definition of the human condition in relation to man's material circumstances and his divine destiny. We must not let differences in terminology obscure for us the similarity of method, intent, and content which marks these two critical enterprises, one medieval, one modern. Together they make it clear that Ovid's *Metamorphoses* must join the *Commedia*, the *Romance of the Rose*, and, as we shall see, the *Canterbury Tales* as a work whose unity the principle of stories in parallel best explains.

We have already begun our analysis of the *Canterbury Tales* along the lines of investigation we have been outlining in this chapter. First, we named the parts of the poem as stories, whose elaborate prologue framework defined the poem's subject as ethical standards of conduct, presented in a form accessible and intelligible to man. The stories have in common a limited number of narrative situations, more than half of them describing an intrusion by an outsider into the harmony of a marriage, and most of the rest devoted to brotherhoods among men, usually including a clergyman, and difficulties which threaten to destroy the fraternal relationship. From the *Knight's Tale* and the tradition of Ovidian commentary, we found a division into kinds of moral activity which was helpful in distinguishing the kinds of stories into categories smaller and more specific than a division based only on the marital status of the characters could offer. Our classification of four changes enables us to identify four groups of stories, with each group exemplifying a particular kind of change and a particular kind of moral activity. We have identified four sorts of stories in the *Canterbury Tales*—tales of natural changes, whose preoccupation is with the nature and exercise of human authority; tales of magic, which furnish a normative array of disorders, illusions, deceptions, and mistakes; tales of worldly moral struggle, in which merely human solutions to the problem of orderly living succeed and fail; and tales of spiritual interpretation, which furnish a normative array of human postures within which given events may be confronted, lived with, and understood. Together the tales constitute a normative array of exempla, classified and defined according to their place in a fourfold *distinctio* of moral activity, whose common subject and final goal is a definition of just order in human affairs, and of the
human acts and human communities which constitute that ordered way of life.

In order to show all this meaning at work in the *Canterbury Tales*, we must obviously deal with each tale. To do so, we must arrange for the tales to occur in some appropriate order. As a framework for reading the tales, we have reordered the accepted fragments of the poem in a sequence reflecting the four kinds of Ovidian change, so as to make four groups of stories. Our purpose in this reordering, and this classification of stories into four groups, is essentially logical. The sequence which we propose is one which makes the significance of Chaucer's stories for a definition of human society clearly obvious and permits us to make a seriatim reading of stories in which the various parts and aspects of Chaucer's definition are logical, ordered, and coherent.

Since, in making this reordering, we respect the integrity of established fragments, we take advantage of as much of Chaucer's intention for the ordering of his collection as can be known. In so doing we have obeyed the critic's obligation to read the text as history has given it to him. But beyond this obligation we have felt not only free but obliged to order our discussion of Chaucer's tales in a way permitting greatest possible clarity to our argument. For the ordering of tales, and their classification into four groups, which supports this discussion, we wish to make one major and utterly serious claim, and several much more speculative ones. Our major claim is that this ordering is heuristically correct. It works. It grounds our reading. It was, in fact, a considerable catalyst for it. We found, as we worked, that having the tales in juxtapositions different from those familiar from the Ellesmere often stimulated insight. The tales responded well to having been classified, under the four Ovidian categories, into four quite speculative groups, and illuminated one another under the logic of the whole in precisely the way which medieval literary theory predicted. Therefore, on the grounds both of our a priori medieval definitions and of an experience of successful critical reading, we claim that our proposed order for Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is true in the only way which ultimately matters: it helps to make the work clear, both as a whole and in its parts.

Beyond this claim, there are several more speculative ones which we should make, because the order of the *Canterbury Tales* has been a much discussed topic whose bearing on our own proposal we cannot legitimately ignore. We are well aware that our order is not just a new one, but a new kind of one, whose proposal does not really enter into
previous discussion, but rather dismisses it as an enterprise wrongly grounded, and therefore unlikely to produce interesting results. The point at issue is basically this: one can order the surviving fragments of the *Canterbury Tales* in terms of some perception of the logical or thematic demands of the tales themselves, as we have done, or one can order the tales in such a way as to make as verisimilar as possible the plot of the Canterbury journey, including, of course, Chaucer's incidental geographical allusions. One can, in short, order by ordering the tales, or one can order by serving the frame. Given the condition of surviving manuscript evidence, one cannot really do both at once.

As it happens, we do not find arguments about the order of Chaucer's tales based on the map order of the towns between London and Canterbury very interesting. They are not medievally grounded, and they do not enrich our understanding of the tales. But we do not intend to be merely negative. Rather, we wish to suggest that asking a new kind of question generates the possibility of a rich new array of answers—we wish to suggest that in proposing a new kind of ordering for Chaucer's tales, based on considerations that have nothing to do with English geography, we are in consequence permitted to see the surviving manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales* in a new and fruitful light. Fifteenth-century scribes of these manuscripts ordered the tales in a variety of ways; we should take this variety as an opportunity to take seriously the work of a number of late medieval editors in reconstructing, as best they could, groupings of the tales in terms of which they would make a coherent whole. The standard presumption that the order must be geographical blinded scholars to the likelihood that these scribes were serious editors, because they manifestly took no interest in such evidence. Realizing that the tales, as exempla, may have a logical order permits us to realize that the scribes seemed to have operated under similar assumptions. Work based on such a realization has not even begun; surviving manuscripts must eventually be the basis of numbers of specialist studies, on the basis of whose accumulated speculations and analyses this whole question of ordering can be answered on much firmer medieval grounds. Meanwhile, our speculative leap forward to an experimental final answer will be, at worst, methodologically instructive and, at best, a possible achievement of what further study will confirm. We have not, ourselves made exhaustive study of the manuscripts, but we are encouraged to have found, for each of the joinings of two fragments which our reordering requires, at least one medieval editor who agrees.

More important than these specific correspondences, however, is
the fact, clearly proved by the manuscripts, that the medieval editors tried to present their material in coherent groups of tales. Modern scholarly discussion of these groupings and their rationale was conducted primarily at the time of the publication of Manly and Rickert's *Text of the Canterbury Tales* and tended to discount the importance of these groupings because of reservations about the editorial capabilities of the scribes preparing the manuscripts. Although we differ from their conclusions in many ways, we are indebted to Tatlock, Dempster, and other interpreters of the Manly and Rickert text for much valuable insight into the procedures of manuscript preparation. Although they disagree with the wisdom of medieval editors of the text, Demster and Tatlock acknowledge that the manuscripts were produced by men conscious of their responsibility to give the poem an arrangement.

Though the principles of editorial judgment at work in these manuscript orders are not approved of by either critic, still their analysis of the early history of text helps us to recover some medieval attitudes toward the poem, which we believe bear a different interpretation from that proposed by Dempster or by Tatlock. The scribes generally are interested in making their text as complete as possible and in giving the pieces they have the appearance of constituting the whole of the poem. Before we condemn the principle, we should bear in mind that the same desire to discover an arrangement revealing the wholeness of the *Canterbury Tales* lies behind most of the critical enterprises devoted to the poem and is certainly an important element in the selection process which lies behind even the most exhaustive of critical editions. Robinson's *Chaucer*, for example, acknowledges the existence of contradictory evidence of arrangement and of prologue links, but presents as a final text the best solution available to him to all the work's difficult passages. Another scribal practice that Dempster records, although she does not approve of it, is the conservatism with which scribes regard any testimony to manuscript arrangement they receive along with the tales. Such conservatism may be suspect, if we demand that scribes care as much about the geography of the journey as modern readers often do, but it is in keeping with the desire to retain any vestiges of the author's intention, which, in the absence of absolute evidence to the contrary, is understandably sought in any version of the text closer in time to the author than the scribe is himself. The transmission of certain variations from Chaucer's clear intentions for the fragments, particularly in the order of fragments E and F, may seem culpable, when modern searches for manuscripts reveal that other lines of transmission knew E and F in
their proper form. However, scribes appear to have been limited in their exemplars, a situation which they acknowledge in various ways and which often disappoints the hopes we see, preserved in spaces left for tales never received, to complete the whole text. In the absence of better information, their decision to remain faithful to the orders they have is understandable and acceptable; Dempster's rejection of their editorial choices, by suggesting only their desire to publish quickly and to make a profit, does not do justice to the difficulties faced by scribal editors and their achievement in disseminating the Canterbury Tales.

If we return to the manuscript order, we find that some groupings of tales, which violate no final judgment of Chaucer except the doubtful case of geography, suggest patterns of associations at work in the text which are not evident in the familiar Ellesmere Order. For example, three of the four textual traditions identified by Manly and Rickert place group G, that is, the tales of the second Nun and the Canon's Yeoman, after the Franklin's Tale and before the Physician's Tale. Many manuscripts preserve a provisional ordering of the tales of groups E and F, that is, the tales of Squire, Franklin, Clerk, and Merchant, made in early manuscripts before the authoritative forms of the links became available. Without exhausting the subject, we may suggest here the valuable new perspectives on the Canterbury stories which these alternative combinations of tales, familiar to many fifteenth-century readers, provide.

The position of the tales of Cecilia and the avaricious priest between the tales of Franklin and Physician provides a focus of theme and imagery which bridges the gap between, on the one hand, the tales of marriage commonly supposed to reach their culmination with the Franklin and, on the other, the tales on a variety of subjects comprising groups C and the lengthy B². The tales of group G juxtapose the pursuit of a virgin and the pursuit of gold, suggesting a contrast between the two activities. The same juxtaposition occurs in group C; the Physician narrates the sorrows of Virginia, the beset virgin child, and the Pardoner tells the story of the three gamblers in pursuit of gold. The two themes of winning a woman's love and pursuing wealth are combined in the next tale, the Shipman's account of a woman's success at equating the goods of marriage and the golden goods of buying and selling. Finally, the Prioress's Tale becomes the third tale of virgin children beset by public dangers in a series of six stories, with the alternating tales treating the theme of the avaricious pursuit of gold and its death-dealing power. The similarity between the stories
of Cecilia and the little clergeoun, and the possible significance of Chaucer's inclusion of the two saints' legends, is obscured in the Ellesmere Order because they are separated by the lengthy group B². In sum, it seems probable that the placement of group G before the Physician's Tale was prompted by a recognition on the manuscript editor's part that such positioning revealed the thematic unity drawing these tales together. It may be noted, as well, that a juxtapositional connection between the amorous pursuits of women and the avaricious pursuit of gold, suggested by group G, might be helpful in explaining the appearance of the tales of the Friar and Summoner among the tales of marriage in groups D and E.

Another very frequent variation from the familiar Ellesmere Order occurs with the splitting and rearrangement of groups E and F around group D. The order of the tales becomes Man of Law, Squire, Merchant, Wife of Bath, Friar, Summoner, Clerk, and Franklin. One benefit of this rearrangement is that the Wife of Bath's Tale, rather than her prologue, is given new prominence as the third story in which magical occurrences surround courtship and marriage. The magical tools of perception in the Squire's Tale give the heroine the means of learning the tercelet's sad lesson of trusting too much to a lover's promises; both in the fairyland atmosphere and in its theme of being able to see rightly the true desires and intentions of the opposite sex, the Squire's Tale is closely related to the Wife of Bath's, a connection hidden by the Ellesmere Order. The Merchant's Tale prepares both for the magical story of the Wife and her own lusty career with its narrative of May's treetop romance preserved by the intercession of the magical Pluto and Proserpina. Placing the Squire's Tale closer to the tale of the Wife of Bath brings to light the significance of her story, generally neglected in the studies of the marriage group in favor of the Wife herself and her experiences. It also serves to emphasize the themes of magical seeing and deception in love, which link together the stories of the Squire, the Merchant, the Wife of Bath, and the Franklin. Another benefit of the arrangement is to force the reader to weigh the various points of view on marriage against one another more carefully: a juxtaposition of the tales of the Clerk and the Franklin makes a total acceptance or rejection of either Walter's authoritarianism or Arveragus's surrender impossible.

These two medieval proposals for reordering and grouping certain of the Canterbury Tales are but examples of a great many which the manuscripts preserve. Another, clearly Chaucer's own, is the first fragment itself, whose series of Knight's, Miller's, Reeve's, and Cook's
tales is universally recognized as thematically coherent and logically ordered. Efforts to discover similar clusters of tales grouped about a common subject have yielded important readings, as in Bruce Rosenberg's discussion of the tales of group G and Penn Szittyà's discussion of structural similarities linking the tales of the Wife of Bath and the Friar. Such an approach to understanding the arrangement of the tales places primary emphasis on content, on what is being discussed; each section of the poem—tale, prologue, enclosed digression, or whatever—is examined for its mutually informing relations with the material around it. This approach, in the light both of medieval editorial procedure and of the clear intention of Chaucer's first fragment, is historically correct.

By contrast, the importance of geography as a clue to the final intended arrangement of the *Canterbury Tales* is questionable for a number of reasons. First, the evidence from geography is limited; references to time and place on the journey occur only rarely in the links and seem to be there more as local color than as direction of the storytelling. Second, the evidence from geography admits a number of contradictory constructions. Efforts to explain the tales as making up a trip to Canterbury cannot resolve the evidence, remaining in the text, that Chaucer was still considering the possibility of giving every pilgrim more than one tale (IX [H] 9-29). Some time conflicts, such as the juxtaposition of the Manciple's brief morning tale followed immediately by the Parson's afternoon tale (X [I] 2-5), remain, even after group B² is relocated in accordance with the Bradshaw Shift. The evidence of geography has permitted other scholars to argue that we have in the tales the remnants of a two-way journey. The principal challenge to this theory in the text is Chaucer's elaborate endpiece of the *Parson's Tale*, clearly identified with the coming to Canterbury. The drawback of arguing from geography, common to both the Bradshaw Shift and to proposals of a two-way journey, is that geography does not answer all the questions of arrangement which remain after the evidence of a geographical reference is fully correlated. The placement of some fragments remains the work of editorial hypothesis, rather than the determination of Chaucer's description of the journey. Third, geography is suspect because early editors take so little notice of it; we realize here that we are reversing the usual direction of this relationship, but we think with good reason. To modern readers, accustomed to think of Chaucer as a genius unappreciated in his own time, the geographical references have become a proof of a narrative plot, structured by the realistic material of
the actual road to Canterbury, and almost lost to us because of the blunted sensibilities of Chaucer’s first readers. It is argued that Chaucer never would have permitted errors in geography, because he knew the geography so well; yet Chaucer’s contemporaries surely were equally well acquainted with the road to Canterbury from London and would have been more disturbed than we are by inaccuracies of this kind, if such inaccuracies were really to be judged important. Both J. S. P. Tatlock and Germaine Dempster argue that early scribal editors willingly sacrificed accurate transmission of the poem for the sake of better sales; scribes frequently departed from their exemplars for the purpose of giving the text a surface appearance of completeness. Several manuscripts manufacture links to connect tales which are not joined, or to introduce tales without prologue material naming and introducing the speaker. Yet, in both alterations of links and manufacture of links, no medieval editor of the poem improved geography to give the poem an appearance of being finished, despite the fact that their readers obviously were closer than modern readers to the geographical facts, and more likely to be sensitive to them if they had been important. For all these reasons we would explain the geographical references in the links as merely realistic details, inserted provisionally to flesh out Chaucer’s frame story, and perhaps to be polished in a final revision which never took place. With Manly and Rickert, then, we would call it a probability that “in making allusions to time and place he [Chaucer] may have been guided by the needs of the moment, as Shakespeare was in his allusions to time, and not have considered carefully whether these allusions would fit into his general plan or would harmonize with one another.”

In absolute terms, moreover, the sequence of place names between London and Canterbury forms no plausible mnemonic series, either for medieval or for modern sensibilities. The art of memory practiced in the Middle Ages, and derived substantially from the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, specifies images in places, not times; and universal human experience confirms the fact that it is far easier to remember a number of items in correct order if they are composed in a single visual space than if they are ordered in time. The geographical ordering of the *Canterbury Tales* is not so much based on any temporal experience of the journey, medieval or modern, as it is on the modern scholar’s access to reliable maps—that is, to a visual mnemonic for his material. One may make a journey many times, and may know every town along the way, and still not be able to name them in order—the senior author remains to this day uncertain whether Cookeville or
Crossville, Tennessee, comes first on the way from Nashville to Asheville, and that after having made the preinterstate round trip once a year for twenty-five years, and with the aid of maps. We therefore conclude that any ordering of the *Canterbury Tales* based on allusions to place names is implausible both on medieval and on absolute grounds, and we therefore do not consult geographical references as evidence for the proper sequence of tales.

The order of tales which we propose is set forth in the following table, which includes also, for contrast, the Ellesmere Order, and, opposite each juxtaposition of fragments which we propose, the name of the manuscript or manuscripts which agree with it. In the rest of this chapter, we will consider the four groups which this order generates, their relation to one another, and their significance, in the light of Ovid's *carmen perpetuum*, as an ordered set of groups. In part 2 of this study, we will make a detailed reading of all the tales, following this new order.

With the tales thus ordered, we can begin to see the full complexity of the unity they achieve. The fundamental movement is one which begins in order, meets challenge by struggle, and finally reinstates order and understands it; this pattern receives full and stately definition in the *Knight's Tale*, to whose parts the four groups serially correspond. Then, echoing Ovid's chronological *carmen perpetuum*, the incipit tales of each of the four groups, taken as a series, define a pagan-to-Christian chronology, from pagan Athens to the early Christian St. Cecilia and the established imperial Christianity of Constance to the high medieval child saint of the *Prioress's Tale*. More important, the four kinds of metamorphoses of the commentators are adapted to the four steps of the action, and to the four groups which reflect and repeat them. In the first great section, fragment A, Chaucer examines social orders resting on a variety of systems of justice from high to low; the transformations in the section are all natural, wrought by men on men. In the section following Chaucer adopts the medieval formula for magical changes, under which "Things appear to be different, but are really the same." Some of the magic is the true marvel of saintly life, some of it is the fraud of alchemist and magician, and some of it is from faerie—in all of the stories Chaucer ties together the problem of true and false sight with the problem of a collapse of order through misunderstanding and misinterpretation. In the third section Chaucer is concerned with moral transformation, and here most strongly he concentrates his attention on the image of marriage as the figure of moral combat,
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<td><strong>VI (C)</strong></td>
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VII (B²)  
- Shipman's Tale
- Prioress's Tale
- Sir Thopas
- Melibeeus
- Monk's Tale
- Nun's Priest's Tale

VIII (G)  
- Second Nun's Tale
- Canon's Yeoman's Tale

IX (H)  
- Manciple's Tale

X (I)  
- Parson's Tale

III Moral  
- Man of Law's Tale
- Clerk's Tale
- Merchant's Tale
- Manciple's Tale

IV Spiritual  
- Shipman's Tale
- Prioress's Tale
- Sir Thopas
- Melibeeus
- Monk's Tale
- Nun's Priest's Tale
- Parson's Tale

(Laud 600; Paris)

(Holkham)

(Trinity Cambridge)

(Holkham; Hengwrt)
both within a person and between persons. Finally, the last tales in the Canterbury trip reflect, along with Theseus's speech on order, the human effort to regain control of the world through interpreting events; this action is linked clearly with the fourth kind of transformation, the spiritual, with the virtuous descent into hell and, most important, with the admonition to interpret earthly changes in terms of heavenly truths, which is the burden of the whole of the medieval Metamorphoses.

Thus, Chaucer does not stumble or ramble for lack of structure, as many critics have argued when stopped short by the question of the whole Canterbury collection. Rather, working from a traditional model, he has adapted the moralistic interpretation of the transformations of Ovid to the problem of the Christian's inability to remain constant before God and his neighbors. To underline the relationship to the model, and undoubtedly because he saw that the manner of telling was intimately bound up with Ovid's meaning, he took from the Metamorphoses a logic of both large-scale and small-scale design. Most significant of all, Chaucer, like Ovid, built his world of transformations on stories. Like Ovid he constructed a history of civilization built on its literature, on its great stories. We shall return to the significance of such a choice in the Epilogue. Here it is enough to say that by such a choice Chaucer was identifying literature with man's ability to reorganize his universe again successfully, after sin and error had repeatedly thrown it into confusion. In making this choice, Chaucer affirms both the ethical significance of story and the story quality of ethics. He places a higher value on story than can anyone whose categories are merely aesthetic, because he involves them directly in the real ordering of the moral universe. At the same time, because he puts stories at the center of his ethical enterprise, he asserts for reality all the decorous qualities which the stories in fact do have, and for which readers now tend to have only aesthetic appreciations.

In order to show how this structure works, we propose to analyze it in two stages. The rest of this chapter will be devoted to the sections as such, and to the contrapuntal chronology asserted by their four opening stories. Part 2 of this study will, presuming this larger order, focus on the more particular exempla of consuetudo and credulitas with which Chaucer accumulates his definitions of human nature and social order.

The tales which begin the four sections—that is, the Knight's Tale, the Second Nun's Tale, the Man of Law's Tale, and the Prioress's Tale—
cover, as we have said, the chronological range which extends from pagan times to high medieval Christianity. That is, the tales cover the range of history which constitutes the medieval sense of the past. Theseus, the virtuous pagan, achieves in story the same predictive order for which the Middle Ages prized Virgil and the literally pagan Consolation of Boethius. Like them, he qualifies as one of John of Salisbury's giants, on whose shoulders the Christians of a later age achieve their vision. As a pagan, he is preliminary, but assimilable; possessed of incomplete truth, he is yet one of the foundations on which later providential history could be built. The Second Nun's Tale of St. Cecilia deals with the era of primitive Christianity, and therefore with the saintly paradigm which defines the ideal of individual life. Within the social order governed by the pagan successors of Theseus, she inserts a dialectic of personal holiness before which it is by definition incomplete, and in confrontation with which it falls into sin and eventual defeat. Here, more than anywhere else in the Canterbury Tales, we have the intrusive presence of the transcendental ideal; here, and not in the Parson's Tale, is the heavenly presence. It is here, we think, in order to confront the social order—that is, it is here, representing its crucial point in salvation history, in order to set in motion an interaction between heavenly definition and earthly particular fact, which the Tales as a whole collection will apply to the definition of earthly and provisional orders. Following up this interaction, the Man of Law's Tale presents a Christian emperor's daughter, born into a social order now imperially Christian, in confrontation with the pagan borders. Once she fails and once she succeeds; the eventual result, with the help of Providence, is the expansion of the Christian social order. Finally, the Prioress's Tale presents the Christian social order in conflict with an internal alien. In all three of these Christian situations, the burden of the definition is carried by an individual—in two cases they are true saints, and in the third, an exemplary, saintly person. Two are women, and the third is a child—all, in a sense, are innocents. All are more acted upon than active; all represent that ideal of Christian patience amid the circumstances of a less-than-perfect world which is the truest posture of any individual.

Cumulatively, they define a progress which defines the social order as well. The order of Theseus is pagan, but noble; subject to attack, but ultimately in a Boethian posture which is immune to absolute disaster. Under the onslaught of personal holiness, this order at first falls into opposition, but finally achieves affirmation, in the cult of the little clergeoun. Here it is important to avoid being misled, on the
one hand, by a too modern and too sentimental revulsion at an anti-Semitic pogrom, and too naively historicist a willingness to accept the slaughter in the ghetto as an ideological convention indulged by a society which was not living with real Jews at the time anyway. The truth is something in between, in a society which is Christian, but imperfect; which desires to praise the Virgin, but does not know the meaning of the words; which sustains an alien presence in its midst for the sake of “foule use and lucre of vileynye,” (VII 491 [B² 1681]) but which must then deal with those aliens “with torment and with shameful deeth” (VII 628 [B² 1818]). It is, in short, a society which needs, and gets, the benefit of occasional miracles, such as this childish postmortem singing, which both remind people of the mercies of God and provide a sainted means of obtaining them. Thus, the social ordering which began under the rule of Saturn, whose results were neat but ironic and beyond the calculation of even noble men, ends here in an ordinary, compromised but working society disordered by simple greed and reordered, provisionally, by a pious child and an intrusive miracle. The conclusion which these four incipit tales implies is that society is only a provisional good, but one to be taken seriously; not heaven, but something for the sake of which heaven exerts itself and its powers. This conclusion, as we shall see, is one which the whole series of tales both confirms and richly defines.

1. Nims, Poetria Nova, pp. 18 ff.; Faral, Les arts poétiques, pp. 200 ff. Commentary treatment is consonant; for example, the material of the Thebaid is analysed as follows: “Notandum quod ordo alius naturalis, alius artificialis. Ordo naturalis est rerum gestarum expostitio, secundum eundem ordinem quo geste sunt, ut quod primum fit, primo loco narretur, quod statim post, secundo loco, et ita deinceps. Artificialis ordo est quando rerum gestarum fit prepostera expostitio, quando quod primum fit, secundo narratur loco, quod secundo, primo exponitur, et hoc ordine hic utitur autor. Nam incipit ubi Edippus precatum suum recognovit de patre interfecto, de matre violata, et sibi ipsi oculos exsecavit. Unde ait: Impia iam merita scrutatus lumina dextra. Ibi, inquam, incepit cum multa precessissent que summatim et satis oratorie declarat autor. Vere multa precesserunt. Nam primum rapuit Europa a love mutato in speciem tauri. Deinde Cadmus exulavit responsum in parnaso accepit, vaccam videns Thebas condidit, in serpentem vertit. Filii sui silicet athamas et pentheus regnaverunt usque ad Layum. Hunc Edippus eius filius occidit, matrem eius locastam nomine in uxorem duxit, ex qua pignora suscepit, quo comperto sibi oculos exsecavit, et ab hoc puncto Statius incipit, quod fere ultimo loco gestum erat” (Venice, Biblioteca Marciana MS lat XII. 61 (4097),
fols. lv–2r). "It must be understood that there is one order which is natural and another which is artificial. The natural order is the presentation of events, according to the same order in which they were done, so that what was first, is narrated in the first place, what happened immediately after, in the second place, and so on in order. The artificial order of events is inverted, when what was first is narrated in the second place, what was second is placed first, and the author uses this order here. For the story begins when Oedipus ended his search with father dead, mother violated, and he blinded himself. Thus, he said: 'He probed his sinful eyes with an avenging hand.' There, I say, the author began although many things had gone before which he declares briefly as sufficient for its statement. Truly many things had happened before. For first Europa was carried off by Jove changed into the shape of a bull. Then Cadmus was banished, accepted the command from Parnassus, seeing the cow founded Thebes, and turned into a snake. His sons, that is, Athamas and Pentheus, reigned until Laius. Oedipus, his son, killed him, took his own mother, Iocasta by name, in marriage, from whom he received pledges of love. When he discovered these things, he blinded his own eyes, and from this point Statius begins, which happened almost last." It is most significant that the commentator should feel it necessary to begin the story so far back, with Cadmus; obviously, the material itself is seen as having a canonical shape and content, which any given poet may adapt, but only by deliberate "artificiality."


3. Allen, "Commentary as Criticism."

4. The commentator's attitude is clearly betrayed in this gloss on a section of book 1 of the *Thebaid*: "Hoc est capitulum quintum huius primi libri in quo continentur narrationes adrasti et primo facit suam narrationem ad istos, secundo interrogationem sive directionem sermonis. postquam: Modo incipit narrare et dividitur hec pars in tot quot sunt ea que narrat sive quot sunt membra huius narracionis." "This is the fifth chapter of this first book in which are contained the narratives of Adrastus; first he tells his narrative, second he [poses] the question or point of the speech. Postquam; Now [i.e., at this lemma] he begins to narrate and this part is divided into as many things as there are things he tells—the narrative is divided into as many members as it is." Such language ceases to be circular as soon as one grants that the narration really does have an essence, intrinsically divisible into so many parts. The commentator's job is not hermeneutic, but simply reporting, even though what the medieval commentator in fact does often seems to us exegesis.

5. The difference is that working with medieval patterns, it is almost always unwise to trust to unconscious, archetypal, personalist, or other modern associations of one's own. Formally and structurally, medieval handling of meanings and the associations which meaning made possible was quite similar to the forms and structures now relegated to the unconscious and its "nonscientific" relations; but the specific associations which were in fact made had an explicit conscious statement and were thought at the time to have been made rationally and reasonably, on a true ontological base. We must therefore proceed in terms of associations which they actually made, as well as in terms of their associative logic.
6. Venice, Biblioteca Marciana MS lat. XII. 61 (4097), fol. 2r. “It must be noted that it is laid down sufficiently as in a certain preface, by dividing briefly into three parts, that is, into a proposition, invocation, and narrative, by following elegantly the duties of the beginnings. For a preface makes readers well disposed, docile, and attentive. He proposes where he says, ‘Fraternal battlegrounds,’ and then he makes them there docile. He invokes where he says, ‘Whence you will judge, etc.,’ and there he make them attentive. He narrates there, ‘Unworthy ones now with a righteous [hand],’ and there he make them well disposed. Or he proposes there concerning what thing he is about to say. There, where he invokes, they are attentive as they are well disposed. For then, in that way, the manner of treating is shown, and in the manner of treating the readers are always well disposed. But in the narration they are docile.” The reference to *modus tractandi* in this context is most unusual; it probably means that a reader would be expected to be most receptive to a book after he knew its discursive genre—i.e., whether it intended to prove, refute, define, or whatever.

7. Ghisalberti, “Giovanni,” p. 19. “After these things let us come briefly to the division of the book. I say therefore that this book is divided after the manner of poetry into three parts, because first it proposes, then it makes an invocation, and third it narrates.”

8. Assisi, Biblioteca Communale MS 302, fol. 6r. “It should be known that the author in the manner of the poets makes a prologue in which he proposes also the material he will present. Second, the author also invokes, first in general there, ‘Whence you will judge of the wrath of the goddess,’ and second particularly there, ‘Which of the heroes will you give first, Clio?’ In the general invocation he raises two questions or inquiries: the first is whether he ought to begin from the remote ancestors of the Thebans and the city’s first founders by setting out its ancient history which preceded the point the author intends to describe, and this question he resolves there: ‘a long sequence backwards.’ The second question is with whom he ought to begin. There were many who were related to this subject, and he asks whether he should begin with the pious or with the cruel. Resolving this question he begins from the impious, that is, with Oedipus, that is, the house and family of Oedipus.”

9. Two studies of Geoffrey’s rhetorical works now in progress at the University of Toronto promise to contribute significantly to our understanding of medieval poetic theory. Margaret F. Nims is editing a new, and lengthier, version of the *Documentum de modo et arte dictandi et versificandi*. One version of this work is included in Faral, *Les arts poétiques*. Marjorie Curry Woods’s editing of the versions of the earliest known commentary on *Poetria Nova* for her dissertation is “The *In principio huius libri* Type A Commentary on Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s *Poetria Nova*: Text and Analysis” (University of Toronto, 1977). She will follow this with a study of the commentary tradition as a whole. Half of the two hundred manuscripts of the *Poetria Nova* have commentaries and marginal notes.

10. Assisi, Biblioteca Communale MS 309, fol. 2r. “By a first division the book, therefore, is divided into two parts, that is, a prologue and a treatise, that begins ‘If someone has to found a house,’ because in prologues poets are accustomed to invoke and propose, but in the treatise to narrate what they are
setting out. Next the prologue is divided into two parts. And note that I have said 'prologue,' and not into a 'prohennium' and treatise, because as Aristotle says in the third book of the Rhetoric, 'prohennium' is the beginning of a speech just as a prologue is the beginning in poetry and a prelude in a song, from which it is apparent that when the author draws on poetry or on poetic art and we are treating poetry, on account of what has already been said, the part of the discourse should rightly be called a 'prologue,' although it is possible to be called a 'prohennium,' when speaking colloquially, since these things are the same with respect to substance and are not different except by mental distinction." This manuscript is the fullest commentary on the Poetria Nova yet identified; it seems to have two accessus, not quite duplicates of one another—one at the beginning and the other at the end.


14. Among the things which "anima dicitur" in Hugh's distinctio on the topic are "vita hominis," "totus homo," and, most useful for our purposes here, "status hominis" (*Opera Omnia* [Venice, 1732], vol. 2, fol. 82rb).


16. For a summary of the controversy over the attribution of this letter—a controversy which seems to us to exist only because certain critics are so opposed on various a priori grounds to what the letter says that they are forced to deny Dante's authorship—see Robert Hollander, *Allegory in Dante's Commedia* (Princeton, 1966), pp. 40–41.

17. The title of *Dante Studies I, Commedia: Elements of Structure* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), is indicative of Singleton's principal interest in discovering the manner in which Dante constructed his poem. See, in particular, the final chapter, "The Two Kinds of Allegory," pp. 84–98.


20. Ibid., p. 123.

21. Ibid., p. 59 n.

22. Ibid., pp. 75–76. It is also true that during the period of Dante's own life the traditional insistence that figural meanings be applied only to true
events, and the related insistence that true or pious exempla were more valid than fictional and secular ones, were both beginning to break down, so that by mid fourteenth century all kinds of fantasies and marvels were being admitted into sermons and other religious contexts, eventually breaking down entirely the earlier distinction between the allegory of the poets and the allegory of the theologians. For documentation and discussion on this point, see Allen, The Friar as Critic.

23. A similar but more pedestrian example of this syncretism is Peter Comestor's Historia Scholastica, which interpolates episodes of pagan mythology into biblical history (see P.L. 198, cols. 1054–1722).


25. The reading which follows was presented by Theresa Moritz in an address to the Medieval French section of the Medieval Institute, Kalamazoo, Mich., May 1973, "‘Nothing Comes from Nothing’: The Structure of Jean de Meun's Roman de la Rose.”


27. Otis, Ovid as an Epic Poet, passim.

28. For a fuller discussion of the symbolic dimensions of Chaucer's choice of four parts, see above, chap. 1, esp. n. 79.


30. Since no single manuscript contains the order we propose, as a whole, it may well be that these partial correspondences are merely accident. But they do exist, and so we mention them, well aware that their full significance cannot be known until the manuscript evidence has been reconsidered under new assumptions.

31. Both acknowledge, for example, the intelligence and care of the Ellesmere scribe (Dempster, “Manly's Conception,” p. 396). At the same time, Dempster customarily finds scribal editors careless and hasty (“A Chapter in the
Manuscript History of the *Canterbury Tales,* "PMLA 63 [1948]: 482). Tatlock, "The *Canterbury Tales* in 1400," p. 136, defends the authenticity of the Hengwrt arrangement but criticizes the "wit" of the editor who put it together by a logic of grouping similar stories.


33. Manly and Rickert describe and provide charts of these groups in The *Text,* 2:475-95. In addition to the articles already cited, Dempster discusses these various orders, with an eye to their ancestry, in "A Period in the Development of the *Canterbury Tales* Marriage Group and of Blocks B² and C," *PMLA* 68 (1953): 1142-59; and "The Problem of Tale Order in the *Canterbury Tales,*" *PMLA* 64 (1949): 1123-42.

34. Tatlock, "The *Canterbury Tales* in 1400," pp. 110-12, is generally kinder than Dempster in his characterization of the efforts of early scribal editors to produce good texts; he mentions a number of cases in which blanks are left for tales not at the time available, or in which words that cannot be made out in exemplars are omitted in the copying of new manuscripts.

35. Several manuscripts, including some of the groups c and d, preserve the early tradition of grouping these tales, and providing appropriate links, in a manner different from Chaucer's final plan for the tales, clearly indicated by their pairings through linking material. The problem of this sequence is discussed by Dempster, "Manly's Conception," p. 394.

36. Rosenberg, "The Contrary Tales of the Second Nun and the Canon's Yeoman," pp. 278-91; Szittiya, "The Green Yeoman as Loathly Lady," pp. 386-94; and several other studies of similar type devoted to various fragments: for a partial list, see above, chap. 1, n. 38. To the same end, but with more self-conscious use of medieval critical structures, Glending Olson's "Fragment VIII of the *Canterbury Tales,*" presented to the Kalamazoo medieval conference of 1979, shows that the fragment is a unit illustrating what can properly be called a single medieval distinctio.

37. Many tales begin without even an identification of the speaker, in the conversational style familiar from the Monk's Prologue; others have only a reference to time, as in the important case of the *Man of Law's Tale.* Still others depend not on any reference to geography, or time, but on some interruption or controversy arising during the journey, as in the Franklin's succession to the Squire, or the logic by which the Friar and the Summoner follow the Wife of Bath.


available by manuscript in the body of the book. None of these spurious links introduces any geographical allusion to pinpoint a story or to give a sense of completing an essential aspect of the original work; the majority of them perform the task of introducing the speaker by name, a conventional rhetorical device for a prologue, and on occasion refer to a possible subject for a story.


42. One may of course memorize any arbitrary series of names, as Sunday school children learn the books of the Bible, and as commuters may learn to repeat the conductor’s singsong of stations. But such series are learned as unified patterns of sound, not as a set of discrete experiences in time. Had Chaucer let the Host name all the towns along the way in one batch, then subsequent allusion to them might have been significant. But he did not.

43. The table presents, in brief, a comparison between the order we propose and the most familiar arrangement of tales, the Ellesmere Order. The right-hand column mentions some of the principal manuscript justifications for the new connections between the established fragments. See the following discussion, along with notes, for a fuller treatment of each of these significant connections in the proposed order. To summarize the changes we propose: the *Man of Law’s Tale* moves down to a position before the *Clerk’s Tale*, to open a group of stories on marriage. Groups III, IV, V, and VI are rearranged, with IV moving down along with the *Man of Law’s Tale* to form a marriage sequence. Group VIII (G) becomes the new source of a serious theme following the *Cook’s Tale*, followed by groups V, III, and VI, in that order. These changes are completed by moving the *Manciple’s Tale* into the marriage group, which leaves group B₂ immediately before the *Parson’s Tale*.

44. See above, chapter 1.

45. It may have been noted that in our ordering, all the proposed major groups begin a fragment except the last. Here, Chaucer has provided what seems to us an internal clue: in the epilogue of the *Shipman’s Tale*, the Host says: “But now passe over, and lat us seke aboute,/Who shal now telle first of al this route/Another tale” (VII 443-45 [B₂ 1633-35]). In so doing, with explicit reference to “first of al this route,” Chaucer underlines in stronger terms than anywhere else in the links an impression of new beginning. Doubtless there would have been more such hints of large structure had all the fragments received their final editorial joining; here, at least, the underlining of a major division happily reinforces what seems apparent from the stories themselves.