PART TWO

A Reading of the Tales
In this chapter we shall begin to present the tales of Chaucer’s Canterbury collection as a normative array of exempla, which accumulate a definition of the good human society. Both their plots and the society they define are founded, maintained, and informed by words—founded on a responsible exchange of vows or promises, maintained by faithful adherence to those promises, and informed by the memory of past moral action, preserved as narrative. The power of words to interpret and direct life is therefore implicitly the focal interest of the Canterbury Tales, both in its exploration of the validity of fiction and in its preoccupation with marriage as the representative human situation. Stories bring the past under man’s control by presenting it in a form which both preserves and values the experiences of the race, and so makes it possible to learn from them. Promises share with stories their ability to describe and determine the future, because they establish the intentional limits within which action is to be performed and judged. We have seen, in part, what can happen when these stories and promises are misunderstood or misappropriated, because we have confronted the literary misunderstandings of Chaucer’s pilgrims. In this part we will deal with further misunderstandings, misappropriations, and misbehaviors, along with much that is actually good and right, as we read the entire series of prologues and tales as an ordered array of exempla. In this array the quality which Chaucer prizes in both stories and promises is the power they hold over the future; bad beginnings, he shows us repeatedly, make bad, or absurdly and ironically good, ends, but good beginnings, whether they come from reading a story or making a promise,
are a foundation for good conclusions. His stories enact promises, and
their consequences, and so help us both to formulate and to enact our
own.

The reading which follows differs visibly from previous analyses,
both in its unconventional ordering and in its linear method. The
ordering is intended to emphasize the unifying associations which
relate tale to tale. The linear procedure, which reads tales and pro-
logues in order at the same level, as parts in series of the same moral
discourse, not only has the pragmatic value of permitting richer in-
sights into the meaning of Chaucer's text, but also has the advantage
of following both the example of medieval commentary and the rec­
ommendation of medieval writing manuals. Necessarily, therefore,
our reading differs from previous ones also in its results. Trusting
one tale to inform the next leads us to emphasize details previously
passed over and to differ from precedent in many details of inter-
pretation. We challenge traditional readings of a number of tales
previously taken as Chaucer's straightforward statements on many sub­
jects, including marriage, courtly love, prudential wisdom, and Chris­
tian repentance.

On the other hand, a text may mean more than one thing. Medieval
commentators regularly react to their sense of the richness of a text by
making several different and mutually complementary allegoriza-
tions. We do not attempt to exhaust the meaning of every tale, or even
of any tale, but rather wish to present those aspects of each tale's
meaning made obvious by the fact of that tale's presence in a collec-
tion, an array. We therefore intend that our reading should be taken
more often as supplement than as contradiction. But however it is
taken, it is the only ultimate justification of the method which makes it
possible. The reading itself, and its ability to offer new insights and
depths of meaning in the tales and in the whole poem, proves itself by
its own value. To the extent that it has value, both our medieval
method and our selection of the particular details which we discuss
are vindicated.

We offer no apology for dealing with what stories have in common,
rather than with stories in isolation; we find no medieval justification
either for the isolation implied by a story's being taken as a dramatic
speech with a Jamesian or Browningesque point of view, or for the
isolation required for a story by Aristotelian or new critical notions of
aesthetic integrity. In Chaucer's nominalist age, concrete particulars
are not universalized by virtue of any close aesthetic attention, but
rather relate to and define universals by having been assembled and
arrayed for conceptualization. Chaucer therefore uses his largely borrowed plots, and their various styles and genres, in multiple, testing one against the other in the belief that all stories relate to and make possible truthful statements about proper moral conduct. His irony is not the unstable irony of modern fiction, but rather that medieval irony which is one of the kinds of allegory, and one possible expression of clear moral commitment. His irony is pervasive, not because the universe makes no sense, but rather because the predicament of all particulars, in themselves, is ironic. Only in groups can particulars become true. The very variety of Chaucer's tales helps constitute their unity, because this variety arrays them, distinguishes them, in an association which can be taken as a whole.

In the variety of Chaucer's tales, the first group is the one beyond all question he designed himself: the tales of the first fragment. We have already shown how the *Knight's Tale*, in its four parts, defines Chaucer's whole collection. In addition, of course, it also belongs to and begins the first fragment, and thus belongs in the first group, the nature group, as well as being paradigm and introduction to the whole. In this group we have in social and human terms an analysis of *contextio elementorum*—the elements, of course, being those human beings whose condition is a present potentially liable to vice and a future potentially liable to hell. What Chaucer does in this group synthesizes the formulas of the Ovidian and the descent-into-hell tradition; he is concerned with defining the authority—or rather authorities—by which the social *contextio hominum* is to be achieved. The humanity involved is in a state of nature, not grace. The Athenians and Thebans are literally before Christ; the Miller's carpenter, at least, thinks he lives just before the flood; the Reeve's miller defines his life by the lawless state most vividly described later by Thomas Hobbes; the Cook's pimps are riot.

Nevertheless, this group of tales also exemplifies, perhaps more explicitly than anywhere else in Chaucer's work, the operation of justice. We have already seen that Theseus is a just ruler because he wisely rules himself, his family, and his state. The authority he imposes does not control Saturn, of course, but can make orderly and just sense of what Saturn does. The poetic justice of the fact that Palamon and Arcite each gets precisely what he has prayed for is ironic, but nevertheless neat. With Theseus so firmly and responsibly in control of what man can control of society, the work of providence seems mere work of fortune, as it often does to pagan eyes. Beyond the *Knight's Tale* the operation of poetic justice becomes more and
more obviously fair and less and less merely ironic. As a group, the tales become a complex and contrapuntal examination of the relation between absolute justice, on the one hand, and the human laws and human authorities through which, or in spite of which, it is achieved. In these terms one may see the four tales as concerned with, respectively, the imposition of law and justice, the unjust intrusion against the law, the imposition of unjust law, and the abolition of law altogether. In each case there is an authority figure who defines the law, or his posture toward it, in a way which makes claims on society: Theseus rules, both Nicholas and his carpenter host expect to intrude into higher places than they own, the dishonest miller affirms theft as the law of his life, and the master of apprentices and the husband of the swiving wife both abdicate their obligation to make law and order. The *Cook's Take* is unfinished; to this point the operation of poetic justice and ordinary human selfishness and self-protection compensates as the law degenerates. It is as if Chaucer is telling us that nature cannot endure too much disorder; if man will not rule properly, then God will dispose fortune into the balance.

Saturn, the god of nature, rules the events of the *Knight's Tale*; it is his decision which disposes of the relative claims of Arcite and Palamon and foresees an eventual reconciliation of the quarreling Mars and Venus. His presence places the tale in an ambiguous a-Christian time, on the one hand a Golden Age of innocence and on the other the fallen age after the Garden and before the saving intervention of Christ. Saturn's complex double aspect, as, on the one hand, the god of human perfection and human justice and, on the other, the god of fortune and of wealth—the most pernicious of fortune's weapons—is expressed clearly in the tale. Chaucer skillfully uses this seemingly contradictory figure to express mankind's complex longing for the ability to perfect himself, without divine intervention. Saturn presides over an age of courtly sentiment and human greatness which seems always at the point of achieving perfection—Theseus has settled his borders and established an age of peace, administered with justice and compassion, from his seat at Athens. He seems to promise, in his thirst for the orderly disposition of love and justice, the very Golden Age which, for the Middle Ages, had been Saturn's realm. On the other hand, in practice, Saturn's justice is rude and peremptory; Arcite will win but will not receive the prize; Palamon will be shamed by defeat and receive a winner's portion only by default. Saturn's identification of his activities with the darkest deeds of human life has led some critics to think that he is exclusively the evil god of bad fortune.
In fact, Chaucer has struck a traditional balance, weighing the problem of man's perfectibility against what is his present lot and what he might have been had he not sinned. Much as Boethius praises Saturn's Golden Age in the midst of his attacks on the tricks of Fortune, so Chaucer presents a two-sided god of nature in Saturn. Saturn rules a society which is in the state of nature, whose homely and earthly virtues are an enticing end in themselves for most readers. There is struggle, but it is in the cause of wedding justice and love, as Jean de Meun had said the Golden Age also achieved. But, on closer examination, this social order is not perfect, because it lacks the divinely given perspective of salvation history. Human justice, without Christ, is the imperfect institution which Jean de Meun found ruling the world and which Chaucer ridicules more and more evidently as the first fragment develops. Theseus takes the first step outside the Garden of Saturn when he appeals to Jupiter as the order-giver and planner of the universe, whose schemes are outside the control or comprehension of man, but still to be trusted. In doing so, he lays the groundwork for the search to understand which will occupy the remainder of the tales, and particularly the final great section devoted to interpretation. It is only a more perfect interpretation of the world which can draw back Saturn's golden mask and reveal behind it the ugly face of Fortune.

The Knight's Tale ends with a marriage; Theseus calls the arrangement his "accord" (I [A] 3081). The Knight's final judgment is approving:

For now is Palamon in alle wele,
Lyvynge in blisse, in richesse, and in heele,
And Emelye hym loveth so tendrely,
And he hire serveth al so gentilly,
That nevere was ther no word him betwene
Of jalousie or any oother teene.

(I [A] 3101-6)

But there will be both words of jealousy and other "teene," at least as far as this social institution is concerned. Chaucer gives us a marriage as the fundamental social arrangement of mankind—as the result of the rule of Theseus—not because it is perfect, but because marriage is the example through which Chaucer will examine social order in general.

Therefore, all the rest of the stories of the natural group emphasize a challenge to a householder's authority over his family. Weddings
make households, and the conventional phrase “and they lived happily ever after” covers all the more interesting possibilities for trouble and success in human life. Nowhere outside these first tales of the Miller, Reeve, and Cook is the pattern of conflict established in the *Knight's Tale* so thoroughly reproduced. Just as the kingdom of Theseus is disturbed by the presence of Palamon and Arcite, so the households of John and Symkyn are each shaken by the intrusions of two young men whose efforts to undermine the authority of the head of the house include sexual conquests of the family's female member or members. The proper dominance of husband and father in each story following the Knight's is compromised by the cunning of young lovers; in each, the father figure is discomfited. Throughout the group, even in the fragment of the *Cook's Tale*, a man in authority takes into his house potentially disruptive forces, trusting to his own presence and power to keep order. Theseus succeeds; the others, whose bases for authority are progressively lower than his, fail. But whether the authority figure succeeds, fails, or makes disorder his order, the tales as such are about the variety of human attacks on this authority—various efforts to overturn human organizations, thus exemplifying the natural changes which are the subject of the first in the four groups.

The stories of the first fragment concentrate on the ramifications of the situation which opens the *Knight's Tale*: that is, Theseus's conquest of Thebes and his imprisonment of Palamon and Arcite. The *Miller's Tale* opens with a newly wedded couple who provide lodgings for a young clerk. There is an even closer parallel in the *Reeve's Tale*, when Symkyn, after duping the clerks, John and Aleyne, accepts them as house guests for the night. But the wisdom of Theseus in jailing the last disruptive power of Thebes is contrasted with John the carpenter's foolishly harboring the cause of his undoing in the same “narwe cage” in which he guards his Alisoun; the same lack of foresight, compounded by proud self-reliance in Symkyn's case, causes the miller to house the enemies he has bested in his own bedroom. Even the *Cook's Tale* promises a similar situation:

Anon he sente his bed and his array
Unto a compeer of his owene sort,
That lovede dys, and revel, and disport,
And hadde a wyf that heeld for contenance
A shoppe, and swyved for hir sustenance.

(I [A] 4418–22)
The stories after the *Knight's Tale* differ in their approach to this beginning: the possibilities they examine descend from the rightful exercise of authority by Theseus through the ignorant hysteria of John to the pride of Symkyn. The reign of Theseus expresses honest, intelligent efforts to control life or, if not to control, at least to understand its providential workings. But the old carpenter with the "wylde and yong" wife helps in the work which undoes him and is unable to punish the man who cuckolds him, this task, ironically, being performed by his wife's other suitor. Still, John's ignorance is pitiable, and his crime, "that he lovede moore than his lyf," earns him some sympathy from us when he is made ridiculous before his neighbors. Symkyn, on the other hand, is a thief, and his initial conquest over the clerks is accomplished by deceit. Not only is he unable to avenge the clerks' swyving, but "Thise clerkes beete hym weel and leye hym lye." The "poetic justice" the Reeve points out with great relish provokes a readier audience response, because there is nothing sympathetic about the proud Symkyn and his wife, the parson's proud daughter.

An exemplum which is intimately related to these problems of marriage and the administration of justice within that institution is the story of Mars and Venus caught in adultery. Within the *Knight's Tale* itself, Mars and Venus may be principally the opposed representatives of two incompatible types of temperament, the irascible and the passionate. Within the Canterbury collection as a whole there are echoes of the adulterous union of the god of war and the goddess of love, a romantic alliance for which the pair was certainly more famous than as the champions of Palamon and Arcite. In the *Knight's Tale* itself, Arcite invokes Mars as lover:

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Whan that thow usedest for beautee
Of faire, yonge, fresshe Venus free,
And haddest hire in armes at thy wille—
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(1 [A] 2385–87)

but recalls the end to this adulterous affair, with the lovers trapped by Vulcan "in his las." Saturn's call for a reconciliation between the warring pair some hundred lines later has an ironic ring, in the light of Arcite's recollection of their adultery; Chaucer might also have intended an allusion to the matter of Thebes, in which the adulterous union produced one of the great plagues of the house of Cadmus, the necklace given to Venus's love-child Harmonia by Vulcan. On at least two other occasions, Chaucer treats the Mars-Venus love affair: first, in the Wife of Bath's horoscope, and second, in the "Complaint of
Mars,” which, in the manner of the Ovide moralisé, presents an elaborate astrological treatment of the encounter between a courtly knight and his lady. It is possible that the exemplum is echoed as well in the Miller’s Tale love triangle of John the craftsman, his young and uncontrollable wife, and her courtly, able suitor.

The attraction of this exemplum for Chaucer is obvious. It came to him treated in many sources and with a variety of meanings. Within the Canterbury collection, the manner in which Chaucer manipulates this story suggests his method in the larger problem of dealing with his many tales of marriage and human relationships. All the possible dimensions of the tale, with due respect, or at least humorous attention, to everyone’s point of view, are explored, not for the sake of choosing among them, but rather in the hopes that from all of them some reasonable conclusions may be drawn about principles and practice. The one interpretation which Chaucer chooses to present only implicitly is the standard moralization, which stressed the dire consequences of sin through the figures of the chains of vicious habit preventing the sinner’s escape from his fault. Although such a moralization might be implied in the career of such incorrigible pursuers of their private vices as the Pardoner or the Wife of Bath, still it is never stated. Chaucer can rely on his audience to know this allegorization of the chains which bind man habitually to his sins.

Rather, Chaucer stresses perspectives on the story suggested by its affinities to the basic love situation and to the principal interpretations of courtly love poetry and of the fabliau. That is, there is a love triangle, in which an undesirable husband is faced with a lover for his wife. In courtly treatments the worth of the lover is offered as proof that his claims to the woman are superior to her husband’s. “Who regneth now in blysse but Venus,/That hath thy worthy knyght in governaunce?” (“The Complaint of Mars,” lines 43–44). On the other hand, fabliau traditions tend to stress, first, the wife’s crafty ability to dupe her husband and, second, the uncontrollable drive for sexual fulfillment. It is to explain her cupidity that the Wife of Bath mentions her astrological profile:

Venus me yaf my lust, my likerousnesse,
And Mars yaf me my sturdy hardynesse;
Myn ascendent was Taur, and Mars therinne.

In much the same way, in the Miller’s Tale, the passionate nature of Alisoun is explained in a series of animal allusions, which, particularly in the figure of the caged bird, suggest the unnatural constraint of
marriage on sexual desire. From both these traditions, which stress the rights of the lovers regardless of the marital claims of the wronged husband, Chaucer creates the exemplum of Mars and Venus, which is suggested by a number of direct allusions and implicit parallels throughout the collection. Within the nature group, the story is an apt figure for a wholly unspiritual treatment of the sordid problem of adultery. Although it is an incident which concerns the gods entirely, it is a story which lends itself readily to treatment as an all-too-human situation. The lovers meet with no special exercise of divine powers and are caught by Vulcan’s skill, rather than by divine might. As the result of exposure, Mars and Venus continue their affair openly, with Vulcan powerless to act.

By casting special light on the Mars-Venus exemplum, we reveal within the *Knight's Tale* seeds for the discontent to come. Mars and Venus signal always the ever-present danger that marriage will be undone by discontent, mismanagement, or chance—including the appearance of an ideal lover. When Saturn calls on Mars and Venus to be reconciled, particularly in the context of the story of Thebes, there is a suggestion that we have come full circle, and that the cycle will begin again, a new society to be faced with disruptive forces, within and without. They are a troublesome discordant note sounding against the harmony of wedded bliss forecast by Theseus at the story’s close. Finally, the figure of Mars and Venus caught in adultery is taken up by the remaining stories of the first fragment, repeated and elaborated, in a manner which we shall see below characterizes Chaucer’s method in linking the tales within each of the groups we have classified under the headings natural, magical, moral, and spiritual. Within the stately harmony of the *Knight’s Tale*, even the disruptive clash of Mars and Venus may be restrained; but when we pass outside the reign of Theseus, disorder intrudes more and more insistently in human affairs.

The *Miller’s Tale* is an elaborate, outrageous, blasphemous reversal of the proprieties established in the *Knight’s Tale*. The young woman being protected by John is not his virgin ward but his own wild, lusty wife. Neither the virgin modesty of Emelye nor the queenly dignity of Hippolyta survives in this willing wife, whose first protestations against Nicholas’s wooing are changed to words of love in the space of a few lines:

This Nicholas gan mercy for to crye,  
And spak so faire, and profred him so faste,  
That she hir love hym graunted atte laste.
There is nothing of the ethereal goddess in Alisoun, whose description is filled with allusions to animals. The young men who seek her out are both clerks, both accomplished wooers, whose differences to a certain measure parallel the differences between Palamon, the follower of Venus, and Arcite, the follower of Mars. Absalom trusts to words of wooing and love gifts to gain Alisoun, whereas Nicholas is a schemer intent on winning the game. Their situations, Nicholas in the house and Absalom outside, recall the prison of Palamon and the exile of Arcite, but Nicholas's situation gives him opportunity, rather than preventing him from reaching the object of his lust. John is duped into constructing the elaborate equipment which frees Alisoun for a night with Nicholas; his *constructio* evokes, by the medieval doctrine of concordance, an analogy with the construction by Theseus of the pavilion in which the young men will contend for his ward. The exchange of insults between Nicholas and Absalom is a vulgar exchange in comparison with the stately tournament between Palamon and Arcite, especially because Absalom's actions are dictated by revenge. The pathetic end of Arcite, his complaint of fate and forgiveness of Palamon, offers a significant contrast to Absalom's bitter determination to strike one final blow when it is evident that he may not win the girl for himself.

The tale ends with all the carpenter's pain turned to a public joke. "The folk gan laughen at his fantasye; ... And turned al his harm unto a jape" (I [A] 3840, 3842). The shame of his situation before his neighbors is that he thought the flood was coming; but for the story's audience, it is his further shame that his wife has deserted him, and that the clerk who won her has been punished for his crime not by her husband but by another suitor. The problem of poetic justice posed by the disposition of Palamon's and Arcite's claims is raised again here. Although the judgment of Saturn determines the ends of each suitor, it is Theseus's authority which stages their conflict and steps forward to offer the human understanding of events. In the *Miller's Tale*, on the other hand, John's authority has no place in the rivalry between Nicholas and Absalom. The settling of their claims with Nicholas's punishment and Absalom's revenge, much like Palamon's defeat and Arcite's victory, ultimately means little to the award of the girl's affections, because Nicholas has already won her, and she is already married to John. Further, Nicholas is not punished for his real crime, adultery, but rather receives the blow intended for Alisoun. Thus, all the merely human intentions are lawless, but their result is, by providential accident, just, and the Miller's list of the
punished makes of them the comic butts which their deeds deserve. But we are left without proper authority; the carpenter, made foolish by his lodger, is written off: “The man is wood, my leewe brother” (I [A] 3848). From such a conclusion there can come no interpretation except laughter:

Whan folk hadde laughen at this nyce cas  
Of Absolon and hende Nicholas,  
Diverse folk diversely they seyde.  

(I [A] 3855-57)

It is not so cosmic a laughter as that of Troilus; it is not obviously Boethian, and it involves diversity of individual judgment, but nevertheless it does answer to the great Boethian meditation of Theseus. It affirms, as does he, that the point of a tale is what one does with it, the point of an event is how one reacts to it. The common laughter in which these diverse interpretations find expression is the comic *ars vituperandi*, an implicit recognition of the normative.18 John the carpenter is a bad husband and a bad man; that Nicholas promises him Noah's vacant realm is Chaucer's ironic indication that he would have been a bad ruler. Nevertheless, there is justice. The ceremony of accidents which gave not only both Thebans their prayers and Emelye a husband but also Theseus the occasion for a noble speech gives here each man his due.

The Reeve, however, has no use for law. His world, more primitive even than the law of revenge, is the world of private revenge, personally inflicted. He takes the law into his own hands and thereby abolishes it. As both the Miller's Prologue and his tale exemplify the theme of unjust intrusion against the law, so the vengeful, quiting Reeve, his hero miller whose only law is that millers must steal, and his students, who accomplish a private revenge, all exemplify the theme of the imposition of unjust law. In this theme the *Reeve's Tale* brings into sharp focus what had been implicit before. The rule of all these tales, in a sense, is quiting—an interruption of the order proposed by the Host and conducted under the rule of the self-confessed drunk, the Miller. His purpose is to offer a “noble tale for the nones,/ With which I wol now quite the Knyghtes tale” (I [A] 3126–27). The Cook also threatens a quiting, with Harry Bailly, though he postpones it (I [A] 4356–61). But what the Miller began within the game, as he sought to quite the Knight's story, the Reeve and the Cook continue outside the game, as they attempt to quite real people. Although the Miller slyly argues that the Reeve cannot be insulted by a story of a
cuckolded husband without admitting that he is one, still the Reeve, who must announce that he is a carpenter to justify his feeling insulted, is determined to apply the story to himself, and to return insult for insult. The Miller's intention is to answer nobility, a pageant of high seriousness with a burlesque of low comedy. But the *ars vituperandi*, or comedy, is as morally serious as tragedy, the *ars laudandi*, and what quites at one level repeats at another. The Reeve, mistaking game for earnest, intends to insult the Miller by relating the downfall of another miller.

The series of tales descends. From the high management of Theban disorder to the fool undone by prognostications of a supernatural disorder which does not happen, we go to the thief undone by the arrogance he asserts in presuming his right to steal. The *Miller's Tale* is a rich, complex answer to the *Knight's Tale*; the *Reeve's Tale* is a vulgarized looking-glass image of the Theseus, Palamon, and Arcite struggle. The ruler of this tale is a "theef"; his family is a proud wife, a willing daughter, the unawarded daughter of the piece, and a babe whose innocent cradle is used in the clerks' cunning plan to outwit Symkyn. Unlike Theseus, Symkyn does not award his virgin; she is stolen from him, and his wife as well. The shrine of Theseus's lists is obscenely parodied in the "places" of the beds, where prayers and consummations are combined. John and Aleyn are rivals in love, but only in the sense that each wishes equally to have his lust assuaged, in one bed or another. Hilarious coincidence eventually intervenes to expose what has been going on, to unleash chaos for a time, and to bring on the moral summary of punishments.

Aleyn and John are primarily partners in revenge, not lovers. They believe in the law of divine compensation:

> For, John, ther is a lawe that says thus,  
> That gif a man in a point be agreved,  
> That in another he sal be releved.

(I [A] 4180-82)

But they take the law into their own hands, using love as a mere instrument of a lower and even more lawless purpose. Love, even here, has an integrity of its own. Although it is hardly more than sex and is being consciously manipulated for vengeful and selfish purposes, love resists Aleyn's reduction of pleasure to a neutral return for value lost. Although his purpose is to cheat the miller, Aleyn parts with the miller's daughter fondly, and she has been sufficiently moved
to enter willingly into the plan to get the better of her father. Symkyn has trained her and so must receive his reward.

Right at the entree of the dore byhynde
Thou shalt a cake of half a busshel fynde
That was ymaked of thyn owene mele,
Which that I heelp my sire for to stele.

(I [A] 4243-46)

Thus love does justice. Symkyn's cheating costs him not only his honor but the fruit of his deceit, and the clerks' revenge has created a relationship which resists reduction. In the same way, the Reeve's story as a whole exists as something beyond the intended insult of Reeve to Miller. The story is welcomed as a pleasant one; the Cook cannot contain his delight with it. The Cook, moreover, gives it the right moral—the moral which integrates it properly in the series as a whole:

“Ne bryng nat every man into thyn hous”;
For herberwyng by nyghte is perilous.
Wel oghte a man avysed for to be
Whom that he broghte into his pryvetee.

(I [A] 4331-34)

It is all, from Knight's Tale to Cook's Tale, an "argument of herber­gage." Whatever is taken in must be dealt with—be it Theban princes or Amazonian princesses, student lodgers, cheated customers, or riotous apprentices. The Reeve's story, as story, is not a mere insult at all but a piece of nature, an exemplum of the contextio elementorum humanorum, which succeeds in exemplifying justice even in the lives of unjust men and unreliable authorities. They are practitioners of sin, and they are under threat of damnation, but their descent into hell, however natural, is nevertheless exemplary, and therefore both true and moral.

The Cook's Tale, the last of the series, is unfinished. Since the me­dieval rhetoric of endings was not nearly so elaborated as the tech­nique of beginnings, Chaucer's having simply stopped should cause no trouble. We have neither to speculate about what he might have done nor to justify the Cook's Tale as we have it as an organically integrated fragment. Rather, we simply note that the situation which the Cook defines does fit into what has gone before. It repeats the pattern of authority figure, awardable woman, and two males. It con­fronts the authority figure with a problem of disorder in his house­
hold. It even ends, as we have it, with the establishment of another household. Most important, it is a logically appropriate last statement, because it deals with the weakest of authority figures, the least significant of kinds of households, and the least orderly of awarded woman solutions. That the difference between the king's awarding of a ward in marriage and the awarding of a prostitute's favors for an hour is morally so large as to be taken as a difference in kind should not obscure the fact, more important here, that the two acts are structurally in series, and that the one is indeed a degenerate version of the other. Authoritative responsibility for the sexual fate of a woman is one of the most important arrangements which society makes—the exercise of this authority, in a range of its permutations, is an excellent paradigmatic example of authority in general. Chaucer's extremes are socially realistic—some people, and some acts, are high, and some are very low.

The authority figure is the master of apprentices. As a teacher he is a failure; as a master he endures insubordination and embezzlement with increasing discomfort, until finally he simply abdicates his responsibility. Perkyn, his riotous apprentice, is a lover, a skilled servant of fortune with his dice, a sometime prisoner (as were Palamon and Arcite), a frequenter of triumphant parades, and in the end, a suitable member of a ménage à trois. Love is no longer something that a man wins, but rather something because of which "wel was the wenche with hym myghte meete" (I [A] 4374). Family has been reduced to parody, and the duty of awarding the virgin has been transformed into the commerce of selling the whore.

From the first fragment we gain not only the rich and subtle mediations of the interplay between nature and grace, between God's law and poetic justice, provided us by the tales, but also a valuable model for understanding the manner in which the groups of stories within the Canterbury Tales will work with one another. We have observed a close thematic unity, which explores the rule of human justice on the earth; Chaucer sets this high ideal in the best light in the Knight's Tale, where it brings to mind the medieval longing for the Golden Age, and in the worst light in the Reeve's Tale and the unfinished tale of the Cook, where, as will happen so often on the journey, love is replaced by a reverence for money. We have seen that this thematic unity rests firmly on an analogical association of the narrative patterns and characterizations to be found in the tales: Palamon and Arcite are repeated, a little blurred and a little coarse, in Nicholas and Absolom, and in the two young clerks who best the Reeve's corrupt miller; the
same with Emelye and Theseus, with motifs of imagery and incident, with the final resolution of the action, all the things we have set forth in this chapter. We have taken note, as well, of the strong sense of descending order in the arrangement of the tales, from an ideal statement of Chaucer's theme—justice in the natural order of human society—to its debasements in the hands of sinful men. These three qualities of a story group, its close thematic unity, the binding of the tales by analogical association, and a descent in ideals and harmony from first tale to last, will all be observed in the other groups of tales discussed in the following chapters—the tales of magic, of morality, and of interpretation.

1. The phrase which for Ovid defined natural changes. Of all the tales, the Knight's is perhaps the most elaborately and elegantly treated by scholars. We are particularly indebted to the following works: Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*; Stokoe, "Structure and Intention"; Joseph, "Chaucerian 'Game'"; and Leyerle, "The Heart and the Chain."

2. Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy* (London, 1964), trace the various traditions of the god in astrology, art, mythography, and so forth. They find in Chaucer, Gower, and Lydgate examples of the double-sided medieval view of the god, but they suggest that this is due more to a confusing tradition than to an artistic insight into the related aspects of the god's character; in particular, they cite the *Knight's Tale* portrait of Saturn as an example of "the cold, leaden, destructive, planetary god" (p. 193). On Saturn as the god of gold and wealth, see pp. 179 ff.

3. As we have already seen, in discussing the *Romance of the Rose*, the figure of Saturn's Golden Age was associated for the Middle Ages with a time of great innocence and freedom from conflict. But the ambiguous merits of its virtues, which we would suggest are at work in the *Knight's Tale*, are ironically suggested in the *Romance of the Rose*, especially by Reason's criticism of natural justice. See *Romance of the Rose*, ed. Dahlberg, pp. 113-15, lines 5555-692.

4. This is true in Klibansky, *Saturn and Melancholy*, p. 193. It is true, as well, of Alan T. Gaylord's study "The Role of Saturn in the Knight's Tale," *Chaucer Review* 8 (1973): 171-90. Gaylord argues that the tale reflects the dark, planetary aspect of Saturn as the representation of people, like Palamon and Arcite, who have willfully submitted themselves to fortune.

5. In book 2 of the *Consolation*, Lady Philosophy treats the glories of the Golden Age in the context of the evils of the present age, ruled by Fortune. Man's willingness to believe in the goods of wealth and prestige, and his consequent disappointment with turns of Fortune's wheel, are treated in prose 5 and 6; with such slavish devotion to things of no importance, Lady Philosophy contrasts the wisdom of the Golden Age, when men did not disrupt natural harmony by searching for gold or adventure. She suggests, in
fact, that it was the lust for gain which disrupted Paradise: "Heu primus quis fuit ille/auri qui pondera tecti/gemmasque latere valentes/ pretiosa pericula fodit?" (book 2 meter 5).

6. As we shall see below, the image of old age, connected both with sexual potency and with experience as the proof of authority, is developed throughout the *Canterbury Tales*. Saturn, too, is a figure of old age, as well as of the old times which men both miss and yet know must pass away. Chaucer states that Saturn's solution to a problem Jupiter could not solve was based on "his olde experience," and offers him as proof that "elde hath greet avantage." But his old man's solution, though it tidies up the problem, betrays a lack of sensibility for the issues at stake in the problem; it is "agayn his kynde" for Saturn to be solving "strif and drede."

7. Although there will be husbands confronted with suitors for their wives, as in the *Franklin's Tale*, and parents challenged for their virgin children, as in the *Physician's Tale*, the pattern of a man in authority contesting with two suitors is nowhere repeated in the *Tales*. Cf. Stokoe, "Structure and Intention," passim.

8. Joseph, "Chaucerian 'Game,'" pp. 84–96, relates the tales of the first group through their use of space. He contrasts the *Knight's Tale*, with its sense of confining limitations, and fabliaux, in the contentment they feel in small spaces. See, also, the treatment of the contrasting image patterns of "links" and "holes" within the first fragment in Leyerle, "The Heart and the Chain," pp. 118–21.

9. Statius tells the story of the cursed necklace in book 2 of the *Thebaid*, lines 269–305. Chaucer alludes to the jewelry, wrought by Vulcan, in the "Complaint of Mars," line 245, as the "broche of Thebes," a charm with the ability to drive man mad with the desire to possess it. Through this necklace Chaucer links the madness of Thebes with love madness, a connection which is implicit in the distress of Thebes's last two sons, Palamon and Arcite, in the *Knight's Tale*.


12. Of course, as we readily admit, the general situation of the elderly husband, the young wife, and the suitor is the stuff of a wide variety of medieval love traditions, with echoes and associations extending as much to Mary, Joseph, and Mary's mysterious suitor as to Mars, Venus, and Vulcan. But there are some details of the story which might be attributed to Chaucer's knowledge of the story of Mars and Venus, as it was told by Jean de Meun; these are details whose conjunction cannot be explained by a common source.
The Natural Group

Cf. Stith Thompson, "The Miller's Tale," in Sources and Analogues, p. 106. Some of these details include the name of Absalom, who occurs as an alternative lover for Venus in the Romance of the Rose, ed. Dahlberg, p. 238, lines 13850-74; the smith who aids in the undoing of the lovers—Vulcan was a smith; and Alisoun, like Venus, who is identified with birds, mares, and other animals which must not be restrained in marriage from pursuing their natural drives.

13. Thomas D. Hill, "La Vielle's Digression on Free Love: A Note on the Rhetorical Structure in the Romance of the Rose," Romance Notes 8 (1966): 112–115, discusses the variety of interpretations given the story. Typical of the tradition is Arnulf of Orleans's comment on the story, as told in the Metamorphoses by Ovid, which concentrated on the crippling results of the passionate involvement; Vulcan's chains become, instead, the representation of the lovers' own feelings: "Quae quidem virtus prava consuetudine illiciti fervoris quasi cathena constringitur" (Ghisalberti, "Arnolfo," p. 210). On the other hand, Ovid, in telling the same story in the Ars Amatoria, book 2, lines 550–600, emphasizes the lesson that men must not pry too closely into their lovers' activities. Jean de Meun picks up this interpretation in the speech of the Old Woman.

14. We are not suggesting here the richly allegorical sense of natural fruitfulness which Jean de Meun ironically advocates, through his evocation of Alanus de Insulis's Complaint. Rather, we are referring to the earthy wisdom of the Decameron, which may well be indebted to the tradition of natural fruitfulness growing from Alanus, but which presents a different aspect from Jean. For Boccaccio sexual energy is natural, opposed in its vitality and energy to the restraint and emptiness of the social conventions, of selecting marriage partners, and so on, imposed on its naturally unharnessed power. Without appealing to supernatural defenses for the necessity to allow this power to act in human life, Boccaccio, rather in the manner of Shakesperean comedy, promises that this energy will win out and revivify mankind.

15. See Allen, Friar as Critic, p. 101, for a reading of the tale in very human terms from Giovanni del Virgilio.

16. Animal imagery unites the two tales and emphasizes the carnal character of love. Salutati's definition of the "natural" descent as the passage of the spirit into the body is fulfilled in these stories, which reduce the spiritualized love-seeking of Palamon and Arcite to bawdy dalliance. The exegetical overtones of these images, outlined by R. E. Kaske in "The Canticum Canticorum in the Miller's Tale," Studies in Philology 59 (1962): 480–85, only serve to underscore that love here is carnal, rather than spiritual.

17. Joseph, "Chaucerian 'Game'," p. 89, considers this particular significance of Nicholas's description as "hende."

18. The same kind of comedy is implicit in the tale's exegetical echoes, as Kaske so well shows in "The Canticum Canticorum in the Miller's Tale," pp. 479–500. Universally, laughter results from the awareness of incongruity; medieval laughter is more moral than ours, and less often simply an expression of the fact that the one laughing is relieved to distance himself from some threatening or absurd situation, because the medieval sense of the congruous, and so of incongruity, had a larger and more well defined base in reality.
19. As we saw above, the Reeve's error, unlike that of the quiting critics, is to assume that the Miller's story is intended to say something applicable to all carpenters and so necessarily to himself. His error is that he cannot see that the brunt of the story is not John as carpenter but rather John as the authority figure in a marriage.

20. Glending Olson, in "The Reeve's Tale as a Fabliau," *Modern Language Quarterly* 35 (1974): 230, distinguishes between Chaucer's fidelity to the fabliau genre in the *Reeve's Tale* and the author's elaborate reworking of fabliau motifs in other tales, particularly the Merchant's. His suggestion that the *Merchant's Tale* is more than a fabliau applies, we think, to the *Miller's Tale* as well. The evocation of Christian symbols, their interweaving in the fabliau, places the *Miller's Tale*, generically as well as thematically, between the high seriousness of the Knight and the low comedy of the Reeve.

21. E. D. Blodgett, in "Chaucerian Pryvete and the Opposition to Time," *Speculum* 51 (1976): 493, characterizes the whole of the first fragment as "the steady play on the notion of 'pryvete.'" The opposition of moral precept and the secrets that resist it, both in God's perfect knowledge and in man's guilty attempts to conceal his sin, it evoked throughout the tales and is linked clearly to the effort to understand the conflict between "ernest" and "game" (pp. 482-83). The theme of "pryvetee" is discussed profitably elsewhere, as well; Blodgett provides a helpful summary of this scholarship on the first fragment, pp. 473-93.

22. This series of tales began with Theseus's triumphal parade; it is fitting that in the *Cook's Tale* we should return to the same motif, reduced now to a mere amusement, and the occasion of shirking lawful work and responsibility. The ceremonial presence of authority, at first Trajanlike, is now disorder.

23. Perkyn's running off to see "any ridyng was in Chepe" (I [A] 4377) ironically reminds us of the triumphal parade of Theseus, and its evocation of Trajan.