The Moral Group

Chaucer’s third group of tales the Ovidian distinctio labels moral. In the distinctio of descent into hell, the moral descent is simply the descent into vice. In this category, combining both traditions, we have all those human arrangements of order capable of being labeled good or bad. It corresponds to, and is defined by, the third section of the Knight’s Tale, which is full of catalogues of typical human actions—most of them calamitous. But it is also the most formal of the parts of the Knight’s Tale, and it is this paradoxical combination of general formality and particular calamity which defines medieval ethics. In this section Theseus builds his grand stadium, and the three principals offer themselves at the shrines of Venus, Mars, and Diana.

It would seem, at first glance, that our four-part order is faulty here. Section three of the Knight’s Tale is superficially more magical than any of the others, with its atmosphere of pagan shrines—and, to modern eyes at least, the easiest and most obvious division of the tale into natural, magical, moral, and spiritual would seem to take parts one and two as natural, part three as magical, the actual tournament of part four as moral, and the Boethian speech and its circumstances as spiritual. But properly understood, it is the disguises of part two, and not the prayers of part three, which best fit the medieval category of magic. And part three, properly understood, is the best definition of the moral.

In part three of the Knight’s Tale, human intentionality reaches its highest level of control of its world. This intentionality may be virtuous, or it may be vicious. What the powers invoked in this part actually do, or patronize, is for the most part quite bad. But the framing
postures are wholly good.¹ Here Theseus does the best that he can do to build a world, a perfect circular microcosm, in which the events that accumulate as human history can be defined and controlled. Combat here can be moral—combat, like beasts in the forest, was not immoral so much as amoral. The prayers which occur within this microcosm, shrine by shrine, are an array of particular intentionalities each of which attempts to plan the world in ideal fashion. Nothing really happens in the section, but everything is planned. Such action as there is occurs in catalog and betrays the vice and evil of which humanity is capable, even (or perhaps especially) within the ethical frame. This section is, in sum, the most ceremonial, the most iconographic, the most hieratic, the most pageantlike in the whole of the Knight's Tale.

All this is the ideal to which medieval morality aspires. For modern critics, accustomed to the rhetoric if not the practice of situational ethics, the medieval ideal requires a considerable adjustment of sensibility. It is not simply that medieval standards of ethics were normative rather than situational—they were, but they were more. Huizinga well describes the heightening of decorum, of form, which was involved.² This heightening, this formality, more than anything else, is the quality which both justifies and explains the medieval association between literature and ethics. Actions are more than mere acts—they are acts which can be associated with, possessed by, their particular daemon—Mars, Venus, Diana, or Saturn. Human beings enter into these patterns of action by means of prayer—that is, by means of the words of intentionality—in a setting which, as a shrine, physically confirms the association between act and definition.

The tales which constitute the moral group are the Man of Law's Tale, the Clerk's Tale, the Merchant's Tale, the Manciple's Tale, and the Shipman's Tale. Each of them is the story of an attempt at ordering—at constructing a microcosm within which the world can be defined and history can be controlled. Each of them involves human intentionality; in most, this intentionality is expressed formally in the words of some vow. In none of them is the action, either intended or accomplished or both, wholly admirable, but all of them record the achievement of some kind of stasis—an acceptable orderly arrangement of human affairs, which one must trust to structure the future bearably, if not virtuously or wholly comfortably. Further, they are, like the tales in the previous groups considered, arranged in descending order, both in terms of the sociopolitical status of the principal characters and in terms of the quality of moral achievement which is
defined. Finally, all these tales, for reasons which touch at the essence of Chaucer's art, have to do with marriage.

The traditional marriage group—Clerk's Tale, Wife of Bath's Tale, Franklin's Tale, Merchant's Tale, with the Friar's Tale-Summoner's Tale interlude (and with the Squire's Tale awkwardly hanging about)—seems to us not helpfully labeled, because looking at the tales this way tells us not about marriage but about marriages, and ignores the fact that if one is simply considering tales about marriages, there are a large number of others to be included. The schema of husband-wife-attacker, in fact, can be applied to most of Chaucer's tales, and after only minor transformations to all of them except the final sermon. We shall eventually try to show just why it is that tales involving some actual reference to marriage were so central a part of Chaucer's strategy of social definition in the Canterbury Tales as a whole.

Here, however, we wish to use an array of tales of marriages as a normative array of something else—that is, of intentional structures designed to achieve, or exist as, order. Some marriages are structures to which, or within which, things happen. Others are structures created for the sake of making something else happen. In the first category, marriages are simply parts of life and history—things are always happening. The second category, however, is quite different; the intentional event is an event defined, caused, and determined by its final cause, and secondarily by its formal cause. Material cause is relatively unimportant, and efficient causality may even be defied. The feature of this moral group of tales, which is also our marriage group, which gives it coherence is intentionality, or final cause. Each tale involves an arrangement (a marriage, or in one case the canceling of a marriage) brought into being for the sake of generating greater order, stability, and satisfaction than had existed before. The plot of each tale is the gradual definition and accomplishment of this arrangement; each story ends with the arrangement in existence.

The order of the tales is from high to low, greatest to least, most to least admirable. Here as in the other groups Chaucer has put his best exemplum first and then gradually trails off. In the Man of Law's Tale the marriage of Constance is intended to extend the boundaries of empire and of Christendom. It fails, but Providence arranges that a second marriage will accomplish the intentions originally frustrated. In the Clerk's Tale a sovereign marquis is persuaded to marry for the sake of perpetuating his line and his rule, and does so. In the Merchant's Tale a knight persuades himself to marry in order to legitimize
his access to sex, and succeeds in legitimizing the sexual morality for which his life really stood. In the *Manciple’s Tale* a married bachelor kills his wife in punishment for adultery, and succeeds only in proving that ignorance was bliss. In the *Shipman’s Tale* a merchant treats his marriage as an extension of his business, and succeeds in making it so.

The tales are of marriages, but the normative array is of orders, for whose definition Chaucer found marriages exactly suitable. The first order is of empire, the second of sovereign realm, the third of family, the fourth of person, and the fifth of property—once again a descending series, from general to particular, from the universal of imperial society to the particular of an accident of a single person. The difference between this array and the first one—*Knight’s Tale* to *Cook’s Tale*—is that in the first group the focus of attention was narrowly on authorities, and the kinds of law and order those authorities generate. Here the focus is on what surrounds, generates, and results from authorities—on the one hand, the intentionalities because of which people enter into social orders (representatively, the social order of marriage), and on the other hand, the resonances and analogies for total order which those intended and created orders generate. Thus, in the *Knight’s Tale*, Theseus, already married and king of Athens, with his order already established and defined, must deal with an intrusive test personified by Palamon, Arcite, and Emelye. In the *Man of Law’s Tale*, on the other hand, a marriage is intended which will, it is hoped, create a new order. The plot of the story is the history of the adventures and trials of this intention, rather than of the order which it will eventually accomplish.

In a second way these tales are also in descending order—that is, in terms of the activity of God (or the pagan gods). It would seem that in this group Chaucer is playing games, both seriously and comically, with the notion of the divine presence. In the *Man of Law’s Tale* the providentially assisting Christian God is fully and powerfully present. In the *Clerk’s Tale* we have a man functioning as God, with his godlike activity clearly underlined by allusions to Job. In the *Merchant’s Tale* there are pagan gods, with real powers, working in a kind of parody of Providence to give the tale its outcome. In the *Manciple’s Tale* we have a pagan god without powers, acting merely as a bachelor. In the *Shipman’s Tale* there is no god at all. The rhetoric of the tales, in turn, both underlines and complicates the point. As Chauncy Wood has so well shown, there is a great difference between the simple, committed faith of Constance and the Man of Law’s disaster-preoccupied and loudly expressed desire that God act as a kind of omnipotent body-
guard. In fact, the Man of Law so overdoes his prayers as almost to transform these adventures of sweet Constance into the perils of Pauline. Thus, the providential guiding of history is comically undercut even while its successful and wholly proper course is narrated. On the other hand, Walter’s sadism is protected, by careful allusion both to the fallibility of the human condition and the testing of Job, from ever being comic, in spite of the fact that his pretentious exercise of his right to test his wife is very little more justifiable than the Miller’s carpenter’s promised sovereignty over the drowned world as a second Noah. The gods in the Merchant’s Tale are radically humanized into a standard argumentative married couple, and the game they play on January and May evokes the irresponsible and at times sadistic presence of the gods in the Metamorphoses. But the richly allusive texture of the tale, with irony and allegory undercutting the letter and each other, constitutes a level of seriousness which prevents our settling for either the Merchant’s misanthropy or January’s pathos as the point of the tale. Apollo, in the Manciple’s Tale, is even more humanized; when we see him sunk in remorse for rash and foolish action, an ironic dimension is imposed on the wisdom he represents. And in the merely commercial world of the Shipman’s Tale, it is gold, not God, which can protect from the evil chances of Fortune. The Shipman’s Tale, in fact, is a precise inverse of the Man of Law’s Tale in this matter of Fortune and Providence—the merchant, with gold, must look out for himself:

And therfore have I greet necessitee  
Upon thi% queynte\textsuperscript{5} world t’avyse me;  
For everemoore we moote stonde in drede  
Of hap and fortune in oure chapmanhede.  

(VII 235-38 [B\textsuperscript{2} 1425-28])

The character, extent, and manner of involvement with some kind of divine will which these tales exhibit is, of course, an indicator of moral value. The fact that, beyond the first tale especially, the divine presence has something wrong with it fits with the fact that the array of moral values and orders being presented is a human one merely—even though the outcome of the Man of Law’s Tale is a happy part of Heilsgeschichte, it is clear that the narrator goes beyond the bounds of faith and pure religion in demanding it so selfishly for his heroine.

In all this Chaucer’s ultimate point, delivered as always in a complex, ironic way, is that divine sanction and protection are always desirable but not always available. When they are available they may
be compromised by wrong attitudes. When they seem available they may in fact be merely something human, projected on the transcendent. They may be mere natural chaos, or something out of the psychomachia of temperaments and humors (which allegory perceived under the names of pagan gods), wrongly perceived for the moment as orderly and providential. Man always likes to believe that what he does bears some relation to the will of God; the games Chaucer plays with what is really going on as the context of that desire show how much of delusion there may be in faith. We cannot know, of course, one way or the other—faith is always prudent, but it is equally prudent to keep always a little irony in reserve.

These stories, however, are not about faith. Faith, and the divine powers which faith evokes, are present in the tales, as is the irony which protects faith from the full consequences of being mistaken, but both faith and irony are accidents rather than essence here. What the tales are about is order—order intended and order accomplished. In the best sense, these tales are worldly. They are, therefore, appropriately much concerned with two important aspects of worldly life and worldly order—vows, or promises, and property. Both these themes are made more emphatic still by their prominent introduction in the prologue material which serves to introduce the whole group.

A vow, or promise, is a form of words which describes the future and commits the speaker to perform actions which will make that particular description of the future come true. In the medieval experience there were three kinds of act which, by their very commonness, would particularly define the act of vowing or promising. These were the vow of holy orders, the pledge made to one's feudal lord, and the vow of marriage. Of these, the most common, and the most accessible to experience at all levels of society, was marriage. For this reason, if no other, marriage would have been the most suitable vehicle for Chaucer's analysis of the human order that results from intentional creation of structure.

It is most important to notice that the act of vowing has a connection with the act of storytelling. A vow is a story in the future tense whose claims on reality complement and balance those made by an ordinary story, or exemplum, which exists in the past tense as a moral and prudential influence on the present and the future. The present, the sphere of moral action and existence, is thus surrounded by words, which enclose, define, evaluate, and guide it, and, as it exists through time, are also narrative. These stories, as they grow out of
vows, thus enact the verbal quality appropriate to the real moral world, as well as the fictive ones of Chaucer's Canterbury collection, and celebrate the fact that real human orders arise out of the power of words to make commitments which pattern and order the real world. In all these stories the primary vow is the wedding vow, which intends and describes the order being created, whose history the past tense story will preserve as an example for other vows and other stories. Thus the foresight of the right vow and the memory of the right story surround the intelligence of the present and make possible that prudence whose parts are these acts of past, present, and future. But this primary vow exists in the presence of other vows—to do murder, to obey one's sovereign husband, to interfere with January and May, to keep secrets—which compromise and comment, as we shall see, on the primary vow of marriage which generates the context of order.

The theme of property ends with sexual bookkeeping and the invitation to "score it upon my taille" (VII 416 [B^2 1606]). It begins, in most complex fashion, with Chaucer's prologue—the "wordes of the Hoost to the compaignye" and the "prologue" properly so called. This, as was the Second Nun's Prologue, should be taken as an introduction to the whole group. In the Second Nun's Prologue, we were warned against the *Romance of the Rose*, and especially against Idle­ness, and exhorted to that good work which consists of making and understanding words. Idleness, there, seemed to imply the loss of full significance or full dimension, as in the *Romance of the Rose* Idleness tempts one to diminish love to its merely sexual literalness. In the introductory material to the *Man of Law's Tale*, we are once again warned against idleness, but now in the context of the speedy passage of time. One must "bewaillen tyme moore than gold in cofre" (II [B^1] 26) because, unlike property, it can never be recovered once it is past. Implicitly, what we are being warned against is the idleness that refrains from any action at all (rather than against acting, but acting idly)—that is, we are being warned against wasting history, or not making any. The fit destiny of man and woman is to fill time with acted exempla, worthy "to drawen to memorie"—idleness is a waste of that property in time more valuable than gold.

There follows a seemingly miscellaneous, dramatic passage in which the Man of Law honors his promise, complains that Chaucer has told all the good stories, disclaims literary ability, and indulges an apostrophe denouncing poverty. But all this ceases to be miscellaneous as soon as we see it in relation to the whole of the group, and to
the example and precedent of the third part of the *Knight's Tale*. All of it, from beginning to end, is about property, and subtly expands the time-gold *translatio* with which we began.

In the first place, the Man of Law has made a promise—to obey the Host by telling a story. Such a vow, he admits, is a debt. A story, then, is property, to be paid over in satisfaction of the debt. But Chaucer owns—that is, has told—all the good stories. There follows a list, remarkably similar when one thinks about it, to the catalogues in the third part of the *Knight's Tale*. By an analogy not at all unfair to the storyteller, Chaucer is the patron, or daemon, or divinity of his stories, and they are his property. In contrast, the Man of Law is very poor, with only his prose “hawebake.” It is a bad state to be in, and so the Man of Law complains of it, but translates his condition out of the literary and back into economic terms: “O hateful harm, condicion of poverte!” (II [B¹] 99). Far better it is to be a rich merchant, a man whose figurative dice always roll winning numbers. Such people seek to become landed. Finally, they know the “estaat of regnes” and are “faddres of tidynges / And tales, bothe of pees and of debaat.” From financial property we return to tales, to literary property. It is from such people, rich in money and in lore, that the Man of Law gets his tale.

Three of these tales, in fact, are merchant’s tales—the Man of Law’s at second hand, the tale of January and May at first hand, and the *Shipman’s Tale* in actual subject matter. This dialectic, whereby the content of the frame is eventually absorbed into, and becomes a part of, the level of story, matches the dialectic of judgment operating from the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* to the *Physician’s Tale* by which an audience reaction in the Wife’s tale is absorbed and becomes the subject matter of the Physician’s Tale. But all of them are about “tidynges . . . of pees and of debaat.” More important still, they all have to do, explicitly or by analogy, with the “estaat of regnes”—with that “commune profyt” which is true commonwealth and which is precisely defined (since literature is ethics) by the seesawing *translatio* of story into property and property into story.

The tale of Constance itself is the third in the framing series of incipit tales which are the *carmen perpetuum* of this medieval *Metamorphoses*. With Christianity established as the religion of the empire, the sacred and the secular are at least normatively and theoretically in harmony, and the conflict will properly be with the borders. Constance herself is largely sweet and passive—more so than in
Chaucer's source—we think because ideally in Christian society eventualities are more given than striven for and achieved. "Take no thought for the morrow" is an exhortation more to serenity than to mere passivity; still, whatever achievements of holiness and even sainthood there are tend to come upon people who were doing something else, and often something else wholly ordinary and daily. Even the large transitions of history are often more visible to hindsight than to observation; the Renaissance is the only age that ever called itself anything other than "moderna tempora"; and expansions of Christendom such as the one of which Constance was the instrument tend always to happen in a way which should encourage us to view with irony even the best laid plans of men.

This is not to say that Constance's adventures lack significance in themselves. Most important, there are two of everything—two marriages, two different pagan realms (and at opposite edges of the empire), two mothers-in-law, two sexual assaulters, two sea voyages, two framing episodes with her father. This doubleness forces us to realize, at the very outset, that the difference between success and failure in human arrangements does not depend as much on the shape and character of what is done or planned as on the quality and character of the divine intention involved. Constance's imperial father had in mind, when he married his daughter off to the sultan, exactly the result which Providence eventually accomplished. But the emperor is not God, and his plans do not necessarily work out, at least not the first time. At the same time, this doubleness reminds us that there is an analogical energy at work in the world between divine and human levels, and that what eventually receives divine approval and providential help must be, in shape and character, appropriate to that divine preoccupation. At the highest and most general level of meaning, therefore, this doubleness reminds us, first, that allegory is not identity, and second, that an event must in a sense await its interpretation. The emperor cannot be God, cannot literally assert for himself divine prerogatives and divine actions, but he is nevertheless obligated to act in analogy with God, in some way he will never, at the time, understand.

A second feature of the Man of Law's Tale most important for its meaning is that the Man of Law is not "good at parties" but is good at pathos. In the Knight's Tale, as has been shown, the use of the rhetorical strategy of occupatio contributes greatly to the richness and elaborateness of the ceremonial, tapestrylike quality of the tale. The
more the Knight protests that there is not time to tell, the more rich description he heaps up. The Man of Law, on the other hand, uses *occupatio* to avoid descriptions of ceremony:

> Me list nat of the chaf, ne of the stree,  
> Maken so long a tale as of the corn.  
> What sholde I tellen of the roialtee  
> At mariage, or which cours goth biforn;  
> Who bloweth in a trumpe or in an horn?  
> The fruyt of every tale is for to seye:  
> They ete, and drynke, and daunce, and synge, and pleye.

(II [B¹] 701-7)

Or again:

> The day goth faste, I wol no lenger lette.  
> This glade folk to dyner they hem sette;  
> In joye and blisse at mete I lete hem dwelle  
> A thousand foold wel moore than I kan telle.

(II [B¹] 1117-20)

At the same time, the tale is full of effective rendering of pathos; Chaucer never achieved a greater or more telling comparison than one he gives to the Man of Law in description of Constance:

> Have ye nat seyn somtyme a pale face,  
> Among a prees, of hym that hath be lad  
> Toward his deeth, wher as hym gat no grace,  
> And swich a colour in his face hath had,  
> Men myghte knowe his face that was bistad,  
> Amonges alle the faces in that route?  
> So stant Custance, and looketh hire aboute.

(II [B¹] 645-51)

In poetic effects as well as in vivid characters, there is in Chaucer’s work God’s plenty. But it is not enough to notice that these effects are indeed masterfully achieved—one must go further and notice where they are put, and to what effect. The dramatic principle, which is pleased to assign these effects to the Man of Law and to account for them by projecting from his imagined character their efficient cause, makes it possible to say interesting things about a hypothetical medieval lawyer but prevents us from asking and answering more interesting questions about Chaucer’s art. It is true, after all, that he wrote everybody’s speeches, and if it is true, as we believe, that morally and doctrinally the Canterbury pilgrims are the result of their tales, and
not the other way around, then one accounts for the nature and
distribution of Chaucer's "beauties" in terms of the larger coherence
of tale with tale.

The tapestrylike quality of the *Knight's Tale*, which has been well
enough noted as a merely aesthetic virtue and as evidence of "medie­
valism," is in fact precisely the right quality for a tale of definition as
we have defined it. The whole enterprise of the *Knight's Tale* is, as it
were, to persuade the inevitable emergent disorders of this world to
accept the shrine-bounded stadium of Theseus as the fit circumstance
of their resolution and to persuade the hearers and readers of the tale
that a successful progress from existence to understanding—from an
order intruded upon by Palamon and Arcite to an ending made ac­
ceptable by having read Boethius—is to be achieved only by the cere­
monialization of facts, or (in Chaucer's terms) the assimilation of ear­
nest into game. Therefore, at the level of answerable style, the rude
facts of this Theban rivalry must be contained within the ceremony of
a verbal *occupatio* whose dense and hurried pressure achieves their
verbal ceremonialization.

The tale of Constance, on the other hand, exists at the level of a fact
searching for, and still not confident of, its definition. Constance's
father intends that the bounds of Christendom shall be enlarged, but
he is not God and cannot make Providence his puppet. Rather, Provi­
dence, definition, the perfection of what will be is hidden and must be
aspired to by people who can in fact see only the chaos and not the
shrine-bound stadium. The *Knight's Tale* contains the reconciliation
of fact and definition; the *Man of Law's Tale* contains facts in search of
definitive affirmation. Therefore necessarily their visible aspect must
be pathetic; likewise, ceremony must therefore necessarily be hidden,
unreachable, unachievable. Chaucer's orchestration of effects is thus
program music—we can know why he is good at this, here, and that,
there, only after we have learned what the program is. Then every­
thing is clear.

In terms of the precedent of the *Knight's Tale*, then, the *Man of
Law's Tale* reproduces in larger and more foreground detail what the
catalogues of human conditions associated with Mars, Venus, Diana,
and Saturn listed. When Saturn says

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Myn is the drenchyng in the see so wan;
Myn is the prison in the derke cote;
Myn is the stranglyng and hangyng by the throte,
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And myne be the maladyes colde,
The derke tresons, and the castes olde;
My lookyng is the fader of pestilence.

(I [A] 2456–58, 2467–69)

his words are followed by the providential promise, echoing the promise of Apocalypse that “God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes” (Apoc. 21:4):

Now weep namoore, I shal doon diligence
That Palamon, that is thyn owene knyght,
Shal have his lady, as thou hast him hight.

Weep now namoore, I wol thy lust fulfille.

(I [A] 2470–72, 2478)

In the context of the Knight’s Tale, the calamities of life are contained within their daemonic supervision; in the Man of Law’s Tale they are forced for a time to stand alone, unsupported even by daemon, let alone the Christian God of Providence, and are therefore necessarily pathetic.

All this is literally appropriate to Christendom, where life must be by faith and not by sight. There are, in the church, ceremonies and securities, but they are tentative, provisional, and ad interim. The revelation of the opus restaurationis, which is and will be the career of the church, is ultimately eschatological, and the shrine-girt stadium in which everything will be clear is only in heaven. “We see now through a mirror in an obscure manner, but then face to face” (1 Cor. 13:12). To be good at pathos and incapable of celebration is, sub specie aeternitatis, to be precisely qualified to describe the visible part of the present life of the church, of Christendom, in history. It is a provisional order, capable of using the full resources of merely mortal intentionality but at the same time incomplete, because we do not now see face to face. Since in the Man of Law’s Tale we have as subject the extension of Christendom, we appropriately see it only literally, but with the Knight’s Tale resonating in the analogical background to reassure us that all this pathos will not be in vain and to predict the happy ending.

The Clerk’s Tale is about an earthly kingdom. As it stands it deals with an implausibly monstrous man and an implausibly obedient wife, the marquis and marquise of Saluzzo. At the level of psychological realism, Talbot Donaldson makes more sense of the tale than any other critic we know when he says that constancy, not patience, is Griselda’s virtue—“of her own volition she has made constancy to him
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supreme. . . . While Walter remains the visible symbol of the vow Griselda made him, it seems less Walter than the vow itself—her own vow, to which Griselda remains unflinchingly constant. It is this quality of strength in Griselda—a strength so indomitable in its very meekness as to be an awesome self-assertion—which fascinates students who universally find her acceptance of the happy ending implausible. But in this they, and Donaldson, are wrong. He says of Griselda that it "is not human to go on loving a monster." But of course it is, and has been ever since the first husband came home drunk and beat his wife.

The Clerk’s Tale, as all critics know, is a naturalized version of a generic folktale motif, Beauty and the Beast, which generates an array of plots extending from the Cupid and Psyche myth to the story of the princess who marries a frog in order to break the enchantment and make her frog a prince again. In all versions, whether the ending is happy or not, a woman is asked to accomplish the ordeal of loving and obeying a repulsive, sadistic, unintelligible, supernatural, sometimes invisible, or otherwise impossible consort. Eventually, if faithfulness is perfect (or almost perfect), it is rewarded by having the monstrous consort transformed into an ideal lover or husband. It is impossible to know how much Chaucer knew of the folktale roots of his story. But it is even more impossible to believe that he could have been ignorant of the profound truth of human nature which it expresses. The marriage vow, for better or for worse, and even more because it evokes the faithful saving love of Christ, presumes a radically and stubbornly persistent redemptive power. Wives, and husbands too, who truly marry commit themselves to a faithfulness strong enough to redeem and transform a monster and are perhaps most radically glorified in this world when that is the ordeal they are given.

We need to remember, though, that there is not one vow, but three. Walter vows to God a devotion which Chaucer makes a precise equivalent of Griselda’s to Walter; and Walter imposes on his people, before he chooses a wife, the same vow again. These vows reflect the triple duty of the sovereign, as defined by Aegidius Romanus, to rule wisely himself, his family, and his realm. Self-rule, of course, is the very opposite of autonomous self-assertion; rather, it is a cultivation of virtue which is the earthly expression of one’s subservience and service to God. The story begins, therefore, with the levels announced and sorted out. In trusting God, Walter implicitly puts himself in the place of Constance—a member of the visible world, dependent upon the invisible workings of the providence of God to provide a meaning-
ful outcome in the *opus restaurationis*. It is his place to be, as marquis, merely human, while God, who has divine use for human actions, provides the allegory.

In the *Man of Law’s Tale*, the action of the plot really does expand Christendom; the doubleness consists first in the two parallel actions, one of which fails and one of which succeeds, and then in the pathetic predicament of people who must necessarily see this *opus restaurationis* as a process in time rather than as an ordered and eschatological whole. In the normal career of the human sovereign, however, the doubleness usually consists of the fact that earthly events have a heavenly allegory—the king’s practical and daily acts of rule may be devotionally and allegorically compared to the activity of God in Christ, for both the spiritual correction of the king and the spiritual edification of him and of his people. The lesson of the *Man of Law’s Tale* is that this doubleness must be accepted.¹⁸

But Walter does not accept this advice. He is compulsively anxious to play God—as it were, to force the divine level into identity with the human level, rather than to accept it as the analogy that it is and must be. Instead of being the sovereign who is a figure of God, he wishes literally to perform the acts of God—though in terms of the comparison with the Job story, what he actually performs are the acts of the devil. Instead of expanding Christendom by the faithful performance of earthly life, he wishes to expand the scope of earthly sovereignty to include, literally, heaven.¹⁹

In thus wishing and thus doing, Walter is unfaithful to the pattern of the three vows with which his story began and unfaithful to the ideal of justice which, as sovereign, he was obligated to serve. William Peraldus’s definition is instructive:

Quia virtute iustitiae reddimus unicuique quod debemus, dividetur iustitia secundum ea quae debemus, et quibus debemus.

Notandum ergo quod quaedam debemus omnibus, ut dilectionem, veritatem et fidem: quaedam vero non omnibus et inter ea aliquid debemus superiori, aliquid inferiori, aliquid pari. Item aliquid speciale debemus nobis specialiter coniunctis, ut parentibus, et patriae benevolis, quod debitum solvit pietas, prout Macrobius et Tullius de ea loquentur. Item debemus aliquid his qui beneficia conferunt: scilicet gratiam, de qua loquitur Tullius. Et aliquid his qui mala inferunt: scilicet vindicationem, de qua idem loquitur. Et aliquid etiam his qui mala ferunt vel sustinent, scilicet misericordiam.²⁰

Peraldus goes on to define, as a part of the office of “latria,” which we owe to God and only to God, a kind of committed obedience. “Ter-tium est vitam nostram Deo committere. Qui enim agnoscit per fidem
se habere vitam suam a Deo, vult illam ei offerre, et oratione, et
obsequuis impetrat eam a Deo dirigi. Tob. 4. Omni tempore benedic
Dominum, et pete ab eo ut vias tuas dirigat, et omnia consilia tua in
ipso permaneant.”

It is not at all clear that Griselda’s vow of obedience, or that of the people, is overdone, though in the absolute sense, of course, it is ultimately appropriate only to God. However, Walter is clearly in the wrong by not performing his debt of “dilectio, veritas, et fides”—he is harsh rather than cherishing, deceitful rather than true, and faithful only in the sense of technical chastity.

Throughout Peraldus’s discussion of justice, which is of course one of the supreme obligations of the sovereign, there runs most strongly the notion of what is due—the actions and relations which are demanded by the very nature and definition of the entities (usually people) involved. We are dealing with definitions and types, not cases: normative procedure at its most normative. The pressure of the medieval conviction that stories are about consuetudines and credulitates, rather than things obvious to sense, is very strong here. Equally strong, in the story, is the magnificent and indeed iconic perfection of Griselda’s constancy—real women are not like that, though in the divine economy of God in which people are tested and tried as if by fire, women and men are expected to be like that, and do indeed sometimes measure up. Therefore, because of the heavy pressure of abstraction, of the perfection of the typical, of the consuetudo which is definition, Walter’s compulsive playing of God is an imitation made all the more outrageous, all the more absolute and absolutely pretentious, by the perfection of the response to it.

The outrage, as we have said, is that Walter’s actions intend literally, rather than analogically and allegorically, to be godlike actions. In this dimension, what the story is about is the abuse of allegory by virtue of the refusal of doubleness—by virtue of an absolute and outrageous demand for unity, singleness, and unequivocal existence. It is an abuse which the doubleness of the Man of Law’s Tale warns against; it is an abuse which the tales following will compound in various ways, as we shall see; and it is an abuse which gains special meaning because it is committed in the context of marriage, as well as in the context of sovereignty.

We have repeatedly claimed that allegory is, in the later Middle Ages, a principle of structure rather than, or more significantly than, a linguistic strategy of reference. It is in the Clerk’s Tale, more than anywhere else in Chaucer, that this medieval structural principle is most blatantly and obviously violated. This is true, we think, because
it is in the merely human moral order represented by this combination of a sovereign in his realm and a husband in his marriage that there is the greatest human temptation to feel self-sufficient and complete, to refuse or ignore the analogies, and at the same time the greatest opportunity for devotion or insight to develop an awareness of the analogies. The love of Christ for the church should be present to the marriage bed; the sovereign love of God for his Creation should be present to the functions of the king. That they so often are is cause of the human sense that these earthy human functions are both supremely important and superbly meaningful. But when one wishes to have the importance and the meaning, without the humility to keep in mind their ultimate basis, one has the all too easy and natural sin of which Walter's playing God is type and emblem, so radically that one must know, not only that it is perverse, but also what is the norm of doubleness which it violates. The *Clerk's Tale*, then, represents the moral order of the merely human, evil or lacking only when it fails to remember that it is derivative and not absolute, and even then capable of being the context of great individual moral achievement.

Walter is a monster, irredeemably. Yet the tale is not monstrous—or at least it is tantalizingly close to being acceptable. Therein lies its fascination. Just as the *Man of Law's Tale* takes a feature of the third part of the *Knight's Tale*, the pathos of the human condition catalogues, and makes that pathos the theme and essence of the whole tale, so the *Clerk's Tale* takes a part of the *Man of Law's Tale*. When Constance bears Alla's child, the messenger and the constable condemn it (with its mother) to possible death, and with every appearance and conviction of having acted on Alla's instructions. Given Griselda's absolute and absolutely kept promise not to complain or even question, it would take only the smallest of adjustments of the plot of the *Clerk's Tale* to transform Walter's monstrous test into an innocent act of some sort, which his wife unquestioningly misconstrued as a murder. The motif "father rejects innocent child," which in the *Man of Law's Tale* really is an occasion of Job-like endurance of testing, becomes in the *Clerk's Tale* the horror it is only because we have Walter's motivations explained to us. The *Clerk's Tale* permits the horrid mistake of the *Man of Law's Tale* to come true, precisely in order to rid the story of the need for the operation of Providence, to reduce the moral order involved to the merely human by the smallest possible change, so as to preserve for that merely human moral order as much of the absolute character appropriate to definitional paradigms as possible.
The result can perhaps be best defined, briefly, by calling it an exactly medieval equivalent of surrealism. It has the same haunting, troubling quality of overdefinition, of more meaningfulness than meaning, which must accrue to a story which claims to be the act of God while it admits that it is not God.

What are we to make of it? Essentially, that we cannot accept any moral order which insists on unifying all levels of allegory into its literal self. Moral questions depend for their answers not only on the nature of the act involved but also, and perhaps even more importantly, on the nature of the structures, and the structures of structures, which surround and condition and interpret (or fail to interpret) that act. This is the statement that the *Clerk's Tale* makes, partly because it is the tale it is, and partly because we have seen it as a tale that comes immediately after the *Man of Law's Tale*, the third member of a descending enthymeme of tales whose initial proposition is part three of the *Knight's Tale*.

But this tale, uniquely in Chaucer's collection, has an Envoi, which has been on medieval authority labeled as Chaucer's. Dramatically it belongs to the Clerk, but this fact is irrelevant. We are not reading on dramatic principles. In fact, it belongs to Chaucer, and the medieval scribal label properly recognizes the fact that here the author, Chaucer himself, has added something, and speaks from behind his puppet show in his own voice. In the tale Chaucer has not been allusive. Beyond some obvious "ox stall" underlinings of Griselda's identification with Christ, and some quotations from Job which repeat the tale's point and its overt ostensible moralization, the verbal texture of the *Clerk's Tale* is spare, lean, literal, and direct. Such a style is absolutely appropriate, because the point of the tale is to claim (perversely, as it happens, but the style is still answerable) that life can be thus spare, simple, unified, and absolute. But with the Envoi the Chaucerian wit becomes more ostentatiously complex. In the Envoi Chaucer reverts to his favorite ironic technique, a richly allusive statement contradicted or complicated by external commentary.

The tale begins with Petrarch dead, and "nayled in his cheste" (IV [E] 29); the Envoi begins with Griselda dead, along with her patience. In both cases there is a related quality—Petrarch's rhetoric, which illumines (as does Lanyan's philosophy and law), and Griselda's patience. Presumably abstractions can die as well as people—the reality of the *consuetudo* is no more. Therefore, since the old world is dead, we must welcome the new. Follow Echo; answer back. The medieval glosses on Echo repeat and complicate the theme and advice of the
Clerk's Tale marvelously and, when taken with the text, predict and advise the following tales.

Literally, Echo is one who answers back, and therefore by example advises wives to be like the Wife of Bath rather than Griselda. One of Bersuire's glosses says the same thing: "Vel dic quod tales echo sunt quedam litigiose et brigose mulieres vel etiam quidam servitores queruli qui ultimum verbum semper volunt habere: et ad omnia que dicuntur a maritis atque dominis respondere. Etsi ab eis reprehenduntur semper murmurant. Contra illud leviti. xix. Non eris criminator aut susurro in populis." Chaucer's reference to the camel is also appropriate, because he is a strong beast and swift, and able to carry heavy burdens—at the same time a camel will refuse a load that is too heavy or a trip that is too long. The tiger is notable chiefly in the bestiaries for being swift and for being deceivable by a hunter with a mirror.

Other glosses, however, rather contradict the real implications of what Chaucer says. In addition to representing "litigiose et brigose mulieres," Echo may also mean a good reputation: "Per Echo hominis bonam famam, que arrogantem amaret et benedicendo extolleret nisi ipse se cunctis preferendo bonam famam contemperet. Quia igitur contempta fuit, latuit nichil boni dicendo de eo." Or Echo may mean flatterers: "Dic quod echo significat adulatores qui et montes, idest prelatos: silvas idest religiosos: flumina idest seculares et delicatos frequentant et circa ipsos resonant et clamant. Si enim contingat aliquid ab aliquo dici statim solent ad verba ipsius respondere: et verbum eius tanquam benedictum replicare." The camel is allegorically an exemplum of patient endurance of penance: "Sic pro certo veri patientes debent esse agiles, per obedientiae velocitatem, onera poenitentiae et praelia adversitatis sustinere, per patientiam, et firmitatem. Unde ad Gal. 6. Unusquisque onus suum portabit. Et ideo quando magister Cameli, idest, prelatus vel sacerdos, vel etiam quando Deus indicit, inungiit et immittit aliquid opus poenitentiae, laboris vel adversitatis, statim nos debemus incurvari per humilitatem, obedientiam et subiectionem, et genua flectere, per gratiarum actionem." Thus, to follow the example of Echo, and to be like the camel, means to answer back and be stubborn. But these examples also advise us to be like Griselda, careful for the *bona fama* of our Walters, even to the point of flattery. In the camel we are allegorically exhorted to the precise patient endurance of testing which the Envoi says is no longer possible or necessary. Thus Chaucer contradicts himself, if we are learned enough to know the glosses and see the
irony. If we see the irony, then we can accept Petrarch's allegorization, and Griselda's death does not mean the death of patience as well. If we know only that Echo is "litigiosa et brigosa," then we are led to Leviticus 19:16: "Non eris criminato aut susurro in populis," a verse which predicts the actual recommendation of the Manciple's Tale. If we accept the merely literal recommendation of the Envoi, always to answer back, we will have the gift of ready answer that Persephone gives to May in the Merchant's Tale. If we are like Echo, who "evere answereth at the countretaille," then we are prepared to deal with tallies, and with the wife's answer in the Shipman's Tale: "Score it upon my taille." Taking all levels together, Griselda's example is both denied and affirmed, and all the following tales are predicted. In a world defined by a man who acts as if he were God, real truth tends to be obscure.

The Merchant's Tale accepts Chaucer's advice: always have an answer. It picks up and makes absolute a detail from the Clerk's Tale, just as the Clerk's Tale had done from the Man of Law's Tale and the Man of Law's Tale from the Knight's Tale. Walter's proposed January-May marriage to his own daughter, which is of course pure pretense, becomes in the Merchant's Tale the serious basis of the narrative. And the complex irony of Chaucer's Envoi, with its literal statements contradicted by the glosses which come with allusions and comparisons, is the basic strategy of the whole of the Merchant's Tale.

We have said that the Man of Law's Tale represents the moral order of imperial Christendom, which properly exists, ad interim huius mundi, in a state of pathos out of which providence eventually works good ends. The Clerk's Tale represents the moral order of any earthly realm, which sees itself as absolute and so misappropriates to itself divine functions, but which nevertheless can be the context of superb moral achievement. The Merchant's Tale represents the moral order of any merely human marriage.

Properly, marriage is not a good in isolation. In the full dispensation of Providence, marriage exists for the sake of engendering children, for the sake of avoidance of sin, and for the sake of figuring the divine truths and relationships which centuries of biblical authority and human devotion had related to it. Necessarily, therefore, January's narrowly sexual reasons for marriage are wrong primarily (discounting his advanced age) because they are incomplete. Avoidance of sin is but one-third, and the least third at that, of the full meaning. To affirm the part as, and instead of, the whole is to make one's self liable to the ironies generated by the whole's inevitable
presence; like the Romance of the Rose, the Merchant's Tale is allegorically haunted by what is missing.²⁹

The tale is haunted as well by the true version of what is literally there. Reduced to outline, the Merchant's Tale is about an old man who accepts his wife as innocent after he has seen visual evidence of what seems to be her sexual relation with a man in a tree. The most famous old cuckold in the medieval tradition is Joseph; the most famous apparently guilty but acceptably innocent young maiden is Mary.³⁰

The man in the tree is Satan, if we can accept the testimony of the Biblia Pauperum.³¹ On the other hand, Christ was also in a tree,³² and since Mary is pregnant, and May only in danger of being so, the substitution of child for lover is plausible. Nicholas of Lyra comments extensively on Joseph's predicament; one bit is an especially telling parallel with May's pagan goddess-given ability to talk her way out of difficulty: "Sed queritur hic quare maria non dixit ei divinum secretum. Est dicendum quod talia non sunt revelanda: nisi quantum se extendit voluntas divina. et ideo beata virgo tacuit: tenens firmiter quod sicut istud secretum fuerat revelatum sancte eligabet: ut habetur Luce primo: sic revelaretur aliis competenti tempore ex beneplacito divine voluntatis. Similiter queritur quare ioseph non petivit ab ea? Dicendum quod pro nihilo petisset: quia ipsi marie pro se dicenti non credidisset: et iterum ex divina dispensatione hoc factum est, ut per revelationem angeli ipse ioseph sic certificaretur quod de cetero nullo modo dubitare posset."³³ A husband (or an espoused husband) has a right to be doubtful, in such a case as this; the irony is intensified as, in the Merchant's Tale, May herself is made the medium of the divine certification. In thus being able to answer back, she takes the advice of Chaucer's Envoi and at the same time accomplishes, by morally blinding her husband as his real sight is restored, precisely the same detachment from allegorical validity which the tale's assertion of sex-for-its-own-sake marriage has already generated.

Morally, "Per ioseph cogitantem dimittere mariam: qui certificatus de mysterio per angelum accepit eam ut dominam: significatur homo dubitans in fide vel moribus qui per predicatorem vel confessorem bonum in fide solidatur: et subiicit se ei in illis que fidei sunt orthodoxe."³⁴ January has a great deal of good advice given him, before he marries in moribus bonis, but he will not take it. His marriage is an example of the literal contradiction of what Joseph's marriage morally means.

This neat ironic layering of gloss upon event is, as we have said, the strategy of the tale. So much has been obvious for a long time, espe-
cially from Emerson Brown's work. Our point, in adding to this rich
texture a gloss or two from Nicholas of Lyra, is not simply to note that
the ironies are there, but rather to claim that their presence is a
comment upon allegoricalness of a certain sort, and at the place in this
descending enthymeme of merely moral orders where that comment
has most point.

The merely human marriage is what the Wife of Bath defends—
"Whos lyf and al hire secte," says Chaucer's Clerk, may "God mayntene" (IV [E] 1171). It is intrinsic to the nature of marriage, and
especially good marriage, to be preoccupying. The Wife of Bath
wants husbands who are good in bed. Sovereigns wish to expand their
sovereignty, even at the expense of God; lovers, even married ones,
wish simply to be left alone. But to be thus left alone is ultimately to
have nothing but the predicament of the flesh—this is why the Wife
regrets her pith; this is why the sweating Lover of the Romance of the
Rose has aged so much in his staff-assisted pilgrimage; this is why
January's slack skin and badly shaven whiskers are so repulsive; this is
why Chaucer forces on his audience in the Merchant's Tale the half-
fascinated, half-sick repulsive point of view of the voyeur; this is why
the gods who rule in this new Eden of the second fall are pagan gods,
and from hell at that. The flesh is necessary, and good. The predic-
ament of the flesh, however, is by definition, and because of the Incar-
nation, self-imposed, unnecessary, escapable. The hovering allegories
of the Merchant's Tale, which its literal sense constantly contradicts and
rejects, are a persistent reminder to the predicament of the flesh that
it is unnecessary, and that the whole truth of January's marriage, or of
any marriage, as an ideally intended moral order of use in this tem-
porary world, is larger than January knows. Because January refuses
to know, the allegories hover ironically; because what he refuses is in
fact true, they must be present.

The Manciple's Tale and the Shipman's Tale elaborate this predica-
ment of the flesh. If marriage is merely carnal, then adultery is its
normal complication—the eternal triangle is profoundly grounded in
human nature. Two reactions to adultery are possible—outraged
condemnation and acceptance. The Manciple's Tale has for its matter
January's wrath, the Shipman's Tale the blindness which May's ready
answer imposes on him. Neither order is very good, but we are in a
descending series, and lower than the Merchant's Tale is at best far
from ideal.

The Manciple's Tale is really two tales and three discursive essays.
The first part is a narrative of the Manciple's prudent reconciliation
with the hung-over and drunken Cook, to prevent the Manciple's embezzlements from being found out. The second part is an essay dealing with the relationship between a creature and its nature or definition. The third part is another essay, which deals with the relationship between a thing and its right name. The fourth part is the tale of Apollo and his crow. Finally, there is an essay on the tongue, warning us against too much talk. Four of these five have to do with the kind of order an individual generates, or tries to generate, around himself to make himself comfortable in the world. The Manciple obviously has an interest in the continued benign intoxication of a potential witness against him. The examples of the caged bird, the cat, and the she-wolf would seem to argue that lower impulses, being natural, must find indulgence. Apollo, who is comfortably married, destroys his wife and his situation in defense of principle, and concludes bitterly that he was wrong. The essay on the custody of the tongue then generalizes, advising against any talk which might cause mischief.

In order to see what is the true sum of this miscellany, we must reconcile the tale of Apollo to its context. In the descending enthymeme of tales of marriage, this is a tale which values definitions so far above facts as to be willing to destroy the facts for the sake of definition. This may seem a strange way of describing what he does, but it is deliberately done in order to find a place for what might be called philosophical idealism, or, in modern terms, utopianism, in this descending series of human moralities by which the world is provisionally ordered. Robertson's willingness to give up the Wife of Bath for the abstract name of a grotesque is the critical equivalent of this idealism, and the too easy acceptance of the Parson's condemnation of all that has gone before him is, we suppose, the devotional. Both are ultimately destructive, both of life and of definition. To say, as Apollo does by implication, that it is better to have a dead wife than an unfaithful one is to destroy the marriage along with the wife and be left with nothing. His solution was manifestly unsatisfactory and was instantly repented of. As a god, Apollo is a failure—and precisely the kind of failure to define, by his existence, the influence of idealism upon human morality. He is supposed to be the god of wisdom, but he is in fact a mere bachelor, without powers or numen, whose providential working in the world begins in jealous rage and ends in disaster. We are far removed from the providential God who guarded Constance, and even from the lesser gods who gave to January and May (and Damian) what they needed to make a bad situation livable.
It is gratifying to have idealism so far down. We have seen that one of the ruling strategies of this moral group of tales is the evocation, in an array of ways, of some kind of allegorical resonance, overtone, assertion, or relationship. In the *Man of Law's Tale* the allegorical or providential dimension was hidden behind pathos, but eventually, by the power of God, was made part of the literal. Walter acted as if godlikeness could be made literally his merely by behaving like God. January, May, and Damian are pleased to pretend that there is nothing but the flesh, accepting its carnality, and are reproved by the ironies which their unintentionally resonating actions evoke. Apollo, still lower, would pretend that mere flesh can be perfect, and gets nothing. And the merchant and his wife, in the *Shipman's Tale*, mistake the metaphor of the marriage debt for something literal, equate sex and gold, and get the kind of love which results from that equation.

Apollo's foolishness is surrounded by a context which interprets and corrects it. Chaucer's discussion of the propriety of the word *lemman*, and his suggestion that the name of thief is equally applicable to Alexander as to a petty outlaw, speak directly to the problem of the relation between words and things—the relation which Apollo so foolishly and destructively tried to make perfectly pure. The problem Chaucer specifically addresses here is the problem of the correct name, in two opposite senses. First, can a word be used which carries with it a moral evaluation as well as a definite meaning—can one "talk dirty" about dirty things? Second, can a word be expanded beyond its normal usage to expose a truth usually ignored—can we call an emperor a thief when his legitimizing force is nothing but a very large army? The questions seem obvious to the point of triviality, but they are not. First of all, the word *lemman* is not, in fact, a dirty word, since it can be used in perfectly straightforward fashion in religious contexts.\(^{41}\) Second, the Alexander story, which was enormously popular,\(^{42}\) tended normally to be told as a story recounted to Alexander himself, to make the point that Alexander would reward a culprit with a brave and ready answer. Chaucer's point would seem to be that one can handle things by using words, but not without admitting that the way between "is slider." The claims which a nominalist would make for words would be high claims, but not at all absolute ones.

The same kind of comment is appropriate to the essay on the nature of birds, cats, and she-wolves. The very fact that the examples echo the *Romance of the Rose* should put us on our guard. Even though the nature of birds is to eat worms, and of cats to chase mice, such low
lusts are not absolute, because birds and cats are not absolute. One must ask of Nature, whose gift these natures are, not only what they are but also what they mean, since no single thing can be taken in isolation. Such a question, of course, is ultimately beyond Nature's competence.

Therefore we begin with a Manciple who uses wine to make himself friends of the Mammon of unrighteousness, lest true but inconvenient words about his own history be spoken. And we end with the exhortation to tell nothing, lest we tell too much. Such a philosophy of language is a poor one, but it is the best response that life can make of the ironies of the Manciple's Tale. There Apollo, unwise in action though the god of wisdom, has a concept of marriage which leads him to kill his wife. Since concepts are empty words unless they attach to the world, and since the murder which Apollo's notion justifies destroys his marriedness along with his wife, his conceptual use of language empties his language of reference and nullifies his ideal. Silence is indeed better than this.43

The action of the Shipman's Tale begins with a double vow: on the part of Don John, "That nevere in my lyf, for lief ne looth, / Ne shal I of no conseil yow biwrey" (VII 132–33 [B² 1322–23]), to which the merchant's wife responds: "Ne shal I nevere, for to goon to helle, / Biwreye a word of thyng that ye me telle" (VII 137–38 [B² 1327–28]). Both vows assent to the final advice of the Manciple's Tale. Secrets will not be told; cuckolded husbands will never be given a chance to kill in haste and repent at leisure. From this promising beginning the tale goes on to make absolute the result of the Merchant's Tale—a stable arrangement for probable further adulteries, with the wife in command and fully aware of the commercial value of her principal assets.

Priest John is a member of the merchant's household—a familiar, an honorary cousin, who gives good tips to the servants and causes no comment when he visits in the merchant's house while the merchant is away. He is, in fact, such a familiar that the merchant is embarrassed to have given him the impression of wanting to have his money back. And the merchant's wife shares with him the secrets of her "privitee"—that her husband is not good in bed. The whole arrangement, in fact, is liberated enough to be modern instead of medieval. The only household in the whole of the Canterbury Tales to compare with it is that of the Cook's Tale, where sex was actually sold, rather than simply used in payment of debt. This is a world in which there are no gods, no powers except gold (and its sexual equivalent). As a moral order it is the most pragmatic, the most merely human in the
series. Beyond this point one cannot go and still be orderly, or main­
tain even the pretense of morality.

The irony of the tale involves one metaphor and two puns, whose
use defines the verbal potential of this kind of order. The metaphor is
that of the *debitum*, or marriage debt; the two puns are of "cosynage"
and of "taillynge." The metaphor of the marriage debt is a sufficiently
arid-seeming justification for sex, but in rational terms it fits very well.
Like marriage, a debt is created by a vow or a promise, it involves
something physical or material, and it creates a relationship between
two people in which the major concern of the debtor is for the satis­
faction of the creditor. The only adjustment which marriage makes is
that the status of debtor tends to be maximized, for both parties, and
the status of creditor is ignored, or at least not encouraged. Once past
the commercial overtones of the word, one must admit that a
metaphor which encourages each member of a marriage to be primar­
ily concerned for the satisfaction of the other is a good and noble
thing, not to be condemned out of hand because celibate moralists
may have made it joyless and repulsive.44

But the connection with money does linger; this metaphor, like all
metaphors, is subject to abuse. What the characters in the *Shipman's
Tale* do is take the metaphor literally. Sex can be bought, as Priest
John buys it; once bought and sold, it can, and indeed must, be a
currency capable of satisfying debt:

Ye han more slakkere dettours than am I!
For I wol paye yow wel and redily
Fro day to day, and if so be I faille,
I am youre wyf; score it upon my taille,

By God, I wil nat paye yow but abedde!

(VII 413-16, 424 [B² 1603-6, 1614])

So much is obvious, and has been often noted. What is important to
see, however, is what happens to language when people try to pass off
this kind of order as moral. Puns become perverse, or threatening,
rather than clues to the secret harmony of the universe. "Cosynage"
equates the bond of family, in which one should be able to feel most
secure, with precisely that kind of fraud by trickery which especially
depends upon and exploits the feeling of being secure. If sex is
merely "taillynge," then the woman who suggests the arrangement
has reduced herself to mere flesh, or she has dignified bookkeeping
by calling it orgasmic—and, indeed, her husband does seem to be
better in bed when he has just been triumphant in the market. When the moral order is nothing but the flesh, and arrangements for its comfort, then words lose all power to save. When facts try to get along without the truth, they find that language will not only permit them to do so but will even encourage them, and will by the tricks that only language can play—puns and metaphors—make the situation worse. A part of the wife's triumph is the possibility of the pun. Without it she still may have talked her husband into reasonable good cheer about her clothing bills, but her larger audience would have been less satisfied. Language gives her a connection—accidental, untrue, degrading—which she uses, and in using, accepts.

Hell, says Charles Williams, is imprecise. So is sin. And so in real life are the intricate arrangements we make to cover the tracks of our sins and our mistakes. The very fact that in fiction always, and even sometimes in life, words will go along with these intricate imprecisions, through metaphors and puns, in ways which have about them a quality of wit, adds a dimension of rightness to the wrong and begins to redeem it. When, in the beginning of the story, we are told of the troubles husbands have with their wives' expenditures on clothing, we smile in recognition. When Priest John giggles at his risque language, we smile again. And when the possibility of this tallying knits up this feast, and makes an end, our satisfaction is as much with the moral power of words to be neat as it is laughter at the immoral power of people to keep their original private little worlds going, more or less in order, for a while.

The moral group, then, is a group of marriages. Chaucer chose this particular human experience as the paradigm for particular morality because marriage so perfectly combines the particularity of the flesh with the narrative intentionality of the vow—that is, because it combines words with things; and because marriage, of all human institutions, best admits to allegorical or analogous or typical resonances without surrendering its existence as a daily set of facts which unify two people with past and future, constituting social history. His examples occur in descending order; we have called the series an enthymeme both because of that figure's connection with rhetoric and because of the fact that in series a detail from one story becomes the whole of the next. Throughout, there is one game being played with the presence and power of God, or his pagan substitute; another is played with what may be most generally called allegory—that is, the resonant relation, positive or ironic, between the facts of a story and the truth which the story might exemplify. Both these games are
right, at this place in Chaucer's Canterbury collection, because it is private moralities which have the most ambiguous, or dubious, relation to God, and because the test which these particular assertions of order demand by wishing to be true is the test of allegory. That all of them, except the Man of Law's Tale, are found wanting should be no surprise; only Saturn was right, and no shrine was built to him. Lesser daemons may make their promises, but none will come true unless Saturn wills it. Men may make their marriages, playing God or playing pimp, as the case may be, but we only discover what it all means after it is all over, Constance has come home, and she finds that God has a use for the fact that Alla loves her truly still.

1. The term frame comes from Erving Goffman, Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience (Cambridge, Mass., 1974). In using it we do not intend to import into the analysis of Chaucer a sociological anachronism. But if we discount the phenomenological dimensions of Goffman's analysis, the notion of the framed event—the event whose shape and significance depend largely (or even partially) on the assumptions or truth systems of the actors and audience (if any)—nicely defines medieval morality. The medieval frame, of course, was ontologically grounded.

2. The Waning of the Middle Ages, passim.


5. If we may trust the pun established in the Miller's Tale and the Wife of Bath’s Tale, then the Merchant speaks more truly than he knows, because the "queynte world" for whose good order he is concerned will to his loss come to include the world of "queynte."

6. Thus, in the Òvide moralisé, the romance of Mars and Venus is discussed as a conjunction of planets, which govern the "colerique" and "pasibile" temperaments (2:131 lines 1489-96). This relation between emotions and temperaments, and the stars, for the Middle Ages is explored in Curry, Medieval Sciences.

7. See below, in the Epilogue, for a fuller treatment of this dimension of marriage imagery and the intimate connection between Chaucer's understanding of human marriage and the power of story.

8. Of Chaucer the narrator E. Talbot Donaldson remarks, "It is almost as if the Creator were watching with loving sympathy and humorous appreciation
the solemn endeavors of His creatures to understand the situation in which He has placed them" (Chaucer's Poetry: An Anthology for the Modern Reader [New York, 1958], p. 944).

9. Emelye's two potential mothers-in-law, if we take the easiest implication of Chaucer's pedigree for Palamon and Arcite—"... of the blood roial/Of Thebes, and of sustren two yborn" (I [A] 1018–19)—were Antigone and Ismene. The disorder that intricately and incestuously ravaged Thebes has now been pushed back to far distant borders. Emelye is almost as passive as Constance. Theseus's project in making his ward's marriage is like the emperor's in sending Constance to the sultan, in that he has succeeded in consolidating his border states, Amazonia and Thebes, much as the emperor hoped to Christianize the pagan realms and eventually succeeds in doing so in his daughter's second marriage. Constance's adventures are alternate.

10. This lesson, that allegory cannot be identity, is of course the one that Walter, in the tale immediately following, violates—as we shall see, with interesting consequences for the enterprise of interpretation.


12. R. K. Root calls the tale "a splendidly pictured tapestry" (quoted by Muscatine, Chaucer and the French Tradition, p. 176). The nonsequential character of the Knight's Tale is also stressed by Muscatine in his own treatment of the poem, which he finds more appropriately understood as a "poetic pageant" than as a story organized around plot and character development (p. 181).


15. The problem of the folktale origins of the tale is treated, with a helpful bibliography, by J. Burke Severs in The Literary Relationships of Chaucer's Clerk's Tale (New Haven, 1942), pp. 4–6. Severs discusses the various types of folktale traditions which have been offered as suggesting key elements in the tale, including the Cupid and Psyche tales and those of the Calumniated Wife and the Intended Bride. Severs concludes, along with W. A. Cate, "The Problem of the Origin of the Griselda Story," Studies in Philology 29 (1932): 399, that the story "is derived from a special development of Cupid and Psyche folktales." The Griselda story is not entirely faithful to the Cupid-Psyche pattern because Griselda never fails in her duty to her husband, whereas Psyche does and must win back his love. See Margaret Schlauch's discussion of the tests which Psyche traditionally must undergo before winning Cupid back, in Chaucer's Constance and Accused Queens (New York, 1927), p. 54. Stith Thompson classifies the Griselda story among the tales of wives tested by husbands who feign illness, and so forth, in order to prove their brides' worth; see his Motif-Index of Folk-Literature (Bloomington, Ind., 1955), 3:415. One crucial element of the story, that is, the presumption of Walter's efforts to play God, could be due, at least in part, to the story's folktale backgrounds, in which the actions of the superhuman character are not explained or ac-
counted for but only serve as the impetus for action. At the same time, stories of the tested wife sometimes deal explicitly with this question of why the test should be conducted at all. Don Juan Manuel, in *El Conde Lucanor*, an early fourteenth-century Spanish story collection, tells a story analogous to the *Taming of the Shrew*, but without the shrew as an excuse for the harsh treatment. The husband explains that after testing his wife in examples of arbitrary demands on her obedience, he could have confidence in her judgment at all times. From the number of folktale analogues catalogued by Cate, it seems likely that Chaucer could have known the story in other forms. At any rate, he seems aware of the dual aspect of Walter's character as both man and God.

16. "I truste in Goddes bountee, and therfore / My mariage and myn estaat and reste / I hym bitake; he may doon as hym leste" (IV [E] 159-61). The Latin of the source is less open-ended a commitment: "Illi ego et status et matrimonii mei sortes, sperans de sua solita pietate, commiserim; ipse michi inveniet quod quieti mee sit expediens ac saluti" (Bryan and Dempster, *Sources and Analogues*, p. 300).

17. This definition was documented in connection with our discussion of the *Knight's Tale*.

18. Robert Kaske, in his article "Chaucer's Marriage Group," draws a similar conclusion as an explanation for the various tensions between literal story and allegorical meaning established within the tale.

19. Walter's usurpation of the place and activity of God has been often enough noted. See especially Jordan, *Chaucer and the Shape of Creation*, p. 198, and the scholarship that Jordan cites.

20. William Peraldus, *Summa virtutum ac vitiorum* (Lyons, 1668), p. 302. "Since by the virtue of justice we give back to everyone what we owe, justice is divided according to those things which we owe, and to whom we own them. Therefore it should be understood that we owe certain things to everyone, as affection, truthfulness, and faithfulness: but certain things we do not owe to everyone and among them we owe something to someone superior, to someone below us, and something else to an equal. Next we owe something special to our relations and friends, as to our relatives and to our countrymen, which debt is paid by dutiful conduct, as Macrobius and Cicero say concerning it. Next we owe something to those who give benefits, that is, thanks, about which Cicero speaks. And something to those who try to do evil, that is, defense, about which Cicero also speaks. And something also to those who endure or suffer evil, that is, mercy."

21. Ibid., p. 305. "The third is to commit our life to God. For one who knows through faith that he has his life from God, wishes to offer it to him, and by prayer and supplications brings about that it is directed by God. Tob. 4. Bless God all the time, and desire of him to direct your ways, and that all your counsels may abide in him."

22. If reference may be made to the analogous claims made about *Gawain and the Green Knight* in *The Friar as Critic* (pp. 145-49), one might say that Walter, throughout the tale, has the status of the Green Knight when he first comes to Arthur's court. It is as if the Green Knight had come, made his
challenge, lost his head to Gawain's stroke, and had then said, putting his head back on, "All right, boys, I was only kidding, to see if you were really brave. Now where's my chair?"

23. *Ovidius moralizatus*, p. 71. "Or say that these are Echo: certain litigious and quarrelsome women, or also certain complaining servants, who always wish to have the last word, and answer back to whatever their husbands or lords say, and if they are reproved by them always grumble. Against them [see] Lev. 19: Do not be a detractor or whisperer among the people."

24. In T. H. White's *The Book of Beasts* (New York, 1954), a translation from a medieval Latin bestiary, camels are described as beasts both swift and strong, although they "cannot be given loads beyond what is fitting, nor are the latter willing to do more than the accustomed distances" (p. 80). Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiarum* 12.1, gives the standard explanation of the camel's name, based on a Greek word meaning humble, because the camel kneels to accept its burdens. See also Florence McCulloch, *Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries* (Chapel Hill, 1960), who cites a probable origin for the majority of the camel's traits in Pliny *Historia naturalis* 8. 18 (p. 102).

25. White, *Book of Beasts*, pp. 12-13: "Tigris the Tiger gets his name from his speedy pace.... When he perceives that the mother is close, he throws down a glass ball, and she, taken in by her own reflection, assumes that the image of herself in the glass is her little one."

26. Ghisalberti, "Arnolfo," p. 209. "Echo means a man's good reputation, which should love the proud [Narcissus] and extol him with blessing lest he prefer himself above all and have contempt for good reputation. Because she was held in contempt, she hid, saying nothing good of him."

27. Bersuire, *Ovidius moralizatus*, p. 72. Echo's wanderings through the mountains and forests and along the riverbanks are allegorized as the following of the flatterer after all classes of people in society, the prelates and religious and secular individuals. Echo is described as repeating back their words.

28. Bersuire, *Reductiorum morale*, p. 643. "Thus, certainly, the truly patient ought to be agile in the quickness to obey and should sustain the burdens of penance and the attacks of the enemy with patience and steadfastness. Whence Galatians, 6, 'Each one will bear his own burden.' And so when the master of the camel, that is, the prelate or priest, or also when God names, enjoins, and sends some work of penance, work, or trouble, immediately we must bow down through humility, obedience, and submissiveness, and bend our knees, through the action of grace." The allegorization that accounts for the camel's unwillingness to bear unreasonable burdens is directed to the edification of the ruler, not to permitting the subject to answer back: "Verumtamen magister Cameli, idest praelatus non debet plus debito imponere vel iniungere, alioquin Camelus, idest subditus forsitam non impleret, immo totum reiceret, et nihil de impositis perficeret, et sic gravius delinqueret, et peccaret" (p. 643). "Nevertheless the master of the Camel, that is, a prelate, ought not to impose or enjoin as an obligation something too difficult, lest the Camel, that is, the penitent, by chance should not do it, on the contrary reject it entirely, doing none of the things required, and thus fail and sin even more gravely."
29. Philosophically, an isolated particular must always be ironic, since it cannot be the basis of true knowledge, which is of universals, whether it insists on its particularity or not. But the irony is a redeeming one, which delivers us from the necessity of a thoroughgoing skepticism. For an opposing view, which takes Chaucer's arrays of particulars and alternatives as skeptical, see Sheila Delany, *Chaucer's House of Fame*.

30. This relation between January-May and Joseph-Mary is discussed briefly by Emerson Brown in "Biblical Women in the Merchant's Tale: Feminism, Antifeminism, and Beyond," *Viator* 5 (1974): 387-412. Brown offers a suggestion valuable for the *Merchant's Tale*, and for the other tales as well, when he remarks that, "Perhaps the time has come to move beyond arguing whether the *Merchant's Tale* is either 'dark' or 'mirthful'" (p. 411). That is, judgments based on "dramatic" questions of mood and self-revelation have tended to distract attention from the stories as stories. Brown's article should also be consulted for a summary of critical opinions on the tale. The burden of Brown's argument on the tale's meaning is that the allegorical overtones of the tale establish equations between May and Mary, and January and some diabolical or otherwise evil figure, in order to undercut the narrator's misogyny and give some overtone of Boethian hope to an otherwise pessimistic narrative by promising that alternative, and purer patterns of life, could obtain. This is certainly true, and one must always try to say something about the divine order of things in the midst of human circumstances, however sordid. At the same time, it should be possible to use the same technique of allegorical irony, plus the allegorical structuring which this book defines, to let the Merchant tell us something about marriage as well, and the intentional earthly order of which it is a part—sub specie aeternitatis, of course, but still real and necessary on its own.

31. Ibid., p. 403: "The connection between the Virgin and the woman of Genesis 3:15 is unmistakeable in the first illustration of the *Biblia Pauperum*. This commonly presents the beginning of New Testament history with a central picture of the Annunciation. To the left of this is an illustration of Genesis 3:15, often with the woman in a tree, trampling the head of the serpent coiled about the trunk." The position of the snake in the tree is further testified to by the plate on p. 10 of *Biblia Pauperum: The Esztergom Blockbook of Forty Leaves* (Corvina Press, 1967). In parallel with the central panel of Christ's temptation in the desert is the right-hand depiction of Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit, while Satan, coiled about the tree trunk, looks on. Cf. also p. 25 of the *Biblia Pauperum*, when Christ on the cross is linked with the episode of Exodus 7:9, the plague of serpents. In the illustration a snake is elevated on a branched rod, while on the ground below snakes devour the Egyptians. The identification of the figure in the tree as a snake, with whom the woman Eve makes her sinful agreement to the detriment of her husband, Adam, suggests obviously the parallel between Damian and the snake, a parallelism which is supported by the *Merchant's Tale* itself (Brown, p. 406). On the other hand, if the parallel is to suggest Christ, Mary, and Joseph, then the figure of the snake must, in some sense, be connected with January, and through him to Joseph. Brown, p. 406 n, suggests the possible double association of January with both Adam and the snake. The possibility that the man in the tree is God, and that the snake is either coiled at the tree's base or
standing beside it, making his arrangements with Eve, is suggested by the plate, taken from a Dresden manuscript and presented on p. ii of the *Biblia Pauperum*, in which God looks down from the tree on Eve and the snake. January's posture in the tale, "He stoupeth doun, and on his bak she stood" (IV [E] 2348), might well have been suggested by the curving figure of the snake.

32. For a discussion of this tradition, which relates the child in the tree of the fall to the Christ in the tree of the cross, and which stems ultimately from the Gospel of Nicodemus, see Esther Casier Quinn, *The Quest of Seth for the Oil of Life* (Chicago, 1962).

33. *Biblia sacra, cum glosa ordinaria et expositione lyre litterali et morali*, vol. 5 (Basel, 1498), fol. a7v–a8r. "But it might be asked here why Mary did not tell him the divine secret. It must be said that such things are not to be revealed, except as much as the divine will permits. And for that reason the holy virgin was silent, believing firmly that, just as the secret had been revealed to St. Elizabeth, as it is told in Luke 1, so it would be revealed to others at the right time from the goodness of the divine will. Similarly it might be asked why Joseph did not ask her? He would have asked in vain, because he would not have believed Mary speaking for herself. And so it was done through the divine dispensation, so that through the revelation of an angel, Joseph was assured that he would not be able to doubt concerning these things in any way."

34. Ibid., fol. a8v. "By Joseph, who was thinking of putting Mary away but accepted her as wife when the angel convinced him of the miracle, is signified a man who, doubting about faith or morals, is confirmed in the faith by a preacher or a good confessor, and submits himself to him in matters pertaining to orthodox faith."

35. This desire to place one's moral choices outside the judgment of God or man is connected with the theme of "pryvete," man's secret knowledge or inner convictions, which we considered in the first fragment. The connection is especially clear in the story of January and his private garden, in the *Merchant's Tale*.

36. Harwood, "Language and the Real," pp. 268–79, which raises the same question of defending poetry as accurate reportage which we considered in chap. 2 with regard to the General Prologue, Miller's Prologue, and Retraction.


38. Robertson says of the Wife that she is the "literary personification of rampant 'femininity' or carnality" (*Preface to Chaucer*, p. 321).

39. The entire collection, in fact, turns on the testing of an ideal—that married people live happily ever after—against the harsh, perhaps the harshest, tests.

40. Except to effect the transformation of the crow. But Chaucer's language radically obscures the miraculous dimension of that transformation and describes the metamorphosis as if it were merely physical aggression:
And to the crowe he stirte, and that anon,
And pulled his white fetheres everychon,
And made hym blak, and refte hym al his song,
And eek his speche, and out at dore hym slong
Unto the devel.

(X [H] 303-7)

41. For instance, in “A prayer of the Five Wounds” Jesus is the leman: “Ihesu cryst, myn leman swete.” In “Christ Pleads with His Sweet Leman” the term is applied to the other member of the relationship: “Lo! leman swete, now may þou se” (Religious Lyrics of the XIVth Century, ed. Carleton Brown [Oxford, 1957], nos. 52, 78).

42. George Cary, in his Medieval Alexander, ed. D. J. A. Ross (Cambridge, 1956), examines the medieval treatment of an episode in Alexander’s career which had been for the authors of antiquity a serious mark against him, an instance of a foolish mismanagement of the emperor’s high trust. Cary suggest that in Chaucer, on the contrary, as in most medieval treatments, the story reflects the emperor’s courage rather than his error (p. 252).

43. Chaucer’s Apollo becomes still more ironic when we note that Chaucer has neglected to mention Aesculapius, the child who resulted from this relationship. Bersuire’s interpretation establishes the parallel with politics to which medieval marriage was so amenable: “Recte tales corvi sunt adulatores et verborum relatores: qui soli idest dominis suis semper nituntur referre adulteria quae committunt concubinae eius idest mala que committunt subditi eius: et hoc ut eis placeant: et gratiam ab eis obtineant. Sed quandoque fit quod tales relatores poenam portant: unde premium reportare crediderant. Nam quando homines vident propter malam relationem et informationem talium se male egisse ipsos odiunt et quandoque ipsos puniunt: et nigros id est viles et pauperes faciunt” (Ovidius moralizatus, pp. 54-55). “Rightly such crows are flatterers and tellers of tales: to him, that is, to their masters they always attempt to reveal the adulteries which their concubines commit, that, is the evils which their subordinates do. They do it to please their master, and obtain favor from them. But it sometimes happens that such tale-tellers carry sorrow, where they had believed to receive a reward. For when men see that on account of the bad report and information of such creatures they have done evil themselves, then men hate them and punish them, and make them black, that is, cast down and poor.”
