A search for the unity of the Canterbury Tales is by no means an unfamiliar occurrence in twentieth century Chaucer studies. The stature of the poem has seemed to many readers, as well as ourselves, to justify the hope that in addition to all its other excellences of wit and characterization the Canterbury Tales, albeit unfinished, is outstanding in organization and thematic coherence as well. But whereas other researchers have concentrated on the pilgrims and their journey, we have preferred to search among the tales themselves for the unifying qualities that relate the stories one to another in ways that harmonize the entire collection. An examination of medieval literary criticism, particularly the commentary tradition of Ovid’s Metamorphoses, and of medieval love allegory, especially Dante’s Commedia, has provided evidence that techniques of order and arrangement based on analogical associations between story elements were available to Chaucer. Our examination of the Canterbury Tales in the light of this medieval literary precedent reveals this type of association within the work. The arrangement of tales used in our reading, while not demonstrably Chaucer’s own, does throw into sharp relief the patterns of connection present in the tales. These patterns are the mortar, as it were, to bind the blocks of story Chaucer was assembling for his grand design.

Although our reading has focused on a general theme of the collection, that is, the formation of a good human community, primarily we have concentrated on a principle of structural rather than thematic unity. The patterns of relationship uniting the tales not only produce a well-ordered collection, however, but yield a coherent, ethical statement as well. The variety of the poem is not miscellaneous but
harmonious. Chaucer adduces so many contradictory human testimonies about life, especially conflicting evaluations of love in the family, in the confidence that a broad and purposeful sampling of human experience will yield insights, reducing confusion to order and understanding. In these final pages, a few of the thematic elements of the poem illuminated by our method of structural interpretation will be discussed. The ideas about poetry and marriage, as subjects of the *Canterbury Tales*, which are presented here, are the direct and necessary outcome of our approach to the work as an ordered collection of exemplary stories.

It may seem a bit dangerous to suggest that Chaucer, valued today as the supreme ironist and tolerant humorist, is supplying an ethical judgment on his fellow men. In addition, our structural argument which supports this conclusion is liable to arouse opposition because it appears to limit Chaucer's innovation by arguing that his poetry is, in some ways, dependent on cultural tradition. A balance must be struck between our recognition of Chaucer's creative genius and his vital role, one he eagerly sought, as a transmitter of Western culture. The wealth and variety of the tradition available to Chaucer, and his own powerful reworking of it, forbid any reduction of his ethical poetry to axiomatic moralizing and guarantee an originality in itself much greater than the inventiveness often praised in his work as its highest merit.

To say that the *Canterbury Tales* is ethical and exemplary is not to suggest that Chaucer is repeating or embroidering formulas of right and wrong. He chose to speak ethically in stories, and he warns his readers repeatedly of the dangers involved in leaping too lightly from exemplum to moral. Chaucer makes story's interaction with life one of his subjects, especially in the prologues; he counsels great care in relating story to life, not because he supposes that the stories are an evil influence but rather because their precious import can so easily be lost in the transfer from fictional exemplum to man's particular experience. The poem is ethical because it supposes that a proper openness to the text awakens the reader to his responsibility to act ethically, to relate the poem creatively to his own life as a source of ethical insights. The *Canterbury Tales* illuminates and orders life; that is its ethical character.

The question of Chaucer's indebtedness to tradition is slightly more complex. First, Chaucer's development of the story collection, in its selection and manipulation of exemplary narrative units, is as extraordinary in his age as critics have long recognized his technique
with the frame to be. Our emphasis on medieval parallels to various elements of Chaucer's technique was not intended to detract from this originality; rather, it seemed necessary to examine the backgrounds of poetry employing exemplary narrative units in order to justify a reconsideration of the story collection, a genre whose qualities had been firmly codified in other terms within Chaucer scholarship. While recognizing the work's originality, it is essential as well to appreciate Chaucer's evident pride in the time's traditions of expressive language and his desire to preserve and advance, rather than contradict and remove, the techniques and ideas available to him from his culture. The optimistic vision Chaucer presents of the blending of word and deed, of vow and fulfillment, of good action and its exemplary preservation in memory, springs from a culture which was rich in voices proclaiming the sacramental power of the word. The *Canterbury Tales* is rooted in an atmosphere of confidence in a harmonious creation and, in fact, affirms that this harmony is accessible to man through a proof of Chaucer's own making.

The starting point for this harmony is love in marriage. Chaucer is not alone among the great medieval love poets in broadening his studies of love to a consideration of the place that loving couples occupy within the larger frameworks of society and creation. Like Dante and Jean de Meun, Chaucer does not abandon love as a focal point when he expands his gaze to encompass all of human society, but rather seeks to reconcile the qualities of private love with the love which, according to philosophers and theologians, harmonized the universe and regulated the affairs of God and man. The *Canterbury Tales* stands out among the poet's works as an attempt to draw together all of life into a harmony based on love. The work is notable among late medieval allegories, also, in that Chaucer chooses to speak specifically about love in marriage; although by no means the only medieval love poet to speak of married love, Chaucer is the only one of the three poets we have been discussing together throughout this study—that is, Chaucer himself, Dante, and Jean de Meun—to make the love he uses as a principle of universal harmonies the love to be found in the marriage relationship.

The *Canterbury Tales* has been identified as marriage poetry in various ways. On the one hand, there are allegorical interpretations which neglect Chaucer's realistic observation and appreciation of the concrete diversity of human relationships. On the other hand, emphasis on the personalities and quarrels of the pilgrims has reduced Chaucer's metaphorical expansions on the idea of marriage to a one-
dimensional argument about the marriage debt. The married couple is the focal point of Chaucer's investigation, around which both allegorical analogies and the practical realities of everyday experience are arranged. In all this patterning, Chaucer never loses sight of real marriage; it is central because he perceives it to be both literally the building block of the human community he would set in order and metaphorically the widest reaching and most richly developed symbol he could employ to name all that human relationships involve. The allegory of marriage presented in the *Canterbury Tales* develops its image of the married state within these defining limits to ensure that neither the commonsense understanding of the union nor the deeper, spiritual harmonies it represents is absent from the final synthesis.

Chaucer defines love anew within the context of marriage. The questions of social responsibility and moral accountability which marriage raises frequently are presented by medieval love poets as threats to true love. Chaucer, far from placing love at war with these considerations, insists that love can and must permeate all aspects of the marriage relationship. The love which may sustain a couple in all of life's tasks and against blows of chance differs from the love of courtship, precisely because both partners have moved from the state of desiring an unpossessed and unknown experience of union to the reality of partnership.

The defining instances of human relationship which Chaucer collects in the *Canterbury Tales* all reflect on marriage, precisely because of the nature of marriage as a permanent, abiding unit with an essential function in larger orders of social and cosmic harmony. Around the married couple Chaucer arranges other relevant examples of union—the marriage of Christ and the soul, of a priest and his congregation, of a lord and his country—along with several concrete instances of loving and unloving arrangements contracted within and outside of marriage. The difficulties man and woman encounter in establishing and then maintaining their relationships involve clashes between promises and temptations, between illusions and experience, between ideals and practice; these conflicts are played out within individual tales and also serve as the connecting points between various tales, as they present diverging testimony about married life and its trials. From even the most satisfactory of resolutions Chaucer counsels at most a cautious selectivity in accepting any one element of the marriage as paramount; from the least satisfactory he draws the truth that all elements of the relationship may be used for ill but each remains essential to the whole.
With marriage rather than love only as his subject, Chaucer treats the figures of man and woman precisely as they function within such an abiding, socially integrated relationship. What this means for woman has been discussed a good deal, because Chaucer has been so highly regarded for the female characters in the *Canterbury Tales*; what is often absent from this praise, however, is an appreciation of all the aspects of the wife which Chaucer enumerates. Essentially, the married woman commands the respect and admiration, the reverence and worship, which were her due in the poetry of the love of courtship. Arveragus and Dorigen propose to continue loving one another in the same fashion they had known before marriage. Within marriage, Valerian follows the path from human love to divine through the guidance of woman that was set forth in much poetry of the love quest. In addition to these testimonies to a continuity of emotional and spiritual attachment between courtship and marriage, Chaucer presents woman as lover in her own right and, especially, as an eager participant in the mutual pleasures of sexual love; the many roving wives encountered in the collection represent the reality of woman's role, as not only the object of desire but also an independent self with needs and desires to be realized. Chaucer's passive heroines, like Constance and Griselda, and the martyred children, like Virginia and the litel clergeon, prompt the reflection that what a wife may contribute as inspiration and as active partner in marriage requires a husband lover whose partnership frees a woman to love fully and to be fruitful both in children and in good works.

Perhaps more significant than Chaucer's profound sensitivity to woman's role in marriage is the balancing insight he brings to the role of the husband. The poem has received much less attention on this subject, and yet it is more in his assertion of the dignity of man's love in marriage than in his view of woman that Chaucer stands out among medieval poets. The poetry of his age had canonized the aspirations of man in courtship; it had gone on to couple with this a deepening appreciation of the spiritual fruits of this purifying aspiration. What is rare before Chaucer, although by no means absent altogether, is the praise of the husband, too, as true lover. In this Chaucer forshadows the Renaissance, with its schema of intimately related natural, human, and divine planes within which man's God-ordained task is to perfect himself in his humanness and to minister as governor to God's creation. In some tales the husband seems in large measure a prolongation of the knightly wooer or the idealizing dreamer in service to his lady. Even in these stories, however, marriage brings with it the trans-
formation from the task of seeking love to the work of preserving it. In the fabliaux primarily, in the figure of the failed husband, Chaucer ironically evokes the promise of the true male role in marriage. He draws together the metaphor of Christ’s union with his church and the outrageous errors of lecherous old men and their amorous, unfaithful wives, because he would blame the men not for sexual desire, precisely, but rather for the selfishness and unloving greed which lie behind their pursuit of a wife. Behind January, for example, a failed Adam and a failed Christ, hovers the model of a true husband, a paterfamilias and husbander of the family garden whose direction is taken from love, presented in the metaphor of the nurturing, supporting love of Christ for his church. The figure of the husband does not reflect primarily the lessons of the church’s teaching on male superiority or authority in the partnership, or the mutual exchanges of the marriage debt—these aspects of marriage wisdom are present in the collection, usually with a rather doubtful eye to their efficiency or correctness—but rather is modeled on the figure of Christ as husband and lover which emerges from medieval spirituality. This application of the spiritual marriage to human marriage, although justified in some measure by the commentary tradition of the Song of Songs imagery which Chaucer introduces in the fabliaux, yet is primarily Chaucer’s own in its effort to discover the spiritual dignity of the love known in marriage. Thus, in the role of the husband, Chaucer draws both on the lessons of secular poetry’s aggrandizement of the male desire for love and on the spiritual tradition which suggests the possibility of channeling this desire into the new role of a husband now called on to preserve and maintain love in marriage.

Chaucer presents marriage as both the living heart and the fullest image of the good human community. He promises that within it man encounters the most profound range of meanings to be discovered in existence, meanings which not only enrich his private experience but also serve as a guide to his appropriate actions as member of society. When marriage is less than it might be, Chaucer points primarily to the failure of the partners to contract a true marriage or their inability to remain faithful to their promises. For Chaucer the vow is a prediction that reveals to man in advance the nature of the relationship he is entering; the promise is, moreover, the best protection the relationship has against collapse. The tie between the vow and married life is not a simple identity. As Chaucer shows repeatedly, even the most zealously loving couples find themselves precipitated against the black
rocks. The word of the promise, like the word of a story, exists as a metaphor for life and must be creatively applied as life unfolds.

The allegorical tie between promise and deed, present in so many of the tales of faltering marriages, is in small an image of the relationship between language and life on all levels and especially between Chaucer's own writing and its audience. Real associations between elements of creation make verbal analogies not only possible but deeply revelatory. At the same time, allegorical statement is perceived always as a complex parallelism which can elucidate but not reduce life. Within individual tales particular marriages are surrounded by allegorical parallels underscoring the general significance of the struggles the particular couple endures. Between tales the same sort of reverberation is established. And on the final and deepest level, Chaucer looks to his readers to bring the experience of the poem and their own lives into meaningful parallel.

In some respects Chaucer's use of allegory resembles the poetic strategies to be found in other late medieval love poetry; a consideration of some similarities between the Canterbury Tales and the love allegories of Dante and Jean de Meun will be helpful in measuring the originality of the method in Chaucer's work. All three writers display a reverence for expressive language and a confidence in their ability to communicate effectively, through language, important insights on the human condition. All are innovative practitioners of the new vernacular literature and eager defenders of its dignity; interestingly, though, an essential part of their innovation as vernacular poets is the determination to transfer the Latin cultural heritage into a new language, for a new readership. At the same time that they advance the cause of the vernacular against the Latin tradition, they are also concerned to defend the integrity of the poetry of this tradition against the encroachments of dialectic. They affirm that a specifically analogical process of understanding, coupled with an eloquent appeal to man's conviction, remains a powerful and efficacious method of expression and communication. They practice their art under the guidance of a tradition of rhetorical literature founded in the classical poets but enriched as well by philosophers and moralists within the Christian tradition.

Three markedly different works emerge from this common background, and they testify strongly to the need in modern research to replace the long-standing assumption of a unitary medieval literary theory and to open research into the evolution of the many currents
of rhetorical expression present during the period, especially in the years 1150-1400. The three poets being examined here exemplify very well the range of possibilities for allegorical poetry during the Middle Ages. In the Romance of the Rose, a vernacular dream vision is continued under the rubric of philosophical poetry presenting quests after knowledge, especially the knowledge of the harmony of creation. Jean de Meun, writing during the thirteenth century, deliberately returns to models of rhetorical poetry especially identified with the School of Chartres; in adapting Latin culture to the vernacular, he challenges his time's prevailing interest in dialectic as the most effective linguistic tool of expression, and proposes as an alternative the rhetorical method of learning from previous literary works and adapting their insights and techniques to new human problems. Jean illuminates the essential nature of love by contrasting its meaning within the secular tradition of love poetry with the natural and cosmic significance it held in the works of Boethius and Alan of Lille. In the Commedia poetry again is made new under the inspiration of ancient and medieval examples, and its subject is the interrelationship of personal love and cosmic love. Here, however, the source of expression and the lessons of love's deeper significance come from specifically Christian, biblical, and theological sources rather than from philosophy. In Chaucer a great change occurs, in that his focus moves from the love quest, which provides narrative continuity in both the Romance and the Commedia, to a panorama of life. Whereas both Jean and Dante link the lover's quest to poetic forms in which a hero receives instructions and performs a series of tasks, Chaucer chooses as his model an epic of many stories, many heroes: the Metamorphoses. Chaucer links this model to a contemporary literary phenomenon, the multiplicity of stories he finds in all genres and types of writing which take as their primary focus the relationship of man and wife. Tapping the philosophical and Christian sources of wisdom his predecessors had consulted, he reached farther than they in attempting his own harmony of this wisdom with love, both idealized and in its full, concrete, various reality.

The task of making insight fresh and relevant goes hand in hand with the task of reworking the traditions of expressive language in order to embody these insights effectively. Chaucer extends his command of language not only into the provinces of God's own words in the Bible but also to the most humble human utterances, in order to find just the right way to reach the truth of life and then reveal it to mankind. Unless the truth speaks, it cannot shape the lives of his
listeners, and those lives are his most significant goal, for in them, in the private dramas of a thousand households, Chaucer discovers the true substance of human society.

For Chaucer the fundamental human entity is a married couple whose vows have conquered the tragic human condition of isolation, both physical and spiritual, and have given man and woman a territory in which to work and to dream. Chaucer does not suggest that life's difficulties are ended with a promise of marriage; rather, he perceives that man, by nature, is incomplete, and that a commitment to marriage begins a life of commitment to completion, through communicating and sharing with all of creation and ultimately with the Creator. Chaucer discovered in the human institution of marriage a paradigm of life which would enable man to touch both heaven and earth in his every conscious choice and willed action. The otherness of things lies within man's understanding and reach when that otherness is acknowledged as the necessary complement to human nature's inadequacies. Any society or community is plagued by the very differences among its members, which make their cooperation and union such a desirable goal. Man, for whom it is not good to be alone, has the power in his life-giving words to make lasting contact with things outside himself, with people and with ideas. Chaucer offers the description of such a way of life in the *Canterbury Tales*. It is a world rich in permutations on the essential human fact of making contact. There are false starts and poor finishes, there are grandiose schemes which collapse and modest suggestions which gain unexpected success. There is even the Knight, who in his life and tale is that rare object, a good man. In its pleasing wholeness, which defies the mundane fact of Chaucer's death, the *Canterbury Tales* holds the whole of the human condition, which may be failed by some of its participants, but which in itself offers hope for every man.