Though incomplete, the *Legend of Good Women* resolves the problems it raises. It is a conclusive narrative form. Its conclusiveness may be one reason why it has generally been considered one of Chaucer's least successful works. Once the storial part of the poem gets under way, readers either lose interest in its content or grow impatient with its execution. Yet the form of the *Legend of Good Women* is interesting to think about in context of Chaucer's other narratives, for it marks a simple development from Chaucer's earlier works whose result is complicated and significant. The poem combines a dream-vision prologue and a set of storial narratives into one composite, consequent structure whose form resembles no earlier work by Chaucer, although it is remarkably similar to the more complex form of the *Canterbury Tales* in the way it combines an outer form, or frame, with an inner form of stories. In the first part of this chapter, I shall discuss the conclusiveness and composite structure of the *Legend of Good Women*, which functions as a prototype for the outer form of the *Canterbury Tales*. In the second part, I shall turn to the outer form of the *Canterbury Tales* to examine the relationship between the work's inconclusiveness and the multi-level complexity of the outer form.

The plot of the prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* relates how Chaucer has a vision in which the God of Love is angry with him for having written of a bad woman in *Troilus*. Queen Alceste, a very good woman indeed, intercedes on Chaucer's behalf; she tempers the God of Love's rage by ordering the poet to do penance for his poetic sin:

*Thow shalt, while that thou lyvest, yer by yer,  
The moste partye of thy tyme spende  
In makyng of a glorious legende*
Of goode wymmen, maydenes and wyves,
That weren trewe in lovyng al hire lyves:
And telle of false men that hem bytraien,
That al hir lyf ne do nat but assayen
How many women they may doon a shame;
For in youre world that is now holde a game.
And thogh the lyke nat a lovere bee,
Speke wel of love; this penance yive I thee.

The persona Chaucer undertakes the penance, although the poet Chaucer never finishes the work. Yet the form of the poem is conclusive because Chaucer continually writes of good women who “weren trewe in lovyng” and of “false men that hem bytraien.” He could have spent the rest of his life on the project, progressively adding more legends of either good women or false men—the list of such classical stories seems to be endless. But he could not have made the poem’s form more conclusive than it already is since the poem’s conclusiveness resides not in its execution, for which completion would be a necessary consideration, but in its plan, which is to reiterate by different examples a continuously singular theme.

The single-minded didactic impulse that propels the legends is finally of limited interest, despite certain felicities of style and an occasionally interesting use of rhetorical tropes. The reason, I think, is clear from the first legend. Cleopatra is a perverse choice of a good woman and might have offered the narrator the chance to characterize in smaller form someone potentially as rich as Criseyde. But Chaucer avoids or overlooks any details of his heroine’s life or behavior that might lead him away from his singular narrative purpose of speaking well of women who were true in loving and badly of men who were not.

When details periodically stand out in the legends, they seem momentarily curious or dissonant to the univocal didactic injunction, but the narrator soon makes them relevant to his theme. Instead of letting them stand or developing them to some point of ambiguity—a method of which Chaucer was fond in his earlier works—the narrator directs attention to the moral conclusion that may be drawn from the detail. Here, for example, is the suicide of Lucrece:
But pryvely she kaughte forth a knyf,  
And therwithal she rafte hirself hir lyf;  
And as she fel adoun, she kaste hir lok,  
And of hir clothes yet she hede tok.  
For in hir fallynge yet she had a care,  
Lest that hir fet or suche thyng lay bare;  
So wel she loved clennesse and eke trouthe.

[1854–60]

The point about Lucrece's modesty is striking. When the same detail is used in the tragedy of Julius Caesar in the Monk's Tale, it unexpectedly complicates our assessment of the emperor's "manhede," which, along with "wisedom" and "greet labour," brought him "from humble bed to roial magestee" (CT, 7. 2671—72). It also enriches our understanding of the Monk as a character. In this passage, however, the detail suggests no ambiguity. Lucrece's sexual modesty is a necessary element of a virtuous wife's nature that the narrator uses for the conclusive purpose of speaking well of women.

What is true about details within the stories is also true about the total form of each of the legends. Whether a legend is about a questionably good woman, like Cleopatra, an unquestionably good woman, like Lucrece, a woman like Thisbe, whose virtue has never been a part of our interest in her story, or one like Philomela, whose violent revenge, though justified, seems irrelevant to the narrator's purpose of writing about the good woman as passive victim, there is something about the form of each story that remains flat. The reader carries away two general senses of the form of the individual legends: first, they are shaped as a series of brief—sometimes too brief—descriptive narratives interspersed with, or followed by, a series of complaints about the suffering of betrayed lovers; and second, their totality is one of pathos, unabashed, indulgent, and without much of the irony Chaucer characteristically uses to contain and control his interest in the pathetic elsewhere. Although irony is present in some of the legends, like those of Thisbe or of Hypsipyle and Medea, it is an irony available only to the learned who study the same stories in other versions. Generally speaking, we need to know what Chaucer did to Ovid to appreciate the irony. It is not readily available in the text itself. Pathos, rather than irony, controls affect in the poem, yet the pathos of each story is so
much of a piece that the general sense of the nine legends taken together is curiously similar to the sense one gets from other penances, like a set of Hail Marys or Our Fathers that a sinner repeats in order to atone for his sin. Although the repeated prayer may cleanse chanters or help them transcend their state, it mesmerizes others who hear it but who are not caught in the same state of feeling.

I do not know what event at court caused Chaucer to write the *Legend of Good Women* as a penance and to select the format that requires a series of brief stories with the same intention and in the same pathetic mode. John Fisher suggests that both the *Confessio Amantis* and the *Legend of Good Women* “appear to stem from the same royal command.” Since we have no biographical data to confirm the speculation, it seems as fruitful to ask what this list of stories, similarly narrated, suggests about Chaucer’s literary consciousness.

Robert Worth Frank has argued that in the *Legend of Good Women* Chaucer was working toward a narrative form concerned with “feeling” and that he was developing “an awareness of the problem of ‘characterization,’ ” with its emphasis on “role” and a “sense of personality.” Frank’s argument sustains my own. It is especially important to consider that role and a sense of personality give the form of the *Canterbury Tales* its most intense dramatic quality. Yet, in his attempt to give more dignity to the legends by showing them to be intrinsically interesting, and by arguing that Chaucer did not abandon them because he was bored by them, Frank overlooks both the truly monotonous effect of the legends taken together and the significance of the monotony.

The nine narratives comprise a series of stories reiterating a common theme and a common mood. Taken as a whole, they constitute a single structure, a tale, as the Monk’s series of tragedies constitute a tale, which the persona tells for a certain purpose. As a single tale, this series is unrelentingly tedious. Chaucer is never so consistently and extensively tedious elsewhere, unless he intends to be, as in the *Monk’s Tale*, or in the *Melibee* where the pilgrim Chaucer, interrupted from telling his tale of Sir Thopas, responds to criticism of his abilities by offering a “litel tretys” that turns out to be an enormously long and redundant moral tract. The consistently reiterative structure of the storial section of the *Legend of Good Women* has a mesmerizing effect,
as if the poet were doing penance with a vengeance on an audience that may have required him to undertake the project in the first place. If it is true that the effect of the storial portion of the *Legend of Good Women* is intentional, then we need to look at the prologue to the poem, and at the persona in the prologue, to see how and why Chaucer develops the familiar figure of himself as persona into a fictional character motivated to produce the effect. Once we have examined this development in the presentation of the persona, we shall be able to examine the entire composite structure of the *Legend of Good Women* to see how the form of the poem functions as a prototype for the form of the *Canterbury Tales*.

The persona of the prologue is a man familiar to readers of Chaucer's earlier dream visions, except that he is neither hysterical, as in the *House of Fame*, nor afraid of his own skepticism, as in the *Parliament of Fowls*. Otherwise he is quite recognizable. He is a poet, he likes books, except in May when he likes flowers, especially the daisy. He is skeptical, in this case about the afterlife; but since no one has ever returned to talk about the afterlife, he believes that we must believe in things that cannot be proved by sense experience. He is, thus, still the man with abiding interest in what Payne has called the theme of "the nature and functions of art and the justification of the artist." The first forty lines of the prologue in both versions raise the issue of the limitation of human knowledge and the need to believe opinions from books of the past about facts that an individual cannot himself verify firsthand; they also urge us to honor these books "there we han noon other preve" (F, 28). In the earlier dream visions, the persona was frightened by his inability to understand the truth-value of literary traditions and frightened even when presented in the dream with firsthand experience. In this poem the persona is committed to believing authoritative opinion even without personal experience—"Bernard the monk ne saugh nat all, pardee!" (F, 16). He is willing to have "feyth and ful credence" (F, 31) in books and in authority.

The persona has a vision in which the God of Love accuses him of having sinned against love. Despite his protestations of innocence and no indication that he ever feels any contrition for what he has done (F, 462-74), he undertakes a penance to please Alceste and to pacify the wrath of the God of Love. The penance, of course, is the series of
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Legends of good women; but because the persona feels no remorse—in fact, because he feels that he is innocent—the undertaking is without the energy that derives from the contrite and without the interest that motivated him elsewhere. The voice of the narrator of these legends, then, must not be heard as the voice of Chaucer the persona familiar to us from Chaucer’s other poems. Rather, in the prologue the familiar Chaucerian persona develops into a yet more complicated fictional character because he agrees to take an identity not consistent with his own sense of himself. More significantly, he agrees to project this identity through the stories he tells.¹⁰

The F prologue makes little explicit connection between the theme of belief and the charges of betrayal. The persona raises the issue of belief again (F, 97-102) and claims that he will explain what he means at the appropriate moment—“whanne that I see my tyme” (F, 101). But it is forgotten as the plot moves on to the adoration of the daisy and then to the vision of the God of Love and of Alceste. The G prologue, however, corrects and clarifies somewhat why the persona begins his poem about a vision with the trope of belief in things not seen with the eye. In it the persona tells us:

![G, 81-88]

Here our interest is directed not to the prologue itself but to the series of tales of good women, intended to follow the prologue, that the persona will indite from old sources. By the time he revised his prologue, Chaucer must have recognized that the trope of belief was significant for the second part of the new form he was creating. Moreover, in the G prologue, the poet understood that although he chose to believe things the eye could not necessarily see, there might be those who would choose not so to believe. Thus he gives his readers the freedom to doubt by concluding his remarks with a statement of choice—“leveth hem if yow leste!”
In the time between the writing of the first prologue and the second, Chaucer must have recognized that he was evolving a new form, one that he had not developed earlier but that he would continue to develop in the form of the *Canterbury Tales*, a work he may also have been beginning at that time. This would be a form containing a dream-vision of personal experience and a story, or group of stories, rendered from “olde bokes.” The persona would be characterized by his actions and by what others said about him, and the voice of the story, or stories, that he rendered would somehow accord with the personality that the prologue established.

The form may be diagrammed abstractly as a bipartite structure combined by a linear causality: since A, then B. Part A, the dream-vision prologue, consists of a plot of fixed dimension whose concern motivates part B. Part B, the storial unit, comprises a series of plots, discreet unto themselves yet of a theme that can be repeated indefinitely. Despite the causality between parts A and B, however, the form of the work is not organic. Rather it is serial. It can be experienced partially, either A or B, or parts of B; yet its parts are not independent, since all units of the storial part have a first cause, a character, voice, or consciousness developed in A and projected through B. Moreover, just as any unit of part B takes significance from part A in the total form, so part A requires at least some units of part B for its own fulfillment. Yet part A puts no limit on how often the discreet units of part B may be repeated. In the retraction to the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer mentions that the *Legend of Good Women* had stories about twenty-five ladies, suggesting that he had set a limit on the number of variations he intended. Our evidence shows that he actually stopped before he finished nine legends; but we also know from part A of the *Legend of Good Women* that Alceste wants him to continue the undertaking for the rest of his life, an appalling wish. Whatever the number, however, the form of the poem is conclusively realized as soon as one or two of the units of part B appear. Despite the limitless repetitive possibilities of part B, the demands of the form have been satisfied as soon as the series is under way.

The similarity of the form of the *Canterbury Tales* to this form is clear. Like the *Legend of Good Women*, the form of the *Canterbury Tales* consists of two major structural parts, A and B. The A part, a prologue extended into narrative links, motivates and causes B. B is a set of
units, tales in different voices, at once discreet, capable of being read without their connection to A, yet dependent, motivated by the events that transpire in A and enriched in meaning by the characters and by some issues encountered there. The A section offers an original plan that thirty tellers will tell four tales each, but that original plan is altered during the course of the work and is never fully realized. As with Legend of Good Women, however, the number of units making up the B section of the Canterbury Tales is not as important as the fact of the causal relationship between those units and the A section, and the perhaps paradoxical quality of independence that each of the units manifests. Moreover, although the B section of the form of the Canterbury Tales comprises storial narratives, as does the B section of the Legend of Good Women, the tales in the earlier poem follow upon each other in an unattached serial order, whereas in the Canterbury Tales they are significantly attached to the links developed from the A section. This attachment alters the nature of their serial quality.

Donald Howard, after Paul Ruggiers, has conveniently called the two major elements of the structure of the Canterbury Tales the inner and the outer forms. The nature of the relationship between these two elements of the form and the inconclusive structuring of the inner form will be the subject of the next chapter. In the remainder of this chapter, I shall examine how Chaucer developed the outer form of the Canterbury Tales, the A section, beyond its model in the Legend of Good Women so that it could accommodate the massive amount of storial narrative he had planned for it. Then I shall examine how Chaucer made what was conclusive in the Legend of Good Women inconclusive in the Canterbury Tales, resulting in a large narrative form that could suggest a multifaceted, yet valid, sense of subjective experience and opinion about the nature of the world.

II

J. V. Cunningham has convincingly argued that "the literary form to which the Prologue to the Canterbury Tales belongs and of which it is a special realization is the form of the dream-vision prologue in the tradition of the Romance of the Rose and of those associated French and English poems of the subsequent century and a half." The form of the Prologue is thus the same as the form of the A section of the Legend
of Good Women, although the ways in which it is different seem to me as significant in accounting for its success as Cunningham’s argument for the ways in which it is the same. Let us look at some of these differences.

Although the outer form of the Canterbury Tales resembles Chaucer’s dream visions in its use of recognizable conventions, like the journey, it is not a dream vision. The persona never falls asleep, nor does he claim to be recording an experience in a dream. Rather, he rehearses a waking event, a journey through geographical reality from Southwerk to Canterbury. The familiar spring trope that opens the prologue does not induce sleep and the loosening of the imagination in dreams about love or truth. Rather, the opening lines energize the human species to action; they emphasize the copulating of nature’s elements, the production of the new. The riches of these lines have been so frequently mined that we need not examine them here, except to point out that like many of Shakespeare’s sonnets the grammatical structure of the first sentence develops a causal relationship between nature’s fecund impulses and man’s urges to do, to act, to move, and not to sleep or wonder. Chaucer connects the “when” of April (1), the “when” of Zephyrus (5), the assumed “when” of the “yonge sonne” (7), and of the birds who “maken melodye” (9), with the “then” of people who long “to goon” on pilgrimages, to “seken straunge strondes” (13), and to “wende” (16) from all over England, the geographical place, to the specific shrine of Canterbury. Like the generalized “folk” (10), and the more specific “palmeres” (13), the persona is also in a state of energized becoming. He tells us that he “lay” at the Tabard Inn “redy to wenden on my pilgrimmage” (20–21). In precisely the place where we would expect the sleeping and the dream to occur “at nyght” (23), after the “sonne was to reste” (30), the persona sees that he has “time and space” (35) to tell us about the people who accompanied him on his journey. Chaucer may have discovered from the F version of the prologue to the Legend of Good Women that sleeping was not necessary for visioning—although changes in the G version suggest that he was uncomfortable with the idea. In this form, however, the persona does not go to sleep at night; but if sleep and dreams are automatic assumptions of this form, then the sleep will be like that of the birds who “slepen al the nyght with open ye” (10), for the portraits of characters
that follow the opening lines involve details that are quite undreamlike. They are filled with actual details of geography, generally of little interest to a dream vision, but of considerable interest to the reporter of actualities: the Knight’s battles in identifiable though outlying regions; the Squire’s campaigns in the Low Countries; the Prioress’s convent at Stratford atte Bowe, the Merchant’s concern for the ports of Middelburgh and Orewelle, and so on.

In the outer form of the Canterbury Tales, Chaucer is externalizing the usually internalized dream vision. Historical time and space are significant. There is evening, a next morning, an identifiable inn in a familiar locale with a historically known innkeeper. Later, in the links that extend the outer form, there is movement through measurable, known, and familiar landscape. The dream-vision conventions have been altered to appear actual rather than ideal, journalistic rather than imaginative, objective rather than subjective. Absent from the form as we have come to know it in Chaucer’s earlier works are the expressions of anxiety about truth, and about how books, learning, and dream experience can show truth. Absent as well are concerns about poetic identity and value, the appropriate and best subjects of poetry, and the relation between poetry and truth. Present is the desire to have words “be cosyn to the dede” (742), record what happened as it happened, speak plainly (727), not feign (734–35). In short, the persona is here concerned with mimesis, a concept Chaucer probably absorbed from the tradition of Plato’s Timeus. In the outer form of the Canterbury Tales, Chaucer is no longer interested in the relationship of aesthetic or poetic questions to truth, certainty, and belief; rather, he is interested in how to depict an actuality as it was perceived by the senses and as it is now being remembered.

There is a formal corollary to this new interest in reporting an actuality in the past rather than a dream of the imagination. Chaucer extends the form of the dream-vision prologue, now perhaps better called the recollection, into a series of narrative links that chart the journey more or less specifically and relate the events as they developed through time. These links frame the storial materials that occupy the bulk of the new form, altering the serial nature of the fictions as the B part of the Legend of Good Women presents it. The links create a frame
structure in which the outer form, reporting historical actuality, surrounds the inner form, narratives expressed by actual, or at least stipulated, people. In the *Canterbury Tales*, storytelling is no longer an act of personal commitment to authority for the sake of bringing the audience to see the correct moral, as it had been in *Troilus*; it is neither an activity of imaginative experience in dreams, as it had been in the *Legend of Good Women*. Surrounded by an actualistic frame, storytelling becomes a representation in fictional form of imagined attitudes toward the world, meant at once simply to pass time and to reveal the natures of an established assortment of people from different levels of society. This unique form has the consequence, or end, of suggesting that subjective opinion is valid, that many opinions, the vicious as well as the virtuous, make it difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain with certainty the absolute truth of any matter—as, say, the matter of marriage—that certainty is contingent upon possibility. Finally, it suggests that reality may be expressed pluralistically. The formal corollary to this new kind of fictional structure is that inconclusiveness is no longer a problem the form manifests by representing anxieties about how to ascertain and express truth. Rather, inconclusiveness is a manner of representing complexity and multifariousness. Its power is that it does not conclude, draw the line, cease. In the form of the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer has made virtue of necessity by developing a narrative form congenial to his own interests and techniques, yet without the problem to his moral nature that the use of first-person subjective form produced and without the peculiar kind of tension created in *Troilus* between what the narrator wanted for his fiction and what he had to give it because of authority. Moreover, with this form, Chaucer is less likely to be misunderstood and accused, as he had been for his writing *Troilus*. Here, the persona, now character, is freed from the moral responsibility of his writing: “blameth nat me”; “my wit is short”; “he moot reherce as ny as evere he kan”—disclaimers abound. Consequently, he can experiment, test, question all the themes that had previously interested him. By writing the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer discovers a narrative form experimental by nature, needing neither completion nor conclusiveness. With this form
he can project onto imagined characters, whom he claims to be real, imagined opinions expressed through stories that he claims these characters told.

Howard is undoubtedly correct in arguing that, since what we have of the *Canterbury Tales* is all we are ever likely to get, we might as well view it as a whole, even in its fragmentary state. One assumes that, since the work is conceived as a journal of a completed past event, Chaucer originally intended to complete it, for he had in mind a complete journey. Although that journey ends, finally, in Canterbury after most, though not all, of the pilgrims have told one tale, not back at Southwerk after each of the pilgrims has told two tales going and two returning, the *Canterbury Tales* is ended. In the prologue to the Parson's Tale, we are prepared for an ending; the tale by the Parson is a spiritually appropriate meditation on the moral, or immoral, life and on salvation; even the imagery of copulation and fructification, introduced in the General Prologue, is reintroduced in the last fragment to knit up the matter by suggesting that the true fruit of human desire is salvation; finally, the author's leave-taking of his book after the Parson's Tale asserts that we have reached the end. Because of these indications, the *Canterbury Tales* may be said to be ended, closed, or shut. But the middle of the work is open. The order of its parts is by no means certain. Nor is the girth of its content. We have no idea how many people after the Canon's Yeoman might have or could have ridden up; we have no idea whether or not the Plowman, the Guildsmen, or the Yeoman would have told tales or what the nature of their tales would have been. The *Canterbury Tales* ends because the author stopped his writing. But it is neither complete, since it does not fulfill either of its stated intentions, nor conclusive, since it nowhere settles the issues it raises.

A narrative form cannot be conclusive that allows for opposing claims but refuses to evaluate or judge. In the *Canterbury Tales* each character represents in a tale an attitude toward the world. The Knight's is noble, the Miller's is not; the Reeve's is vicious, the Franklin's is not. Each attitude expresses an opinion that derives from a particular set of values. No opinion is true or untrue; no set of values absolute. The Wife of Bath urges experience against authority, the Franklin urges "gentillesse"; Chaucer the pilgrim urges prudence, the
Manciple urges silence; the Second Nun revokes carnality, the Canon's Yeoman revokes alchemy; the Parson revokes the world of both flesh and fiction; Chaucer the maker revokes those tales that "sownen into synne." But the *Canterbury Tales* urges all possibilities and revokes none. Possibility is the central concern of the entire work and inconclusiveness is the means through which the form expresses it. Just as the tales about Sir Thopas and by the Monk are purposefully incomplete, the form of the *Canterbury Tales* is purposefully inconclusive.

I am interested in two ways that Chaucer makes the outer form of the *Canterbury Tales* inconclusive: his method of making authoritative adjudication impossible and his method of creating in the portraits of the *General Prologue* characters of varying, though plausible, attitudes whose later tales suggest plausible, though varying, versions of reality.

The narrator asserts in the *General Prologue* that he has no intention of mediating or of evaluating the actions or the opinions of the people he has met:

> Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,
> He moot reherce as ny as evere he kan
> Everich a word, if it be in his charge,
> Al speke he never so rudeleche and large,
> Ore ells he moot telle his tale untrue,
> Or fye ne thyng, or fynde wordes newe.
> He may nat spare, althogh he were his brother;
> He moot as wel seye o word as another.

[731–38]

The poetic intention of the *Canterbury Tales*, then, will not be to tell a truth in order to create an appropriate moral response; rather it will be to tell the truth of an experience exactly as it happened. The narrator's responsibility is to "pleynly speke" (727) about what he encountered; it is not to judge.

The narrator is so committed to this journalistic rehearsal of his experience that he even refuses to edit or judge remarks or tales by characters, such as the Miller, whose concerns might outrage his audience's sense of decorum. Knowing, because he has supposedly experienced it, that the *Miller's Tale* might be offensive to some, he warns us that we are about to hear an outrageous piece, but he refuses to
alter in any way the piece or the manner of its presentation. In the
prologue to the Miller's Tale, he tells us what his responsibility as a
reporter entails:

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

[1. 3173–85]

These lines repeat the intention to rehearse the entire matter as it
happened but add that the responsibility for judging lies with us. We
must know what we are interested in hearing; we must recognize that
churls tell churlish things; we are free to "chese another tale" if our
sensibilities are offended; we make the wrong choices.

As if to confound any attempt we might make to establish an au­
thoritative model of adjudication for the Canterbury Tales, Chaucer
gives us Harry Bailly as host and self-proclaimed judge on the pil­
grimage. Harry's stated literary standards are Horatian, offering the
prize to the "tales of best sentence and moost solaas" (798). But since it
is one major purpose of the Canterbury Tales to raise many philosophi­
cal, generic, social, and psychological issues, it is difficult to imagine
the Horatian standard as an appropriate measuring stick or to imagine
Harry objectively measuring with it even if it were. Harry is petty
bourgeois—"a fairer burgeys is ther noon in Chepe" (754)—whose
motives for action are always personal and economic. He is a "myrie
man" (757), but he does not begin to "pleyen" (758) with the pilgrims
until after "we hadde maad oure rekenynges" (760). He decides to
accompany the pilgrims because he wants them to return to the Tabard
Inn after their journey and because, we learn in later links, an absence
from his wife Goodelief would come as a welcome vacation in the name
of profit. True, he has an appropriate sense of social hierarchy that
ought to qualify him to be a judge of social situations. Hence the “cut” falls to the Knight “by adventure, or sort, or cas” (844)—or by Harry’s tampering; but he is easily overborne by churls, as the Miller shows after the Knight has finished the first story.

Harry’s judgments are often peculiar and always subjective. At times they have little relevance to the tale he is supposed to be judging. He insults the Pardoner, perhaps justifiably, defending himself against the Pardoner’s insinuations about his sinfulness; and he insults the Monk whose tale, admittedly dull, is filled with the sententiousness Harry himself has requested. He trivializes the moral of the Shipman’s Tale, has an unexpectedly hysterical—perhaps inebriated—response to the Physician’s Tale, takes sides between the Canon and the Canon’s Yeoman, attacks the Parson and the Reeve, and chides the Franklin, the pilgrim Chaucer, and the Cook. He is not a trustworthy judge.

As opposed to the narrator’s refusal to judge and Harry Bailly’s bias in judging, there is a judgment by the pilgrims, either as a group or as individuals. Sometimes the judgment comes forth in universal consensus, as after the Prioress’s Tale where we are told that “every man / as sobre was that wonder was to see” (7. 691—92). Sometimes it is a group judgment, as when the “gentils” react to Harry’s request that the Pardoner tell “som myrthe or japes” by crying “Nay, lat hym telle us of no ribaudye!” (6. 319-24). Most frequently, however, another character responds to a tale or to a situation. The nature of these responses is varied, now direct, as with the Merchant to the Clerk’s Tale, now indirect, as with the Franklin to the Squire’s Tale, now as a keeper of the peace, as with the Knight to the Monk and Pardoner, now as an aggrieved party, as with the Reeve and Summoner to the Miller and Friar. Whether or not we accept the judgment depends on how reliable or noble we perceive the judge to be. Since we perceive the Knight as an ideal character, and his tale as a “noble” tale, we accept as just his interruption of the Monk and his peace-keeping role at the end of the Pardoner’s Tale. Otherwise, we may only ask whether or not the response and judgment are appropriate, for we recognize personal and, at times, vicious motives behind the response. Since our acceptance of a character's judgment of another character or tale depends on what we know about the characters from their portraits, let us look at Chaucer’s method of constructing them in the General Prologue.

Chaucer creates portraits in a traditional form, the catalogue, and
according to commonly assumed principles of rhetorical *descriptio*. But the portraits are unique in the tradition of medieval catalogue portraiture because Chaucer juxtaposes detail in them, which results in an inconclusive or, at least, open-ended portrait form that he may develop in the narrative links. From these portraits come the various consciousnesses who project their personalities through the stories they tell, and hence control meaning in the inner form of the *Canterbury Tales*. Thus, they contribute to making the work inconclusive, concerned as much with psychological plausibility and opinion as with moral truth. To recognize how the unique style and structure in these portraits makes them inconclusive, we must first understand the nature and end of medieval catalogue portraits in general.

Rhetorical *descriptio* in the form of a catalogue is one of the most basic techniques for establishing character in the Middle Ages. Manuals like those by Geoffroi de Vinsauf and Matthieu de Vendome direct would-be writers to describe character according to a commonly assumed symbolism of face and body. Although the conventions for the symbolism derive originally from the Neoplatonic and allegorical world of medieval perception and interpretation, the technique came also to be used on nonallegorical but nonetheless conventional characters like heroes and heroines of courtly romance. Whatever the literary mode, the catalogue portrait was static rather than dynamic and avoided specific individuation by using generalized physical detail to suggest an abstract ideal ultimately for moral evaluation. Here, for instance, is Guillaume's description of the face of Idleness from the first part of *Le Roman de la Rose*:

Cheveus ot blons come bacins,
la char plus tendre que poucins,
front reluisant, sorciex votis;
li entr'ieuz ne fu pas petis,
ainz ert assez grant par mesure;
le nés ot bien feit a droiture
et les ieuz vers come faucons.
Por feire envie a ces bricons,
douce aleine ot et savoree,
et face blanche et coloree,
la bouche petite et grossete,
s'ot ou menton une fossete. . . .
[Her hair was yellow as a golden bowl, her flesh more tender than a little girl's, her forehead radiant, with arched brows; the space between her eyes was not small, but just the right size; her nose was straight and well-formed, and her eyes colored as a falcon's. Enviable were her soft, sweet breath, her face of pink and white, her mouth small but ample, her dimpled chin. . . .]

The description continues down to her feet in an assumed and expected order, classifying rather than individuating according to notions of ideal beauty. As with Idleness, the other personifications in the courtly dance that the dreamer joins are all composed of generalized qualities of ideal beauty. The audience understands the symbolic meaning of the physical qualities so that a poet rarely needs to direct his audience's attention to it.

Occasionally, we find aspects of this non-individuated, generalized physiology in the General Prologue. In the portrait of the Squire, the modifiers defy specificity, although their sum total is of courtly excellence: "evene," "wonderly," "greet," "fresshe," "faire," "weel." The same is true of those elements of the Prioress's portrait that represent her as a courtly lady:

\[
\text{Ful semyly hir wympul pynched was} \\
\text{Hir nose streys, hir eyen greye as glas,} \\
\text{Hir mouth ful smal, and thereto softe and reed;} \\
\text{But sikerly she hadde a fair forheed.}
\]

[151-54]

As with the Squire, the italicized modifiers of the Prioress's beauty represent the general rather than the specific.

Details in descriptions of ideal beauty could, of course, make distinctions in classes or types yet still not individualize. In the Knight's Tale, for instance, Lygurge and Emetreus both represent ideal manliness, although the particulars of their descriptions suggest symbolically contrastive allegiances; in the Miller's Tale, the details in the portraits of Alisoun and Absolom support the parodic intention of the tale by directing Alisoun's ideality to the barnyard and Absolom's ideality to courtly effeminacy.\(^{21}\) Sometimes an unusual use of detail could charge the expected ideality with ambiguity, as with the portrait of Criseyde toward the end of book five of Troilus. In three stanzas of moralized, though unspecific, description of his heroine, whose ostensible inten-
tion is to present an example of ideal womanly beauty, the narrator excepts Criseyde from the convention of ideally beautiful women by telling us that her eyebrows were “joyneden yfere” (813). In a note F. N. Robinson tells us that this particular of joined brows “was held to be a mark of beauty, and sometimes as the sign of a passionate nature” in Greece. Where it appears in descriptions of Criseyde in Dares, Joseph of Exeter, Benoit, and Guido, however, the detail is sometimes used positively and sometimes used to suggest a “lak” in the excellence of the ideal, as it is in Chaucer. Since it is not likely that an audience would know the historical tradition behind the particular of Criseyde’s joined brows, it would readily assent to Chaucer’s implication that the brows somehow represented an imperfection not in beauty but in character. Unusual or specific physiological particulars represent moral shortcomings and not individuality or uniqueness.

Like the portrait of Criseyde, the portraits in the General Prologue use rhetorical descriptio in catalogue form to present character. Also in the tradition, the portraits use specific detail for a moral end. For instance, each of Chaucer’s lascivious characters, of whom there are many, possesses some physiognomic peculiarity that represents not merely a genetic inheritance but a fault in spiritual condition as well. These characters are “gat-tothed” (468); they have voices “as smal as hath a goot” (688); they sweat profusely, or they have bulging eyes, or wens on their noses. Their faces are pocked or boiled, their hair is limp, or they are bald. The choleric Reeve is skinny and close-shaven, the sanguine Franklin has a white beard and reddish complexion. Oppositely, the portraits of the morally ideal characters, the Knight and the Parson, contain no physical details, although each has identifying appurtenances, like the Knight’s stained “habergeon” (77), or the Parson’s staff.

Yet, every reader of the General Prologue senses that however much the portraits use specific physical detail to suggest moral evaluation, however, much they appear symbolically to represent social types or estates, they transcend the conventional, the typological, the symbolic. Chaucer’s style, his organization of particulars, makes the portraits dynamic; it quickens them with a sense of individual life, a life lived, as it were, through time and from which readers want to derive motive and experience to explain character. For instance, we may learn that the Wife of Bath has a literary heritage from La Vieille in Le Roman de la
Rose, that the fact of her five “housbondes at chirche dore” (460) suggests her figural connection to the Samaritan Woman of the New Testament, and that her wide-set front teeth suggest a problematically energetic libido; we may learn that the Pardoner derives from Faux Semblant in Le Roman de la Rose and that the many details in his portrait that suggest his ambiguous sexuality symbolize what has been called “scriptural eunuchry.” But our first response is that both characters, to name the two most potentially mimetic portraits, have about them a sense of their own individual history that transcends the conventions or at least makes the corrupt spiritual condition that the conventions suggest less significant to our interest in them than their identity, psychology—their personality.

What is more, once the characters of the portraits become animated in the narrative links that grow out of the General Prologue, Chaucer sometimes makes it impossible for us to derive a moral evaluation from the iconographic and symbolic particulars in the portraits, for he gives us historical information that explains the detail literally, as much as the detail may earlier have appeared to be symbolic. For example, early in the portrait of the Wife of Bath, we learn that she is deaf in one ear. Robertson shows that Chaucer uses this detail to suggest that the Wife was a sinner who refused to hear the new music of salvation. As much as this detail may suggest moral evaluation in the portrait, however, it becomes less conclusive as Chaucer develops his portrait into a character. In the prologue to her tale, the Wife tells us that she is deaf because her fifth husband struck her a blow that deprived her of her hearing. To be sure, we do not know this in the General Prologue, nor are we surprised, once Jankin hits her, that she grows deaf, since she had refused to listen to him read from his “book of wikked wyves” (3. 685). But if the Wife’s deafness originally stands out as a symbol of her sinfulness, Chaucer chooses not to leave the symbolism unattached to an actual explanation for the fact. In consequence, the moral evaluation we may first have made on the basis of the detail in the portrait is ultimately but one element of a complex response. We recognize that the detail may not have been intended simply for moral evaluation, that it is historically explicable.

The example of the Wife of Bath suggests a characteristically Chaucerian mode of operation. Chaucer constructs his portraits of concrete particulars. Because the particulars are conventional, they
suggest symbolic or typological meaning, hence moral evaluation. Yet Chaucer’s seemingly random method of structuring his details and his apparent interest in extending the concrete or literal significance of a particular into the links imbues the portraits with a mimetic and dynamic potential suggesting an individual, at times neurotic, psychology with personal motives for actions and attitudes, personal history, and a future. In other words, detail in the portraits can function both as a marker for moral interpretation and as an accident in individual psychology, history, or genetics.

Morality and psychology are not inimical categories in interpretation. But they are usually distinct. Chaucer, however, often suggests both either in a single detail or by coordinating two or more details in a series of couplets. The technique creates irony that ultimately complicates both moral evaluation and character analysis, for it undercuts the quality of absoluteness in each category. The effect on the form of the portraits of this complication is an inconclusiveness akin to the inconclusiveness in the form of Chaucer’s earlier works. But, whereas inconclusiveness in the earlier works was in some measure either unintentional or, as in *Troilus*, finally unacceptable, in the portraits of the *General Prologue* it is intentional, created by a conscious poetic technique that undercuts absolute moral evaluation and leaves interpretation open-ended, without the possibility of concluding, without even the need to conclude.

The portrait of the Prioress offers an excellent example of how this intentionally inconclusive structuring works. Chaucer tells us that the Prioress’s name is Madame Eglentyne—a sweet-smelling wild rose—which locates her in both religious and courtly traditions for which the rose is a central symbol, but which also ironizes both, since a wild rose is neither the red rose of the courtly tradition nor the white rose of the Marian tradition. The images Chaucer attaches to her throughout her portrait contrast yet unite in ambiguous alliance conventions from both religious and courtly life. About her singing of the religious service, we are told:

Ful weel she soong the service dyvyne,  
Entuned in hir nose ful semely.  

[121–22]
The image suggests that she does her religious duty with an eye for fashion, since nasal singing was the current style in Chaucer's time. This is but one of many images, like the Prioress's "pynched" wimple (151), her rosary "gauded al with grene" (159), and the remarkably ambiguous brooch she uses for costume jewelry (160–62), which align yet contrast the religious and courtly conventions that compose her portrait. On a larger scale within the portrait, but to the same ironic and ambiguous effect, are the couplets that contrast the Prioress's fastidious table manners, perhaps the most trivial expression of courtly sensibility, with her "conscience," her charity, and her pity, qualities expected of a nun. Having composed the images of her courtliness by a simple coordinative syntax, Chaucer turns from the courtly to the Christian elements of her conscience with the emphatic use of the negative "but," suggesting that the lines following will negate by contrast the lines preceding them. What follows, however, is a facetious listing of more triviality, this time more egregious because the sphere of interest is religious, not courtly. The Prioress weeps out of charity and pity when she sees mice caught in traps or when her pampered and perhaps illegally kept dogs are beaten. Because the triviality of her charity is of a piece with the triviality of her courtliness, the coordinate "but" does not contrast good against bad—as it will do in the portrait of the Parson. Rather, the word functions to subordinate another set of details of similar effect to those that preceded it. When Chaucer turns again from her "conscience and tendre herte" (150) to describe her face and costume according to expected courtly rhetorical conventions, we do not feel that we are moving into yet another set of conventions, but rather that we are continuing the original set in the same manner.

Chaucer clearly did not intend to place the Prioress in a simple moral category representing either an inappropriate nun with misguided spirituality or a courtly lady manqué with trivial aspirations. Rather, he wanted her to exist ambiguously before us, all sides of her nature, her courtliness and her Christianity, equally trivial. The conventions from the one undercut yet extend the conventions of the other. Both sides of her identity are finally of little substance, yet ironically, perhaps even tragically, the Prioress reveals them because she wants to
appear “digne of reverence” and “estatliche of manere” (140–41). Chaucer leaves her portrait purposely inconclusive by alternating elements from the two life-styles she expresses, which produces a sense in us that the Prioress is deficient both as a nun and as a courtly lady. But this complexity leads beyond simple moral judgment; it produces a psychological picture of a woman whose frustrations lead her to over-sentimentalize her charity and perhaps to overeat—Chaucer uses the adverb “ful” nine times in his description of her and tells us that “hardily, she was nat undergroe” (156).

The characteristics that Chaucer catalogues for us in his portrait of the Prioress, conventional as they are, hold the potential for later, more specific and individual character development along psychological lines that absorb, if they do not preclude, moral judgment. Whatever is sadistic, bloody, or sentimental in the tale she later tells, whatever is bathetic in its identification with the “littel” child and his suffering mother, whatever is shocking in the Old Testament judgmentalism of her story about a Christian martyr and in her presentation of the Virgin as one who “ravyshedest” the Holy Spirit “down fro the Deitee” (7. 469), has plausible motivation from the portrait Chaucer draws of her in the General Prologue.

Like the portrait of the Prioress, all the portraits of the General Prologue juxtapose conventional details from different, often incongruous, modes of life that produce a double sense that most pilgrims are at once types and individuals. Since the catalogue convinces by the accretion of particulars, Chaucer simply lines up details and images in his portraits. He ties together details in loose coordination, using “and” to summarize or “but” to contrast them. At times he uses the slightly more subordinating “for” to suggest a causal connection between particulars, as in the portrait of the Friar (218, 220, 225, 227, 229). Basically, he coordinates details within a couplet, in which case the rhyme controls the effect, or from couplet to couplet. Most characteristic about the syntactic organization of detail in the portraits is its skillfully random effect, its apparent lack of order and control, which creates irony and humor, seems stylistically appropriate to a recollection of the past, and suggests a sense that conclusive moral evaluation is not possible.
III

Chaucer creates inconclusiveness in the forms of the portraits of the General Prologue in three specific ways. He disarranges the expected order of detail so that the character-types common to catalogue description elsewhere become individuated, potentially dynamic and mimetic instead of static and typical. He repeats words, phrases, or images from portrait to portrait, so that their context alters their connotation. And he uses double entendre to create ambiguity and often unresolvable contradiction. However, since Chaucer the pilgrim mediates our recognition of Chaucer the poet’s techniques, let us get to his poet through his pilgrim, whose subjective approach to description and refusal to judge at once increase our sense of a free flow of associated particulars and intensify our sense of inconclusiveness.27

The pilgrim Chaucer intends to be an impressionistic journalist. He will describe the other pilgrims according to the way they seemed—“so as it semed me” (39). And they all seem just fine. Adjectives like “worthy,” “good,” “fair,” “noble,” “gentil,” “solempne” abound throughout the portraits, as do phrases like “noon hym like” (Physician), “no man nowhere so virtuous” (Friar), and “ful riche of excellence” (Sergeant of Law). The pilgrim Chaucer likes most all his companions and agrees with all their opinions (except the Summoner’s on excommunication), either by assenting openly to a pilgrim’s opinion, as with the Monk, or by praising the actions of each pilgrim even when those actions are reprehensible, as with the Physician and the Pardoner. As a journalist, the pilgrim Chaucer shows an undiscriminating enthusiasm for what he thinks to be an abundance of talent and excellence among the pilgrims.

The pilgrim’s refusal to criticize—in fact, his apparent commitment to praise—forces us to make our own sense out of the particulars in the portraits, especially the incongruous ones, and finally to evaluate the character for ourselves. This couplet from the Wife of Bath’s portrait is a stunning example of the pilgrim’s technique and its effect:

She was a worthy womman al hir live
Housbondes at chirche door she hadde fyve.
In the space of one couplet, we see the Wife's femininity praised because she has fulfilled herself as a woman by having had five husbands. We are left to judge whether or not “husbandizing” perfects the worth of a woman. Similarly, the following paired couplets from the portrait of the Physician exemplify the technique more expansively:

Of his diete mesurable was he,
For it was of no superfluitee,
But of greet norissyng and digestible.
His studie was but litel on the Bible.

Without the narrator’s moral consciousness—in fact, because of his exuberant praise of most actions—the reader is led into the poet's ironic trap, recognizing on the one hand that the ingenuous pilgrim is limited in his perception, and on the other that his very charitable, if simplistic, approach to the world is nonetheless a good value to which all good Christians must pay attention.

A more-developed case in point is in the portrait of the Monk, whose manliness and venereal pursuits at once qualify him to be an abbot and yet disqualify him from being a good monk. As with the Prioress, the Monk’s portrait is constructed of competing sets of details from the courtly—in this case the chivalric—world, and from the monastic Christian world. Neither side ever gets the upper hand, and when the pilgrim openly agrees with the Monk’s refusal to follow the rules of monastic life—“and I seyde his opinion was good” (183)—we, who have been critical because he had not fulfilled his vows, must consider with the pilgrim whether the rules are not after all too stringent, whether a man of the Monk’s physical stature and drive might not need “the space” of holding “to the newe world” (176). When we reach the question “How shal the world be served?” (187), we recognize that we have been trapped, for we know that a monk’s role is not to serve the world but to serve God; yet we also know that there is something valuable about a man of the Monk’s virility serving the world—Harry Bailly will later comment on it with considerable envy (7. 1932–62). Chaucer the pilgrim’s commitment to praise the characters who emerge from Chaucer the poet’s technique of combining details with frequently contradictory implications produces the
complex characterizations that, as Muscatine points out, "on a large scale disarrange and make quasi-dramatic the sequence of tales as a whole."\textsuperscript{29}

The several stylistic devices that create such complexity of characterization in the individual portraits also create the dynamism felt among and through all portraits taken as a whole. Chaucer, working through his pilgrim character, charges words and phrases in one portrait with another connotative sense in another. He rings changes on the meaning of terms while creating a connection from portrait to portrait between the standards and values that the terms represent. Thus he creates an ironic interchange between us and two or more characters within the portrait gallery. The most obvious example of this technique is in the repetition and development of the word \textit{worthy}, introduced in the first line of the Knight's portrait and emphasized throughout it, so that the word comes to signify the virtuous quality Chaucer wants us most to respect in the Knight. By the time we reach the Merchant's portrait, where the term appears three times to suggest the Merchant's financial concerns as opposed to the Knight's virtue, Chaucer has already changed the connotation of "worthy" in the portrait of the Friar, who is interested in "worthy wommen of the toun" (217), women of wealth, who is himself "swich a worthy man" (243) because it

\begin{quote}
Acorded nat, as by his facultee,
To have with sike lazars aqueyntaunce.
\end{quote}

\[244-45\]

The Friar is worthy because his interest is in places "ther as profit sholde arise" (249). Chaucer accomplishes the same kind of ironic effect and dramatic result when he repeats a line from one portrait in another portrait. In the portrait of the Squire, he balances the gently patronizing humor that the pilgrim creates in his description of the Squire with the remarkably dignified final couplet that makes unimportant the "litel space" (87) of the Squire's military experience:

\begin{quote}
Curteis he was, lowely, and servysable,
And carf biforn his fader at the table.
\end{quote}

\[99-100\]
Virtue of Necessity

When he repeats the line about courtesy in the new context of the Friar's portrait, it sounds unctuous, obscene, and sarcastic:

And over al, ther as profit sholde arise,
Curteis he was and lowely of servyse.
There nas no man nowher so vertuous.
He was the beste beggere in his house.

Yet the repetition of most of the line from the more idealized Squire's portrait in the Friar's portrait makes us wonder what courtesy really means. A similar intrusion occurs when, after the pilgrim has called the Knight "a verray, parfit gentil knyght" (72), in praise of his spiritual nature, he calls the Physician "a verray, parfit praksisour" (422), in praise of his materialism.

Finally, Chaucer's brilliant use of double entendre, perhaps his most outstanding stylistic technique in the portraits, conflates into one line or into a couplet or two competing, even discordant, details that charge the portraits with the paradox of ethical contradiction. I have already quoted the couplet about the Wife of Bath's worthiness as a woman. To this may be added the line "She koude muchel of wandrynge by the weye" (467), which brings together in one ambiguous image the Wife's sensuality and her spiritual penchant for visiting religious shrines throughout Europe. Or, the line that combines her wealth and her competitiveness by emphasizing that if any woman in her parish were allowed to go to the "offering" before her, then "she was out of alle charitee" (452). Chaucer's remark that the Monk is "a manly man, to been an abbot able" (167) connects surprisingly the Monk's masculinity with his religious calling. The obscene remark bringing together the Friar's linguistic facility and his lasciviousness is a less terse example:

In alle the ordres foure is noon that kan
So muchel of daliaunce and fair langage.
He hadde maad ful many a mariage
Of yonge wommen at his owene cost.
Unto his ordre he was a noble post.

The Sergeant of Law "war and wys" (309), who "semed bisier than he
was" (322), uses his great learning and wisdom to purchase outright, hence without record of his possibly shady dealings:

Al was fee symple to hym in effect;
His purchasyng myghte nat been infect.

[319–20]

The three lines concluding the portrait of the Physician align that character's pharmaceutical interest in soluble powdered gold and his interest in money by the implication that plagues are economically good for the medical business:

He kept that he wan in pestilence,
For gold in phisik is a cordial;
Therefore he lovede gold in special.

[442–44]

The list of examples can be extended, for double entendre represents one of Chaucer's most basic techniques for energizing by compression the sometimes contradictory lists of qualities that catalogue description required of him. 30

Chaucer effected in the General Prologue of the Canterbury Tales a most unusual and complex form of description. Working within the tradition of rhetorical descriptio, listing qualities in the form of a catalogue, but using a journalistic, noncritical, and loosely coordinated hypotactic style, he created a set of portraits at once morally symbolic in traditional ways and capable of energetic and psychologically mimetic development. The conventionalism of the portraits derives from traditional methods of description, yet his organization of these symbolic details within each portrait and his alignment of noncontiguous elements from different modes of life and with different expectations express an individuation unknown to, and unexpected from, the tradition. In the portraits Chaucer creates characters who rest in a middle state, a state between the static, the exemplary, and the dynamic, even the mimetic. It is up to the narrative links that follow the General Prologue and to the tales themselves, which represent in some ways the moral and psychological values of the pilgrims we meet in the portraits, to show whether Chaucer will move to a mimetic fiction or remain traditionally in an exemplary one. When the narrator completes
his portrait gallery, the character-types of the portraits are, like the narrator himself, "redy to wenden" (21) on their own pilgrimage.

Yet, because the form of the Canterbury Tales is both unique for Chaucer and unique in the literature that Chaucer knew, the poet had no compositional model; he had to go it alone as he worked out his plans for its organization and meaning. His progress throughout the tales was not linear. He knew where he wanted to start and where he wanted to end. The progress of the geographical journey may have represented the structural arch. But he clearly did not understand how to follow that arch and what to say as he went. Without a model, but with the ambivalence about meaning that seems as much a part of Chaucer the poet as it is of Chaucer the persona and narrator, it is no wonder that the Canterbury Tales is fragmented in the way that it is. The outer form of the Tales enabled Chaucer to solve the epistemological problems his earlier poems had confronted. But before his composite form could express pluralistic opinion as its own end, he would have to make the outer and inner forms interpenetrate so that they appeared to be one, and he would have to vary the storial materials of the inner form so that the meaning of one tale in context of another would appear inconclusive. How Chaucer went about these tasks will be the subject of the next chapter.