VI. “After my Lawe”: Inconclusiveness and the Fragmentary Nature of the Canterbury Tales

Inconclusiveness sustains the poetics of the Canterbury Tales. It underlies the numerous fictional voices that relate the outer and inner forms, and it motivates Chaucer’s method of composing in fragments. Although I shall not discuss the meaning of any tale specifically, except when it is relevant to my argument about the entire work, inconclusiveness also charges the content (thematics) of the Canterbury Tales with the energy of paradox. Thus it functions both as a principle of structure and as a tactic to control meaning.

A mass of discrete storial narratives makes up the inner form of the Canterbury Tales. It is commonly assumed that Chaucer composed some stories, like the tales by the Knight, the Monk, and the Second Nun, before he composed the Canterbury Tales as a single work, presumably not conceiving a pilgrim’s voice to speak these tales but later assigning a fictional teller to them. Other tales, like those by the Canon’s Yeoman and the Pardoner, so thoroughly depend on the fictional consciousnesses of their tellers that Chaucer must surely have written them in his characters’ voices. Yet, whether Chaucer conceived first of tale, first of teller, or of the two inseparably, he intended every storial narrative of the Canterbury Tales ultimately to have a fictional voice different from his own, a voice spoken by one of the characters on the pilgrimage. He never accomplished this intention completely. The voices in about one-fourth of the tales cannot be identified clearly with the attitudes or the values of the pilgrims who tell them. In the Shipman’s Tale, for example, the narrator says little to suggest that he is the Shipman of the General Prologue. In consequence, the Canterbury Tales, despite its many coherent virtues, is not fully realized. Nonetheless, as in Chaucer’s earlier works, but on a vaster scale, narrative voice in the Canterbury Tales controls meaning.
In all cases before the Canterbury Tales, the speaker had been the poet himself, either as persona in a dream experience or as a translator of another author's text. He had sought to tell his dream "aryght" (HF, 79), to render facts correctly, and to direct meaning in the experience toward its appropriately moral end. But the literary materials that the speaker rendered rarely gave the simple answers he wanted. More often than not, they left him in a state of confusion, as in the House of Fame, or of dissatisfaction, as in the Parliament of Fowls. Both states even reappear periodically in Troilus and the Legend of Good Women. In the Canterbury Tales, however, Chaucer frees himself from the earnest persona, who previously had been unable to make his information fit an expected system. He invents fictional tellers on a purported journey, makes himself merely one more teller, separating himself from the burden of writing with a univocal moral goal. He simply reports what each said, "everich a word" (1. 733). With such a new form, Chaucer can now think about the multifaceted implications of fiction without suffering the anxiety of didactic responsibility. Perhaps he thought as follows: "Let a miller tell a ribald story, a squire be interested in talking birds; let a manciple render Ovid, a physician translate Livy; let a nun translate a saint's life and a prioress tell a miracle of the Virgin. I will play my part by parodying the silly metrical romances and by parodying myself as the inept poet for whom I have become known; if that tour-de-force should fail, I will turn dutifully to my other literary role in life, that of translator, and I will translate an important moral text about the virtue of prudence. This course is itself most prudent, for though I cannot be a poet as is the moral Gower, I can poetize nonetheless."

In his new form, Chaucer could experiment with the kinds of meaning that different genres, modes, and voices could express. Certainly aware since the House of Fame of the limited truth-value in literary expression, Chaucer could translate or invent many kinds of stories in the Canterbury Tales that claimed to represent some truth about the nature of the world and about man's goals, yet that paradoxically remained mere opinions because their narrators were limited. These fictions may have contained a clearly readable didactic pulse elsewhere in a source, like that part of Nicholas Trivet's Les Chroniques écrites pour Marie d'Angleterre that is the source for the Man of Law's Tale.² In the Canterbury Tales, however, a character like the Man of Law
recalls the fiction and projects his own values through the story. Thus the tellers color meaning in the tales, at times in peculiar ways. The characters on the pilgrimage tell stories merely to pass the time and to win a prize; Chaucer tells stories that reveal in their course the spiritual or psychological "condicioun" of the tellers and suggest, in effect, that a narrative consciousness different from the author's must limit the truth-value a story can express.

Discounting the problem tales, whose problems no doubt result from the incomplete state of the work, I believe that in the *Canterbury Tales* Chaucer imbued the fictions of the inner form with the voices of characters or personalities developed in the outer form. During the last two decades, researchers have shown this practice to be more closely related to learned rhetorical methods of composition than to a "dramatic principle," an innate drive to represent and interpret perceived reality. But the source of this practice is less important to this argument than its effect—the creation of a composite narrative form at once dynamic and inconclusive because personalities of the outer form suffuse the fictions of the inner form. Each tale of the inner form, an independent fiction with an assumed omniscient narrator, becomes, in context of the other tales, an opinion. Even the Knight's and the Parson's tales become mere examples of stories that express their tellers' values and needs, not Chaucer's, not the reader's, not the other pilgrims'. The existence of all the tales in context of each other makes both a former and a later statement seem partial. Thus the *Canterbury Tales* experiments with the power of opinion and the limits of meaning.

Chaucer achieves this kind of inconclusive form by creating an interchange between the outer and inner forms of the work in both obvious and subtle ways. The most obvious way is by creating a dynamic in the outer form that the tales of the inner form intensify and complicate, as when the Reeve and the Summoner respond with fictions to the Miller and the Friar respectively, when the characters of the "Marriage Group" respond in some way to the Wife of Bath, when the Franklin responds to the Squire, when the Miller tells a story "to quite" the Knight's story, and when the Nun's Priest tells a tale in response to the *Monk's Tale*, echoing through its course the *Prioress's Tale*. This dynamic contributes to the inconclusiveness of the entire form because these tales, responses to the values of other tellers and
tales, attack, undermine, correct, or develop the themes of the tales to which they are responses, making the values within those tales, as well as within their own, appear partial or inadequate.

Chaucer also achieves inconclusiveness by matching a teller’s psychology with his tale’s theme in three-quarters of the tales, or, to put the matter another way, by using the fictions as projections of his tellers’ attitudes. Few of us, for example, doubt the motivation between character and tale in the cases of the Pardoner and the Wife of Bath. However, motivation exists between most of the characters and their tales, so that the tale represents not only the values of a social type, like a Franklin or a Miller, for which the conventions of typology would function simply to describe moral universals, but a personal psychology often working curiously to extend meaning. Two examples will have to stand for many.

The Reeve’s Tale is not merely a story a low-class Reeve might tell, not even a story that merely punishes a miller for the supposed insult of Robin the Miller’s story. It incorporates as well the anger and self-hatred at being old and impotent that the Reeve’s prologue raises from implicit indications in his portrait in the General Prologue. Oswald’s attitude turns a simple fabliau plot into a dark, mean, and cruel story about vengeance, self-hatred, and bestial sexuality that punishes Oswald for a condition he cannot abide in himself, a condition not relevant to Robin the Miller, as he has been presented to us, and not explained by a vice typologically expected of a Reeve.

The effect of the Merchant’s Tale is more complicated because the General Prologue leads us to expect in the tale the manifestation of a vice related to the Merchant’s concern about “th’ encrees of his wynnyng” (1. 275). But Chaucer does not develop the related particulars about the Merchant’s profiteering, unless marriage is understood to be related to profit; instead the Merchant becomes one of the tellers in the “Marriage Group.” In his prologue he tells us that his wife “is a shrewe at al” who could “overmacche” the devil if he “to hir ycoupled were” (4. 1218–22). He also says that he will not tell a tale “of myn owene soore” (4. 1243), then presents a mordant examination of the folly that occurs when “tendre youthe hath wedded stoupyng age” (4. 1738). The tale reveals to us what the prologue and the portrait withhold, a complex relationship between marriage, youth, age, and sexual
appetite that suggests retrospectively why the Merchant condemns both his wife and marriage after only two months.

The highly developed characterization of the Reeve in the prologue to the Reeve’s Tale extends the psychological dimensions of meaning in his tale. Oppositely, the complexly represented materials of the Merchant’s Tale enrich our understanding of the Merchant in his prologue. The relationship between the teller of the outer form and the tale of the inner form creates in the Canterbury Tales a series of self-revelations of which the characters themselves are not necessarily aware. If tales by characters such as the Reeve and the Merchant represent deep psychological motives of which the tellers are not aware, then what they suggest about the typological “condicioun” of the teller is continually complicated by our deeper understanding of their psychological “condicioun.”

The third and final example of how Chaucer creates inconclusiveness through an interchange of outer and inner forms in the Canterbury Tales is more radical than the other two, for it represents not an interchange but an interpenetration between the two fictional planes of the composite form whereby inner and outer forms are no longer distinguishable. As a general rule, Chaucer distinguishes between his inner and outer forms in the Canterbury Tales; hence he forces his reader to infer from a tale, a separate fiction, the values and motives that the character of the outer form represents. He distinguishes between a prologue, a statement generally about self in the outer form, and a character’s tale, a story about the world in the inner form through which that character projects his or her values. Although the manuscripts are not unanimous in their handling of rubrics, they generally follow what I assume to have been Chaucer’s own practice of separating by headnotes the tales from each other, from prologues and epilogues, and from interchanges between two or more characters. Yet in those prologues and tales where self-revelation is most explicit, the distinctions between inner and outer forms of the Canterbury Tales curiously disappear.

The Pardoner and his tale represent the most outstanding case in point. At first we find much mediation: an introduction in which the Pardoner tells us he is going to think “upon som honest thyng” (6. 328); a prologue in which he tells us with stunning honesty how
corrupt and hypocritical he is; and a sermon-like tale in which he exemplifies in a story the corruptions of which he has confessed himself to be guilty. But the tale does not come to an end in its expected place or manner, as we find in other tales, nor does a headnote indicate a movement to an epilogue or end-link. During the Pardoner's recital of his sermon in story form, which he knows "al by rote" (6. 332), the boundary between the tale with its moral goal and the performance with its profit motive merge within the Pardoner's consciousness so that he seems to forget where he is and falls into his own fiction. When he has completed his sermon-tale and his benediction, he turns immediately to Harry Bailly and the other pilgrims as if they were his audience of "lewed" people, presumably convinced that he has hoodwinked them by his brusque honesty. The effect of this fluid interchange between inner and outer forms produces one of the most intensely dramatic moments in the entire Canterbury Tales. Harry Bailly feels threatened and responds by insulting the Pardoner violently. The insult is effective, for the Pardoner, previously voluble and glib, secure in the power of his words to control the reality around him, is struck dumb—"This Pardoner answerde nat a word" (6. 956).

Chaucer creates a similar effect with the Wife of Bath. In some senses fact and fiction merge in her presentation of herself since her autobiography is her tale. She tells us that her poetic is to "speke after my fantasye" (3. 190), and while drifting through nostalgic reminiscences, she catches herself up and returns to her structured history:

But now, sire, lat me se, what I shal seyn?
Aha! by God, I have my tale ageyn.

[3. 585–86]

So beguiled are we by the liveliness of the Wife's prologue, we need to be reminded by the Friar at its end—an end that concludes with a prayer like so many of the tales proper—that this was indeed a preamble to a tale and not a tale itself. Although the rubrics of, say, the Ellesmere Manuscript make clear at this point that the Wife's prologue is ended and her tale is about to begin, there is a sense that the story following the Wife's "preamble of a tale" is yet one more example, relevant to the first, of the Wife's personal story of the woes in mar-
riage. It may even have been this sense that a character's history could itself be a tale that made Chaucer tamper with the Wife's actual tale, shifting to the Shipman what is commonly believed to have been her first tale and eventually supplying her with another one that fit the character more tightly. Whatever Chaucer's reasons, it is clear that the Pardoner thinks her autobiography is a tale. Early in the wife's prologue, he says, after she has threatened him, "as ye bigan, / Telle forth youre tale" (3. 185-86). To this she replies: "Now, sire, now wol I telle forth my tale" (3. 193), and she returns to tell the history of her marriages.

The places where Chaucer obliterates the expected fictional distinctions between the inner and outer forms of the Canterbury Tales are, admittedly, few. Aside from the two already discussed, there is only the peculiar fact that the first part of the Canon's Yeoman's Tale is actually the Canon Yeoman's professional autobiography and not his fiction. In kind, it is like the prologues to the tales by the Reeve, the Wife of Bath, and the Pardoner. This kind of obliteration, confusing, of fictional boundaries seems to be one of Chaucer's experimental methods for creating fluidity between the two components of his composite form, a method by which he tests how far he can proceed in the direction of making the voice of the outer form penetrate the fiction of the inner form, or vice versa. In effect it intensifies a reader's sense that the stories are fictive projections of the characters on the pilgrimage and provides the Canterbury Tales with a mimetic potential found nowhere else in the encyclopedic forms of stories popular in the Middle Ages, both of which contribute to the inconclusiveness of the entire form by making meaning partial, equivocal, inextricably an element of the limited consciousnesses of those characters purported to have been on the journey to Canterbury.

Inconclusiveness is not related only to the mimetic potential with which Chaucer imbues the form of the Canterbury Tales, however. It is an element of the work's structure, a principle by which Chaucer composes and with which he can explore and test the manifold ways fiction can represent reality. It is, then, both a principle and a method of composition. Chaucer not only composed the Canterbury Tales in fragments; he "fragmentized" meaning within each fragment. In order to understand the principle, let us look at the method.
II

What can we know about how Chaucer composed his massive and complex *Canterbury Tales* when we do not have his workbooks or his plans? We do not even have the text he himself wrote. The different groups of manuscripts disagree on the order of the fragments, and the most authoritative manuscripts of the most authoritative group, the Ellesmere and the Hengwrt, even disagree on the content. The Hengwrt, for instance, contains neither the prologue to the *Merchant’s Tale* nor the Canon’s Yeoman’s prologue and tale. Despite the admittedly serious drawbacks that the lack of an original text presents, however, two characteristics of Chaucer’s compositional method emerge. First, although the order of the fragments within the manuscripts varies and the materials of each fragment occasionally differ, the fragment itself appears to be the basic unit of composition. It represents something like Chaucer’s own habit or idea of construction, the one his literary executors, presumably following his wishes, passed on to the scribes. Second, Chaucer customarily constructed his fragmentary units to include tales on varied themes or points of view. As a general rule, he did not allow the meaning implied by one tale in a fragment to stand without countering, altering, or in some way enriching it by the implied meaning of a companion or companions.

No matter how our modern editions vary in their ordering, the *Canterbury Tales* exists as a group of ten fragments. One fragment, number seven, contains six tales but only five tellers. Two, numbers one and three, contain three tales each; of these, fragment one also contains the *General Prologue*, assuring it of first place in the order, and a brief fragment by the Cook. Four fragments, numbers four, five, six, and eight, contain two tales each and constitute the largest number of similarly structured fragments. Finally, three fragments, numbers two, nine, and ten, contain only one tale each, except that fragment ten also contains the retraction, which assures it of ultimate place in the order, especially since the retraction exists in every manuscript where the *Parson’s Tale* is complete. Seven of the ten fragments, then, contain more than one tale; of the remaining three, there is evidence that Chaucer was working on extending two of them to in-
clude at least one more tale. Let us examine briefly what evidence the fragments with only one tale offer that Chaucer considered extending them to include at least one more tale.

Fragment two contains an epilogue in which the Host asks the Parson to tell a tale after the Man of Law has finished his tale. When the Parson refuses, either the Shipman, the Squire or the Summoner—the manuscripts vary—asserts that his "joly body schal a tale telle" (2. 1185). Although Robinson tells us that there is manuscript support for the theory "that Chaucer abandoned the Epilogue," its existence shows Chaucer's intention, at one point in the development of the Canterbury Tales, of offering at least one more tale in this fragment, one that would contrast the morally tendentious tale of the Man of Law in a way that a tale by the Parson could not. The epilogue and the curious prologue to the Man of Law's Tale suggest that this is the least "finished" fragment of the ten, the one whose form is least clear. But in it we nonetheless can see evidence that Chaucer considered using at least two kinds of contrasting fictions.

It is interesting to speculate that Chaucer planned a similar contrasting structure for fragment nine. The prologue to the Manciple's Tale introduces dramatic materials which suggest that Chaucer may once have intended to juxtapose the Manciple's story of Phoebus and the crow with a tale from the Cook. The fragment opens with Harry first calling upon the Cook to tell a tale—"he knoweth his penance" (9. 12). but the Cook cannot respond because he is asleep. Whereupon the Manciple offers to tell a tale, but not before he ridicules the Cook. Chaucer is establishing here the familiar dramatic situation of having Harry call upon one teller only to have another teller preempt his choice. In fact, after the Manciple berates the awakened Cook, Harry warns him that the Cook might choose "another day" (9. 71) to reveal things about him that "were nat honest, if it cam to proof" (9. 75). In response to this statement, the Manciple retracts his insult, recognizing that the Cook might "lightly brynge me in the snare" (9. 77). He offers the Cook some wine, then tells a tale about why it is best to keep silent. The content of the prologue to the Manciple's Tale suggests that Chaucer created this altercation to motivate a second tale by the Cook. The design resembles the pattern of altercations he already had...
created between the Miller and the Reeve and between the Friar and Summoner.

Even if the speculation should prove unconvincing, the first line of fragment ten, which follows the Manciple's Tale and also contains but one tale (plus the retraction), indicates that Chaucer wanted to make a contrastive connection between the materials he finished before he stopped writing. The last fragment begins: "By that the Maunciple hadde his tale al ended" (10. 1). Evidently Chaucer intended a temporal relationship between these two last fragments, the one following immediately upon the preceding one. In effect, therefore, he wanted the two tales by the Manciple and the Parson to be seen in contrast.

Although the prologue to the last tale connects it to the fragment before, there is no indication, as in the other two fragments containing single tales, that Chaucer considered adding another tale. The position of the Parson's Tale at the end and the nature of its subject matter suggest a special consideration for it. It is conceived as a singularly important statement of man's spiritual purpose in life, intended "to knytte up al this feeste, and make an ende" (10. 47). It turns our attention to salvation, the main spiritual goal of European life in the fourteenth century. The Parson's treatise on sin and repentance represents an orthodox view of the world and of man's function in it. It was neither given to Chaucer's age, nor to Chaucer, to question or undercut the orthodoxy that the Parson's Tale represents. Whatever peculiar angle of devotion—Lollard or otherwise—this meditation might represent, the main lines of it respond to all that has come before in the Canterbury Tales with an earnest religious answer (and without the complication by personal motive one would expect from a fourteenth-century book about the nature of the world). Its existence in a fragment without other opinions in the forms of tales, but with Chaucer's own retraction, seems both appropriate and just. The fact that fragment ten contains only one tale, however, does not invalidate my argument about Chaucer's "fragmentizing" method since even fragment ten has a binary structure, if we consider Chaucer's retraction.

My purpose in discussing the three single-tale fragments has been to delineate a potential pattern of composition similar to the compositional pattern of the other fragments. In the Canterbury Tales, seven of the ten
fragments contain at least two tellers and two tales; of the remaining
three fragments, two contain materials for possible development into
fragments of more than one teller and tale, and one opens by referring
to a tale in the fragment before it. The evidence is overwhelming that
Chaucer's compositional method was "fragmentizing," dialectically
presenting in each fragment one valence—an issue, an opinion, an
attitude, or a theme—and at least one counter or alternate valence. By
such a method, he either limited authority or extended possibility in
each of the fragments, and hence structured the Canterbury Tales by a
principle of inconclusiveness that implied pluralism of opinion as its
end.

This principle of inconclusiveness has even motivated the enormous
critical drive to establish unity in the Canterbury Tales. The com-
plicated diversity of themes and subjects without a clear architectonics,
as in the Divine Comedy, challenges readers to order and organize
meaning where Chaucer does not. We have been treated to arguments
on the unity of the entire Canterbury Tales, the unity of fragment
one, of fragment seven, and of fragment eight, there has also
been an argument relating the thematics of fragment six to fragment
two; and there have been many arguments relating the fragments
that comprise the "Marriage Group," commonly thought to include
fragments three, four, and five, but to exclude the tales by the Friar,
the Summoner, and the Squire within the fragments. No argument to
my knowledge has ever been advanced about the unity of fragment six,
despite many excellent analyses of each of the tales as independent
entities. Yet such an argument could be made.

The tales by the Physician and the Pardoner, which make up frag-
ment six, are unified by a common assumption about how language
means. Both the Physician and the Pardoner invert the dichotomy
between substance and accident by taking accident for substance. The
canny Pardoner tells us he understands both the dichotomy and the
inversion when he says:

Thise cookes, how they stampe, and streyne, and grynde,
And turnen substaunce into accident,
To fulfille al thy likerous talent!

[6. 538–40]
Howard's analysis of the Pardoner and his tale has shown clearly how transposing the spiritual matter of salvation with the material matter of profit ultimately brings about the Pardoner's humiliation. A similar principle of inversion without the undoing of the teller works implicitly in the Physician's Tale, which precedes the Pardoner's Tale in the fragment. The Physician tells a seemingly moral tale about false judges and contrasts it to the powerful bond between father and daughter, wherein true judgment is implied. A long introduction describes Nature's role in making creatures and the role of governesses and parents in nurturing them. The brief narrative then dwells upon the dilemma Virginius faces when Apius and his henchman plan to debauch his namesake Virginia, hence ruin the reputation of both father and daughter. After establishing that Virginia was "floured in virginitee," chaste "as wel in goost as body" (6. 43-44), the narrator describes how Virginius interprets Virginia's chaste spiritual condition in terms of the physical condition of virginity. In defense against Apius's desire "in lecherie to lyven" (6. 206) with Virginia, Virginius beheads her:

Hir heed of smoot, and by the top it hente,
And to the juge he gan it to presente.

Virginius deprives his daughter of her maiden's head in order to save her maidenhead. He presents the one to the judge who desires the other. Like its companion in the fragment, the Physician's Tale offers an example of the devastating effect of taking accident for substance. The inconclusiveness of the fragment lies in the ambivalent response readers feel. The Physician tells a story that he believes describes virtue defeating vice while we wonder how the means has justified the end. The Pardoner, a "ful vicious man" by his own admission, tells a "moral tale" (6. 459-60) whose end is material gain. Both tellers consistently reverse Saint Paul's dictum that the letter slayeth but the spirit giveth life, yet each in his own way proves the dictum right.

Like fragment six, each fragment of binary structure presents a tale upon a certain theme and follows it with a tale that develops that theme in another, sometimes contrary, direction. The second response invariably derives from the first, but the nature of its thrust is so different
that the second statement complicates the meaning of the first. The fragment becomes inconclusive by virtue of its mere placement in context of its companion. In fragment eight, for instance, both the tales by the Second Nun and the Canon's Yeoman deal with the idea of "business" and the profit derived from it. By a single-minded faith that borders on spiritual obstinacy, Cecilia multiplies the number of souls saved. The Canon's Yeoman by contrast, seeks to inspirit matter, transform and "multiplye" the worthless to the precious with the frustrating result that he is left black in the face. The order of reading, from the Second Nun's Tale to the Canon's Yeoman's Tale, however, reveals the theme of business, profit and "multiplicacion," unusually, for the first story is actually a simply told Saint's Life devoid of the explicit alchemical metaphor. Only by the retrospective contrast of the Canon's Yeoman's Tale, which follows it, does the literal story of Saint Cecilia assume the metaphorical richness we understand it to carry. In this way its structure is like fragment six, whose overall meaning works by a retrospective contrast.

Fragments four and five also deal with two versions of the same theme, each version enriching the other by contrast and complicating our understanding of the theme. Because these fragments form the second and third parts of the "Marriage Group," we rarely consider them as independent units. When so considered, their forms appear to be related by virtue of their binary structure and different from the form of fragment three, which inaugurates the subject of marriage but is constructed in a very different way. Let us look first at these binary fragments of the "Marriage Group."

Both the tales by the Clerk and the Merchant in fragment four are without doubt about the condition of marriage, and both refer to the Wife of Bath, who began the debate in fragment three. But the tales within this fragment also have a relationship in common beyond their considerations of marriage. Their common theme is the willfulness of men. Both tales, quite different in form, genre, and tone, present versions of willfulness in men and examine its effects, the former on the world within Walter's control, the latter on January himself.

The Clerk's Tale examines Walter's willful testing of Griselde's promise "nevere willyngly, / in werk ne thoght," to "disobeye" (4. 362–63). The clerk repeatedly criticizes the extent and severity of
Walter's testing. He even explains it in terms of psychological obsession:

But ther been folk of swich condicion
That when they have a certain purpos take,
They kan nat stynte of hire entencion,
But, right as they were bounden to a stake,
They wol nat of that firste purpos slake.
Right so this markys fulliche hath purposed
To tempte his wyf as he was first disposed.

[4. 701–7]

The tale concludes by openly calling intolerable the relationship between dominance and submission that the narrative has described; instead it calls for a symbolic interpretation:

This storie is seyd, nat for that wyves sholde
Folwen Grisilde as in humylitee,
For it were inportable, though they wolde;
But for that every wight, in his degree,
Sholde be constant in adversitee.

[4. 1142–46]

The Merchant's Tale approaches the issue of willfulness differently, suggesting that willfulness is endlessly tolerable as long as it is directed at the self, that is, as long as January blinds himself to the truth that his senses apprehend and his reason offers. "Ye algate in it wente! . . . He swyved thee, I saugh it with myne yen," (4. 2376–78), January exclaims to May in the pear tree. Yet he accepts her judgment that "Ye han som glymsyng, and no parfit sighte" (4. 2383), and her explanation:

Right so a man that longe hath blynd ybe,
Ne may nat sodeynly so wel yse,
First whan his sighte is newe come ageyn,

[4. 2401–3]

January even accepts what May tells him: "Ther may ful many a sighte yow bigile" before "youre sighte ysatled be a while" (4. 2405–6). The tale ends with January's continuance in willful blindness and with the happiness of a willed innocence as he looks forward to the birth of his heir:

This Januarie, who is glad but he?
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This Januarie, who is glad but he?
He kisseth hire, and clippeth hire ful ofte,
And on hire wombe he stroketh hire ful softe.

[4. 2412-14]

In the discussion of marriage, the Merchant's Tale neither challenges nor denies the Clerk's Tale. Rather, the two tales work together examining two versions of male willfulness in marriage and implying ways in which we can interpret and understand it.

The relationship between the tales by the Squire and the Franklin, which make up fragment five, is less transparent because the Squire's Tale is itself incomplete. Since we do not know whether Chaucer created the tale as an intentional fragment, as he seems to have done with his tale of Sir Thopas, or simply never completed it, any examination of its relationship to the Franklin's Tale must remain speculative. About the two tales of this fragment, however, this much is certain: the Franklin's Tale develops from the Franklin's response in the link to the Squire and his tale. Whether for reasons of flattery or for genuine appreciation, the Franklin admires the Squire's "gentil" manner. His own tale, of course, is about "gentillesse," and in it he is sanguine about the power of "gentillesse" in human beings to make things right and to overcome a difficult situation. By contrast, what we have of the Squire's Tale spends much time—its second part—emphasizing Canacee's "gentil herte" in response to the suffering falcon whose lover "semed welle of alle gentillesse" (5. 505), but who showed that he had "no gentillesse of blood" (5. 620) when he flew off with a "kyte." Whatever other matter the first part of the tale contains, whatever else of "grete mervailles" (5. 660) the Squire promises to tell but never does, seems peripheral to the central action of the second part of the tale, its most coherent part. The concern of this part is directly related to the concern of the Franklin's Tale. But whereas the second part of the Squire's Tale implies that "gentillesse" is a quality easily feigned, the Franklin's Tale understands the term as a genuine condition of character, not influenced by birth or limited to class. Though both tales use the concept of "gentillesse," each understands and applies it differently, creating a sense, as with "multiplicacion," that "termes" themselves can create ambiguity because they can contain their conceptual opposites within them.
The first fragment of the “Marriage Group,” fragment three, contains only one tale about marriage, and two others, by the Friar and the Summoner, that have nothing to do with marriage. It is curious that, however often the “Marriage Group” is discussed, from the time Eleanor Hammond introduced the term until now, no one has seemed particularly concerned with the possibility that this fragment might have its own thematic coherence not necessarily concerned with marriage. Moreover, critical interest in the subject of marriage in the three fragments that constitute the “Marriage Group” has caused us to overlook the fact that the form of fragment three is different from the form of the two other fragments. Fragment three contains a long prologue and three tales, two of which are intended as attack and rebuttal. The two other fragments do not follow this pattern, for they contain only two tales, the second of which is not conceived as an answer but as a variation on a theme presented in the first. The structural pattern of fragment three is more similar to the pattern of fragment one than it is to the pattern of fragments four and five. Both fragments one and three contain a long prologue, the earlier 858 lines long, the latter 856 lines long. Both prologues are then followed by a tale, one an epic that asks “what is this world, what asketh men to have” (1. 2777), the other a romance that asks what “wommen most desiren” (3. 905). Both fragments introduce a second tale of a different nature that yet a third pilgrim takes as a personal attack. The third teller then responds vengefully with a third tale to “quite” the insult. In form, then, and not considering the nature of the content, fragment three shows Chaucer working out a structural pattern already established in fragment one.

The similar pattern and construction of fragments one and three indicate that Chaucer also used another method to create inconclusiveness as he composed the fragments of the *Canterbury Tales*. This method was more complex than in the binary fragments, for it offered in a triadically structured fragment a causal motivation from the outer form to the second and third tales of the fragment. The difference between the two fragments under discussion is that whereas the second tale of fragment one, the *Miller’s Tale*, reflects thematically on the first, the *Knight’s Tale*, while it develops cause for a response from the Reeve to follow, the second tale of fragment three, the *Friar’s Tale*, has
no obvious thematic connection to the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, which precedes it, although, like the earlier fragment, it develops cause for a response to follow from the Summoner. Let us look first at some thematic and structural connections within fragment one before conjecturing about analogous connections in fragment three.

The *Miller's Tale* presents both a contrastive world view and parodic echoes of the *Knight's Tale*. It offers a fabliau and the spirit and values of the fabliau in place of the Knight's epic with its elevated philosophical concerns. Two idealistically loving knights trying to win a royal, bloodlessly virginal lady become in the *Miller's Tale* two libidinously driven clerks who seek to bed a lusty married wench; a mature, wise conquerer, a builder of civilization, who even protracts the action of the epic into a stadium he has built, yet learns by an act of the gods the limits of human power, becomes a foolish, old husband who builds circular tubs to serve as arks and becomes a laughing stock of the town because a young man's plan, in a manner of speaking, backfires. The window of the *Knight's Tale*, through which Palamon and Arcite view Emily and hence are laid low by love, is transposed down in the *Miller's Tale* to the window on the carpenter's wall through which both Nicholas and Absolom are laid low. In contrast to the parodic way the *Miller's Tale* echoes the *Knight's Tale*, the *Reeve's Tale* directly answers, genre for genre, gull for gull, the tale by the Miller with a personal animus that carries from the argument between the Miller and Reeve in the outer form into the fictions of the inner form. However, the tone and attitude of the *Reeve's Tale* are more vicious than the Miller's parody of the *Knight's Tale* because the intention is vengeance and not simply another opinion about the nature of the world.

Despite structural similarity between fragments one and three, however, the thematic issues of fragment three are not clearly related from tale to tale as they are in fragment one, although the tone, intention, and the similarity in the genres of the second and third tales of fragment three directly correspond to the tales in the same position in the earlier fragment. The Friar mocks the Summoner in a tale whose theme concerns the relation of words to intention; in counteraction, the Summoner tells a more vicious, scatological tale with the same theme, using the Friar—or a Friar—as the dupe. The relationship of
these tales to the tale by the Wife of Bath, however, is less clear. Unlike the parodic echoes in the *Miller's Tale* of subject and theme in the *Knight's Tale*, the *Friar's Tale* shows no obvious connection with the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, except that the Wife of Bath's theme in the tale—what women most desire—and her sermon-like talk on "gentillesse" and age reflect Chaucer's interest, as in her prologue, in words, in the power of words, and in having the last word. Although these thematic concerns relate only obliquely to the thematic concerns with the meaning of words that course through the *Friar's Tale* and that imbue the form of the *Summoner's Tale* with a kind of nominalistic wit, they all have a common source in books one and two of Saint Jerome's *Contra Joviniam*.28

I am less interested in the thematic connection between the tales of fragment three than I am in how the pattern of construction, a long prologue and three tales the second of which motivates the third, resembles the pattern of construction of fragment one, and how this structural affinity between fragments reveals Chaucer at work on a more complex manner of extending the possibilities of inconclusiveness than the fragments containing only two tales offer. If the form of the *Canterbury Tales* comprises a series of fragments representing opinions that individual consciousnesses project in fictional form, the fragments containing three tales each imply a more extensive analysis of the effects of varying opinions. In addition to offering two opinions about the nature of the world, these fragments present characters who respond directly to those opinions, as if the opinions were insults to their own integrity; in turn, the characters answer the insult vindictively. Fragments one and three therefore not only reveal a sense of inconclusiveness but imply that the pluralism the inconclusiveness suggests may create difficulty, especially when vicious motives are either perceived or imagined.

III

By considering thematic as well as structural relationships within the individual fragments, I have not meant to argue either for a thematic unity or for a single meaning in the *Canterbury Tales*. Although critics have argued for a singular, univocal meaning29 and have sensed a unifying artistic purpose,30 my own endeavor has been to show that
Chaucer's characteristic mode of operation in the *Canterbury Tales* was to create inconclusiveness by a principle of "fragmentizing." Within each fragment he offered either another opinion on the same subject or theme, or a similar opinion handled differently or in opposition to the first. In those fragments containing only one tale, he generally built in the possibility for the development of a second, limiting opinion; in the other fragments, he offered at least two opinions, the second making the first only a partial answer.

Nowhere in Chaucer's works do we get a fuller, more complete picture of the kind of poet Chaucer was, of the breadth of his talent, and of the pluralistic effect inconclusiveness could create in the structure of a fragment than in fragment seven, the longest fragment of *Canterbury Tales*. To close this study of the ways in which inconclusiveness functions in the development of Chaucer's narrative forms, I shall examine the structure of this fragment, for in it we find Chaucer's most mature—at least, most sophisticated—uses of inconclusiveness and the rich dramatic effect he could create with it.

Although fragment seven is the only fragment of the *Canterbury Tales* considerably more developed than the fragments containing merely two or three tales, Chaucer's pattern within it of alternating kinds of tales and tellers supports my claim that he created inconclusiveness in all his fragments by providing a counter-valence to a first tale with a second. Robinson says about fragment seven that "there seems to be no principle of arrangement save that of contrast and variety." Although this fragment does not continually alternate humorous and serious tales—the serious *Tale of Melibee* is followed by the more serious, because depressing, *Monk's Tale*—the variety of genres that the fragment contains directs our attention to the sense of multiplicity underlying Chaucer's constructional practice. This sense of multiplicity in turn makes it impossible to attach a univocal meaning to Chaucer's intention. Even Alan Gaylord, who thinks the fragment is unified by the subject of "the art of story telling," admits that the subject is "very broad." His argument supports mine in its claim that the broad-based subject and highly developed action in the links of the outer form of fragment seven serve to make judgment and evaluation the responsibility of the reader rather than of the poet. Harry Bailly's simplistic and often misguided assertions cause us to refuse his
judgments as either overly nice or overly bourgeois. Harry is working Chaucer the poet's purpose of creating inconclusiveness by making judgments unacceptable to us. Gaylord recognizes this when he claims that if "Harry is the Apostle of the Obvious, Chaucer is the master of Indirections." Indirection is, of course, one of the principles of construction of this fragment as well as of the Canterbury Tales as a whole. Its relation to inconclusiveness is obvious in that Chaucer's roundabout means of composition, whose goals are not usually clear, keep the form from concluding in any certain way the options and questions it offers or raises.

Fragment seven is the most striking example of Chaucer's technique of constructing inconclusive fragments not only because it combines a variety of genres and develops Harry Bailly as an inappropriate editor of the tales. The complex interrelationship between teller and tale as well as the juxtaposition of moral and generic considerations make the fragment a most significant example. The Shipman's Tale, for instance, is a bawdy and witty fabliau. Yet the tale contains a dark undercurrent about the viciousness of mankind that robs the fabliau form of its expected joyous energy, an energy felt even in the angry, vicious Reeve's fabliau. The Prioress's Tale, moreover, intended as a tonal and thematic counter to the Shipman's fabliau, is complicated by the Prioress's extensive use of an overly sentimental and judgmental rhetoric. Like the Reeve's Tale, the Prioress's Tale functions as a psychological revelation of character that cuts deeper than a simple appropriateness of tale to teller. It reveals so many particular aspects of the Prioress's character, as it was presented in the General Prologue, that a typological interpretation of her "condicioun" as the tale reveals it is finally less than satisfactory. In light of what we know about her naivété and secular aspirations, one cannot read her tale simply as a pious Miracle of the Blessed Virgin.

Absurdity characterizes Chaucer's Tale of Sir Thopas. The parodic and comical mood he establishes in the tale counteracts the sober effect of the Prioress's narrative. This tale not only makes fun of the form and content of metrical romance; it claims, if taken seriously (and Chaucer the pilgrim tells us the tale in absolute earnest), that a legitimate literary genre may be a total failure and that a narrative form can be meaningless. Sir Thopas argues for meaninglessness based on a
principle of incoherence. Its effect is not much different from that of the *House of Fame*, except that in the earlier poem incoherence seemed a problem caused by trying to handle too much within a single form and trying to direct that overabundance toward a single conclusion. In *Sir Thopas*, however, incoherence is intentional, not accidental. Harry is right that this brilliantly allusive story is "drasty," hence "nat worth a toord" (7. 2120). Meaninglessness is its reason for being, and the purposeful interruption at the beginning of the Third Fit is as good a place to end it as any, for a poem without a meaning cannot have a natural conclusion.\(^36\)

The purposeful interruption of the *Tale of Sir Thopas* reminds us that there is a fictional audience, not unlike us, attentive to the fictions, aware of its responsibility to evaluate. Like us, they too are seeking "sentence" and "solaas" from the stories, and like us, they may be periodically confused about the point and purpose of a tale. The case is even clearer later in the fragment when Chaucer has the Knight interrupt the Monk, for unlike the *Tale of Sir Thopas*, the meaning of the *Monk's Tale* is very clear indeed. Its clarity not its confusion is what makes it intolerable.

Chaucer's second tale of *Melibee* is no tale at all. It is a close translation of Renaud de Louen's *Livre de Melibée*. Like the *Boece*, and even like the meditation that comprises the *Parson's Tale*, the treatise could probably have stood on its own as one of Chaucer's translations, except that its sober reasoning and its argument against vengeful action provide an antidote to the driving activity, "prickynge," and challenging that characterize the *Tale of Sir Thopas*; hence it serves as a variational possibility within the fragment. It does not come, however, as a welcome relief; for although the argument of the *Melibee* is interestingly worked out, its length and sober proverbial style seem to be a problem for modern readers.\(^37\) Harry's response to the tale is positive, but his understanding of the virtue of prudence seems doubtful and his narrow application of the moral is reductive. Ironically, Harry sees the *Melibee* not only as a moral treatise but as a fiction from which he would like his wife to learn something.

With Chaucer's *Tale of Melibee*, the pattern of alternation so far structuring fragment seven ends, for the *Monk's Tale* continues the sobriety established by the *Melibee* despite Harry's contrary ex-
pectations. It moves the sober tone into the realm of the dour and bitter. Difficult as the Melibee is to read through, its vision is continually optimistic. Just the opposite is true of the Monk's Tale. It is a pessimistic vision of the world and of man's powerlessness in it. Its pessimism is the reason for its remaining incomplete, for the Knight senses that the tale contains too much unmediated heaviness. The interesting thing about the Monk's Tale for our purposes is that its intentional incompleteness comes about for reasons opposite to those that left Sir Thopas purposefully incomplete. Whereas Sir Thopas is incomplete because its absurdity and incoherence make conclusiveness of any sort impossible, the Monk's Tale is incomplete because, like the Legend of Good Women, it is conclusive with a vengeance. The Monk's Tale may be the most conclusive piece of literature Chaucer ever wrote. For the Monk, tragedy is a foregone conclusion, and all the stories that make up the tale appear as examples of the same conclusion established from beginning—that Fortune deprives man of happiness and that life continually frustrates man's urges for power. The two definitions of tragedy that flank the seventeen examples are slightly different from each other, but the argument of the tale is constructed by a method of post hoc, propter hoc, unlike any of Chaucer's other fictions. What is defined at the beginning and fictively exemplified throughout the middle is again redefined at or toward the end (the manuscripts are not consistent in their organization of the separable parts of the tale). The form of the entire tale is a conclusion, but the conclusion is unsatisfying to two members of the pilgrimage and apparently to the poet, so that it is interrupted, gently by the Knight and severely by Harry, and then followed by the Nun's Priest's Tale, whose greatest virtue is, by contrast, the inconclusiveness of its form and the joy that inconclusiveness produces.

The Nun's Priest's Tale may be Chaucer's most beloved tale, but nobody has been able to offer a total reading of its meaning. The illusiveness of its meaning is, in fact, its chief delight. From its humble opening, as in black and white, the fable bursts forth into glorious technicolor once it moves into the locus amoenus—Chauntecleer's Paradise, "a yeerde . . . enclosed al aboute / with stikkes and a drye dych without" (7. 2847-48). In this enclosed "yeerde," chickens enact the fall of man (birds were always Chaucer's favorite exemplary animals),
and his salvation as well. Just as Chauntecleer, despite the warning of his dream and his conclusion that "I shal han of this avisioun / adversitee" (7. 3152-53), flies down from his edenic perch toward impending tragedy, so too he saves himself by his chicken-wit. By the end of the story, he has flown "heighe upon a tree" (7. 3417), safe from death. From serious line to serious line, the story offers a frequently altering set of attitudes that offer as frequently an altered set of conclusions. If anything is certain about the Nun's Priest's Tale, it is its alterability, its shifting morality, and its "continuously human suggestion of the relativity of things."

Chaucer draws through its plot most of his literary interests: the value of dreams; the value of love; the nature of heroism; the nature of wit; the function of rhetoric; even the value of poetry. At the end of the tale, the priest-narrator asks us to take the "moralite," assuming that we are "goode men" (7. 3440). But the morality is as shifting and inconclusive as the rest of its form. Is it that we should not listen to our wives, or that we should? Is it that we should pay attention to our dreams, should not be caught in "sensual music," should not listen to flattery, should not speak too soon, or should use our wits to save us when all else seems to fail? The tale suggests all, not one, even though some of the morals reside in joyful contradiction with others.

Since we know almost nothing about the tale's narrator, only that he is a brawny priest riding as a part of the Prioress's entourage and that he promises to be "myrie" (7. 2817), we can have few expectations for the genre or meaning of the story he will tell. The story echoes lines, attitudes, and considerations of all the tales that precede it in the fragment but never rests long enough to offer a solid ground for comparative interpretation. As a mock epic, it incorporates elements of fabliau and of tragedy. The Nun's Priest discourses with learning but denies learnedness; he raises serious issues about value but claims meaninglessness, for his story is simply a tale of a cock. He denies any rhetorical ability with brilliant rhetorical flourishes. Even the textual problem with calendar time, remarked by modern editors, seems to work toward the tale's inconclusive effect:

Whan that the month in which the world bigan,
That highte March, whan God first maked man,
Was compleet, and passed were also,
Syn March bigan, thritty dayes and two,
Bifel that Chauntecleer in al his pryde,
His sevne wyves walkynge by his syde,
Caste up his eyen to the brighte sonne
That in the signe of Taurus hadde yronne
Twenty degrees and oon, and somewhat moore,
And knew by kynde, and by noon oother loore,
That it was pryme, and crew with blisful stevene.
"The sonne," he seyde, "is clomben up on hevene
Fourty degrees and oon, and moore ywis."

[7. 3187–99]

Counting from the time that "the world bigan," that time when "God first maked man," and depending on Chauntecleer's expertise at reading the heavens astrologically, "by kynde," we get two dates, without textual correction, during which the almost-tragedy occurs. The first date is May third, a date Chaucer mentions specifically elsewhere. The other date is April first, sustaining any opinion that this tale may be taken as an April Fool's joke. Just as the meaning of the tale seems conceived in inconclusiveness, so the dates do not align. But their nonalignment does not matter. Relativity in telling time seems to this tale of a piece with the inconclusiveness of its form. It is with this joyously inconclusive tale that Chaucer ends his longest fragment after wandering through, testing, and complicating meaning by varying a group of dissimilar tales in different genres. Among the many senses with which we are left at the end of this tale and of the fragment is the sense that everything will be all right.

Patrick Gallacher argues that the concept of catharsis informs and enlivenes the *Nun's Priest's Tale* on both its literal and symbolic levels. In a more figurative way, the same could be said about the form of the entire *Canterbury Tales*. The *Nun's Priest's Tale* exemplifies an inconclusive form within the inner form of the *Canterbury Tales* analogous to the form of the entire work. Just as meaning within the tale constantly alters, points one way then another, raises emotion and purges it while on its inexorable route to an end that is ultimately happy, though inconclusively so, the form of the *Canterbury Tales* raises alters, shifts, and purges whole spheres of emotion, suggesting a spectrum of meaning as the pilgrims move toward Canterbury. The form continually tests the appropriateness of opinion while supplying a
rich texture of suggestions about the possibilities of literature to imitate life and mind, and to mean conclusively. Because often peculiar psychology controls meaning and projects it through various narrative genres, the entire form of the Canterbury Tales suggests, finally, that for Chaucer conclusive meaning in literature is neither possible nor desirable. Yet the form also suggests that opinion itself may validly serve as a means for poetry.

The Canterbury Tales is Chaucer's final, most complex, narrative form. It represents the culmination of a career of literary experimentation with both dream visions and storial narratives. Whatever lessons Chaucer learned about meaning and its inconclusiveness from his earlier, more limited, works stood him in good stead as he produced the Canterbury Tales. Chaucer was never able to write comfortably within the traditional forms he inherited because his questioning mind and ambivalent temperament seeking to discover how poetry could represent truth continually encountered frustration, equivocation, inconclusiveness. Remarkably in the Canterbury Tales Chaucer discovered that he could construct a work that could suggest versions of truth; he did not need to adjudicate which version was the best, the most acceptable. He could leave evaluation to his audience and to his interpreters while he presented all possibilities and denied none. Through a series of responses to the questions "What is this world, what asketh men to have?", Chaucer produced a narrative form comprising many plausible imitations of reality that suggests pluralism through opinion.

This form was not without its problems for Chaucer. The pluralistic nature of reality that the form suggests must have worried this poet whose earlier works express a continuously earnest desire to know things with certainty. The relativity that the form implies may well have led Chaucer to create in his later fragments the dark implications about meaning and about truth in the world that Howard has noticed. In these late fragments, Chaucer counterbalances opinions about the value of spiritual alchemy and the valuelessness of material alchemy; he offers us the Manciple's impassioned conclusion to "kepe wel thy tonge, and thenk upon the crowe" (9. 362); and finally, he offers us a meditation that is intended to put us in mind of the heavenly
city of “Jerusalem celestial” (10. 51). These conclusions suggest an increasing realization on Chaucer’s part that the form of *Canterbury Tales* was growing problematic, not only because it was implying a skepticism that literature could provide certainty of meaning, but because the relativity that his inconclusive form was offering frightened him. The fact that Chaucer chose to end his *Canterbury Tales* with an orthodox Christian meditation by the most idealized pilgrim, and to follow it by his own retraction, despite the unfinished state of the middle, suggests that he was finally more fearful of the future of his soul than the experimental nature of his poetry implies.

In the fifteenth century, when most of the manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales* were being copied, those English and Scots poets whom we call Chaucerians because they continually imitated and praised Chaucer showed little interest in imitating the form the master developed in the *Canterbury Tales*. To be sure, Lydgate attempted in the prologue to the *Siege of Thebes* to attach himself to the pilgrimage and to tell a Canterbury Tale; Henryson used the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* (without its inconclusiveness) in his *Fables*; and Dunbar used the materials of the Wife of Bath in his sarcastic *Twa Married Ladies and the Widow*. Otherwise these Chaucerians of the fifteenth century were more interested in imitating the forms of the earlier Chaucer, the dream visions and the love narratives. Apparently the fifteenth century in England was not congenial to a literary form that enjoyed inconclusiveness and the possibilities for pluralistic meaning it suggested. For this reason, perhaps, when we work back from the Renaissance, we spend little time in the fifteenth century, but move directly to Chaucer in the fourteenth for strong signs of a modern epistemology.