Geoffrey Chaucer
Chapter 7: Canterbury Tales

The last of Chaucer's great projects, which, typically, he left unfinished, is the one that most of us associate first with his name, although readers in earlier times did not automatically do so. It is true that one of the first English books William Caxton chose to print on his imported press in 1478, the first printing press in England, was an edition of the *Canterbury Tales*, followed by a second edition, based on a different manuscript, in 1483. But until past the middle of the seventeenth century, it was the dream poems and *Troilus and Criseyde* that attracted most of Chaucer's admirers and imitators. That probably tells us more about the history of taste than it does about the quality of Chaucer's poetry. John Dryden, in the late seventeenth century, and his eighteenth- and nineteenth-century successors, became increasingly interested in literature that represented first a kind of realistic typology of human behavior and then the psychological realism of emotional representation. Until well into the twentieth century, that fascination with the glimpses of medieval or universal reality that we catch in the fragments of this great uncompleted ruin of a poem has dominated the general appreciation of Chaucer's work.

The response is not at all unwarranted. But it is a highly selective response, one that takes into account only parts of what we have of the *Canterbury Tales* and rarely faces up to the enormous problems we are left with by the state in which the surviving manuscripts of the poem have come down to us. So again we have to begin with the problems rather than the pleasures, but especially in the case of the *Canterbury Tales*, that approach has its virtues. We simply cannot read that poem without knowing how its text came to us, and we must finally read all of what we can make out of that scrambled textual transmission to be what Chaucer had written when he left the leaves of unfinished manuscript on his desk in October 1400.

No manuscript of the *Canterbury Tales* survives that Chaucer could possibly have seen. All are copies made by fifteenth-century scribes, many of whom felt obligated to
edit and improve the texts they copied. None of these extant copies can be dated earlier than 1410, more than ten years after Chaucer's death. Between about 1410 and 1478 (the date of Caxton's first printed edition), we now know of eighty-four such manuscript copies, many of them incomplete and some only very small fragments. By the way, this is a fairly large number of surviving manuscripts for a medieval work, and it may imply that the *Canterbury Tales* enjoyed a greater popularity among its general fifteenth-century readership than it did with the poets and critics.

As we might expect under such circumstances, there is a wide variation among the versions presented by the various manuscripts, so that editors ever since Caxton have had to wrestle with the enormous problem of which version to prefer, or where and how to combine the seemingly preferable parts of different versions. Particularly since about the middle of the nineteenth century, when some of the manuscripts came to light and new and better techniques for analyzing them developed, large amounts of the scholarly attention and energy devoted to Chaucer's poetry have gone into trying to establish a standard text, but there is still no universal agreement. Any printed text of the *Canterbury Tales* a reader picks up represents of necessity a host of decisions the editor has had to make about which manuscript to use as a base and where and how to improve it by using readings from other manuscripts or correcting what that particular editor thinks are mistakes in one or another manuscript. Since it is highly unlikely that all editors will ever agree about all such decisions, we shall just have to live with the present situation, using various editions by intelligent, well-informed, careful scholars presenting various versions of the text.

For the beginning reader, many of those variations will not matter much. But many of them do matter a great deal, and I will discuss some of the major ones here, partly so that no one will assume that the particular text he reads is assuredly just what Chaucer wrote, but mainly so that we will always keep in mind what even seasoned scholar-critics may sometimes forget, that we are dealing with an unfinished poem, the exact text of which we can never be absolutely certain about. For this reason, some important critical questions about the *Canterbury Tales* simply cannot be answered or must be answered only tentatively and with heavy qualifications.

There are in general two kinds of textual variation among the surviving manuscripts, the first more amenable to scholarly resolution than the second. If one sat down, as careful editors do, and just read through all eighty-four of the manuscripts, or better still, arranged them side by side so that each line could be compared, the first kind of variation would quickly become apparent: thousands of differences in spelling and wording, omissions or transpositions of phrases or lines--that is, relatively mechanical variations, many of which modern linguistic and orthographic knowledge and careful attention to what makes sense in Chaucer's sentences can resolve relatively easily. There are not many real differences among good modern texts on these matters,
although some notable cruxes remain to be argued over. However, the footnotes in a
good edition always point these out, so again the beginning reader need not worry
much about them.

The second type of manuscript variation is much more noticeable and important, not
only as a factor in the differences among modern editions, but also as an indication of
the state in which Chaucer left his poem at his death and how much editorial
arranging and rearranging fifteenth-century scribes must have done as they copied it.
It will be easier to get at this problem if we leave the surviving manuscripts for a
moment to consider what we can recover of Chaucer's own plan for the poem.

Near the end of the General Prologue, Harry Bailly, the host of the Tabard Inn,
attaches himself to the party of pilgrims, takes over as its unofficial master of
ceremonies, and gets the pilgrims to agree to a plan for amusing themselves along the
way to Canterbury:

This is the poynt, to spaken short and pleyn,
That ech of yow, to shorte with oure weye,
In this viage shal telle tales tweye
To Caunterbury-ward, I mene it so,
And homward he shal tellen othere two,
Of aventure that whilom han bifalle.
(I:790-95)

Chaucer had informed us earlier that the pilgrims were "wel nyne and twenty in a
comaignye", presumably including himself, but not the Host, who had not yet joined
the group. The narrator's account of the group in the Tabard the night before the
pilgrimage begins is in fact vague in many of its details, so that it is hard to pin down
the exact number of pilgrims. Furthermore, late in the work as we now have it, two
unexpected travellers overtake them and one of these, the Canon's Yeoman, tells a
tale. So it is clear that Chaucer never finally settled even the exact number of pilgrims
he intended to appear. But some revealing comparisons can be made without
mathematical exactness, and we will use thirty as a fairly close round figure. The
Host's scheme, then, should provide in the finished poem 120 tales, four by each
pilgrim. A good deal later, along the road to Canterbury, one of the Host's remarks seems to imply, though not at all clearly, that Chaucer may have changed his plan to one tale each way from each pilgrim, which would have resulted in a total of sixty. What we actually have of the poem includes twenty-three tales, one of them (the Squire's) unfinished, and a bare beginning of a twenty-fourth, the Cook's. We have no good reason to suppose Chaucer wrote any more.

Our difficulty is not just that Chaucer finished only a little more than a third of what even the minimum plan would have called for. Just before the Host appears and takes over management of the pilgrimage, the narrator tells us

But now is tyme to yow for to telle

How that we baren us that ilke nyght,

Whan we were in that hostelry alyght;

And after wol I telle of oure viage

And al the remenaunt of oure pilgrimage.

(I:720-24)

The finished poem, then, had it ever been written, would have had a complete account of the journey from Southwark to Canterbury and back, framing the tales and linking them together with descriptions of the route and landscape and a record of the conversation and interaction among the travelers between tales. As it turned out, Chaucer's frame story of "our viage" never gets the pilgrims to Canterbury. And he wrote what he did complete of the frame narrative in bits and pieces, so that only small groups of tales are actually connected by linking narrative. The result is ten fragments, two of only one tale (that is, one with no framing narrative to link it to a preceding or following one) and the longest fragment consisting of six tales.

Let us now return to the variant manuscripts and the question of the order in which to arrange these fragments. We know, of course, as did all the fifteenth-century scribal editors, that Fragment I begins the poem, starting with the General Prologue, and the continuing narrative leads directly into the Knight's Tale, followed by continuing accounts of interaction among the pilgrims between tales, unmistakably linking the Miller's Tale with the Knight's, the Reeve's with the Miller's, and the beginning of the Cook's with the Reeve's. However, when the Cook's Tale breaks off after 57 lines,
there is simply no way to know which fragment should come next. For reasons that
may not be absolutely compelling, most editors, including the fifteenth-century
scribes, have assumed that Fragment X, the Parson's Tale and Chaucer's "Retraction",
concludes the poem. Thus we have fixed places for Fragments I and X, but as far as
any controlling evidence from the frame story is concerned, the eight fragments
between could be placed in any order.

It is not the case that the surviving manuscripts offer us every possible different
arrangement of those eight fragments, but there are importantly different orders in
different manuscripts. To the extent that we assume Chaucer meant the Canterbury
Tales to be a coherent whole poem, we have to be concerned with its structure, the
order and interrelation of its parts; therefore, modern editors remain much concerned
with establishing an order for the fragments and are not fully agreed on what it should
be.

To illustrate the difficulty briefly, F. N. Robinson's edition, which I have been using
throughout this study, prints the fragments in the order in which they appear in what
he and many other modern scholars consider the best of the fifteenth-century
manuscripts, the Ellesmere Manuscript, and numbers them in order with Roman
numerals I through X. But in the nineteenth century scholars noticed that if the
fragments are arranged that way, some of the references in the frame story to places
the pilgrims passed on the road are out of order. Curiously, in no surviving manuscript
is there a sequence of fragments that does keep the geography straight, though the
place references are rather scant in any case, and Chaucer himself may have
rearranged some of the tales without getting around to the revisions that would
straighten out the place references. After a good deal of pioneering textual work, the
Chaucer Society, in its Six-Text Edition of the Canterbury Tales, edited by Walter W.
Skeat, published in 1911 an arrangement attempting to sort out the geography. This
arrangement (if we keep Robinson's numbering for the sake of comparison)
orders the fragments I, II, VII, VI, III, IV, V, VIII, IX, X. Robert A. Pratt followed
that order, with some modification, in his recent edition.²

In the end, even though the order in which we read its parts is of first importance to
the effect any long poem has on us, we just have to leave the matter of the order of
the Canterbury Tales up in the air. So let us try to remember always as readers that we
are working with fragments of an unfinished poem, already under revision at the time
of Chaucer's death, and which have been transmitted to us by intermediaries of
uncertain reliability.

What, then, is left for us to make of these fragments? A very great deal indeed.
Modern scholarship has provided us with texts far more reliable than anything
Dryden, Spenser, of Shakespeare had. And giving full allowance for the critical
precautions I have been urging, those ten fragments contain some of the best poetry in our language. No one, I suspect, has ever read them attentively without feeling intuitively that they do belong together, that complex themes start to develop in them, that there are intimations of fascinating interrelationships among characters and tales, and that we can often hear at its poetically most effective that characteristically Chaucerian divergent polyphony of voices.

The first fragment, beginning with the General Prologue, is an obvious starting place. It seems surely a polished, finished piece, making us feel that this is what the whole poem would have been like had Chaucer completed it. And it introduces that memorable cast of pilgrim characters that from the beginning has been a major attraction for readers. I will argue later that we can go wrong by weighting too heavily these characterizations in our overall view of the poem, but Chaucer obviously expended great care on them. The delightful colored portraits of the pilgrims that decorate the margins of the Ellesmere Manuscript are a sure indication that already in the early fifteenth century readers and manuscript illuminators were responding to the lifeliness of these characters and visualizing them. These portraits of the pilgrims, all of them properly on horseback, are painted in at the beginning of each pilgrim's tale, but whoever made them had obviously read Chaucer's descriptions of them in the General Prologue and made each picture closely correspond to the word-portrait.3

The character to be considered first is the pilgrim narrator who, although we cannot be absolutely sure, may be known to the Man of Law and some of the other pilgrims as Geoffrey Chaucer. It is his voice we hear at the opening of the poem, although for the first eighteen lines it remains detached and impersonal, masked by the elaborate rhetoric that plants the clues we are to follow in reading this pilgrimage as both literal and metaphoric, particular and universal. Then, at line twenty, much in the manner of the narrators of the dream poems, this voice starts to become embodied as a character in the fiction, yet one still sufficiently apart from it to talk to us about it. Characteristically, he never supplies us with a portrait of himself, although much later, in Fragment VII, Harry Bailly gives us an abbreviated one as he invites the narrator-pilgrim to take his turn in the tale telling:

"What man artow", quod he;

"Thou lookest as thou woldest fynde an hare,

For evere upon the ground I se thee stare.
Approche neer, and looke up murily.

Now war yow, sires, and lat this man have place!

He in the waast is shape as wel as I;

This were a popet in an arm t'embrace

For any woman, smal and fair of face.

He semeth elvyssh by his contenaunce,

For unto no wight dooth he daliaunce."

(VII:695-704)

Chaucer may never have wanted us to visualize him, but only to listen to him, partly as the creator of this marvelous poetry, partly as an accurate recorder of what he heard his fellow pilgrims and other writers saying, partly as a participant projected by his own imagination into the action his fiction creates.

The opening lines of the General Prologue and then the series of portraits of the pilgrims have, ever since Dryden's time, received so much critical attention and interpretative commentary that it seems difficult and superfluous to start afresh on them here. The bibliography at the end of this volume provides a general guide to the many available commentaries. However, although it is not an entirely original idea, I should like to discuss here the new version this opening fragment, and subsequent ones as well, gives us of the multiple and ambivalent narrative voices we have been observing in the earlier poems.

For the first eighteen lines, we hear a voice almost like those great "auctoritees" Chaucer was always sending us to in the dream poems and _Troilus and Criseyde_, a voice that speaks easily in the high style, lying out in a single, complex eighteen-line sentence a combination of nature description, zodiacal metaphor, classical allusion, and local reference that makes it clear we are to attend to this poem in several different ways at once. Its narrator announces himself capable of telling us about not only the pilgrimage his little group will make from London to Canterbury, but also the metaphorically equivalent pilgrimages the seasons and the planets make through their cyclical rounds. The successive classical and then Christian allusions probably also imply something about yet another medieval meaning of "pilgrimage," all humanity's pilgrimage from creation through time toward eternity.
Especially in the General Prologue, the arbitrary and unrealistic, yet utterly convincing, shifts in the narrator's perspective keep us aware of the different but somehow coherent meanings of his story. At line 20, he drops us abruptly into an almost Dickensian first person; surely now the fiction is about to become all-encompassing, the narrator a character in it, and we will lose ourselves in a fascinating re-creation of fourteenth-century life. But almost at once the pseudorealism goes askew. Our humble pilgrim sitting at the back table in Harry Bailly's bar knows and tells us things about these pilgrims that he could never have observed from there, very much as the more impersonal voice of the opening lines had spoken from some unknown location outside the cyclical events it was reporting.

This is not a matter of whether something is wrong with Chaucer's "realism," but rather of what his General Prologue begins to suggest. The fictive narrator could never have known from his Southwark tavern bench how the Knight was dressed when he got off the boat to start his pilgrimage, or what kind of horse the Shipman rode and how skilled a moonlight navigator he was. The main point is not even that the narrator wants us to know those things; it is, again, that we follow his clues and learn to look at things in more than one way at a time. We not only imagine our way into the midst of lively fourteenth-century tavern life; we also attend to a poem being made about it, a poem that will show us several kinds of meaning besides the historical and representational.

Many of the portraits of the pilgrims in the General Prologue involve us in some kind of divergence of perspective. There are in this group no saints, with the possible exception of the Parson, and no absolutely lost souls, with the possible exception of the Pardoner. What the narrator, in his uncensuring innocence, offers us most of the time are characterizations upon which he refuses to make any overt judgments, but which we can usually evaluate in at least two different ways. Is the Knight a nearly perfect idealistic Christian soldier or a skilled professional mercenary? He is the highest of the pilgrims in social rank, and perhaps in consequence, Chaucer describes him first. The opening lines of the description are unambiguous, unqualified praise:

A knyght ther was, and that a worthy man,

That fro the tyme that he first bigan

To riden out, he loved chivalrie,

Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie.
And in addition to his secular virtues of "trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie"--the conventional virtues of the storybook hero knights of the romances--most of his military career had been spent in crusading holy wars. But we may begin to feel a little uneasy a few lines later when we are told that

This ilke worthy knyght hadde been also

Sometyme with the lord of Palatye

Agayn another hethen in Turkye.

And everemoore he hadde a sovereyn prys. . . .

Those lines seem to tell us that, for a good enough price, he could be bought as a hired sword by the very Mohammedans he had spent much of his life crusading against. Indeed, some modern critics have argued that such elements in his description should cause us to see him as a hypocritical soldier of fortune who most of the time can cloak his love of the bloody game of warfare in the high-sounding covers of "chivalry" and "crusading." It is surely wrongheaded for us to try to reduce to only one the multiple impressions Chauser carefully evokes.

To turn from this plain, hardy old field soldier to the portrait that follows of his permanented and perfumed son, the Squire, is to sharpen even further our awareness of how many levels of meaning Chaucer is operating on. Like his father, the Knight, the Squire is a character out of the romances. But the marvelous irony is that he typifies just what the old ideal chivalry was actually becoming in Chaucer's time, and would continue to be down to Shakespeare's: a kind of playacting in aristocratic tournament fields in gorgeous costume-armor. So the "reality" of chivalry is that it is becoming a deliberate fiction, while the Knight's stubborn attempts to realize the chivalric ideals increasingly relegate him to a lost fictional world of the past. That is not merely a generation gap, but a whole cultural fault line. Only the greatest poetry can compress into a few dozen lines that kind of revealing insight.

But that is far from all; the Squire may be much more than we infer from his curly hair and modish embroidered tunic, with its sleeves cut in the newest French fashion.
He is an excellent athlete--"wonderly delyvere and of greet strengthe"--and has already had a commendable apprenticeship in the field in France. Although his father probably would have viewed such accomplishments less favorably than we do, the Squire was also an excellent dancer, something of a poet, and a sketcher, and he could even read and write. But the touch Chaucer reserves for the last in his portrait is perhaps most meaningful. Despite the generation gap, the Squire understands, respects, and honors his father: "Curteis he was, lowely, and servysable, / And carf biforn his fader at the table."

Eighteen lines later, the portrait of the Prioress offers us an even subtler mixture of perspectives--subtler because she is in religious orders. However much we know that those in holy orders are nonetheless human beings, whenever we become particularly aware of their humanity, it seems inevitably to be a kind of lapse from their vocation. Is the Prioress a sentimental, vain, worldly woman, or a tenderhearted religious trying to do everything as beautifully as possible in the service of the Lord? Or is she the former, trying hard and sometimes successfully to be the latter?

Chaucer rather stacks the deck against her in the opening lines by telling us first about her coy smile and her genteel swearing, and that she is named Eglentyne, after the conventional clinging vine heroine of several medieval romances. But she is by no means the character out of a Tennessee Williams play those early lines alone would make her seem. She is a prioress--the head and administrator of her convent--whose careful French was surely an asset to her and her convent in the bilingual society she had to deal with. And Chaucer tells us

At mete wel ytaughte was she with alle;
She leet no morsel from hir lippes fallt,
Ne wette hir fingres in hir sauce depe:
Wel koude she carie a morsel and wel kepe
That no drope ne fille upon hir brest.

(I:127-31)

We may well share the amusement of many of Chaucer's contemporaries at recognizing her table manners as identical with those taught to an aspiring young courtesan by an old whore in the *Roman de la rose*. We ought, equally, to ask
ourselves the other question: how would her service to her office and her order be improved by clumsy table behavior and a gravy-spattered wimple? Where does personal vanity end and respect for her position in her order and in society begin, and how far can they overlap? That conflict is raised to an exquisite tension in the description of her rosary that concludes her portrait:

Of smal coral aboute hire arm she bar
A peire of bedes, gauded al with grene,
And theron heng a brooch of gold ful sheene
On which ther was first write a crowned A,
And after Amor vincit omnia.

(I:158-62)

In the deepest sense of the Prioress's religious vocation, love must indeed conquer all, and her prayer beads are the symbols of her expression of the divine love that has conquered her. But we also see that rosary as a gorgeous piece of jewelry worn by a beautiful woman, and many of us (like most of Chaucer's first readers) will recall the elegantly carved ivory mirror backs on the cosmetic tables of fourteenth-century belles, with their cupids and amorous couples and the motto--carved around the circumference--amor vincit omnia. Chaucer almost nags us with that painful ambiguity by repeating it, in the next portrait, of the Monk who fastened his hood with a "curious pyn" of gold with "A love knotte in the gretter ende."

In several of the other portraits the multiple impressions involve different conflicts and ambiguities. In some, like the Friar and the Shipman and the Miller, obvious rascals are given such lively abilities and/or personality traits that we grudgingly admire them even as we recognize their roguery. Still others, like the Clerk and the Parson, are obviously good sober men who just verge on lacking enough human warmth and vitality to engage our sympathy. In still other cases, Chaucer will create an unmistakable double entendre and leave it to us to juggle the two different readings. How do we read "worthy" when the narrator tells us the Friar was "familiar" with "worthy wommen of the toun?" Or when he tells us Alice of Bath "was a worthy womman al hir lyve?" When we are told of the Merchant, "Their wiste no wight that he was in dette," do we conclude that he was in debt but was careful to keep anyone from knowing about it, or that there was no evidence that he owed anyone anything?
Even to phrase the questions as I have just done points the wrong way. No amount of critical debate will settle these "either-or" questions, because the portraits clearly suggest both. That is partly Chaucer's "realism," his representation of characters who appear to us as mixed, as ambiguous, in motive and action, as people in real life do. But it is partly also a subtle comic indication that these are "fallen" men and women whose pilgrimage toward eternity will, because of the fall, inevitably be motivated by an indistinguishable mixture of the spirit and the flesh. Since our narrator is, in this fiction, one of them also, the same applies to him.

It is a major frustration of the *Canterbury Tales* that its unfinished, fragmentary state will not permit us to follow out these suggestions, which seem so provocative in the General Prologue. At the end of it, as these set portraits dissolve into dialogue and dramatic action and the travelers start along the Canterbury road, we look forward to a fictional enactment of the human and thematic potential of the portraits. And this is what we find throughout the rest of the first fragment. There is not only the social and psychological contrast between the Knight and the Miller and the Reeve; the courtly idealism of the Knight's Tale is set off by the cheerful sexual realism of the Miller's Tale and the sourer, harsher cheating and finagling in the Reeve's Tale. A wonderful narrative complexity is beginning to develop. The dramatic interaction among these three characters has social and ethical implications as well as psychological ones. The three tales, different as they are, do have clear thematic links. All three seem to most of us like the kind of stories we would expect such men to tell. That is, they seem to add to our impressions of the tellers, as well as develop their own narrative characteristics.

The Knight, highest ranking of the pilgrims on the medieval social scale, draws the straw that makes him also the teller of the first tale. His first of the *Canterbury Tales* is a long, serious, romantic, philosophical poem that at times seems near the verge of ironic comedy. In some ways it is what we might expect from an idealistic medieval knight, although we know that Chaucer had been working on different versions of the story much earlier in his career. Its central plot is a typical medieval love story: two young noblemen fall in love with the same woman, at first hopelessly, and then after a series of miraculous coincidences, do battle for her hand. Yet the tale is really as much about preserving a civilized order in a chaotic and violent world as it is about the lovers. The tale is filled with the pageantry of elaborate rituals for the containment of violent passions: the codes of warfare; the etiquette of love rivalry; the rules of the medieval tournament; and the funeral ceremony. What we see in it mainly is an ideal of noble conduct--paradoxically, even the civilized conduct of conflict and hostility. Near the end of the tale, Duke Theseus (anachronistically borrowing his metaphor from Boethius) gives us a long definition of that notion of civilized order:
The Firste Movere of the cause above

Whan he first made the faire cheyne of love,

Greet was th'effect, and heigh was his entente.

Wel wiste he why, and what thereof he mente;

For with that faire cheyne of love he bond

The fyr, the eyr, the water, and the lond

In certeyn boundes, that they may nat flee.

That same Prince and the Movere," quod he,

"Hath stablissed in this wrecched world adoun

Certeyne dayes and duracioun

To al that is engendred in this place,

Over the whiche day they may nat pace,

Al mowe they yet tho dayes wel abregge."

(I:2987-99)

For Theseus, a loving God firmly ruling an ordered universe is the model for his conduct of the affairs of his own dukedom. Whatever is done, including living, fighting, and dying, is to be done properly and by the rules.

When the Knight has finished his tale, the Host compliments him and asks the Monk to tell the next tale. But Harry Bailly is no Theseus; the drunken Miller loudly asserts himself, shattering the order of precedence and authority the Host was trying to maintain:

The Millere, that for dronken was al pale
So that unnethe upon his horse he sat,

He nolde avalen neither hood he hat,

Ne abyde no man for his curteisie,

But in Pilates voys he gan to crie,

And swoor, "By armes, and by blood and bones,

I kan a noble tale for the nones,

With which I wol now quite the Knyghtes tale."

(I:3120-27)

The Miller's interruption opens up the plan of the Canterbury Tales to all manner of unpredictable interruptions and diversions; it also introduces a theme that will recur in various ways. When he says his tale will "quite" the knight's, that is, answer back to it or get even with it, he is not only unknowingly foreshadowing the Reeve's angry attempt to "quit" the Miller and his tale; he is also beginning a pattern of answering back and getting even that underlies several pairs of tales and their tellers: the Knight and the Miller, the Reeve and the Miller, the Friar and the Summoner, the Clerk and the Wife of Bath, and in a brief but violent exchange, the Host and the Pardoner.

It is probably better not to ask whether a drunken Miller would be capable of the complex subtlety with which the Miller's Tale "quits" the Knight's. It is, nevertheless, a nice parodic inversion of the main themes of the Knight's Tale. Its main plot concerns two young men competing for the same woman. Alisoun, however, is no duke's daughter, but a country wench; and although Nicholas, the Oxford man, can speak the language of the noble love of Palamon and Arcite for Emily, he and Absolon operate on a social level far below that of Theseus's court. And their "duel" is fought out in a place and manner and with "weapons" that are the opposite of chivalric. Again, there is in the Miller's Tale much ordering and arranging of things, but none of it is directed to preserving the dignity and containing the passions of the noble life. The way the natural order of things asserts itself at the end of the tale is closer to Laurel and Hardy than it is to Boethius.

Still, underneath the slapstick sexual comedy, a kind of order of things is working--a rough poetic justice in which everyone finally gets pretty much what he deserved, as the Miller bluntly sums it up in his conclusion:
Thus swyved was this carpenteris wyf,
For al his kepyng and his jalousye;
And Absolon hath kist hir nether ye;
And Nicholas is scalded in the towte.

This tale is doon, and God save al the rowte.

(I:3850-54)

As Robin and Miller's ale-roughened voice ceases, our pilgrim- narrator deftly leads us back into one of those rapid, sharp-edged dramatic dialogues that compel us to try to imagine what we might have had if Chaucer had completed all of his frame story:

Whan folk hadde laughen at this nyce cas
Of Absolon and hende Nicholas,
Diverse folk diversely they seyde,
But for the moore part they loughe and pleyde.
Ne at this tale I saught no man him greve,
But it were oonly Osewold the Reve.

(I:3855-60)

We have already been told in the General Prologue that Oswald the Reeve is a sour, vengeful, deceitful man, but his angry response to the Miller's Tale here leads into a different version of "quitting"--tale answering back to tale, and one teller getting even with (or one up on) another. The Knight and the Miller are more or less at opposite ends of the social spectrum represented in the Canterbury pilgrims. still, the Miller's "quitting" of the Knight is neither personal nor socially invidious. He seems rather to be saying "look, Sir Romantically Deluded Knight, here's how love triangles really work." It is debatable how much the Reeve is above the Miller
socially, but Oswald, like many newly risen on the social ladder, is very thin-skinned about his former trade as a carpenter and very stiff-necked about his status as a kind of business manager on a feudal manor. So the primary motives for his "quitting" of the Miller are reflected in the class jealousies and mean-spirited revenges of the tale he tells. Probably that is not exactly what Oswald meant to do; his angry intent is to show a vicious miller getting what is coming to him, because the Reeve took the Miller's Tale of a cuckolded carpenter to be a personal affront to all carpenters or ex-carpenters. But both in his own character and in the way his tale reflects it, we have not only a "quitting" of the Miller, but an indirect response to the Knight's Tale. Compare the concern of nearly everyone in the Knight's Tale for stability, order, and a proper and fixed precedence of authority, with the spiteful, distrustful scratching and clawing for a leg up on the social or economic ladder in the Reeve's Tale.

So the third tale of the first fragment, along with its link to the second, continues to reinforce the intuition that a very large and complex poetic intention underlies the Canterbury Tales. The three tales, and their tellers, are very different from each other; nevertheless, several psychological, social, and moral--and even religious--issues are beginning to take shape.

Even as the Reeve is finishing his tale with "Thus have I quyt the Millere in my tale," the cook is slapping him on the back and promising, not to "quit" him, but to keep the string of dirty stories going. And this time the Host doesn't even try to redirect the game of story-telling that has already gotten quite out of his control. Instead, he gets in a little advance "quitting" of his own, needling cook Roger of Ware for his sloppy, unsanitary, and deceitful cookery. But this time it seems to be all in good humor, and Hodge the cook (quite unlike Oswald the reeve) replies in the same light-hearted vein:

And therfore, Herry Bailly, by they feith,

Be thou nat wrooth, er we departen heer,

Though that my tale be of an hostileer.

But natheless I wol nat tell it yit;

But er we parte, ywis, thou shalt be quit.

(I:4358-62)
Although the beginning of the Cook's tale looks suspiciously like another fabliau, we get only the first 57 lines of it, and we never get a chance to hear how a cook's "quitting" of a social-climbing bartender might continue to develop the patterns we have been noting. After Fragment I breaks off, we will encounter this kind of fully realized complexity only here and there among the other fragments.

Apparently, however, few readers have ever left the *Canterbury Tales* without feeling that various groups of tales are somehow linked together thematically or stylistically, even though the actual manuscript groupings may not so arrange them. One of the most widely known (and earlier in the twentieth century, most hotly debated) of such groupings was Kittredge's suggestion of a "marriage group," starting with the Wife of Bath's Tale and continuing through Fragments III, IV, and V, concluding with the Franklin's Tale, which Kittredge read as an expression of the ideal solution to the problem of sovereignty in marriage first raised by the Wife of Bath. Some subsequent critics, especially those who follow the order of some of the manuscripts mentioned above and put Fragment VII after Fragment II, would thus have the "marriage group" start with the Shipman's Tale, even before we get to the Wife of Bath. Such are the problems left us by the discrepancies among the manuscripts.

But it is by no means simply a textual problem. Kittredge's suggestion of a "marriage group" implies a notion of design, of blocks of tales dealing with specific themes, and that is not at all the same thing as noticing that the subject of marriage comes up in various tales scattered throughout the work. The tales of the Knight, Miller, Reeve, and Man of Law are also concerned in various ways with love and marriage, as in truth are more than half of the tales. Even in the group as Kittredge first suggested it, there are difficulties. Fragments III, IV, and V (and remember, there are no links between fragments; we know only that most manuscripts put them in that order) consist of the tales of the Wife of Bath, the Friar, and the Summoner; the Clerk and the Merchant; and the Squire and the Franklin. The tales of the Friar and Summoner have nothing to do with marriage, and are instead a further round of "quitting" between the two rogues. And the Squire's Tale, though it is clearly some sort of romance, with a love story at its center, is unfinished and we simply cannot say what, if anything, it might have had to say about marriage. It is better, I think, to say just that many of the tales are about love and marriage, and that as often as not this recurring theme serves as much to call forth divergent and contradictory ideas and opinions as it does to proceed toward a reasoned conclusion.

Dame Alice of Bath is already in full cry as Fragment III opens, and to modern readers especially, she seems to be preaching an incontestable gospel: "Experience, though noon auctoritee / Were in this world, is right ynogh for me / To speke of wo that is in mariage . . ." (III:1-3). And her way of framing the question might well remind us of a major difference between the Knight's Tale and the Miller's: the
"auctoritee" of order, status, precedence, courtly civility, as against hende Nicholas's "experience" of Alisoun in carpenter John's bedroom.

But even the modern reader must at least blink once or twice when, ten lines later, the Wife is perfectly ready to argue with Jesus Christ:

Herkne eek, lo, which a sharp word for the nones.

Biside a welle, Jhesus, God and man,

Spak in repreeve of the Samaritan:

"Thou hast yhad fyve housbondes," quod he,

"And that ilke man that now hath thee

Is noght thyn housbonde," thus seyde he certeyn.

What that he mente therby, I kan nat seyn,

But that I axe, why that the fifthe man

Was noon housbonde to the Samaritan?

(III:14-22)

Whatever may be our admiration for Alice's determination in her individual womanhood, we must also feel something of the outrageousness of her insistence on it despite all evidence to the contrary, from the Son of God on down.

In the first fragment of the Canterbury Tales, we learned to listen for the different expressions of human love that proceed from different individuals at different points on the social spectrum. In the process, some moral and social issues much larger than the characters themselves began to emerge. Alice of Bath, as far as we can tell from the unconnected beginning of her tale, is neither reacting to any other pilgrim nor raising anything she or we might think of as a social issue. Nevertheless, she raises to a new level essentially the same moral and social issues, simply by pitting her own personal sexuality (and all the considerable wit and cunning she brings along with it) against any constraint, any order, any "auctoritee," that might be brought against it, from whatever direction.
We must not forget that in her prologue, Alice takes on not only her husbands--not even primarily her husbands--but the whole ordered tradition of religious and social authority that would pretend to restrain her individual sense of her own womanhood. Without taking sides on the matter, we have to see that in our time, as well as in Chaucer's, that is a position that will infuriate a large segment of the populace. Once again, we are involved in the divergence of views, the multiplicity of voices, offered in the broken fragments of the *Canterbury Tales*. But Chaucer manages that polyphony rather differently with the Wife of Bath. She attracts and outrages us pretty much by herself, although the Clerk of Oxford takes a rather sharp stab at her at the end of his tale.

But suppose Chaucer had given us exactly the same prologue and tale as we have for Alysoun of Bath, but described her as he describes Alisoun (after all, he did give the two women the same name) in the Miller's Tale. Surely Alysoun of Bath's feminist harangue would have grated far more harshly on both medieval and modern ears had it come from the seductive young country tease of the Miller's Tale. Instead, we get the marvelous sentimental softening, which in the end must have made even medieval readers pause long enough actually to listen to Alice of Bath's outrageous heresies. Dame Alice is not simply an irresistible young animal to be chased to the nearest corner; she is middle-aged, travel-worn, sprung in the hips. But much of the flash and vitality is still there, and it is nearly impossible for us not to feel sympathetically drawn to the faded, wordly-wise ex-beauty, fully able to defend herself (however illogically or heretically) and still willing to look for her *Rosenkavalier*:

But, Lord Crist! whan that it remembrith me

Upon my yowthe, and on my jolitee,

It tikleth me aboute myn herte roote.

Unto this day it dooth myn herte boote

That I have had my word as in my time.

But age, allas, that al wol envenyme,

Hath me biraft my beaute and my pith.

Lat go, farwell! the devel go therwith!
The flour is goon, ther is namoor to telle;
The bren, as I best kan, now moste I selle;
But yet to be right myrie wol I fonde.

(III:469-79)

The up-beat, almost delicate fairy story the Wife of Bath tells after her long, strident, startling prologue has surprised many readers, although it can fairly easily be rationalized as a gentler and far less aggressive assertion of feminine superiority. But even as she repeats the cliches of the live-happily-ever-after ending, Dame Alice drops back into the assertive voice of her prologue:

And thus they lyve unto hir lyves ende
In parfit joye; and Jhesu Crist us sende
Housbondes meeke, yonge, and fresshe abedde,
And grace t'overbyde hem that we wedde;
And eek I praye Jhesu shorte hir lyves
That wol nat be governed by hir wyves;
And olde and angry nygardes of dispence,
God sende hem soone verray pestilence!

(III:1257-64)

When the Friar responds (courteously enough) to the Wife's Tale, he plunges us immediately into another spiteful vendetta between two of the pilgrims, although the animus between him and the Summoner raises religious (or at least institutional) issues rather than the personal and social ones that divided the Reeve and the Miller: "I wol yow of a Somonour telle a game. / Pardee, ye may wel knowe by the name / That of a somonour may no good be sayd . . . (III:1279-81). And Harry Bailly, trying again to keep the party sweet and happy, comes up with a superbly ironic line that
precisely articulates what we have been talking about for the last several pages: "Oure Hoost tho spak, 'A! sire, ye sholde be hende / And curteys, as a man of youre estaat; / In compaignye we wol have no debaat" (III:1286-88). Despite the Host's wishful thinking, we have learned well before this point in the Canterbury pilgrimage that in any company of men and women such as this one, "debaat" is precisely what we are most likely to have--some of it angry and bitter, some of it subtly ironic, some of it formally logical.

The Summoner and the Friar, who apparently have no personal reasons to dislike each other, really initiate a "debaat," a "quitting" between different branches of the institutional bureaucracy of the medieval Roman Catholic Church. Many late medieval writers, like Chaucer, saw that bureaucracy as overelaborate, self-important, and far too blind to fraud and corruption within its own ranks. The orders of friars, and those lay employees of canonical courts like the Summoner and the Pardoner, were particular targets of the reformers' moral indignation, and Chaucer here is in a way using a comic conflict to raise one of the most serious issues of his time.

Typically, however, Chaucer complicates our perception of the issue by embodying it in two very different and very humanly imaginable characters. The fat, cheerful, extroverted Friar Huberd, with his considerable charm and social grace, we know to be as big a fraud as the Summoner. But neither we nor, apparently, any of the pilgrims is angered, frightened, or offended by him. It is very easy, with Friar Huberd, to follow the church's injunction to loathe the sin and love the man. But the bullying, spiteful, hard-drinking Summoner, with a face that frightened little children, seems as ugly as the vices he practices and so he seems as damnable as they are.

With the opening of Fragment IV, the Clerk of Oxford returns us to the marriage question, or rather to the question of the subjugation of women. But in the dialogue between the Host and the Clerk that opens the fragment, the question of style, and the relation of writers to their audiences, surfaces again--as it does briefly in several of the linking passages between tales. In Fragment VII, which we will come to later, it is possible to make a case that, just as in Kittredge's notion of a "marriage group," we have a group centered on the art of fiction--the nature and processes of storytelling. Here in Fragment IV, the matter is broached by the pretentious Host, showing off his knowledge of matters poetical while good-humoredly needling the Oxford scholar:

Telle us som murie thyng of aventures.

Youre termes, youre colours, and youre figures,
Keepe hem in stoor til so be that ye endite
Heigh style, as whan that men to kynges write.
Speketh so pleyn at his tyme, we yow preye,
That we may understonde what ye seye.

(IV:15-20)
The Clerk, partly simply ignoring Harry Bailly's lead-footed irony, and partly just being his naturally slightly pedantic self, answers with a self-conscious allusion to Petrarch, an avant-garde recent Italian poet of whom Harry had almost certainly never heard. And then, to illustrate his command of those very skills the Host had asked him to abjure, the Clerk gives us a thumbnail structural analysis of the source of his own story of Griselda:

But forth to tellen of this worthy man
That taughte me this tale, as I bigan,
I seye that first with heigh stile he endireth,
Er he the body of his tale writeth,
A prohemye, in the which discryveth he
Pemond, and of Saluces the contree,
And speketh of Apennyn, the hilles hye,
That been the boundes of West Lumbardye,
And of Mount Vesulus in special,
Where as the Poo out of a welle smal
Taketh his firste spryngyng and his sours,
That estward ay encresseth in his cours
To Emele-ward, to Ferrare, and Venyse;
The which a long thyng were to devyse.

(IV:39-52)

The tale he tells of the incredibly patient Griselda is certainly one of the hardest of the *Canterbury Tales* for modern readers to come to terms with. The incredibly patient Griselda's total unquestioning submission to the inhuman whims of her husband, Duke Walter, makes it all but impossible for us to follow the story sympathetically, even on some kind of folk-myth level. The Clerk himself, at the end of the tale, seems to be trying to tell us that perhaps Griselda is not any possible model of human behavior, but rather an extremely exaggerated metaphor for a very abstract virtue:

This storie is seyd, nat for that wyves sholde
Folwen Grisilde as in humylitee,
For it were importable, though they wolde;
But for that every wight, in his degree,
Sholde be constant in adversitee
As was Grisilde; therfore Petrak writeth
This storie, which with heigh stile he enditeth.

For, sith a womman was so pacient
Unto a mortal man, wel moore us oghte
Receyven al in gree that God us sent;
For greet skile is, he preeve that he wroghte.
But he ne tempteth no man that he boghte,

As seith Seint Jame, if ye his pistle rede;

He preeveth folk al day, it is no drede.

(IV:1142-55)

That seems to remove the story altogether from any possible marriage debate, and relocate it as a kind of symbolic exemplum of Christian fortitude. And it is worth noting that the Clerk tells this tale in rhyme royal stanzas, rather than the normal rhymed couplets. In so doing, he associates the story with those of the Man of Law, the Prioress, and the Second Nun--all in rhyme royal, all very unrealistic and elaborately stylized, and all focused on the Christian devotion and fortitude of saints or near-saints.

Still, at the end of his tale, the Clerk cannot resist an ironic thrust at the Wife of Bath, indicating that in the back of his mind he had somehow intended to counter her heretical feminism:

But o word, lordynges, herkneth er I go:

It were ful hard to fynde now-a-dayes

In al a toun Grisildis thre or two;

For if that they were put to swiche assayes,

The gold of hem hath now so badde alayes

With bras, that thogh the coyne be fair at ye,

It wolde rather breste a-two than plye.

For which heere, for the Wyves love of Bathe--

Whos lyf and al hire secte God mayntene
In heigh maistrie, and elles were it scathe--
I wol with lusty herte, fressh and grene,
Seyn yow a song to glade yow, I wene . . .
(IV:1163-74)
And Harry Bailly certainly took it as a kind of admonition to wives:

Oure Hooste seyde, and swoor, "By Goddes bones,
Me were leverre than a barel ale
My wyf at hoom had herd this legende ones!
This is a gentil tale for the nones,
As to my purpos, wiste ye my wille . . .
(IV:1212(sup b)-1212(sup f))
It is evident from his opening words that the Merchant, whose tale follows, has marriage very much on his mind. He is, in fact, so nearly obsessed with his own disastrous marriage that he has obviously soured on the whole institution:

"Wepyng and waylyng, care and oother sorwe
I knowe ynogh, on even and a-morwe,"
Quod the Marchant, "and so doon other mo
That wedded been, I trowe that it be so,
For wel I woot it fareth so with me.
I have a wyf, the worste t hat may be;
For thogh the feend to hire ycoupled were,

She wolde hym overmacche, I dar wel swere."  

(IV:1213-20)

His tale, at the same time one of the bitterest and most polished and tightly constructed of the tales, puts so exaggerated a case that it is surely less a tirade against marriage than against foolish old men, the conventional *senex amans* (dirty old man) of medieval moral homilies. In the mixture of this homiletic convention with the fabliauxlike episode of May and Squire Damian making love in the pear tree and the almost lighthearted neoclassical business with Pluto and Proserpina, Chaucer manages to introduce enough moral irony, as well as aesthetic complication, into the tale to remove it a long way from the simplistic homily against senile regression it seemed to start out to be.

Fragment V opens with the Squire's Tale, a rambling, unfocused romance that starts out as though it is going to be one of those "marvels of the mysterious East" stories that had become very popular by Chaucer's time, partly as a result of tales brought back by Crusaders and partly connected with the semifictitious travel literature of the Polos, John Mandeville, and others. But it is not only unfinished; the story has not yet really begun when it breaks off after 672 lines. It is nearly impossible to guess how the Squire's Tale might fit into any conjectural thematic, stylistic, or generic associational patterns that might structure the *Canterbury Tales*.

The following Franklin's Tale, however, has long been one of the centers of critical attention in the *Canterbury Tales*, and (as noted above) Kittredge thought it Chaucer's definition of an ideal marriage, with which he meant to resolve the "marriage debate." However, we ought to note, before getting into the tale of Dorigen and Arviragus, that at the beginning of his tale the Franklin once again raises for us the question of the storyteller's artifice; his sources, the conventional genres that structure his work, the audience, and the stylistic decorations he gives it:

Thise olde gentil Britouns in hir dayes

Of diverse adventures maden layes,

Rymeyed in hir firste Briton tongue;
Which layes with hir instrumentz they songe,
Or elles redden hem for hir plesaunce,
And oon of hem have I in remembraunce,
Which I shall seyn with good wyl as I kan.
But, sires, by cause I am a burel man,
At my bigynning first I yow biseche,
Have me excused of my rude speche.
I lerned nevere rethorik, certeyn;
Thyng that I speke, it moot be bare and pleyn.
I sleep never on the Mount of Pernaso,
Ne lerned Marcus Tullius Scithero.
Colours ne knowe I none, withouten drede,
But swiche colours as growen in the mede,
Or elles swiche as men dye or peynte.
Colours of rethorik been to me queynte;
My spirit feeleth noght of swich mateere.
But if yow list, my tale shul ye heere.

(V:709-28)

That is, the Franklin has been reading some lyrical French (or Breton—a Celtic language closely related to the Welsh and Cornish of Chaucer's time) stories that were read out, sometimes to instrumental accompaniment "for the pleasure" of the audience. Then, sharing the partly spurious humility of several of the other pilgrims, he declines to complete, in his own retelling of the story, with the stylistic graces of
his source. As might be expected by now, after the disclaimer he tells one of the more elaborately and gracefully decorated of the tales.

The story is, indeed, about the testing of an apparently ideal marriage:

Of his free wyl he swoor hire as a knyght
That nevere in al his lyf he, day ne nyght,
Ne sholde upon hym take no maistrie
Agayn hire wyl, ne kithe hire jalousie,
But hir obeye, and folwe hir wyl in al,
As any lover to his lady shal,
Save that the name of soveraynetee,
That wolde he have for shame of his degree.
She thanked hym, and with ful greet humblesse
She seyde, "Sire, sith of youre gentilesse
Ye profre me to have so large a reyne,
Ne Wolde nevere God bitwixe us tweyne,
As in my gilt, were outhere werre or stryf.
Sire, I wol be your humble trewe wyf. . . ."

(V:745-58)

But the manner of the testing is strangely artificial, and the more the story progresses, the more it comes to resemble those riddling games of logical evasion that characterize medieval French *demands d'amours* (poems cleverly built around some "question of love" like "who makes the better lover, a blind man or a priest") and some courses in twentieth-century low schools.
Arviragus, with a commitment to "trouthe" that must have seemed exiguous even to Chaucer's contemporaries, holds his wife to a promise no feudal court would ever have held anyone to. When she agreed (almost distractedly) to make love to Aurelius if he removed all the rocks from the Brittany coast, both of them knew perfectly well it was impossible; therefore no real contract. But as we should expect in a story which is by its very genre half fairy tale, Aurelius is so impressed by Arviragus's stiff-necked "honour" that he releases Dorigen from a promise in which he knew he had swindled her, and even the phony magician Aurelius had hired cancels Aurelius's bill. What exactly about love and marriage has been tested or concluded here remains as unclear as it is hotly contested among the critics. The tale ends with the Franklin reducing its sentence to one of those logic-chopping demand's d'amours:

Lordynges, this question, thanne, wol I aske now,
Which was the mooste fre, as thynketh yow?
Now telleth me, er that ye ferther wende.
I kan namoore; my tale is at an ende.

(V:1621-24)

The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale, in Fragment VI, pick up again the issue of corrupt and vicious people in what are supposed to be holy offices, and the overelaborated bureaucracy that seems to protect them. But with the Pardoner, we get still another view of the matter--another highly individualized character who manages to redefine several issues for us.

Although his is only 164 lines long, the Pardoner's Prologue in Fragment VI in some ways works much like the Wife of Bath's. It too develops further the character we have seen in the General Prologue and in the process generates social and moral questions much larger than the psychological ones it began with. But the ambiguity of our response to the Pardoner is finally very different from that of the Wife. The Pardoner has no illusions about his own character, nor do we ever generate any sympathy for him. Yet both the shameless confession of his prologue and the compelling story he tells confirm what the narrator had told us sarcastically in the General Prologue: "He was in chirche a noble ecclesiaste." Now the Pardoner, as a lay employee of the ecclesiastical courts, has no business preaching or collecting offerings at all. Still, he was an enormously effective preacher and the sermon he delivers as his tale confirms the fact. We have to believe him when he says,
Thus kan I preche agayn that same vice
Which that I use, and that is avarice.
But though myself be gilty in that synne,
Yet kan I maken oother folk to twynne
From avarice, and soore to repente.

(VI:427-31)

We sense another complex pattern starting to develop. There is one other preacher on the pilgrimage, the Parson, and he is as long-sufferingly virtuous as the Pardoner is criminally vicious. Yet the Pardoner preaches a highly effective sermon, while the Parson's, however doctrinally sound, must have put everyone to sleep. Partly what is being raised here is a question relevant in one degree or another to most of the clerical and near-clerical characters, namely, the problem of imperfect or downright evil people holding holy offices, doing God's will whether they mean to or not, while the purest and best-intentioned often fail. Partly, too, the Pardoner and the Parson raise again the question of rhetorical art, of the manipulation of language to convince others by arousing their emotions. The Pardoner is a master of this art and can make it work despite his intentions. The puritanical Parson deliberately forswears all art in his prologue, calling it distracting and deceitful. Yet it is apparent that however many souls the good Parson may win to Christ, it will not be his preaching that does the job.

That question of art, both in the sense of stylistic manipulation and in the sense of fiction--tale telling--in general is also just under the surface through much of Fragment VII. This time we have no introductory piece of frame story to orient us. The fragment simply begins with the opening lines of the story. We do not even know who the teller is until the end, when the Host identifies the Shipman by addressing him as "Sire gentil maister, gentil maryneer!" And the brief link between the Shipman's tale and the Prioress's does not raise any aesthetic questions, either. Still, we have to respond to the placement of the skillful, fast-moving, subtly plotted and characterized fabliau about a business man, his lascivious wife, and a lecherous priest side by side with the lyrical, highly stylized (again, Chaucer shifts to the rhyme royal stanza) saint's legend the Prioress relates-- or rather nearly sings--about the "litel clergeon, seven yeer of age."
With the link between the Prioress's Tale and the pilgrim-narrator's own first tale, the aesthetic issues begin to come more sharply into focus, although rather subtly at first. Although there is a rubric (marginal notation) in the text of most manuscripts reading "Bihoold the murye wordes of the Hoost to Chaucer," it may well have been added by a later manuscript copyist. But we, and Chaucer's contemporary readers, know all along whom the Host is addressing, so that we have to smell some kind of game in the wind when the pilgrim narrator responds: "Hooste,' quod I, 'ne beth nat yvele apayd, / For other tale certes kan I noon, / But of a rym I lerned longe agoon.'" It is almost a vaudeville turn. The great Geoffrey Chaucer will now, since he cannot think of anything else, recite one of those half-forgotten poems he, like all of us, had crammed down his throat by some diligent third-grade teacher.

Most modern readers, unfortunately, will miss much of Chaucer's joke without quite a bit of help. What we would catch fairly immediately in a parody of Longfellow or Robert Service we are likely to miss altogether in Chaucer's parody of similarly banal and oversensationalized fourteenth-century pop fiction in verse. We moderns may, of course, take some comfort in the fact that Harry Bailly does not catch on either. Baffled by the deliberately outrageous ineptness of the tale of Sir Thopas, Harry abruptly reclaims his post as literary critic and simply cuts it off in mid-ramble:

"Namoore of this, for Goddes dignitee,"
Quod oure Hooste, "For thou makest me 
So wery of thy verray lewednesse
That, also wisly God my soule blesse,
Myne eres aken of thy drasty speche.
Now swich a rym the devel I biteche!
This may wel be rym dogerel," quod he.
"Why so?" quod I, "why wiltow lette me
Moore of my tale than another man,
Syn that it is the beste rym I kan?"
"By God," quod he, "for pleynly, at a word,
Thy drasty ryming is nat worth a toord!"

(VII:919-30)

However, before we leave this delightful tour de force, we must notice Chaucer once more playing prosodic games with us, as he had done all his life. Just as Fragment VII opened with the juxtaposition of the skillfully metered decasyllabic couplets of the Shipman's Tale with the intricate rhyme royal of the Prioress's, so the narrator's tale of Sir Thopas takes the complicated "trail-rhymed" stanza of fourteenth-century popular romance to its ultimately intricate absurdity:

Til that there cam a greet geaunt,

His name was sire Olifaunt,

A perilous man of dede.

He seyde. "Child, by Termagaunt!

But if thou prike out of myn haunt,

Anon I sle thy steede

With Mace.

Heere is the queene of Fayerye,

With harpe and pipe and symphonye,

Dwellynge in this place."

(VII:807-16)

It is very like Danny Kaye parodying Gilbert and Sullivan burlesquing nineteenth-century opera.
The narrator's response to the Host's total failure to understand is the tale of Melibee, an elaborate moral allegory in prose that is too readily understandable, nearly unreadable in its flat-footed repetitious simplicity. It may be, as some have argued, that the narrator is "quitting" the Host for his failure to appreciate a fine parody by stultifying him with an interminable homily almost antiartistic in its plodding prose; on the other hand, we have no way to know. The tale of Melibee has much in common with the Parson's sermon, with which the dying Chaucer chose to conclude what he had written of the *Canterbury Tales*. Perhaps, as again some readers have felt, Chaucer's lifelong interest in the serious religious concerns of his day simply led him to include such material as part of what he wanted his readers to confront.

Whatever the case, the Host's literary tastes seem as gratified by the tale of Melibee as they were by those of the Merchant and the Shipman:

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Whan ended was my tale of Melibee,
And of Prudence and hire benignytee,
Oure Hooste seyde, "As I am feithful man,
And by that precious corpus Madrian,
I hadde levere than a barel ale
"That Goodelief, My wyf, hadde herd this tale!"
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(VII:1889-94)

And still pursuing his convictions about literature and its direct and simple relation to life, he misjudges the Monk as badly as he had misjudged the narrator. Harry's ribald needling of the Monk elicits an opposite response from the narrator's ironic parody. The Monk, rather, retreats to a pedantic stuffiness much worse than the Clerk's Petrarchan pedantry at the beginning of his tale, and defines carefully for us what he takes to be the proper genre of tragedy. He then proceeds--certainly with no ironic or parodic intention whatever--to regale us with what again promises to be an interminable series of thumbnail tragedies until the Knight, this time, interrupts and shuts him off with the now-familiar complaint that what people want out of art is entertainment, not enlightenment:
"Hoo!" quod the Knyght, "good sire, namoore of this!
That ye han seyd is right ynough, ywis,
And muchel moore; for litel hevynesse
Is right ynough to muche folk, I gesse.
I seye for me, it is greet disese,
Whereas men han been in greet welthe and ese,
To heeren of hire sodeyn fal, allas!"

(VII:2767-73)

Host Harry, as we should have expected, heartily concurs, and so redirects us to the
central issue of the purposes of fiction and the criteria for judging it:

Sire Monk, namoore of this, so God yow blesse!
Youre tale annoyeth al this compaignye.
Swich talkyng is nat worth a boterflye,
For therinne is ther no desport ne game.
Wherfore, sire Monk, or daun Piers by youre name,
I pray you hertely telle us somewhat elles;
For sikerly, nere clynkyng of youre belles
That on youre bridel hange on every syde,
By hevene knyg, that for us alle dyde,
I sholde er this han fallen doun for sleep. . . .

(VII:2788-97)

The Nun's Priest's Tale, which concludes this fragment, is the finest comic piece and perhaps the best of all the Canterbury Tales. In this case, the tale teller contributes nothing to the complexity of the pattern, since there is no portrait of any Nun's Priest in the General Prologue and he appears in none of the linking passages of the frame story until the Host calls on him to tell his tale. The tale he tells is another confirmation that, however haltingly and imperfectly we trace them out, there are themes and poetic ideas and moral and social issues recurrent in the Canterbury Tales that imply that they were somehow all meant to go together.

There are many marvels in the Nun's Priest's Tale, too many to detail here, but we may note a few that link it to some of what we have been discussing, particularly the matter of persuasion, the manipulation of language, and how people speak to and understand each other. This comic deflation of noble life and love by setting them among chickens is a highly literary poem. Like the tale of Sir Thopas, it is a parody, a comic inversion of an established literary form—in this case three of them at once. It is an upside-down courtly romance, it is a mock epic, and it is a beast fable with no demonstrable moral. Nearly half of the poem is taken up with a dialogue dominated by Chantecleer, which is in effect a comic reduction of a range of serious medieval discussion about interpretation: interpretation of books, interpretation of dreams, interpretation of other people's arguments. Throughout all this, Chantecleer is showing off his own command of rhetorical artifice and reminding us even while we laugh that many of the same artifices are used quite seriously and effectively elsewhere in the tales.

Pertelote starts it off by insisting at some length that the best way to interpret a bad dream like the one Chantecleer had just had is to take a strong laxative and forget the nightmare:

"Now sire" quod she, "whan we flee fro the bemes For Goddes love, as taak som laxatyf. Up peril of my soule and of my lyf, I conseille yow the beste, I wol nat lye."
Chantecleer, however, will have none of so straightforwardly physical a solution. His commitment to speech (indeed, it is the commitment that nearly kills him) is far too strong. And like Geffrey in the *House of Fame*, Chantecleer thinks of all the great "auctoritees" of the past as talking to him, and of himself as their interpreter:

"Madame, quod he, "graunt mercy of youre loore.

But nathelees, as touchyng daun Catoun,

That hath of wysdom swich a greet renoun,

Though that he had no dremes for to drede.

By God, men may in olde boookes rede

Of many a man moore of auctoritee

Than evere Caton, was, so mot I thee."

There follows a two-hundred-line monologue in which Chantecleer shows off all his rhetorical skills while explaining the difficulties of interpretation, only to end in a superbly wrong interpretation that nevertheless leads him straight into the sexual self-assertion he had been aiming at all along.

For whan I see the beautee of youre face,

Ye been so scarlet reed about youre yen,

It maketh al my drede for to dyen;

For al so siker as *In principio*,

*Mulier est hominis confusio,*--
Madame, the sentence of this Latyn is,  
"Womman is mannes joye and al his blis."

For whan I feele a-nyght your softe syde,
Al be it that I may nat on you ryde
For that oure perche is maad so narwe, allas!
I am so ful of joye and of solas,
That I diffye bothe sweven and dreem.

(VII:3160-71)

What Chantecleer shows us, finally, is that all interpretations are made by interpreters, usually for their own purposes, and usually in some kind of ultimate ignorance. The elaborate rhetoric that led him to his immediate sexual gratification with Pertelote ("He fethered Pertelote twenty tyme, / And trad hire eke as ofte er it was pryme") is exactly the same kind of mouthiness that will a hundred lines later put Chantecleer in the mouth of Daun Russel the fox, and give the Nun's Priest an opportunity to show off his own rhetorical pretentions by delivering a quasi-parody of an example offered in one of the standard medieval textbooks on the art of rhetoric, Geoffrey of Vinsauf's Poetria Nova:

O destinee, that mayst nat been eschewed!
Allas, that Chauntecleer fleigh fro the bemes!
Allas, his wyf ne roghte nat of dremes!
And on a Friday fil al this meschaunce.

(VII:3338-41)

After the tale has roared through its Keystone cops chase scene at the end, the Nun's Priest announces a moral just as inapplicable as Chantecleer's translation of "mulier
hominis est confusio": "Lo, swich it is for to be reccheless / And necligent, and trust on flaterye."

Indeed, such it is to trust "flaterye"--persuasive speech, rhetoric: Chantecleer got himself into the fox's mouth and out of it by "flaterye"; Daun Russel nearly won and then lost his chicken dinner by the same means. And in those terms, perhaps Chantecleer's translation was not so far wrong after all. Woman is man's undoing and (or because?) she is his "joye and al his blis." It is just that multiplicity of meaning in language and life that Chaucer's poetry always calls our attention to.

In the middle of the next fragment, Fragment VIII, as the pilgrims are apparently into the last day of their journey to Canterbury (they are some six or seven miles away from it), they are suddenly overtaken by two frantically riding horsemen:

When ended was the lyf of Seinte Cecile,

Er we hadde riden fully fyve mile,

At Boghtoun under Blee us gan atake

A man that clothed was in clothes blake,

And under-nethe he hadde a whyt surplys.

His hakeney, that was al pomely grys,

So swatte that it wonder was to see;

It seemed as he had priked miles three.

The hors eek that his yeman rood upon

So swatte that unnethe myghte it gon.

About the peytrel stood the foom ful hye;

He was of foom al flekked as a pye.

(VIII:554-65)
Chaucer, apparently, has thought of still another way to surprise whatever expectations had begun to emerge from his broken and incomplete poem. Or perhaps it would be better to say that, still experimenting and tinkering with the machinery that he seems to design as he goes along, he hits upon a way to open to infinity what had seemed to be a closed, though almost impossibly large, structure. If the Canon and his Yeoman can overtake the pilgrims, so could any number of unpredictable travelers. The one or two or four tales from each of thirty or so pilgrims can become any number of tales or travelers Chaucer chooses to make it.

This new uncertainty is underscored when the yeoman promises the host to tell a tale revealing the fraudulent practices of his master, the alchemist Canon, and the Canon rides off in a rage, never to be heard of again. The tale the Canon's Yeoman tells, too, is unlike any of the others. It is not a fiction at all, but a confessional outpouring of the teller's experience in the alchemy racket run by the Canon. It has no known literary source; it may be the only one of the tales Chaucer simply made up out of whole cloth. At the end of it, however, the Yeoman manages to lead us back to the matter of books and traditional authority, with his discussion of the major medieval writers on alchemy and the disagreements among them, concluding:

Thanne conclude I thus, sith that God of hevene
Ne wil nat that the philosphres nevene
How that a man shal come unto this stoon,
I rede, as for the beste, lete it goon.
For whoso maketh God his adversarie,
As for to werken any thyng in contrarie
Of his wil, certes, never shall he thryve,
Though that he multiplie terme of his lyve.
And there a poynt; for ended is my tale.

(VIII:1472-80)
If we put aside now the issues raised by the pilgrims themselves, the frame story, and how they do and do not hold the poem together, we can consider this question of the literary artifice of the *Canterbury Tales* in yet a different way. Robinson's text of the *Canterbury Tales* has 19,435 lines. The General Prologue and all of the surviving frame story from between the tales make up 3,471 lines. That leaves nearly 16,000 lines of narrative in twenty-three stories, which are (not only in quantitative terms) the bulk of what Chaucer left us.

If we look at the tales simply as a collection of stories, for the moment disregarding the framework around them and whatever other kinds of connections there may be between them, some interesting things appear. First, although I have already claimed that Chaucer is our greatest comic poet, and several of the best tales are comic, still fifteen of them, totaling over 11,000 lines, are straight, serious narrative. There are six purely comic tales, totaling about 3,000 lines: the Miller's Tale (668); the Reeve's Tale (404); the Summoner's Tale (586); the Shipman's Tale (434); *Sir Thopas* (206); and the Nun's Priest's Tale (626). Two tales, the Friar's and the Merchant's, are hard to count here because they fall on the borderline between serious and humorous: they are satires that use comic devices for deadly serious purposes. But even with the addition of these two tales--bringing our total count of tales up to the twenty-three represented in the manuscripts--we still have a nearly two-to-one preponderance of serious to comic tales--about 11,400 to 4,400 lines.

Furthermore, nearly every conventional type of short narrative available to Chaucer from late medieval literature appears among these twenty-three tales: romances, saint's lives, miracle stories, sermons, fables, *fabliaux*, literary parodies, satires, and one Chaucer seems to have made up on his own, the semiautobiographical confessional outpouring of the Canon's Yeoman, who overtakes the pilgrims along the road. To the end of his life, Chaucer continued to experiment with literary forms and styles, and the *Canterbury Tales* is even more a cross-section of late medieval literature than it is of fourteenth-century English life.

Interestingly, there are three generic types that appear repeatedly, and from this critical point of view seem to be the core of the *Canterbury Tales*, although as with the Prologue and frame story, we should be cautious about structural conclusions. There are four romances, four saint's lives, and four *fabliaux*--one is tempted to say four variations each on three types of love, courtly, religious, and purely physical:

*Romances:*
Knight's Tale (2,250)
Wife of Bath's Tale (408)
Squire's Tale (664)
Franklin's Tale (896)

Saint's Lives:

Man of Law's Tale (1,029)
Clerk's Tale (286)
Physician's Tale (286)
Second Nun's Tale (434)

Fabliaux:

Miller's Tale (668)
Reeve's Tale (404)
Summoner's Tale (586)
Shipman's Tale (434)

By line count, the romances dominate with 4,218 lines, but that is mainly because the Knight's Tale is by far the longest of all the Canterbury Tales. The saint's lives are next, with 2,841 lines, followed closely by the fabliaux with 2,092. However much the rich metaphor of the pilgrimage and our fascination with those vividly imagined
pilgrims may dominate our final impression of the *Canterbury Tales*, it remains an excitingly great collection of stories, a collection the general shape of which also still intimates something of what Chaucer had decided to write.

The last we see or hear of the pilgrims, they are approaching a little village just before sunset. The Host, in a puzzling remark that seems to imply the Parson's Tale was to be the last on the pilgrimage, turns to the Parson, saying:

Lordynges everichoon,

now lakketh us no tales mo than oon.

Fulfilled in my sentence and my decree;

I trowe that we han herd of ech degree;

Almost fulfild is al myn ordinaunce.

(X:15-19)

Although the pilgrims have evidently not yet even reached Canterbury, this is really the end of the poem, where Chaucer's fiction concludes. It may be fitting that the last we see of the pilgrims, they are still riding, as they have continued to do in the imaginations of readers for six centuries now. That late fourteenth-century sun never sets on Harry Bailly and Alice of Bath, Robin the Miller, or even the pilgrim storyteller Goeffrey Chaucer.

**Notes and References**

1. *Troilus and Criseyde*, for example, survives in only twenty manuscripts, four of which are brief fragments.


3. Actually, based on the styles of painting and drawing, there seem to have been two artists involved in illuminating the Ellesmere Manuscript, but the point of my observation remains the same.

5. Some of these are prose, so my comparisons are not mathematically precise, but I am concerned only with general proportions.

6. The frame story is never resumed after the Parson's sermon and Chaucer's "retraction" after the Parson's Tale is not part of the poem at all, but seems to be the aging Chaucer speaking for himself quite outside the character of the narrator who had conducted us through the poem. This short list has been selected on the basis of what I think will prove helpful, stimulating, and fairly readily available to the beginning reader of Chaucer. It makes no pretense to completeness, nor to being a representative cross section of modern criticism and scholarship. I have not listed any articles from scholarly periodicals; any careful reader of the books listed here will find that they will lead him into that vast assortment of publications, and the various bibliographies and indexes that chart it in detail. But I do think these are books that will lead readers further into Chaucer's poetry and provide them much that will be useful in their own further exploration of it.

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