THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

COMIC VISION IN THE CANTERBURY TALES

by

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A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

OF MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

EDMONTON, ALBERTA

FALL, 1972

ABSTRACT

Chaucer's comic vision has an ethical purpose. His Tales are a "game", a lie designed to tell the truth about reality. The pilgrimage is patterned like the procession of the komos which was the forerunner of Attic comedy. However, its design and tone is the same as that of the English mystery cycles whose "playing" had an ethical purpose.

After theories of comedy and of Chaucer's comic vision have been discussed in Chapter One, the Second Chapter of this study examines the comic in situation and in character-types in several of The Canterbury Tales by comparison with those of the French fabliaux, a genre which influenced Chaucer. Influence is also sought in English forms such as the farcical interludes of miracle plays, and in the classical comedy that contributed to the Western tradition in which Chaucer wrote. The comic action of the Tales borders on farce, which has the effect of allowing the feelings of the audience to be disengaged.

The comic in the narrator's relation to his tale, to other pilgrims, and to the poet Chaucer is considered in the Third Chapter. Through the language used, and through situations of conflict quite apart from the rhetorical contest of the frame-story, the audience is given a variety of inflections on the relationships with, and perspectives upon, an incident. Adoption of personae enables Chaucer to set the audience at a distance from the comic action of each tale, while commentary by the Host and the pilgrim Chaucer creates detachment from the illusory world of the frame-story. The comic

design of the Nun's Priest's tale is examined in detail in Chapter Four as a display of virtuosity in narration. Here is shown the comic effect of parody, irony, allegory, and shifting rhetorical styles, which causes sudden shifts in the audience's perspectives, making it leap boundaries between separate fields of ideas to achieve an insight upon the elevated vision of the artist. The tale emphasizes the relativity of man's view of his small world and shows that the extent of man's perspective becomes a measure of his moral position.

The study ultimately concludes that Chaucer adopts a posture of duplicity towards the role of the artist, assuming a mask of naivete which introduces ambiguities into the narration of the Tales. These demand of the audience a readiness to accept spontaneously various kinds of modulation in meaning. As an artist Chaucer uses the ambivalent power of words to counterfeit creation yet, recognizing the comedy in men's attempts to order the unknowable by rational discussion, is also aware that the poet too may distort his spontaneous awareness by ordering and binding his perception through words. The audience lies in danger of being cozened into immorality by narrators who consciously employ duplicity of speech to invite a sense of malicious or indecent pleasure. However, the poet Chaucer as a medieval artist bases his comic vision upon the ideal of the Christian image of the cosmos, and as a moralist can assume that his listeners accept the Christian moral code. His intention is to create a sense of distance in his listeners' minds which will enlarge their awareness of man's position in the Christian cosmos.

And down from thennes faste he gan avyse
This litel spot of erthe, that with the se
Embraced is, and fully gan despise
This wrecched world, and held al vanite
To respect of the pleyn felicite
That is in hevene above; and at the laste,
Ther he was slayn, his lokyng down he caste.

And in hymself he lough right at the wo
Of hem that wepten for his deth so faste;
And dampned al oure werk that foloweth so
The blynde lust, the which that may nat laste,
And sholden al oure herte on heven caste.

Troilus and Criseyde, V 1814-25

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Many studies have been made of Chaucer's use of irony, and several of his word-play, humour and bawdy, but these are only attributes of the comic vision in The Canterbury Tales which few have attempted to define: perhaps because the qualities of Chaucer's comic vision seem to be self-evident. In an unpublished dissertation, McCabe suggests that most of the paradoxes and the ambiguities attributed to the comic genius of Chaucer are those invented by a philosophy of dualism and a consequent theory of comedy which is restricted to several senses of incongruity. He feels that the comic basis of Chaucer's poetry is connected with the poet's conception of himself in relation with his craft and, defining two roles, the Hebraic tradition of the poet as prophet and the Graeco-Roman of the poet as rhetor, McCabe says they are integrated in Chaucer's poetry, the prophet celebrating the reality of temporal experience as meaningful and enjoyable because it derives its being from One Source who is Truth and Beatitude, the rhetorician attempting to control an appropriate poetic response. Where Chaucer is not seen as the detached observer of man's comic incongruities, says McCabe, he is sometimes seen as involved himself in the "ambiguities" of existence.[1] Whether or not Corsa feels that the poet Chaucer is involved in such ambiguities, she does feel it of his fictive pilgrims, and they have real identity in her mind.

[1] J.D. McCabe, "The Comic in the Poetry of Chaucer: Congruence of 'Sentence' and 'Solaas'," unpubl. diss. (Minnesota, 1968), pp. 14-15, 129-131.

She explores all of Chaucer's major works, concluding that his mirth reveals his moral premises and "proclaims an Order, both in this world and the next, even as it celebrates the struggle of the individual to maintain equilibrium in spite of obstacles both within and without the self. All his poetry, whether elegy, tragedy, romance, saint's legend, or fabliau attests to his acceptance of the complexities inherent in coexistence, dynamic and dramatic, of two potentially warring elements: the assertion of the self and that of what he called the 'common profit'."[2] A contrasting view of the pilgrims, and one which sees the poet Chaucer as a detached observer, is given by Lanham. He notes Chaucer's fondness for the concept of "game", and proposes that situations of conflict in the poems be considered as types of games, saying, "Implicit in the matrix of the Tales, in the game on the way to Canterbury, and in Geoffrey Chaucer's detached role within this game, is a characteristic attitude toward human behavior. We see a gallery of portraits remarkable for their self-consciousness as much as for their diversity. They are all, to one extent or another, trying to play a part, to establish an identity in this particular situation. Chaucer assesses both the morality of the pose adopted and the skill used in adopting it. He is not fooled into taking pose for fundamental identity." Lanham observes that for the medieval man, human character was first and foremost typical and social. A character would behave as the situation called for. Identity was to a large extent determined by the game one played. He

[2] Helen Storm Corsa, Chaucer: Poet of Mirth and Morality (Notre Dame, Ind., 1964), p. v.

concludes that Chaucer's comic vision was a plurality of perspectives emerging from his awareness of human personality as a series of poses each adapted to a different life game.[3]

One of the problems inherent in defining comic vision is to find a useful theory of comedy. Although Sypher has not attempted to solve this problem, his essay, "The Meanings of Comedy,"[4] summarizes some of the attitudes that have been expressed towards comedy and humour. Basing his discussion upon the works of Cornford, Huizinga, Welsford, and other theorists, he examines the Attic origins of the comic, comic character-types including the comic hero, and the social meanings of comedy. The ancient Greeks laughed to express disdain, the Middle Ages laughed either at the grotesque or out of charity. Renaissance laughter was contemptuous and satirical, sometimes sympathetic, often directed towards medically "humorous" persons. The Romantics laughed either in sympathy with what is disreputably human, or frantically at the anguish of fallen man in revolt. Our new sense of the comic, he says, is like that of the ancient Greeks, a sense that human life at its depths is inherently absurd. Comedy seems to him to be a more pervasive human condition than tragedy because we cannot speak of "low" tragedy, but comedy runs the gamut of effects from "high" to "low" without diminishing its force or surrendering its values. So the range of comedy is

[3] R.A. Lanham, "Game, Play, and High Seriousness in Chaucer's Poetry," ES, XLVIII (1967), 1-24.

[4] Wylie Sypher, Comedy (New York, 1956), pp. 193-258.

more embracing than the range of tragedy.[5] The ancient rites of comedy belonged to a fertility ceremony involving the death or sacrifice of a hero-god (the old year), the rebirth of a hero-god (the new year), and a purging of evil by driving out a scapegoat (who might be either god or devil, hero or villain). They required a contest between the old and new kings, a slaying, a feast and a marriage to commemorate the initiation, reincarnation, or resurrection of the slain god, and a final triumphal procession or komos, with songs of joy. Comedy preserves the archaic "double occasion" of the plot formula, the dual and wholly incompatible meanings of sacrifice and feast, cruelty and festival, logic and license. Tragedy performs the sacrificial rite without the festival, which means that it is a less complex, less ambiguous form of drama than comedy. Retaining its double action of penance and revel, comedy remains an "improvisation" with a loose structure and a precarious logic that can tolerate every kind of improbability. Tragedy needs a more single vision than comedy, says Sypher, for the comic perception comes only when we take a double view—that is, a

[5] Dante allows comedy a range of styles from the lowly to the high. In the second book of De Vulgari Eloquentia, Chapter iv, A Translation of the Latin Works of Dante Alighieri, trans. Howell and Wicksteed (London, 1904), p. 78, when he speaks of subject and style, Dante says that comedy has a range of styles, "sometimes the middle and sometimes the lowly vernacular should be used." But in his Epistolae X, p. 349, dedicating the Paradiso to Can Grande, Dante observes when speaking of modes of speech that Horace in his Poetica gives comedians leave sometimes to speak like tragedians and conversely, "Sometimes Comedy herself raises her voice, and wrathful Chremes denounces with tempestuous lips, And the tragedian often lowers his wail to pedestrian tone."

perspective by incongruity. Then we take part in the ancient rite that is a debate and a carnival, a sacrifice and a feast.

For an analysis of theories of humour, I have found Monro's article, "Humor", to be most useful.[6] Theories of humour may be separated into three classes according to Monro, those of superiority, incongruity, and relief from restraint. In the first class he includes the theories which emphasize the idea that we take pleasure either in seeing ourselves less unfortunate than another, or in another's degradation. The second emphasizes our perception of contrast or of incongruity between what ought to be as opposed to actuality, while the third stresses the liberation from social constraints or relief from tension provided by laughter. In his commentary on "superiority" theories Monro says that in humour at its best we are conscious of surveying the whole human scene from some godlike level at which all men and women look pretty much alike. If "superiority" is interpreted as this god's-eye view rather than as simply a sneering contempt for some failing we do not have, it is possible to account for laughter not merely at comic vice but also at comic virtue. It may even explain why we often laugh with comic vice rather than at it, since the most penetrating humour is often aimed at the social code itself. He observes of "incongruity" theories that we must be jolted out of one mental attitude into another completely opposed to it and usually this results from

6 D.H. Monro, The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ed. Paul Edwards (New York, 1967), Vol. IV, pp. 90-93.

quality to allow us that feeling of superiority. Liberation from restraint may also be one way of describing the feeling associated with the moment of insight when we make new perceptions from the juxtaposition of matters normally segregated; this would provide a link between "incongruity" and other theories of humour. However, "incongruity" theory generally focuses on the activity of the intellect at the moment of delight in the comic and tries to explain the ability of the mind to leap back and forth between two dissimilar attitudes or fields of thought and to achieve a sudden exaltation in the discovery that their contact leads to greater understanding. All three classes of theories are discussing at heart the one response of laughter, and for an adequate comprehension of the comic we need to account for every aspect of that response.

The effect of comical actions and incidents seems far indeed from the concept of comic vision, yet if we accept that the comic art grows out of ritual we need to consider the design, the ordering of action and the stylizing of the participants, which is an aspect of the medium that transposes the vision to the key of ordinary perceptions. For this reason, I have commenced this study with an examination of the "bodily" parts, the character-types and the plotting of the action, in several of Chaucer's comic tales, although his comic art is a language art. Conception of Chaucer's comic characters as typical has proved most useful, allowing me to consider them as figures for attitudes. The Wife of Bath, when studied from a typological point of view, is a single character composed of three types enacting a comedy that is more revealing than a conventional dramatic interaction.

bringing together two things normally kept in separate compartments of our mind. One element in our enjoyment is the sense of enlarged horizons that comes from seeing unexpected connections. Speaking of "relief" theory, Monro points out that it is liberation of our sexual and aggressive impulses from social constraints, not of our intellects from too narrow a point of view, that this theory emphasizes. Consequently it can account for most of the aspects of humour that have given rise to superiority theories, but it is not adequate explanation for word-play or the appeal of finding unexpected connexions from which incongruity theories have evolved.

It would appear from Monro's analysis that "superiority" and "relief" theories have much in common while "incongruity" theories are concerned with an entirely unrelated approach to humour. It seems to me, however, that the different designs of these theories result from emphasizing different aspects of our response to the comic situation. "Superiority" and "relief" theories try to explain the emotion accompanying our response, that is, our increased sense of self-esteem or satisfying release of nervous energy. "Incongruity" theories emphasize the role of the intellect in making perceptions beyond our habitual fields of thought. But the emotion that accompanies our response is largely determined by our attitudes prior to the comic situation and by emotions aroused by the situation before its comic crux. Where there is a raconteur arranging the sequence of events up to the crucial moment, our emotions will be manipulated by him so that we generate an adequate tension in expectation of such an event, and our emotions are of an appropriate

In considering types of comic character and the conventions of comedy as a literary form, I have relied mainly upon two articles by Northrop Frye, both analysing Shakespearian comedy yet discussing Western drama from the period of the classical Greek theatre. In "Characterization in Shakespearian Comedy,"[7] Frye considers the four types of comic character categorized by Aristotle: the alazon who is the imposter, boaster or hypocrite; the eiron, a self-deprecating character who deflates or exposes the alazon and who may be either the hero or a clever schemer aiding him, or the trickster who acts from pure love of mischief; the bomolochos, or buffoon, a character with comic habits amusing by his mannerisms or powers of rhetoric, and his opposite the agroikos, a churlist or rustic type and a killjoy or miserly character, who in very ironic comedy may be the plain dealer, an outspoken advocate of a moral norm. Frye elaborates upon two of these categories by adding the character of the architectus, or retreating eiron, an older man who begins the action of the play by withdrawing from it, and the typical "cook" buffoon, a master of ceremonies who is a center for the comic mood. The female alazon Frye describes as the shrew, or bluestocking, or the siren who is a menace to the heroine, while her eiron counterpart is the heroine who goes into disguise to forward her schemes.

The second of Frye's articles, "The Argument of Comedy,"[8] analyses the conventions of Greek Old and New Comedy and their

7 Northrope Frye, Shakespeare Quarterly, IV (1953), 271-277.

8 Frye, English Institute Essays, 1948, ed D.A. Robertson, Jr., (New York, 1949), pp. 58-73.

adaptations in the Roman and modern world, also the "drama of the green world," which is the name he gives to the medieval drama of folk ritual, "of the St. George play and the mummers' play, of the feast of the ass and the Boy Bishop, and of all the dramatic activity that punctuated the Christian calendar with the rituals of an immemorial paganism," whose theme is the "triumph of life over the waste land, the death and revival of the year impersonated by figures still human, and once divine as well." Comedy grows out of the ritual of the struggle, death, and rebirth of a God-Man, which is linked to the yearly triumph of spring over winter, and the ritual pattern behind the catharsis of comedy is the resurrection that follows the death, the epiphany or manifestation of the risen hero. This is clear enough in Aristophanes, says Frye, where the hero is treated as a risen God-Man, led in triumph with the divine honors of the Olympic victor, rejuvenated, or hailed as a new Zeus. In New Comedy the new human body is both a hero and a social group. From the point of view of Christianity, tragedy is an episode in that larger scheme of redemption and resurrection to which Dante gave the name of commedia. The sense of tragedy as a prelude to comedy is hardly separable from anything explicitly Christian.

Frye suggests that the essential comic resolution is an individual release which is also a social reconciliation. A new social unit is formed; the audience witnesses the birth of a renewed sense of social integration which is expressed in the form of a festival, whether a marriage, a dance, a feast or a komos, the processional dance from which comedy derives its name. The new social integration may be called, first, a kind of moral norm and,

second, the pattern of a free society. In the New Comedy, the characters who impede the progress of the comedy toward the hero's victory are always people who are in some kind of mental bondage; the humours who are slaves to a predictable self-imposed pattern of behaviour, driven by ruling passions, neurotic compulsions, social rituals, and selfishness. The moral norm is not morality but deliverance from moral bondage, comedy being designed not to condemn evil, says Frye, but to ridicule a lack of self-knowledge. The normal individual is freed from the bonds of a humorous society and a normal society is freed from the bonds imposed on it by humorous individuals. All real comedy is based on the principle that these two forms of release are ultimately the same.[9]

The most frequent description of Chaucer's comic method is that he uses irony or light satire. Satire is not necessarily comic even though it may rely on incongruity, or the distortion of certain characteristics to achieve its effect. Satiric distortion may exaggerate personal attitudes or social conventions by enlarging or by dwindling certain features, or it may change their frame of reference by parody or by allegory. The satirist must generate tension in his audience so that it may take a malicious pleasure or else feel an uncomfortable self-recognition in comparing his distortions with his implied ideal. While Dempster's study of dramatic irony in Chaucer's works is invaluable for its treatment of

[9] George E. Duckworth's comprehensive study, The Nature of Roman Comedy: A Study in Popular Entertainment (Princeton, New Jersey, 1952), summarizes the origins and nature of Greek comedy and its influence upon Roman comedy, and is most useful in his schematic approach to the nature of Roman comedy.

a particular style of irony,[10] Burke's definition is comprehensive and has special merit when we are considering Chaucer's method:

> Irony arises when one tries, by the interaction of terms upon one another, to produce a development which uses all the terms. Hence from the standpoint of this total form (this 'perspective of perspectives'), none of the participating 'sub-perspectives' can be treated as either precisely right or precisely wrong. They are all voices or personalities, or positions, integrally affecting one another.[11]

Irony, as well as comedy, relies upon incongruity to achieve its effect. The ironic becomes comic to the audience when it has been persuaded to accept the absurdity of the attitudes or conventions that the artist is exposing, its emotions have been aroused to the point of incredulity, distaste, even anxiety, and suddenly it is allowed an intellectual relief from tension. It may feel self-satisfied at the sudden deflation of another's affectation, or it may recognize ruefully that the exposed folly exists among its own values, even a sense of freedom should it see successful flouting of a convention. However, there is implied in the artist's total vision a 'perspective of perspectives', which subsumes the attitudes commonly accepted or those displayed in his art, and after its laughter has ceased the audience may be illumined by this different vision. Chaucer's comedy always transcends the ironic and satiric, however, because his work insinuates a further perspective upon the 'perspective of perspectives', an ambiguity which makes the reader suspicious of the art itself.

10 Germaine Dempster, Dramatic Irony in Chaucer, Stanford University, 1932 (New York, 1959).

11 Kenneth Burke, "Four Master Tropes," A Grammar of Motives. (New York, 1945), p. 512.

CHAPTER II

COMIC SITUATION AND CHARACTER-TYPE

The impact of the fabliau, a medieval French literary form, upon Chaucer's comic sensibility is now a commonplace with critics. There are similarities of design among the situations in his comic tales and some of these situations have been traced to fabliaux, which may be why these tales have been classed, severally or together, with that genre. The simple architecture of the fabliau has been explicated by scholars in the tales of the Miller, the Reeve, the Shipman, the Merchant, and the Summoner; the Manciple's Tale has been described as a fabliau situation,[1] while the Friar's Tale and the Wife of Bath's Prologue are said to be close to the fabliau in form and spirit.[2] The Danish scholar, Per Nykrog, is presently the admitted authority on this medieval literary genre which he defines as a relatively short, humorous tale, recounting a single incident and its immediate consequences.[3] Its characteristic situations are, first, erotic intrigue based on the lovers' triangle and seduction, and the conflicts between married pairs, and secondly, those involving a judgment or a pseudo-judicial affair. Nykrog perceives the sources of the comic in these tales to be of a most elementary nature, consisting of unforeseen or extraordinary

[1] Richard Hazelton, "The 'Manciple's Tale': Parody and Critique," JEGP, LXII (1963), 5.

[2] D.S. Brewer, "The Fabliaux," Companion to Chaucer Studies, ed. Beryl Rowland (Toronto, 1968), p. 248.

[3] Per Nykrog, Les Fabliaux: Etude d'Histoire Litteraire et de Stylistique Medievale (Copenhague, 1957), pp. 14-15.

situations showing folly at grips with guile, or subtlety encountering an even more efficacious artfulness, a comedy resting on misunderstandings, mistaken identities, and burlesque.[4] The fabliau may parody religious or aristocratic genres but its satire is all directed towards characters of low class who mimic the manners of nobles.[5] In particular, it is constructed on a theme which throws ridicule more or less strongly on at least one of its characters who is the victim of a clever trick the other characters play on him.[6]

[4] Nykrog, p. 58: "On peut étudier les sources du comique dans les contes non érotiques seulement, et aboutir à un résultat valable pour tous les fabliaux. Ce comique est des plus élémentaires: il consiste en situations imprévues ou extraordinaires, montre la bêtise aux prises avec la ruse--ou, mieux encore, la subtilité qui rencontre une finesse encore plus efficace--, il repose sur des malentendus, des quiproquos, des événements burlesques. . . .Aucune littérature populaire ne s'est consacrée avec un goût si prononcé aux intrigues érotiques et, à l'intérieur de ce domaine, aux contes bâtis sur le triangle amoureux, sur la séduction et sur les conflits entre époux . . .Le seul des autres groupes qu'on puisse établir, que s'élève à des dimensions insolites, est celui des contes comportant un jugement.
De ces deux faits nous pouvons tirer une première conclusion sur les goûts et sur les préférences du public des fabliaux: il s'intéressait surtout aux affaires érotiques, mais aussi, qucique beaucoup moins, aux affaires juridiques ou pseudo-juridiques."

[5] Nykrog, p. 104: "Nous avons constaté que nos textes abondent en traits qui appuient la théorie selon laquelle le fabliau serait intentionnellement un burlesque courtois, et nous avons même pu définir assez exactement la nature de cette parodie. Les allusions littéraires que nous avons relevées, et qui sont assez nombreuses, se concentrent en une très grande majorité autour des genres aristocratiques. . .Il faut pourtant dire que certains fabliaux. . . constituent, par la nature même de leurs sujets, une sorte de parodie de certains genres religieux.
Non seulement les parodies des genres aristocratiques sont de loin les plus fréquentes, mais elles ont presque toutes un même caractère: elles ne raillent nullement les personnages aristocratiques et authentiquement courtois; bien au contraire toute la satire se dirige contre les personnages de rang inférieur, qui singent les manières des nobles sans pouvoir arriver à se donner les allures de la vraie courtoisie.

[6] Nykrog, p. 9.

Speaking generally, it is true that the situations in Chaucer's comic tales involve either erotic intrigue or pseudo-judicial situations: they also involve conflict, both active and latent, between the sexes and between members of the same sex. The tales of the Shipman, the Merchant, the Manciple, the Miller and the Reeve are based upon seduction and some variation of the lovers' triangle. The Wife of Bath's Prologue and, to a lesser extent, the Nun's Priest's Tale, represent the open conflicts of married pairs. Conflict between men occurs in the Reeve's and the Summoner's Tales. In the rough justice of the Reeve's, the Manciple's and the Miller's Tales, and the courtly justice of the Summoner's and the Wife of Bath's Tales, there are pseudo-judicial situations, while the whole of the Friar's Tale involves a special kind of judgment upon the mockery of justice. We may say, also, that the sources of the comic in Chaucer's tales are, in part, typical of the fabliaux in that one or more of the characters in each tale becomes the butt of trickery or draws ridicule upon himself by his own folly, while the crucial situations are sometimes unforeseen or extraordinary or burlesque. The fabliau form has its limitations. As Nykrog says, the sources of the comic are most elementary. But Chaucer has a humour of remarkable variety and he uses it with a virtuosity and complexity that transcends the simple structure of the fabliau.

The Shipman's Tale is considered by Brewer to be closest to the fabliaux in both form and spirit:[7] just such a tale one might expect from a master mariner who knows French merchants and harbours

[7] Brewer, "The Fabliaux," Companion to Chaucer Studies, pp. 259-260.

as well as he knows the English. The basic design is a variation on the love triangle situation. The husband does not actually discover his wife's adultery but does place her in an awkward situation from which she is able to withdraw by cunning inspiration. The comic mood depends neither upon the special talents of one character, nor upon the exposure of another's folly: all three are tricksters who escape ridicule. It is true that the merchant husband has some of the characteristics of a buffoon, notably a clownish mannerism of absentmindedness when he is involved in handling money. Entranced by the process, he becomes a trifle imperceptive about his family life. Merchandising activities have so impressed upon him a fixed habit of mind, a solemnity taking itself too seriously, that he has become a creature of his profession. His counting demands secretiveness and unsociability, yet his profession also requires politic display. Thus he is careful to impress upon his wife the need for "largesse" and for making "chiere and good visage," (VII 230)[8]--in effect, he knows the importance of the businessman's mask. The contrast between this appearance of sociability and "largesse" and his monkish retreat to engage in speculating and counting is emphasized and exploited when his wife tells Daun John her "legende" of martyrdom. She too is a skilful creator of the proper public image for gain. The monk is more than a match for either the merchant or his wife, having the shrewdness and mental agility of an opportunist easily able to surpass their professionalism. If they

[8] Citations from Chaucer's works in my text are to The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. F.N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Boston, 1957).

are subtle in their business dealings, he is even more artful. His monkish exterior really conceals the mind of a consummate merchant and this has been recognized by his abbot who has made him an "outridere" for his house. The monk's treatment of his religious duties is as cursory as the merchant's hearing of mass, both attending only to the ritual. Sterile spiritually, they are fervent in multiplying earthly wealth and indulging fleshly pleasure. Levy has observed that there is an ironic reversal of roles between the monk and the merchant. Moreover, all three characters in the tale equate sexual activity with business dealing and all three, without making any initial investments of their own, by borrowing on credit either money or, in the wife's case, her body, are able to make financial and sexual profits.[9] Evidently the importance of keeping up appearances in both business and sexual dealings bears significantly upon reputation: one may profit by one's creditability.

The tale is amusing insofar as the adulterers' trickery succeeds. It causes delight by showing persons who break restrictive social conventions with impunity. But it is more comic than a fabliau because of its more complex design. To the pattern of the love triangle is added a triangle of commercial activity, and the sexual and business activities of the story are merely repeated under

[9] Bernard S. Levy, "The Quaint World of The Shipman's Tale," SSF, IV (1966), 112-113, says: ". . .the merchant in monkish fashion cuts himself off from the everyday world to plan his financial deals by repairing to his counting house. . . .While the merchant has cut himself off from the world and neglected his wife in doing so, the monk, in contrast, is very much concerned to pay attention to the merchant's wife, to engage in a very worldly business; he repairs, therefore, to the garden while the merchant is in his counting house, in order to seek the wife's favors."

a seemingly continual change of aspect. Once the parallels have been established between the two triangles, the audience is able to jump mentally back and forth between the business field and the sexual, deriving pleasure from the ambiguities inherent in this aesthetic design. An additional impetus to laughter is provided by the ambiguities in the language. This design provides the structure for comic incongruity. A series of three events of a similar character is established. After the first two events have set a congruent pattern, the apparently ordinary business transaction conducted by the merchant, and the less usual but not uncommon business transaction between the monk and the wife, the incongruity in the third, the final sexual and business dealing between the wife and the husband, is revealed. Part of the humour of this situation lies in the absurdity that the merchant is cuckolded not only sexually but also commercially. He becomes a victim of his own business techniques, a more subtle form of ridicule than making him a public laughing-stock, as happens to the husband of the Miller's Tale. As Robertson says, adultery appears in three separate guises in the Shipman's Tale.[10] In his terms the wife is committing adultery with the monk, the monk is committing adultery outside of his spiritual marriage to Christ, while the merchant commits it with his wife, turning the proper order of his marriage "up-so-doun", by allowing

[10] D.W. Robertson, Jr., A Preface to Chaucer (Princeton, New Jersey, 1962), pp. 376-377. Robertson continues his discussion of the abuse of marriage by saying: ". . .Chaucer sets the marriage theme in humanistic terms in the Knight's Tale, suggesting the proper function of marriage as an ordering principle in the individual and in society, and develops its manifold implications in the subsequent tales."

it to become a mercantile arrangement. Furthermore, each evidently engages in prostitution.

The wife has learned her husband's lessons very well because with both men she uses as the excuse for borrowing or spending money her need to protect her husband's reputation. To the monk she says:

> For his honour, myself for to arraye,
> A Sonday next I moste nedes paye
> An hundred frankes, or ellis I am lorn. (VII 179-181)

She later explains to her husband that she cannot give him the hundred frankes supposedly repaid by the monk:

> For by my trouthe, I have on myn array,
> And nat on wast, bistowed every deel;
> And for I have distowed it so weel
> For youre honour, for Goddes sake, I seye,
> As be nat wrooth, . . . (VII 418-422)

There is also a sting in her claim that she thought the hundred frankes was a gift from the monk in return for the "beele cheere" that he had enjoyed so often because of the merchant's "largesse". It is possible to imagine the whole elaborate pattern of trickery being carried out again and again with the same success, a delightful rhythm being set up in the oscillation between the disparate fields of trade and sex, always concluding with the renewed vitality in the couple's sex life and the recovery made possible by her wit and by his humorously philosophical acceptance of mischance. This is, of course, laughter at the expense of morality and social order which seem to take a holiday in this tale of a merchant from Seint-Denys. The superficial order of the design actually covers moral disorder, so that the audience's pleasure in successful impropriety is also in release from moral restraint.

Paradoxically, the basic design, the "schema le plus typique de l'intrigue d'un fabliau (une femme surprise par son mari en flagrant delit d'adultere se tire d'affaire par une improvisation)",[11] is employed in the Merchant's Tale, yet that tale is not thought to be close in form to the fabliau,[12] nor is its tone notably comic. "Ironic" is the epithet usually applied to it. Perhaps we could say that it is wryly comic, for even if we find little else laughable about the tale, the incongruity of using for sexual intercourse a pear tree, that aristocrat of the English orchard, and not the common apple tree, surely is so. Both the plot and the mood depend upon the principal character Januarie, who is given a more varied portrayal than is usual in a fabliau. He combines the two roles of alazon and buffoon. As alazon, he sets the plot in motion with his intention to marry, and his conferences with Placebo and Justinus, revealing his hypocrisy, his unrealistic ideas of marriage, and his ludicrous complacency about his prowess. As an impotent buffoon, he amuses the reader with his absurd expectations and preparations, an exhausted "libido" who has become, not the fool of nature, but of himself. His obsession with his own fantasy of marriage is held so rigidly that he will not be deflected from it by Justinus, the one plain speaker and outspoken intercessor for a normal attitude in the

[11] Nykrog, p. 16.

[12] Brewer, "The Fabliaux," Companion to Chaucer Studies, p. 260, says: "If The Shipman's Tale is closest to the fabliau-type, The Merchant's Tale is by general agreement furthest away; it has attracted much interest, though it is a difficult tale to handle. It does not fit into any simple category, its mood is hard to assess, and the daring dislocations of narrative structure. . .have puzzled and sometimes annoyed critics."

tale. Because Januarie is unwilling to consider the usual social response to the incongruous wedding of age with youth, his obsession reveals his vanity and also makes him ridiculous. He has adopted the role of young lover, absurd in an old man, and as a quixotic idealist eventually comes face to face with the reality that he has hitherto subjected to his fancy. He builds a Utopia that really becomes an anti-Utopia, and his rigidity is revealed in his continuing automatic accommodation to his fantasy. Even in the crucial unforeseen situation he avoids recognition of his wife's adultery by absurdly accepting her improvisation: through vanity and infatuation he becomes a deliberately unwitting cuckold. This conclusion is foreshadowed by the jealousy that would control May rigidly and yet is willing to be disarmed in exchange for all his wealth. As an old man habitually confirmed in his lechery and wilfulness, Januarie has evidently slackened far in vigour and self-control. This lack of vigour is comically framed in a physique that also has slackened. Januarie becomes utterly clownish on the night of his marriage consummation, drawing attention to his own natural decay be taking aphrodisiacs, while the description of his early morning jubilation is one of a grotesque dotard.

The role of eiron is combined in the parts of May and Damyan, the schemers who dupe the old knight. The story burlesques the situation of <u>fin' amor</u> as do the fabliaux, yet its characters are members of the aristocracy. Both old knight and young squire adopt the posture of courtly lover, although Damyan's playing is so stereotyped that he seems to be an automaton, while Januarie's is a

travesty of courtly style and a transposition of the rituals of the courtly code into vulgarity.[13] Furthermore, he introduces his vulgarization into marriage. The art of fin' amor was an art of courtship, not a marital art, and its preferred expression was secret love that conceived of adulterous rather than domestic bliss. Since the lover existed as a vassal to his liege lady, his position was incompatible with the established order of relationship in the sacrament of marriage. Januarie prays that he might experience the "blisful lyf" of marriage but actually behaves as a gross distortion of a courtly lover. Robertson argues that he is an adulterer within marriage.[14] He resolves to marry for purity, yet inverts the sacrament's proper structure by elevating physical lust over the spiritual well-being that he claims is his motive. The ceremony of marriage is isolated from its spirituality, becoming a mere form. In itself, the inversion is comic as he seeks to mould both his

[13] Margaret Schlauch, "Chaucer's Merchant's Tale," ELH, IV (1937), 210, finds the tale to be a bitter satire on the system of courtly love: ". . .members of the highest estate, the aristocracy, are presented to us in conventional relationship to one another. But instead of romance, the traditional and appropriate plot for such people, we find them enacting a fabliau, the very antithesis of romance. Herein lies the wellspring of the satire."

[14] Robertson, pp. 429-430, discussing medieval doctrines of love and the De amore of Andreas Capellanus, says: "The lover warns further that the over-ardent husband is, in effect, an adulterer. That is, if the husband insists on treating his wife simply as an object of 'carnal affection' without reason, he is on the same plane as the lover himself. For this reason, St. Jerome had long since warned husbands that 'nothing is more foul than to love a wife as though she were an adulteress.' To develop a passio in marriage, as Chaucer's Januarie seeks to do, for example, is to destroy the marriage so that it becomes a vehicle for original sin rather than a remedy for it; it is, in the language of St. Augustine, which is reflected in the lover's argument, to abuse marriage rather than to use it."

marriage relationship and his wife to his fantasy instead of adapting himself to a vital relationship. Even in its figurative sense his love is adulterous because it is given to worshipping the idol-lover which he has created in his fantasy. Moreover, he is successful in at least one aspect of the moulding process. May proves to be pliant enough to take an impression of his adultery. Januarie becomes the victim of his own adulterous behaviour, a perfect example of that ridiculous spectacle, the beguiler beguiled. The final miracle should make him perceive the evil in his marriage and his wife repentant and morally steadfast, but both are beyond the power of miracles, he holding to self-deception and she proving her moral pliancy. The inversion of the proper order of marriage is thus paralleled by an inversion of proper order in Januarie's mind, reasoned understanding of reality bowing to fantasy and spiritual blindness. Both are developed through a pitiless exaggeration of Januarie's folly that ends in farce. The effect of farce depends upon absurdly exaggerated situations and character types, often accompanied by boisterous physical activity. The pace of farce scarcely giving the audience time to consider the characters' feelings, its sympathies are disengaged. Hence, the Merchant's audience is able to indulge in the delight of the boisterous activity in the pear tree, of Januarie's misfortune, and of its own sense of superiority.

The Wife of Bath, as a combatant in the battle of the sexes, combines the roles of female alazon, in her character of a medieval shrewish bluestocking, of eiron as a cooly confident schemer, and of

buffoon, amazing and amusing her audience by her powers of rhetoric. One cannot treat the situation in her Tale apart from her Prologue because the character defined by the Prologue enters the world of the Tale through lengthy authorial comment, and the Tale may be seen as an exemplum of the Wife's main theme, that women should have "maistrie" in marriage. This increases the complexity of design and comic mood in the Tale to a point beyond that typical of the fabliau. Although the Prologue has been considered close in style to the fabliau, the Wife reveals in her confession a far richer character than is typical of those brief tales. To create this character, Chaucer seems to have taken the traits of woman that were regularly attacked from the medieval pulpit. Owst suggests the pattern of these attacks by medieval preachers:

> A passage in the Book of Proverbs describing a type of evil womanhood. . .becomes the authoritative ground and substance of their attacks. As one of them reminds us, for example, it speaks "of a foolish woman, garrulous and vagrant, impatient of quiet, not able to keep her feet within the house, now is she without, now in the streets"--inconstant as the swallow.

In a note to this passage he further comments that the "whole of the Wife of Bath's Prol. is nothing but a series of brilliant literary variations upon these pulpit themes."[15] Yet such a comment does not elucidate the tone and design of the Prologue. Only when we see the Wife's confession as both dramatic performance and sermon do we recognize its essential quality. As sermon it parodies the clerical attacks on woman, and as dramatic performance it employs the topos

[15] G.R. Owst, Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England. 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1961), pp. 385-386, n386.

of the stubborn, shrewish Noah Uxor, a "stock" type used not only in English miracle plays but, according to Mill, existing in medieval legend for several centuries.[16] The Wife's essential trait is disobedience to authority, particularly male authority, so that she is similar to the Uxor in the Towneley play of Noah. But whereas the Towneley Uxor is freed from rebellion and reconciled as obedient wife to Noah, the Wife of Bath remains wilful and rebellious despite the moral of obedience and submission that she preaches in her Tale.

The tale of the Wife employs erotic contest that is formally represented by a pseudo-judicial situation, set simultaneously in the mundane world of Arthurian romance and the Otherworld of the fairies. In this complexity the comic mood is so diffused that it seems to be lost at times amid the digressions, and must depend mainly upon the plot and on ambiguity, especially in the roles of the characters, for its effect. The bachelor knight of Arthur's court is an imposter who is untrue to his knightly code. For ravishing a maid he receives judgment at the hands of a court of women and so becomes the butt of his own folly. The Wife fittingly makes her heroine, who is a fairy disguised as an old hag, the triumphant eiron. By her trickery she deflates the knight's arrogance and sways him to admit compliance with her wishes. Superficially, the action seems to be a typical comedy of folly at grips with guile, allied to a battle of the sexes. However, the knight is guilty not only of a foolish assault but also of self-degradation to the point of absurdity. At the queen's court, when

16 Anna Jean Mill, "Noah's Wife Again," PMLA, LVI (1941), 613-626.

the disguised heroine demands that he fulfil his promise and take her as wife, he replies: "For Goddes love, as chees a newe requeste!/ Taak al my good, and lat my body go" (III 1060-61). This shows a greater anxiety about his body than is appropriate to chivalry or to Christian virtue. Equally, the guile of the heroine is directed not so much towards publicly ridiculing this absurd imposter knight as it is to solving his difficulties, educating him and enticing him into an agreeable sexual relationship. As a fairy she does not belong to the human social group in the tale, yet she is significantly associated with it since the queen supports her marriage claim, and she speaks of Christian values in her long sermon to the knight. Arthur has the characteristics of the architectus eiron, an authority figure beginning the judicial action against the knight and then withdrawing completely by handing it over to his queen.

In this tale the battle of the sexes begins with the male showing physical dominance, passes to emotional dominance by the female, and ends with reconciliation. It is a semi-ritualized conflict conducted through scenes of judgment and ordered debate. Love is not treated as an exhilarating passion, the audience is not emotionally involved but distanced so that it may take pleasure in the incongruous nature of the justice apportioned to the knight, and of the marriage to which he is adroitly led. Because of its ambiguity, the conclusion even allows gratification to the audience through release from the normal social constraints upon sex: uncontrolled sexual onslaught by the male actually seems to be rewarded through the old hag's transfiguration, after the knight has

freed himself from the haughtiness and wilfulness that has bound him in self-ignorance. And yet this release for the knight is an illusory one since he places himself in the subservient role of the courtly lover by putting himself in his wife's "wise governance"—the same artful wife who has brought him through dilemma to accept a fairyland marriage. The Wife of Bath draws substantially on the conventions surrounding women in the courtly love tradition, translating these courtly values to suit her own purpose. Thus the admitted sovereignty of a knight's liege lady is reversed to become an imposed mastery upon an ungallant but constrained "bacheler", who succumbs both to his own physical appetite and to the dilemma posed by the old hag. One amusing aspect of the tale's resolution is that the fairy does not show the concern we might expect for the fate of the assaulted maid.

The plot design of the Manciple's Tale is hardly comic, although it has been called a fabliau situation: there is no comic resolution, no social reconciliation nor individual release. The tale is almost tragic. A noble but jealous husband is deceived by his wife who commits adultery with a man of low reputation. They are observed by a member of the household who informs the husband. In rage he kills his wife and then turns upon the informant, calling him traitor and liar and casting him out of the house. However, the principal figures have some of the characteristics of comic plot-makers. The husband, who is the god Phoebus Apollo, reveals that he is a slave to the passions of jealousy and anger, especially by the excessive violence of his revenge which becomes absurd rather than horrific. The crow has attributes of the eiron as a clever servant

in disguise and also as mischief maker carrying his tale of the wife's adultery. But the principal comic effect comes from the use of a mock-heroic and fabulous tone that is not at all like the tone of the fabliaux. Both god and bird behave as human beings, the godlike being degraded to the petty, while the human is ridiculed through association with the crow. The opening description of Phoebus in chivalrous terms as a "lusty bachiler" who did many a "noble worthy dede" is risible, because he is shown to be an imposter and coward who slays the python while it lies sleeping and defenceless, and also because the heroic god of poetry becomes a jealous husband fearful of being cuckolded. Not only does the crow expose the wife's adultery: he unintentionally exposes his master's absurdity by triggering the histrionic lament and accusation, at the end of which he is defrocked. Through exaggeration and by compression of the action, the climax of the tale becomes farcical rather than tragic. As with the Wife of Bath's Tale, the design and comic mood are made more complex by the disproportionate amount of authorial comment within the tale. The narrator's voice intrudes upon the continuity of the action from time to time and by momentarily dissolving the illusory world created in the listener's mind, frees him from emotional involvement with the potentially tragic. He is then able to enjoy the comic effect created by the mock-heroic tone.

The Miller's Tale combines the characteristic fabliau situations of erotic intrigue and judgment, although it is more intricate in design, bringing together Nicholas' fantasy world and the world of Oxford with incongruous effect. The husband John is a

typical alazon in the mould of Januarie, abandoning himself to ideas that have no relation to reality, and he is ripe to be made the comic butt. He recognizes that his unequal marriage to a beautiful young wife is precarious, and he has the basic qualities of the boorish husband so frequently ridiculed in the fabliaux: he is rich, old, bourgeois and obsessed with jealousy. But to this is coupled a narrow-minded rigidity of conviction, revealed by his unthinking respect for the authority of spells and wise saws and the automatic responses that make him an easy pawn in Nicholas' game. John draws attention to his own folly when he comments upon a star-gazing clerk:

> He walked in the feeldes, for to prye
> Upon the sterres, what ther sholde bifalle,
> Til he was in a marle-pit yfalle;
> He saugh nat that. (I 3458-61)

Inevitably, he stumbles over reality in pursuing the illusory world created by clerk Nicholas who pryed into the stars. John's rigidity is caused by self-complacency and an inverted snobbishness about learning. In his smugness, he neglects to keep a wide-eyed regard on his own household, the very place in which his jealousy should make him most alert. He is, in fact, as ignorant of his true self and as spiritually blind as Januarie. This is a state of mind that readily falls into inversion of common sense, which is precisely what happens as he accepts with credulity Nick's magical creation—reality bows to fantasy. The unreflecting nature of his belief is shown by the gesture he makes before entering his boarder's room, a spell that is an incongruous association of Christian and pagan worlds. Once he has succumbed to the spell of Nicholas, he becomes totally clownish,

seduced by his vanity into shaping his life clumsily around his imagined role as a second Noah and lord in a regenerated world.

John's folly is exposed by the guile of Nicholas who is the cheeky eiron, a scheming opportunist acting partly from sexual desire and partly from a sense of mischief. He creates John's illusory world, evidently delighting as much in his own singular creation as he does in cuckolding the jealous husband. Even after the painful rough justice he receives from Absolon in a fabliau-like situation of mistaken identities, and after the unforeseen capsizing of his plan, he recovers his equilibrium by effrontery, declaring to the gaping townsfolk that John is mad. There is something of the hero's victory in his recovery. The marriage of youth and eld is treated as a social dislocation in the world of this tale. Nicholas may not marry the heroine, but in the comic resolution we glimpse for a moment a social reconciliation with the freeing of this society from the humours of John.

Absolon is the unwitting buffoon, displaying absurd mannerisms and rhetoric. He is naively ineffectual in adopting the role of courtly lover so that there is comic contrast between his performance and his real personality as the fastidious parish clerk. His squeamish delicacy undermines his soulful portrayal. Muscatine says that it is faith in the Continental idea of love that is caricatured in this tale, and the parody is most telling on the provincial Oxford version of the imported heresy which is the vehicle for Absolon's courtship.[17] If we assume that the enjoyment of fin'

[17] Charles Muscatine, Chaucer and the French Tradition (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1957), p. 227.

amor dwelt largely in the lingering courtship ritual, then Absolon is doubly amusing as a caricature of the courtly lover because he pursues the conventions so earnestly, when we could expect him "to shewe his lightness and maistrye" (I 3383). The two blows which end his fantasy, the off-target kiss and the thunderous fart, accentuate his physical squeamishness, and reduce his soulful yearning to foolish posturing. Absolon has suffered a comic inversion of roles, the vain dandy becoming the victim of his own vanity. More surprising is his victory in the burlesque tournament with Nicholas. Until this point it is Nicholas who has been the imaginative innovator, and Absolon has been the visionary idealist in love. But Absolon's revenge, although misplaced, is a triumph of readiness: Nick's underhandedness with Alisoun has been equalled by Absolon's handiness with a hot colter.

In this tale there are sufficient allusions to the matter of the medieval mystery cycles to infer that the Miller is introducing this matter purposely, and Harder concludes that the tale is a parody in which Chaucer is making a subtle thrust at the grossness of the plays.[18] Rowland carries this interpretation much farther, proposing that Chaucer uses in comic fashion the structural pattern found in the mystery plays, the order and meaning that is imposed upon Scriptural material by stressing correspondences and

[18] Kelsie B. Harder, "Chaucer's use of the mystery plays in the Miller's Tale," MLQ, XVII (1956), 193-198.

prefigurings in the manner of traditional exegesis.[19] The tale is certainly one of the most dramatically structured of The Canterbury Tales, and the parody such as could be conceived by "a janglere and a goliardeys" (I 560). But, unlike the writers of the mystery cycles and his own fictive character Nicholas, who were using the concept of divine Providence to order their illusory worlds, the Miller creates an illusion of life in which the crucial event happens by chance. In Boethian terms this would define tragedy:

> What other thyng bywaylen the cryinges of tragedyes but oonly the dedes of Fortune, that with unwar strook overturneth the realmes of greet nobleye?
> (Glose. Tragedye is to seyn a dite of a prosperite for a tyme, that endeth in wrecchidnesse.) (Boece, Bk II, Pr. 2)

The tale's climactic situation is both an "unwar strook" for Nicholas and John, and a fine example of the comic effect achieved by the fusing in one episode of two independent series of events as if by coincidence. Nicholas' cry for water is interpreted in two entirely different contexts at the same time, a pun in action, juxtaposing the actual world of the lovers' triangle with the imaginary world of the flood. John's fall might even be called tragicomic, a type of felix culpa.

[19] Beryl B. Rowland, "The Play of the Miller's Tale: A Game within a Game," ChauR, V (1970), 140-146. The essential correspondences that Rowland draws are between Nicholas' salutation of Alisoun and the Annunciation and first Temptation, and between the central action surrounding John and the story of Noah and the Flood. Rowland points out that Noah was a type of Joseph who was depicted in the plays as an aged carpenter, mal marié. "This interpretation emphasizes one strand of the humor: the comic travesty of the St. Joseph legend, with Nicholas as the Evil One and Alison as Eve. . . and, as in the Mystery plays, the link between one Fall and another is neatly and palpably established" (146).

The Reeve tells a tale of retributive justice. In itself, the theme of retributive justice is not amusing. The listener may feel some satisfaction in the restoration of a lost equilibrium, and a sense of superiority to a degraded cheat. Humour depending upon the comic inversion of a cheater cheated by his dupes typifies the fabliaux, as does the farce of mistaken identities that is used in the climax of this tale. The Reeve's Tale, like the Shipman's, is close to the fabliaux in form and spirit. The social pretensions of a pair of villagers are ridiculed in an episode of seduction and rough justice. Muscatine feels, however, that the tale's stylistic elaboration invests the naked fabliau jest with deeper meaning: the naturalistic Northern idiom of the two clerks, which gives them an appearance of rustic simplicity that invites the miller's ridicule, and the preaching tone of the Reeve who makes his tale an exemplum of "avauntyng, liyng, anger, coveitise", extends the meaning of the denouement beyond "the tables turned".[20]

The comic element in this tale depends largely upon the ambiguous social positions of the principal characters, and the Reeve has brought complexity to these by means of his opening descriptions. The miller and his wife are obsessed with false pride because of her kinship with the village parson and her convent education, and they are ostentatious and haughty. But Simkin's judgment is impaired, he presumes upon the worth of the blood to which he is married, and makes some false assumptions about the nature of true nobility. His distorted perception of honour is reflected in his attitude towards

[20] Muscatine, pp. 199-200.

stealing, which he practises with the art of a professional. As Dempster says, ". . .he is an artist, a dilettante, one who knows all the scale from 'curteous' to 'outrageous' theft and enjoys the practice of his art a hundred times more than the possession of a few pounds of meal."[21] The Cambridge students who expose and beat him act at the outset as typical eirons, from love of mischief, scheming "oonly for hire myrthe and revelrye" (I 4005). But finally, they are motivated by revenge. They do not show the mental adroitness of their Oxford counterpart, Nicholas of the Miller's Tale, but they do have the ingenuity to seize upon opportunities. Thus, the miller's initial assumption of their rustic simplicity is not wholly belied by their behavior--they, too, undervalue him at the outset. However, they soon learn to ape Simkin's simian-like cunning and recover from their upset, delivering their small social world from the bondage of the vicious miller by beating down his inflated self-esteem. The single ingenious act upon which the comic plot turns is John's moving of the cradle. It links two independent series of events, bringing first the wife and then Aleyn to the wrong beds. Their similar comments at their apparent mistakes draw attention to this crucial pivot:

"Allas!" quod she, "I hadde almoost mysgoon;" (I 4218)

"By God," thoughte he, "al wrang I have mysgon."(I 4252)

Finally there is a burlesque element in the humour of this tale that reflects upon the wife's ecclesiastical associations. Correale has shown that the farcical bedroom scene is attended by a

21 Dempster, p. 28.

parody of some of the major prayers and themes in the liturgy of Compline, facetiously observed by Aleyn who likens the family's snoring to this night service. The service contains passages warning the Christian to be sober and watchful and Correale says that Simkin's drunkenness contributes to the success of the clerks' schemes, which he might have thwarted had he heeded the Compline warning. Furthermore, the wife's outcry as Simkin falls from his scuffle upon her, "In manus tuas! Lord," is part of a response said at Compline within a prayer for a secure and a chaste sleep. But it is bellowed at dawn when she is rudely awakened from a drunken sleep during which she and her daughter have been violated by the clerks, and has the effect of reminding the listener that she is the illegitimate daughter of the parson, and so is stripped of her social and ecclesiastical pretensions.[22] It should also remind the audience of Simkin's earlier angry outburst:

> Who dorste be so boold to disparage
> My doghter, that is come of swich lynage?" (I 4271-72)

This draws attention to his dreadfully narrow perception of honour, the same as that of the bachelor knight in the Wife of Bath's Tale. Parody of religious subjects is typical of the fabliaux, but here it also serves to point the moral of the tale by implied comment upon the parson's corruption and the miller's false social pride.

Both the Friar's and the Summoner's Tales are fundamentally situations of judgment burlesquing religious subjects, and their principal characters bear a striking mutual resemblance. Neither is

[22] Robert M. Correale, "Chaucer's Parody of Compline in the Reeve's Tale," ChauR, I (1966-67), 161-166.

an ecclesiastic, although both are professionally associated with the church. They are boasters, hypocrites and imposters who show a warped professional vanity since they are knowingly perverting the functions of their offices. Moreover, they are men who abuse words to gain their ends, avoiding the proper performance of deeds.

The summoner of the Friar's Tale, a member of the church hierarchy who represents its judicial arm as an officer of the ecclesiastical courts, has no respect for justice. He exploits the letter of the law by using the threat of Christ's curse, or excommunication, for extortion, even as he neglects the spiritual significance of its ritual. In itself this is not comic. But his understanding is limited by his avarice to grasping after the material good, and his concern with substance has become a fixed idea. The division in his character between an ordinary human adaptability and rigidity of his obsession is revealed in a comically habitual response—curiosity about appearances, notably about shape or form. The basic pattern of the comic in this tale is of comic repetition provided by the summoner's obsession with guise. Although the summoner and the yeoman-fiend are sworn brothers, their true relationship is that of a dull-witted student and a cynical master: "Teche me. . .Som subtiltee," (III 1418,20) says the summoner, but no matter how craftily or learnedly the fiend expounds, his pupil is so preoccupied with surface forms, with the fiend's "shap" and "figure" that three times he asks questions concerning it, ignoring the fiend's learned discourse and warnings of his soul's danger in his exclusive absorption in appearances. This pattern is reinforced by the pattern of oaths in their dialogue which leads to

the comic inversion at the tale's conclusion, when the "cursing" summoner's mockery of the spirit of ecclesiastical justice is punished by the curse of divine justice.

Humour is also generated by the display of subtlety at grips with supreme guile. The fiend as eiron is a clever servant and "vice" in disguise, and the widow is significantly, though unwittingly, associated with him in this role. The summoner is a deceiver who disparages his adversary. The amusing consequences for him of underestimating his "brother's" significance are enhanced by the evident parallel drawn between their moral status: they are equally fiendish. The summoner's naivete allows the audience pleasure at his degradation long before he discovers the true identity of his sworn brother, or that he has been trapped by his opponent, old Mabely, and his own dilemma. The final humour in the design of the tale lies in the burlesque of the archdeacon's court procedure. As Cawley has shown, the tale is full of echoes of the articles of excommunication and of the anathema which accompanied them;[23] and Hatton argues that the old widow is an allegorical type of the Church, so that the summoner's threat to bring the widow

[23] A.C. Cawley, "Chaucer's Summoner, the Friar's Summoner, and the Friar's Tale," Proceedings of the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society, VII (1957), p. 175: ". . .the solemn anathema pronounced against an excommunicated person is referred to in the threatening formula used by the Friar's summoner: 'on peyne of Christes curs' (1347) and 'Up peyne of cursyng' (1587). The anathema, which invokes the curse of the Trinity, the saints, and Holy Church against the excommunicate, is found inverted in the carter's triple blessing on his horses (1561, 1564). Again, when the widow modifies her curse by giving the summoner a chance to repent (1629), she is quoting the words of the anathema—'In this cursyng, who-so deye vnrepentaunt, schal haue a dredeful ende!'"

pedantically exalts his learning, all show him to be a humorous character trapped in habitual thought patterns. Again, we see a display of subtlety at grips with guile. Thomas is not the typical trusting peasant of fabliaux but a shrewd man of ingenuity, and the friar shows a considerable defect of judgment in underestimating his intellect as well as the force of his anger. Just as he is trapped in habitual thought patterns, so the friar becomes the puppet of his own anger, making him an easier victim to the mental adroitness of the squire. Thomas and the squire share the role of eiron, the elder devising the ruse and the younger cheekily exposing the friar by exploiting it.

Part of the humour of this situation is that the fart calls attention to the physical nature of the friar rather than his spiritual aspirations, and it is just this physical nature upon which the squire turns his attention, the friar's mental posture being transmuted into an absurd physical posture. Levy proposes that what is significant about the squire's solution is that it is a parody of the descent of the Holy Ghost upon the apostles at the time of Pentecost, since it too is concerned with the problem of distribution. Friar John himself attempts to suggest his direct relationship to the apostles by the use of a significant image, for he clearly relates himself to them by calling himself a fisher of men's souls. The point of the Summoner's attack, says Levy, is that all the Friar's speech and actions have a fundamentally diabolic inspiration.[25] Such a parody relies for comic effect upon the

[25] Bernard S. Levy, "Biblical Parody in the Summoner's Tale," TSL, XI (1966), 45-60.

before the archdeacon is meaningless and ironical; she, in fact, threatens him with the anathema, and just as the unrepentant sinner is handed over to civil jurisdiction so the summoner is handed over to a force beyond his own court's jurisdiction.[24]

The friar of the Summoner's Tale is not, like the summoner, part of the church hierarchy, but resembles him in being blind to the spirit and bound to the form of words: it is his quibbling over the value of trentels dispersed or concentrated, or over the loss of worth in a farthing parted, and finally his concern with his oath to share Thomas's gift, that make him ridiculous in the eyes of the manor household and of the Summoner's audience. He claims that he is an apostle whose intention is to spread Christ's word (1822, 1871), but his inspiration is manifest in a perverted form, a distortion of his Master's teaching through glossing and sophistry. His habitual mode of windy preaching—neglecting the spiritual while he focuses on material values—is likened by old Thomas to flatulence. Amusingly, the habit is also revealed in his enraged complaint to the lord, which neglects the ethical force of Thomas's insult while chafing about how the fart may be equally parted. His obsession with the problems of distribution, the cut and dried quality of his preaching, and his professional vanity which

[24] Tom Hatton, "Chaucer's Friar's 'Old Rebekke'," JEGP, LXVII (1968), 270: "The widow's curse and its results climax the irony of the incident. That the curse paraphrases the anathema is appropriate since it is delivered by a figure of the Church. The anathema is also, of course, the threat the summoner uses to extort from his victims. Threatened with it himself, he rejects his chance to repent and is handed over to the demon, who, a force obviously outside of the jurisdiction of the Church, acts as an ironic 'civil authority'. The summoner has run afoul of his own writ of Significavit."

incongruity of relating the spreading of the Logos with the spreading of the fart. In any case, the friar's role is comically inverted since he becomes the victim of his own windiness, rough justice on the loquacious. Moreover his scholastic quibbling and pedantry are imitated and inflated out of all proportion, just as he has turned an insignificant insult into a serious outrage, because the squire's solution, says Pearcy, is also a parody of the late medieval scholastic exercise of impossibilia, of attempting to prove or defend a proposition advanced by a self-acknowledged sophist which violates the dictates of common sense or is clearly incapable of demonstration. The role of sophist is shared by Thomas, who propounds the original problem that a fart can be equally divided into twelve, and his representative, the squire, who offers the unexpected and sophistical proof of the initial assertion.[26]

The tales of the Friar and the Summoner are basically fabliaux and very similar in tone and intention. It is in the ingenious burlesque of religious subjects and in the extended development of two characters in bondage to mental habits that the tales surpass the humour of the fabliaux. The comic resolution of both also shows a normal society freed from bondage to one who lacks self-knowledge.

Before concluding this chapter it will be convenient to summarize the ways in which Chaucer's comic tales transcend the fabliaux, and then discuss their structure in relation to the pattern

[26] Roy J. Pearcy, "Chaucer's 'an inpossible' ("Summoner's Tale" III, 2231)," N&Q, CCXII (1967), 322-325.

of classical New Comedy. Chaucer uses the basic comic character-types: small wonder that these tales often have an ironic tone because the eiron is the type appearing most frequently in them. The role is complicated since it is generally shared by two characters. In the Miller's and Manciple's Tales only is it limited to one. The eiron's traditional victim, the alazon, figures in all of the comic tales except the Shipman's, and in several tales Chaucer combines the characteristics of alazon with those of buffoon, making a more complex type such as those hypocrites with comic idiosyncrasies, the friar, the summoner and Januarie. One unusual combination is of buffoon with eiron, creating the quaint preoccupation and earnest contriving of the merchant of Seint-Denys. Justinus is the only evident agroikos. The Miller's is the single tale that uses comic types as individuals and best reveals their natures. Chaucer gives these basic types fuller characterization than is customary in the fabliaux, even when they are stock characters of medieval literature such as the cuckolded bourgeois husband or the unscrupulous cleric.

In every tale considered, Chaucer transcends the fabliaux by the complexity of his design, generally through combining the two basic situations of erotic intrigue and judgment. To the erotic triangle of the Shipman's Tale, however, he adds the triangle of business activity, while that of the Merchant's Tale is greatly elaborated by means of Januarie's fantasy and the concept of disorder in marriage. Burlesque of courtly love, scholarly conventions and religious doctrine is developed to complicated levels in most of these tales, as is parody of literary modes. Finally, the extra-ordinary intrusions of the narrators in the Wife of Bath's and the

Manciple's Tales place them outside the genre of the fabliau. Evidently Chaucer employed material from the English popular literary tradition as well as the French, and the comic in these tales may be influenced by the satire in contemporary homilies as well as the farcical interludes of the mystery cycles. Alisoun of Bath as a disobedient shrew is not the only caricature that we recognize from Middle English writings, and when reading the Summoner's Tale we are reminded of the brief exchange in the Prima Pastorum of the Wakefield Master, following the shepherds' imagined meal:

> primus pastor. then wold I we fest,
> This mete Who shall/into panyere kest.
> iijus pastor. syrs, herys;
> ffor oure saules lett vs do
> Poore men gyf it to.
> primus pastor. Geder vp, lo, lo!
> ye hungre begers ffrerys![27]

Yet this is to say no more than that there existed in the English language "pool" of the times a number of commonplaces of complaint and stereotypes of character.

As for any resemblance between the structure of these tales and the patterns of classical comedy, the most likely comparison could be made with the New Comedy, and I have found Frye's analysis a useful starting-point for this purpose. His definition of the essential comic resolution of New Comedy is the formation of a new social group associated with the hero's victory, signalling release from bondage to either a humorous society or humorous individuals.

[27] "Una Pagina Pastorum," The Towneley Plays, eds. George England and Alfred W. Pollard (E.E.T.S. London, 1897), ll. 280-286.

Such a resolution takes place in the tales of the Friar, the Summoner and the Reeve, and in the Miller's Tale we witness a fleeting release from bondage. There is an impression that the pattern of bondage will continue at the end of the Shipman's and the Merchant's Tales, and the Manciple's Tale is tragic in denouement. Despite the marriage, the comic resolution of the Wife of Bath's Tale is illusory because there is no new social integration, the resolution occurring not in a human society but in a fairyland of romance. Elaborating on the essential nature of New Comedy, Duckworth observes that the comedy of Menander is basically a love story in design, some prominent elements of the comedy being mistaken identity, misunderstandings arising from ignorance and a fortunate discovery which clears up the confusion and brings about a happy ending. He points out that many of the comedies of the Roman playwrights Plautus and Terence follow this pattern: Plautus expands farcical possibilities; Terence avoids farce, striving for a higher type of comedy. One feature which seems to be the basis of the complications in the plots of New Comedy is ignorance, or misapprehension, in one or more of the characters.[28] Mistaken identity is a comic element in the tales of the Friar, the Reeve and the Miller. However, the plots of the Friar's and the Summoner's Tales lack the typical love story of New Comedy, while love is burlesqued in the Reeve's Tale. Perhaps we could say that the one element of New Comedy found most frequently in Chaucer's tales is a special kind of misunderstanding arising from ignorance, usually

[28] Duckworth, pp. 139-176.

ignorance of the self in one or more of the characters.

Such comic action is likely to have a similar effect upon the audience to that of farce: as I have observed, the climax in several of the tales is farcical. The rapid pace of farcical action allows the feelings of the audience to be wholly disengaged so that it can indulge in a sense of its own superiority to those characters who are discomforted. It is also encouraged to laugh at the expense of social conventions and morality, and beguiled into suspending normal moral judgments as, for instance, by the delightful superficial order of the design in the Shipman's Tale. By manipulating the response of his audience the narrator may encourage it in self-deception. On this account, it needs to be wary of the narrator's credentials.

CHAPTER III

COMIC INTERACTION BETWEEN THE LEVELS OF NARRATION

Speaking of the device of a frame-story, Robinson says that "the Canterbury Tales are unlike most collections of the sort in the fact that the enclosing narrative is not formal or mechanical or merely introductory, but provides, and keeps in action, a social group engaged naturally in mutual entertainment."[1] Not least among the effects of the device is the opportunity it provides for comic interaction between the levels of narration, that is, in the teller's relationship to his tale, to the other pilgrims, and to the poet Chaucer. Interaction at several levels of narration is bound to create ambiguity of meaning in the language, which will frequently lend itself to allegory, irony, parody and the comic mood. The tales are not neatly self-contained units in the overall narrative of the pilgrimage. From time to time, matter breaks out of their illusory world into the surrounding frame-story, while the narrator's character frequently intrudes upon the world of his tale. Such is the case with the theme of marriage that recurs in several tales, connected by the direct or indirect responses of the pilgrims to each others' narrations. The narrator's character is often revealed by his intrusion upon his tale as it may be through his interaction with the other pilgrims, an interaction that in several instances swells to conflict. One consequence of this interaction is that the design of the frame-story is broken up in such a way that

[1] F.N. Robinson, Ed. The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, 2nd ed. (Boston, 1957), pp. 1-2.

the reader is unconsciously drawn into the picture to join the pilgrim audience even while his emotions are sufficiently detached from the poem to allow his humour full play. This is merely to say that the device permits our emotions enough involvement to arouse some tension and then distances us, so that our intellect is untrammelled by feelings or the illusory world of the tale, and may respond to a comic episode. Something like this effect must have been achieved in the drama of the mystery cycles. Kolve says of them:

> Never was a suspension of disbelief invited; instead, the game episodes were played in their turn, and in the Chester cycle and the Ludus Coventriae, characters like Nuntius, Expositor, Contemplacio, and Poeta served to direct them, introducing new actions and making doctrinal comments. Their function is to enclose the action, whether natural or mythic, in a frame of commentary which puts the playing unmistakably at a distance from reality.[2]

This similarity between the patterns of The Canterbury Tales pilgrimage and those of the mystery cycles is heightened if we remember that the Host has a function something like Expositor's, commenting upon completed tales, introducing new tales, and controlling the rhetorical contest that he has devised at the Tabard which preoccupies the pilgrims throughout their journey. "Oure Hoost", as a master of revels, is a typical comic moodmaker, a jovial and loquacious buffoon. As a self-chosen adjudicator he attempts to control the mood of the game with his own preference for tales of mirth. Part of the humour in the frame-story arises from the sometimes sly, occasionally surly, rejection by a pilgrim of the

[2] V.A. Kolve, The Play Called Corpus Christi (Stanford, California, 1966), p. 27.

Host's aesthetic standards or control. The Host's occasional obtuseness also contributes to the comic effect.

Obtuseness is a peculiarity of the pilgrim Chaucer whose function contrasts with that of the Host. For most of the journey, Chaucer is a passive spectator and reporter, but one who, as Donaldson says, "is, usually, acutely unaware of the significance of what he sees, no matter how sharply he sees it."[3] Chaucer, reporting his experiences in his own person, does so with a remarkably unchanging innocence that demands an alert and sophisticated assessment of his account by his audience. Moreover, since he is reporting another narrator's narration of a tale, the inner story comes to his audience second-hand, increasing the listener's sense of distance from its world. Such an effect encourages judgment by an audience as much as does the naive reporting by the pilgrim Chaucer. It stresses the style of narration of the inner story as well as the character-types used in it. This, of course, prompts the listener to form opinions about the individual narrator's character and to perceive the incongruities between the pilgrim Chaucer's account of them, their own assessment of themselves, and what they unconsciously reveal of their characters.

In this chapter I shall attempt to show how the language used by the narrator causes amusement, both intentionally and unintentionally. His use of word-play, parody, conscious irony, even indecent language, are his overt contributions to the comic mood. I shall also discuss unconscious humour in the relation between the

[3] E. Talbot Donaldson, "Chaucer the Pilgrim," Speaking of Chaucer (London, 1970), p. 3.

teller and his tale and in the interrelationships of the pilgrims. In the process, I shall show that the narrators, just as the casts of their tales, fall into the several categories of comic character-types.

As soon as the Friar begins his tale his audience anticipates an attack upon the Summoner. It is already apprehensive of a dispute because of the hostile exchange between these two pilgrims at the end of the Wife of Bath's Prologue. There, each unconsciously revealed to the other a vulnerable disposition. The Summoner's offensive proverb, "Lo, goode men, a flye and eek a frere/Wol falle in every dyssh and eek mateere" (III 835-836), is designed to irritate the Friar, and it does: the Friar is angered into making a threat that he will "Telle of a somonour swich a tale or two,/That alle the folk shal laughen in this place" (III 842-843). The Summoner is quick to detect this wrath and remark upon it in his reply, "For wel I woot thy pacience is gon" (III 849). But he has given force to his counterthreat with two curses. Thus, the unconscious revelation of weaknesses—the Friar's anger, the Summoner's cursing—provides these opponents with the targets for the ridicule that they promise in their tales, and creates tension in the minds of their observers.

From the outset the Friar prepares to persuade his audience of the duplicity and corruption of both fictitious and pilgrim summoners, insinuating the relationships upon which his tale will turn. After opening with a vague indication of time and place, "Whilom ther was dwellynge in my contree" (III 1301), he proceeds with a notatio, giving on the one hand character delineations of a

rigorous archdeacon, harsh on lechers and poor tithers, and of his prying summoner who makes his illegal income mainly by extortion from lechers. On the other hand, through these fictitious characters the Friar reveals the misuse of ecclesiastical justice, and also implies that these malpractices are employed by archdeacons and summoners in general. By the ambiguous use of the demonstrative and possessive in "For thogh this Somonour wood were as an hare,/To telle his harlotrye I wol nat spare" (III 1327-28), he ascribes the qualities of his fictitious summoner to his fellow pilgrim. As Beichner says, the pilgrim Summoner rises to the bait of the implicit ambiguity, "interrupts and includes himself in the application,"[4] a reaction which doubtless gives the Friar satisfaction and his audience enjoyment. During his notatio, the Friar introduces other devices which will support the relationships significant to his attack. Several critics have commented upon the pattern of hunting images in the tale, notably Richardson, who observes that while the summoner is in pursuit of his victim, the widow, he becomes himself the object of a far more effective hunter, the devil.[5] Since the summoner's activities have already been associated with hunting by the first two hunting images, his ready alliance with another hunter casually met seems more plausible. Furthermore, the crux of this fictitious summoner's power is shown to be his wrongful use of the threat of Christ's curse, or excommunication, which anticipates the use of

[4] Paul E. Beichner, "Baiting the Summoner," MLQ, XXII (1961), 370.

[5] Janette Richardson, Blameth Nat Me (The Hague, 1970), pp.73-85.

cursing and its significance in the denouement. Finally, the Friar hints at the point of theology upon which rests the moral of his tale, and at the same time reveals the scholar in himself. Speaking of the summoner's practice of extortion, he says, "And for that was the fruyt of al his rente,/Therfore on it he sette al his entente" (III 1373-74). In discussing the repetition of the word "entente" and its significance to this tale, Passon says that in Chaucer's usage "entente" defines moral culpability and, ironically, "entente" cannot be ferreted out by the ecclesiastical courts with their summoners.[6] Having secured a proper emotional tension in his audience by associating the fictitious and the pilgrim summoners and creating antipathy for the two through his insulting and unpleasant portrayal of the fictitious summoner, the Friar is able to fulfil his promise to make the folk laugh, principally by means of comic irony and comic repetition.

The first dramatically presented scene of this tale is the debate between the summoner and the yeoman-fiend, wherein the summoner is drawn by greed and curiosity into sworn brotherhood with the agent of Satan. The relationship between the two is actually one of dull student and learned master, one that permits full play to the summoner's repetitive obsession with semblance, and allows the fiend a small joke at the summoner's expense; that he will learn of fiends' "privitee", not from an authority such as his yeoman-brother, but by his own experience in hell, where he will know "Moore than a maister of dyvynytee" (III 1638). The summoner, as disciple of the fiend,

[6] Richard H. Passon, "'Entente' in Chaucer's Friar's Tale," ChauR, II (1968), 166-171.

is evidently quite incapable of engaging in logical disputation with his master because he is too stupid or too imperceptive, as the master realizes when he says, ". . .thy wit is al to bare/To understonde" (III 1480-81). The art of learning by discussion is practised here in an absurdly one-sided debate that may tempt the audience to feel an amused superiority to such a slow learner. It seems as though the Friar is parodying scholastic dialectic, with which he as a "maister" is thoroughly familiar, and may also be parodying, by the incongruous inversion of characters, the relation between Christ and his disciples.

The comic effect of this tale depends, however, on the Friar's deliberate use of irony. By making his summoner into a distorted but recognizable image of the yeoman-fiend, the Friar focuses attention on the evil direction of his activities, while at the same time the summoner is never particularized, is never given a name. Implicitly he becomes a representative of his profession. The audience has to perceive that the yeoman is the figure of the hunting devil and the Friar provides help with the ambiguous location of the yeoman's "contree", drawing attention to the word, already used in his opening line, by having the yeoman say, "I am unknowen as in this contree" (III 1397). This is followed by an obvious clue when the yeoman tells the summoner that his dwelling is "fer in the north contree" (III 1413), traditional home of the devil. The audience could now be fairly sure of the yeoman-fiend's identity and could take a malicious pleasure in the summoner's situation as the hunter being hunted. Here the pattern of hunting images contributes to the irony because while the summoner recognizes a

fellow-huntsman he fails to recognize his fellow's prey. The Friar would hope that his audience has also perceived the relationship between two creatures previously unassociated, the pilgrim Summoner and the hunting devil. The way is now open for them to enjoy the fiend's mimicry, the word-play upon "feith" and "trouthe", and the repetition of oaths and the word "entente".

The most obvious aspect of the fiend's mimicry is his impersonation, first of a yeomen, then of a bailiff excusing with sad apology his inability to instruct his brother with "Som subtiltee" because conditions are so tough under his lord that he is reduced to the same dishonest means as the summoner—extortion. After he discloses his real identity, one cannot help but contrast his manner as a personification of evil with that of the summoner and conclude that the fiend has debased himself in the alliance. The Friar's use of effictio is skilful and provides evil incarnate with gentlemanly qualities. It is the discrepancy in value between the nature of their collections--one bailiff collecting money, the other souls--that makes the fiend's impersonation absurd and thoroughly degrades the summoner. The fiend also mimics, with ironic intent,[7] his sworn

[7] Passon, "'Entente' in Chaucer's Friar's Tale," 170, says of the value of the repetition of "entente" upon the irony of the tale: ". . .not only the summoner's greed, but his very own, confirmed 'entente' is related to his seizure by the devil. . . .It is ironically appropriate that the tale of the damnation of an officer of the law should be narrated with emphasis on a word which is, among other things, a technical legal term. Our sense of the appropriateness of the device is made even more complete when we realize that the Summoner of the pilgrimage, who is being attacked through the depiction of the summoner in the tale, is himself a man of considerable verbal pretension, with his drunken 'Questio, quid juris,' and his clumsy punning on 'preamble' and 'preambulacioun'."

brother's use of the word "entente". The summoner first uses the word in a false insinuation about his purpose:

> "Heere faste by," quod he, "is myn entente
> To ryden, for to reysen up a rente
> That longeth to my lordes duetee." (III 1389-91)

This allows the fiend to introduce the game of playing bailiff and to draw the parallel between them:

> "My purchas is th'effect of al my rente.
> Looke how thou rydest for the same entente
> To wynne good, thou rekkest nevere how." (III 1451-53)

The use of "good" is in itself ironic, but the comparison is more amusing in that he has told the truth and also shown the summoner how much he resembles a fiend. The summoner's failure to see this manifest truth allows the fiend to comment on the shortness of his wit and to pun on his own "entente": "I wol entende to wynnyng, if I may,/And nat entende oure wittes to declare" (III 1478-79). It also allows him a subtle comment upon the approaching climax of the tale when, in the same speech, he says of fiends' attacks upon a man:

> "Whan he withstandeth oure temptacioun,
> It is a cause of his savacioun,
> Al be it that it was nat oure entente." (III 1497-99)

The object lesson of the carter cursing his horses revolves around this word, the fiend concluding the lesson with an elucidation of the theological point that the word must accord with the intention which ironically foreshadows the summoner's final and fatal speech:

> "Nay, olde stot, that is nat myn entente,"
> Quod this somonour, "for to repente me
> For any thyng that I have had of thee." (III 1630-32)

Finally, having identified the yeoman as a fiend, the audience is able to enjoy the ambiguity in the pattern of oaths, the oath of brotherhood assuming a new perspective. The first oath of

the dialogue, "Depardieux", is uttered by the fiend and fixes attention upon the role-playing at bailiff by these two frauds. As Birney says, we can see the "irony of two deceivers swearing fidelity to each other and swearing it on their own sinister and undefined faiths."[8] What, really, is the truth the fiend means when he swears "by my trouthe"? When the fiend discloses his identity, the summoner involuntarily utters a blessing on him, "benedicite", that shows his insincerity and his misunderstanding, not only of "entente" in action but also in word. Just as he admits he is without conscience and has no moral sense, and as he is exclusively absorbed in appearances to the detriment of his understanding of the reality beside him, so he is unable to distinguish between the significance of words and their mere sound. The summoner is, unquestionably, a loose-mouthed fellow: the Friar makes this point with a striking simile:

> This somonour, which that was as ful of jangles,
> As ful of venym been thise waryangles,
> And evere enqueryng upon every thyng. (III 1407-09)

He further shows that unrestrained chatter leads to boasting. Not only does he boast that he will not be absolved of his sins, but later brags that he can give the fiend an example and allows himself a little irony at his visiting brother's expense, "But for thou kanst nat, as in this contree,/Wynne thy cost, taak heer ensample of me" (III 1579-80). Mroczkowski has shown how this weakness has led the summoner into vice, and doubtless the Friar's listeners were

[8] Earle Birney, "'After his Image'—The Central Ironies of the Friar's Tale," MS, XXI (1959), 24.

familiar with the symptoms of his case.[9]

The final scene of the tale constitutes the proof of the theology argued by the fiend, showing the effect of intention upon the force of a curse. Actually, the summoner is damned because he is unrepentant. He has learned nothing from his master, who understands the spirit of church law just as he understands the intent of oaths, and is concerned not so much with the forms of laws nor the forms of words as he is with their spirit. The Friar's conclusion to the story and his short prayer are doubly insulting, since they imply that, unlike the rest of mankind, summoners are made in the image of the devil, although his story has shown that the summoner is a shadowy and ineffectual image indeed! Moreover, as Beichner says:

> By asking the pilgrims to pray that summoners will repent—a good work which they could hardly oppose—he implicitly assumes that they concur in his opinion of summoners, namely, that they need to be prayed for, especially the pilgrim Summoner.[10]

[9] Przemyslaw Mroczkowski, "'The Friar's Tale' and its Pulpit Background," English Studies Today: 2nd Series (1959), (Berne, 1961): "The man, says the treatise of Vices and Vertues (E.E.T.S., 1942, p. 283), who does not control his tongue, 'he falleth lichtliche into thee/sic/ hondes of his enemys, that ben the deueles of helle'; the tongue is the gate of his castle and 'the deuel, that werreth the castle of the herte, whan he fyndeth the grete gate up, that is the mouth, he taketh lichtliche the castel'; and Peraldus states that 'unless the tongue is diligently watched, it rages in the first place against its master' (Liber ij, Tractatus ix, de peccato lingue, pars i, F° ccviij.)(113).

"In itself boasting, iactantia, one of the vices of the tongue, is already a great sin which makes of man God's thief (arrogating the glory due to Him): such is the case made by the author of Vices and Vertues (p. 56). Things get very much worse if it is sin that is the object of boasting; and such is our summoner's case"(115).

[10] Beichner, "Baiting the Summoner", 376.

The homily upon the nature of hell in the Friar's epilogue is a type of abscisionem such as one might expect from a "maister", refusing to expand but suggesting a great deal of learning by quoting exemplary figures and Scripture. This is, of course, a form of boasting which the enraged pilgrim Summoner immediately notices and he takes advantage of his opponent's vanity with a scurrilous riposte:

> This Frere bosteth that he knoweth helle,
> And God it woot, that it is litel wonder;
> Freres and feendes been but lyte asonder. (III 1672-74)

In his exemplum to this sentence he employs the topos of the descensus ad inferos in order to support the pilgrim Friar's pretension to special knowledge of hell and to deride all friars' claims to special grace. Green says that in the Friar's Tale Chaucer uses this topos to contrast the moral descent into hell taken by Virgil and Dante with the magic evocation of evil and the descent of vice made by the summoner.[11] The pilgrim Summoner in his Prologue parodies this type of moral descent by telling of a friar who is carried to hell in a vision, and suggests that he will inevitably make the descent of vice, since "the develes ers. . .is his heritage of verray kynde" (III 1705-06). Some of the tension created in the audience by the Summoner's angry outburst at the end of the Friar's tale would be released in laughter at this scurrility. But as the Summoner begins with such an attack, his listeners could

[11] Richard Hamilton Green, "Classical Fable and English Poetry in the Fourteenth Century," Critical Approaches to Medieval Literature, ed. Dorothy Bethurum (New York, 1960), pp. 127-128.

only expect that he will continue with a lewd tale and they are not held long in doubt.

The pilgrim Summoner cannot have missed the parody of scholastic debate in the Friar's tale, and he is quick to seize upon the pilgrim Friar's flaunting of scholarship in order to reverse the situation, creating an extremely imperceptive "maister" who learns a lesson in scholarly argument from a rude layman and a quick-witted squire. What the Summoner reveals through the whole tale is that the "maister" is unskilled at debate, relying for effect upon sheer volume of words and perverted glossing, and this is publicly confirmed at the conclusion by the squire. Just as the Friar has done, the Summoner opens his tale with a notatio that describes a fraudulent friar and introduces the devices upon which his attack is based. A brief example of the friar's preaching in church shows that he is motivated by cupidity, and also betrays his hostility towards the beneficed clergy and his preoccupation with ideas of "physical" distribution and haste. The remainder of the notatio conveys a sense of the hurry and busyness of the friar's activities and suggests the perfunctory attention he gives to his duties, while demonstrating his unctuous address to convey the sense of fraternal tie with those from whom he begs. Nor does the Summoner overlook the word-play on "entente" and its significance in the Friar's tale, for he echoes the Friar's phrase, first showing that the intention of his hypocritical friar's sermon is not to explicate the Scriptures but to beg, then putting the phrase in the friar's mouth th draw attention to his falsity:

> . . .in prechyng is my diligence,
> And studie in Petres wordes and in Poules.
> I walke, and fisshe Cristen mennes soules,
> To yelden Jhesu Crist his proper rente;
> To sprede his word is set al myn entente. (III 1818-22)

The transition to his narrative again displays the friar's flattery through his opening words to Thomas, also his self-satisfaction in complacently accepting from a churl the title "maister", later to be disclaimed mock-modestly at the lord's manor.

Just as the Friar has done, the Summoner uses comic irony and comic repetition in order to ridicule both the fictive friar and his own antagonist. The heart of the tale,the friar's shapeless sermon, is preceded by a discussion among the friar, Thomas and his wife which is used to provide the theme for the sermon and to develop some of the implications of the notatio, principally the association of the friar's manner of "glosynge" with the motif of his lying and fraudulence. His hostility towards curates and his parade of learning is also amplified through his claim to greater diligence in preaching and study of the Scriptures, and his affected use of French. The two similes elaborating the wife's complaint of her husband's anger, "He is as angry as a pissemyre" (III 1825) and "He groneth lyk oure boor, lith in oure sty" (III 1829), foreshadow the enraged reaction of the friar to Thomas's insulting gift: "He looked as it were a wilde boor;/He grynte with his teeth, so was he wrooth" (III 2060-61). They also provide the theme of anger for the friar's sermon. Here, too, the Summoner foreshadows ironically the climax of the tale through the friar's metaphorical use of the verb "grope": it is his vulgar groping at Thomas's tail, rather than his conscience,

that reveals the depth of the friar's cupidity and his own need of "shrift". Finally, the friar's outrageous lie in asserting that he had received an "avision" of the death of the couple's child shows the Summoner indulging his satire fully.

The brief sample of preaching in the notatio gives only a hint of the friar's habitual wordiness, and his long sermon to Thomas is a parody of a mendicant friar's preaching technique. Instead of the typical form of a sermon, opening with a text from the Bible which is interpreted, or glossed, and illustrated by quotation of authorities or relating of exempla, concluding with a summary, the friar lumps together an encomium on the worth of friars because of their abstinence compared to gluttony and worthlessness of beneficed clergy, a demand for constancy in alms-giving, and an exhortation against anger with a series of exempla which, as Robertson says, he misinterprets.[12] There is no text, but he quotes authoritative figures abundantly and all his "glosynge" is directed not towards interpretation but to his own avaricious ends. The whole unstructured monologue reveals his indifference to the proper demands of his vocation. It ends with a request that Thomas confess himself, disclosing that the friar is not only busily prying into every house to beg, but that he is eager to insinuate himself into men's souls.

12 Robertson, p. 273: ". . .instead of illustrating the disadvantages of wrath to the wrathful man himself, they show the dangers of associating with wrathful persons, especially those with any power. . .The exempla have no relevance to Thomas, who only becomes more wrathful at what he hears, but they do apply to the friar, who is associating with a wrathful man while he is telling them. He soon has occasion to learn the lesson of his own stories in a striking way, becomes very wrathful himself, and suffers the consequences of 'singing Placebo' once too often when the lord's squire decides his fate."

The Summoner also invites ridicule of his fictive friar through dramatic irony. That part of the sermon on abstinence and against gluttony in clerics follows immediately on the friar's own portrayal of greed by the dinner he requests. Similarly, he has scarcely concluded his exhortation against anger when he displays this emotion after receiving Thomas's gift. Finally, he cautions Thomas, "of me thou shalt nat been yflattered" (III 1970), but depicts the essence of unctuousness by insisting on a literal brotherhood with his benefactors, sealed with a letter of fraternity. Throughout his discourse Friar John indulges a penchant for word-play and the practice has become so habitual that the Summoner allows him to pun both intentionally and unconsciously, establishing a repetitive pattern of ambiguities. In this way, relationships are made between the friar's conscious word-play and his actions:

> "Fro paradys first, if I shal nat lye,
> Was man out chaced for his glotonye;
> And chaast was man in Paradys, certeyn." (III 1915-17)

> His meynee, whiche that herden this affray,
> Cam lepynge in and chaced out the frere: (III 2156-57)

On the other hand, the puns in "What is a ferthyng worth parted in twelve" (III 1967) and "Thou shalt me fynde as just as is a squyre" (III 2090) are unconscious and become more comic at the tale's conclusion. In the exchange between the friar and Thomas following the sermon, the Summoner intensifies the comic effect with figurative language that shows the animalistic nature of the two men's responses, first, of Thomas when addressing the friar:

> Amydde his hand he leet the frere a fart,
> Ther nys no capul, drawynge in a cart,
> That myghte have lete a fart of swich a soun.(III 2149-51)

This is matched by the similes in the friar's responding anger.

The friar's earlier busyness and haste are now mocked as he sets off, "A sturdy paas doun to the court" (III 2162) to the fulfillment of his exposure publicly by squire Jankyn. The whole of the concluding scene quivers with the scarcely contained laughter of the court. As Birney says, "Though they dare not, for gentility's sake, laugh openly at this 'cherles dede', their suppressed amusement is audible in their silences."[13] This private amusement is portrayed by the Summoner's own punning in the persona of the lord, who greets Friar John with "Ye been the salt of the erthe and the savour" (III 2196), but having heard the nature of the "despit" and the friar's own sophistical distortion of it, in his own mind wonders at the physical problem of its division:

> Who sholde make a demonstracion
> That every man sholde have yliche his part
> As of the soun or savour of a fart? (III 2224-26)

And the answer is, squire Jankyn, who can take an explosive situation and by the clever use of words convert it to an amusing game.

What the Summoner shows with the ambiguities of meaning in the use of word-play and with the friar's specious glossing is that the same language may be used for both divine and demonic ends. The friar claims to speak with the inspiration of the Logos but what he demonstrates is a willingness to distort meaning by quibbling. The Summoner's joke then is directed at this demonic rhetoric because he implies that what comes from the friar is inspired from the figurative heritage of all friars, the devil's arse. Furthermore,

[13] Earle Birney, "Structural Irony within the Summoner's Tale," Anglia, LXXVIII (1960), 217.

the exposure by Thomas and Jankyn betrays the literalist, who claims to "glose" the Scripture's literal meaning by reason of his special insight into the secrets of God, clinging inflexibly to the physical rather than the figurative side of words in his narrow understanding.

The two tales are connected by the argument between their narrators. In the conflict between the Friar and the Summoner, each aims to destroy the other in the eyes of his fellow pilgrims, although anger is channelled into a ritualized combat of words, their vicious stories intending to destroy through ridicule. One effect of this display of anger is to generate emotional tension, even anxiety, in the audience. Such tension is released partly by pleasure in seeing the degradation of these scoundrels: two hypocrites showing professional jealousy towards each other, both guilty of extortion and of gulling the people they should serve. The listener feels pleasantly superior while listening to one ridicule the other so that there is a comic relation between the audience and the two narrators because of the quarrel between the pair. The narrators are also consciously ironic at each other's expense. But by attacking the other, each unconsciously exposes his own as well as his opponent's fraudulence. Revenge reveals to the world each one's private sin, showing that he already lacks the grace of God, and baring him to public disgrace. They are therefore unwittingly ridiculing themselves, allowing the audience the pleasure of dramatic irony, and of the perception of the contrast between actuality as opposed to what their behaviour ought to be.

What enables them to give free play to their own perverse

values is the strife existing within the institution of the church between its secular clergy and the mendicant orders: a paradox, because the church's teachings should have the opposite effect, purifying their values and leading them to work in harmony. The quarrel and the juxtaposition of the tales comment indirectly upon the conventions of the church as an authority in the society—the upholder of tradition and the educator of men—showing that as a human institution the church always lies in danger of succumbing to the weakness of man's nature. The parody upon scholastic dialectic and debate reveals the sometimes sterile effect of its manner of education. All four characters, fictitious and pilgrim summoners and friars, abuse the forms of ritual and of the words of faith as their means to evil living and so distort the true spirit of the Logos. They bind themselves wholly to an ideology of appearances, rather than being free to understand the significance of the church's teaching and its justice. In this way, the members of the church may pervert the meaning of the Logos by scholastic argument that introduces incongruity between the moral and the figurative use of language, just as by claiming to administer the distribution of God's word and grace they may fall into the ridiculous problem of deciding how these may be distributed equally among men. Finally, the vicious use of language by these two professed upholders of the Christian faith shows, as Merrill says, the comedy of their posing as moralists.[14] This is comedy aimed at ridiculing a lack of self-knowledge. The tales become a wry comment upon man's propensity for

[14] Thomas F. Merrill, "Wrath and Rhetoric in 'The Summoner's Tale'," TSLL, IV (1962), 346.

ordering and binding his perception by words, an essentially transient form, rather than freeing his perception boundlessly. That Chaucer was sensitive to the transient nature of language is shown in the Prologue to Book II of Troilus and Criseyde, in which the narrator apologizes for his translation, reminding his reader that the form of speech changes with time:

> Ye knowe ek that in forme of speche is chaunge
> Withinne a thousand yeer, and wordes tho
> That hadden pris, now wonder nyce and straunge
> Us thinketh hem. (II 22-25)

The Reeve is a "cherl" and not an officer of the church but his narrative tone and his motivation strongly resemble those of the Friar and the Summoner: he is motivated primarily by revenge, and his method is to ridicule by means of conscious irony and parody, inviting the audience to feel malicious pleasure and a sense of superiority. Tension is aroused in his listeners when the Reeve angrily rebukes the Miller for demanding to tell a tale that will evidently be "of synne and harlotries":

> Stynt thy clappe!
> Lat be thy lewed dronken harlotrye.
> It is a synne and eek a greet folye
> To apeyren any man or hym defame. (I 3144-47)

Although the Miller means no personal offense to the Reeve, he grumbles at the end of the Miller's tale because he feels that it was aimed at him in scorn, and he promises to "quite" the Miller in his own "cherles termes". Aiming his ridicule at the pilgrim Miller through his fictive miller, Osewold makes his tale an exemplum of a sententia based upon Scripture: "He kan wel in myn eye seen a stalke,/But in his owene he kan nat seen a balke." (I 3919-20). The

whole tale has a balanced effect that supports his theme of retributive justice. His characterizations are strongly biased and the two main events of his plot are shown to occur because of the nature of the characters. As Dempster says, dramatic irony is the essence of the plot which shows a deceiver deceived,[15] and according to Richardson structural irony is created by the use of imagery that establishes a parallel between the two scenes of subterfuge of the tale: the connexion is made by images of animalistic sexual instinct, in the first scene through the stallion pursuing the wild mares, and in the second through the unbridling of sexual inhibitions in the two clerks.[16] But it is the Reeve's conscious verbal irony, even sarcasm, that projects the force of his ridicule. His monkish appearance, sharp rebuke of Robin's lewdness as sinful, and the preaching tone of his Prologue all reveal his clerical bias, so that the religious overtones of his tale are almost inevitable. The ironic comments upon the corrupt parson of the town crystallize into sarcastic adnominatio:

> For hooly chirches good moot been despended
> On hooly chirches blood, that is descended.
> Therfore he wolde his hooly blood honoure,
> Though that he hooly chirche sholde devoure. (I 3983-86)

By debasing liturgical language in a parody of Compline, his attack becomes a mockery of the parson's hypocrisy, as well as of the social pretensions of the miller and his wife. Also, the Reeve uses two "clerkes" to degrade the upstart miller who has ridiculed clerks' cleverness with arguments.

15 Dempster, p. 28.

16 Richardson, pp. 89-90.

The Reeve's attack betrays unconscious irony, however, in the relationship between his expressed and his unwitting intention. He is a man who constantly bears a chip on his shoulder, but sees himself as a type of eiron, a clever underdog exposing the boastful Miller who is blind to his own sins. Olson has shown that the Reeve's technique is to disguise revenge as justice: by cloaking personal retribution in the garment of objective moral comment, he is able to pretend that he is concerned not so much with retaliation as with evil itself. In doing this, he makes a mistake. The morality which he announces is more applicable to him than to his victim. His Prologue and Tale, and the treatment of him in the General Prologue and Miller's Prologue all concern themselves with the anomalous position of the judge who unconsciously judges himself by his own principles.[17] The Reeve's self-righteous confession probably conceals the sin of envy. He himself has risen in social status from carpenter to the more powerful and lucrative position of reeve. Yet quickness to take offence suggests that he is dissatisfied and grudges others their success. His distinctly clerical manner indicates the direction of his aspirations. The final target of his rancour is the town parson who is dishonest with church property, just as the Reeve is dishonest with his lord's property, so that there is a parallel between their positions. The difference, of course, is that the parson has power over the spiritual lives of men, a prerogative the Reeve evidently would enjoy, as we may see from

17 Paul A. Olson, "The Reeve's Tale: Chaucer's Measure for Measure," SP, LIX (1962), 1-17.

his sanctimonious censure of Robin. Even more than of revenge for an imagined insult, he is guilty of envy and of vain pride which is the very sin he attacks in Symkyn. The comic resolution of this tale not only shows a social group rejuvenated, but ridicules the Reeve who is an unwitting critic of himself because he lacks self-knowledge.

The Friar, the Summoner and the Reeve as fictitious narrators are granted a measure of personality because of the nature of their motivation and the immoral disposition that they embody. Each wants to be avenged upon a fellow pilgrim and allows his emotions to dominate him while exacting retribution, so that the tale-telling contest is overshadowed by personal vindictiveness. Other narrators, such as the Nun's Priest, are not engaged in emotional conflict with their fellows and tell their tales with a wish to entertain their audience and enjoy the game. Because of their emotional detachment, they seem not so much rounded characters as evocations, or incarnations of ideas. There are, however, several pilgrims who are in conflict, not with another pilgrim, but with a social convention or a concept. Such a one is the Merchant who is in conflict with women in general and "wyves cursedness". Hence his theme is, like that of the Wife of Bath, "of wo that is in mariage" (III 3). As Robertson says, "in the Merchant's Tale the fool's paradise advocated by the wife in her tale is fully exposed for what it is when an old man seeks to make of marriage a lecherous paradise on earth."[18] The Merchant differs from the Wife, however, in refusing to relate his own experience in marriage, and tells instead a parable, typifying

[18] Robertson, p. 376

disorder as it is portrayed in a marriage in which physical lust overrides spiritual well-being, in a mind in which fantasy overrides reason, and in a daydream of the universe in which nature overrides the supernatural, allowing a recreation of paradise on earth. Disorder is not personified, as we might expect, in a wife but in a husband. The Merchant's Prologue partly explains this choice: he sees himself as a dupe of marriage and so is in conflict with himself, a conflict which arises from his disillusionment with his own marriage and is projected by means of his disdain for Januarie who refuses to see the corruption of his marriage. This attitude of the Merchant is expressed in sarcastic gestures towards Januarie's folly and reveals an unusual combination of roles. He is both eiron as a self-deprecator and exposer of vice and folly, and agroikos, not as reason personified like Justinus, but as a gull who has become a malcontent and rails against women and self-deceiving old men.

As with the Wife of Bath's and the Manciple's Tales, the world of the Merchant's Tale is affected by authorial comment. The amount is not disproportionate as in the Manciple's Tale, for the narrator intrudes upon the action even less than does the Wife in her tale. The Prologue to the Merchant's Tale is brief, but like those of the Wife and the Manciple it is a confession and reveals some motivation for the intrusions and the tone of his narrative. It also serves to link the ostensible subject of the tale—a discussion of wives and marriage—with the same subject in the Clerk's and Wife's tales. Finally, the vehemence of the Merchant's denunciation of wedlock and his claim to be able to "Tellen so muchel sorwe as I now

heere/Koude tellen of my wyves cursednesse!" (IV 1238-39) after only two months of wedded life, serves to rouse his listeners' interest and feelings. His method is like the Reeve's, to ridicule by means of conscious irony and parody, but his posture is one of ironic naivete. Much has been said concerning the various forms of irony in this tale,[19] but the quality given to its tone is best explained by Muscatine who says, "Negation, perversion, are characteristic of the narrative tone. . .the narrator, as in the Reeve's Tale, is both prominent and unsympathetic."[20] As a result of this unsympathetic tone and the brief but frequent intrusions by the Merchant, his audience is firmly distanced from the world of the tale. He gives a comic edge to this tone of negation by parody, the use of which is a kind of perversion of order. It is applied to the language of courtly love and also to scriptural language and themes.

William Main has drawn attention to the pun on "lechour" in the line spoken by Pluto, "Lo, where he sit, the lechour, in the tree!" during the passage wherein he determines to cure Januarie's physical blindness (IV 2257-61). Main suggests that the word may be taken to mean either lecher or, in its second medieval sense, healer or doctor. May interprets her act with Damyan to her husband as

19 Germaine Dempster in Dramatic Irony in Chaucer discusses very fully the dramatic irony of the tale. J.A. Burrow's article, "Irony in the Merchant's Tale," Anglia, LXXV (1957), 199-208, suggests that a "generalizing impulse (characteristic of allegory) exists side by side. . .with the ironic or satiric impulse (characteristic of fabliau), which tends to isolate its object and particularize it. . . .The irony is controlled. . .by a recognition that January's case illustrates general human weakness"(208).

20 Muscatine, pp. 231-232.

healing:[21]

> As me was taught, to heele with youre eyen,
> Was no thyng bet, to make yow to see,
> Than strugle with a man upon a tree. (IV 2372-74)

The Merchant has imputed her "healing" in part to the nature of the tree, which is the enchanted pear tree of the folk tales. Thompson briefly relates the motif:

> The wife makes the husband, who has either seen the adultery from the tree, or has surprised the wife and her paramour, believe that the tree is magic or that he has seen double,or has had an illusion.[22]

But the "lechour" in the tree conjures another image, that of the healer who was hung on a tree to cure the sins of mankind. Christ spoke of himself as a healer and by his curing of the physically ill prefigured the role he would play as spiritual healer of mankind. Underlying the farcical conclusion to this tale is a parody of the crucifixion with Damyan, as a figure for Christ, apparently healing another "lechour's" blindness. The image sends reveberations throughout the tale. Richardson, who has traced the patterns of imagery associated with Januarie's physical and spiritual blindness, the garden, and the tree with its fruit, says that it is for the purpose of conveying the theme of fatal spiritual blindness that Chaucer has incorporated the religious overtones on every possible level, so that even the most casual reader of the tale cannot fail to notice its violent juxtaposition of the holy and the unholy.

[21] William W. Main, "Chaucer's The Merchant's Tale, 2257-2261," Explicator, XIV (1955), item 13.

[22] Stith Thompson, Motif-Index of Folk-Literature, 2nd ed. (Bloomington, Indiana, 1958), item K 1518.

Speaking of the pear-tree episode, she says:

> The importance of this final scene in relation to the moral import of the tale is enhanced by its embodiment of the story of Eden. . . .January's spiritual blindness, and all the sins of pride, presumption, and lechery which accompany it, can be remedied only by a true knowledge of good and evil which will enable him to forsake his mortally fallacious concepts. Yet when the fruit is plucked from the tree of sin, January, unlike Adam, does not gain this knowledge. . . .The paradise which he has hoped to achieve through marriage, here, in his garden which reproduces the earthly paradise, becomes hell: for, by his refusal to see the truth, he damns himself completely. . . .Pluto and Proserpine,..however metamorphosed they are into the medieval king and queen of fairy, are nonetheless the traditional rulers of Hades. Hell exists in paradise on every level in this final scene.[23]

The tree, therefore, symbolizes the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and also the cross. Pluto, god of the underworld, is only capable of restoring physical sight. It is the healer Christ who can cure spiritual blindness, but only for those who want to see, those who appeal to him or plead with his mother to show mercy and intercede on their behalf. Januarie's devotion is wholly given to May, however, and he is capable of recognizing only his physical blindness. The Merchant represents the gesture of pleading through the Stabat Mater by means of a "merciful" May coupling in adultery with the man upon the tree. His parody of courtly love and the divine converge at the pear tree in a singularly degrading image of womankind, an image that is as unrealistic in its opposite extremity as the Clerk's portrayal of Grisilde.

There is an incongruous parallel between the situations of these two pilgrims. Both are replying to the Wife of Bath's tale. This we see from the conclusion to the Clerk's tale, and from the

[23] Richardson, pp. 140-141.

anachronism in the Merchant's tale, in which Justinus refers to the Wife's discussion of marriage. The Clerk is an unworldly man in his devotion to scholarship, and his allegory of "pacient Grisilde" stems from a rigorous application of his beloved "logyk", unleavened by careful perception of ordinary women. The Merchant has some affinity with the merchant of the Shipman's Tale. He, too, has become a creature of his profession, entranced by the process of handling money, secretive about his business affairs but politic in his display of the businessman's mask. Both Clerk and Merchant are, therefore, monkishly absorbed in their affairs and reveal an unfamiliarity with and lack of understanding of women. Moreover, the Merchant's conflict with himself arises from disillusionment with his marriage, not only because of his distorted comprehension of its nature, but also from the same failing as his character Januarie, wilful blindness.

The Wife of Bath shows that she understands, better than the Friar and the Summoner, the effective use of words in argument, and her goal, while it is perverse, is not privately vicious. It is not aimed at destroying a fellow pilgrim but, like the Merchant's goal, at overthrowing a system of ideas. For this reason she invites the pleasurable sense of superiority we feel upon seeing another flout conventions. The intertwining of her Prologue and Tale with the dispute of the Friar and the Summoner draws attention to the relationships among these argumentative pilgrims, and especially to her anticlericalism. She is, in fact, an incarnation of the spirit of clerical anti-feminists' eloquence, and is prepared to use the

style of scholarly debate while turning it back upon the scholars who devised it, in conscious parody.

The Wife begins her Tale with an extended sententia which seems to digress from her theme, and apparently illustrates the point that "lymytours" or friars, very properly, have made the land safe by removing the fairies through their "charitee and prayeres". Her description of the friars' activities is as hyperbolic as her erotic simile for their numbers, "As thikke as motes in the sonne-beem" (III 868): it is so exaggerated as to be deeply suspect, especially in view of the pilgrim Friar's recent comment on her garrulity. Her audience may surmise her intention before the thrust in the last sentence of the sententia, "Ther is noon oother incubus but he,/ And he ne wol doon hem but dishonour" (III 880-881), yet when it is revealed it is still mildly shocking. Her purpose is achieved with understatement, in particular litotes, that depends upon the catachresis in the use of the word "incubus". She has drawn a relationship between fairies and friars by suggesting that the latter have replaced the former and this, she says, is to women's advantage because friars have also replaced the incubi. We may assume from her previous use of hyperbole that she is implying an admirable state of affairs now exists. But the ambiguity in her use of the word "incubus" is revealed in the understatement of the final line: in replacing the incubi, the friars have merely assumed their special activities. It becomes obvious during her narrative that the theme of the sententia is part of the theme of her tale—that in the days of King Arthur if a reprobate knight assaulted a woman the fairies would

teach him a lesson, but now, if a friar dishonours a woman there are none to teach him a lesson because the friars have rid the land of fairies, and so they are free to assault women without restraint. When we recall that many friars were clerks, it is possible to see that the Wife is continuing the battle with clerks begun in her Prologue: she has regarded the Friar's comment on her garrulity as a verbal assault, and responding in kind has vocally "hitte hym on the cheke".

She wittingly engages in scholastic dialectic when she opens her Prologue with a text, and a parody of a sermon. She is evidently familiar with proper dispositio, beginning in stylistic elegance with her own sententia, developing it with considerable amplification and occasional abbreviation, and ending her performance by one of the preferred forms, an exemplum, which is her tale.[24] With such a provocative opening text, "Experience, though noon auctoritee/Were in this world, is right ynogh for me/To speke of wo that is in mariage" (III 1-3), she is assured of the whole attention of her contemporary audience and the arousal of their feelings. She can then plunge into her long digression on bigamy and virginity, anticipating and forestalling possible condemnation of her five marriages by the clerks in her audience. Her sermon is not only a

[24] Edmond Faral, Les Arts Poétiques du XII^e et du XIII^e Siècle (Paris, 1923), pp. 55-56, in discussing proper dispositio in narrative works, quotes several lines from the Ars poetica of Horace on elegance of order, for which a commentator in the age of Alcuin furnished the following detailed explanations: "Nam sententia talis est : quicumque promittit se facturum bonum carmen et lucidum habere ordinem, amet artificialem ordinem et spernat naturalem. Omnis ordo naturalis aut artificialis est."

her opening sermon through her scriptural allusions, by implication conveying meanings that rival the glossing of the Summoner's friar in divergence from the spirit of the Scriptures, while in the description of her past life her allusion to her sexual activities is mostly by implication. The whole monologue is leavened by her conscious delight in word-play.

The comic element in this parody of scholarly debate is achieved principally by transposing scholastic style and ideas into an altogether different environment from what is customary to her audience. It has the same effect as the use of the mock-heroic in the Nun's Priest's Tale, one of comic incongruity. And despite her apology following the Pardoner's interruption, which concludes, "For myn entente is nat but for to pleye" (III 192), her "entente" is not just to speak freely for her own pleasure and the pilgrims' entertainment, nor "to pleye" only in amorous dalliance; she also intends to dally with clerks by means of language. In this respect, her parody is at the clerks' expense, because she intends to ridicule both their style and their anti-feminism. Her revelation of her own behaviour and character through her confession shows her to be the embodiment of their traditional descriptions of monstrous woman, hence she is a burlesque herself of anti-feminist conventions. Of course, she is also ridiculing her husbands in the narration of her conflicts with them. She rails against men in general, is outspoken for her moral position which she contrasts with the absurd behaviour of man and his rhetorical mannerisms. This is obviously a distorted version of the duel of the sexes in which the Wife

fascinating transformation of the typical clerical exegesis,[25] but is a fine example of the device of expolitio, or expansion of her idea by amassing of authorities. After the Pardoner's interruption to praise her as a "noble prechour", the Wife restates and amplifies her text:

> And whan that I have toold thee forth my tale
> Of tribulacioun in mariage,
> Of which I am expert in al myn age,
> This is to seyn, myself have been the whippe (III 172-175)

She then illustrates it primarily by means of description of her husbands and her several marriages. This amplification is in itself augmented with her remarkable apostrophe on her lost youth and beauty, and by digressions on the astrological influences upon her character, on books and clerks, and on her "dames loore", in the last of which she loses her train of thought entirely. Her use of digression is carried over into her tale, which she breaks for two substantial amplifications, one upon what women most desire and the other, through the persona of the old hag, on "gentilesse", poverty, and age. Periphrases and parentheses are employed repeatedly, and her whole report of the speeches of her dead husbands is an example of effictio, although the dead do not speak directly, but, as Muscatine says, their masculine abuse is represented as the Wife's invention of what they said.[26] She uses abbreviation effectively in

[25] Robertson discusses the Wife's manner of exegesis, saying: "Her conclusions turn out to be considerably at variance with those of received authority, which she does not hesitate to quote. Where the Scriptures are concerned, her empirical attitude is, as we might expect, a very carnal one"(318). "Alisoun of Bath is not a 'character' in the modern sense at all, but an elaborate iconographic figure designed to show the manifold implications of an attitude"(330).

[26] Muscatine, p. 211.

embodies both the celibant male's concept of woman, and woman emulating the male scholarly role. As Shumaker points out, the Wife uses the stock-in-trade of every good medieval student and, as a blue-stocking, is quite as thoroughly at home among classical and patristic authors as Chaucer was himself.[27] Medieval society did not permit the practical equality of the sexes which would allow a true duel--either woman was subservient to man or man played a courtly subservience to woman through the ritual of fin' amor. The Wife recognizes the value of the courtly love scheme as support for her theme of feminine sovereignty when she uses it in her tale. Once the errant bachelor knight is handed over to the Queen's court of love and becomes, therefore, subservient to woman, he is educated to a proper humility and reformed according to the Wife's moral standards. This is, says Miller, the Wife's final thrust at "clerkes". The logic of her Loathly Lady is as rigorous as that of any schoolman. The knight's predicament is a comic inversion of a clerical problem, the enforced celibacy of a young religious. Instead of an unwilling commitment to chastity, we are given the picture of a youth perforce committed to marriage. The young celibant must learn that the apprehensions of the sensual will are illusions which are dispelled by the light of reason when he has achieved the denial of his corrupt will in Obedience. Obedience is the culminating issue of the Wife's exemplum, but in her scheme the delights presented to the sensual will (or 'worldly appetit') are

27 Wayne Shumaker, "Alisoun in Wander-land: A Study in Chaucer's Mind and Literary Method," ELH, XVIII (1951), 87.

true: the vision of clerks produces the illusions.[28]

The Wife's position in relation to her audience, among whom are several "clerkes", is incongruous. A promiscuous woman devoted to "worldly appetit" and a tamer of five husbands looking for her sixth, she is making a confession of her philosophy of marriage and offering advice to wives on how to master their husbands to a group of men and two celibant women. Since she is forever prepared with "purveiance/Of mariage" (III 570-1), it is possible that her sixth husband might well be among the pilgrims. The Wife's behaviour is inappropriate to the received attitudes of her society, but just as in the Nun's Priest's Tale Pertelote embodies the qualities of human wife and fowl, so Alisoun embodies the qualities of human wife and monstrous parody. Her audience sees a creature composed of two different points-of-view, one, the habitual associations made for her from the anti-feminist pulpit, the other, the daily associations made by men who customarily live with women. What Alisoun sees of herself is revealed in part by her own words:

> For trusteth wel, it is an impossible
> That any clerk wol speke good of wyves,
> But if it be of hooly seintes lyves,
> Ne of noon oother womman never the mo.
> Who peyntede the leon, tel me who?
> By God! if woomen hadde writen stories,
> As clerkes han withinne hire oratories,
> They wolde han writen of men moore wikkednesse
> Than al the mark of Adam may redresse. (III 688-696)

Apart from her use of the word "impossible", implying that such an attempt by a "clerk" would be sophistical, the Wife argues that women

[28] Robert P. Miller, "The Wife of Bath's Tale and Mediaeval Exempla," ELH, XXXII (1965), 442-456.

only seem evil because "clerkes" have depicted them as wicked, just as she has implied, in her outburst of regret several moments earlier "Allas! allas! that evere love was synne!" (III 614), that love is only sin because "clerkes" have made it so. Once again she says that she behaves as she does because she was created under the influence of certain planets. This is, of course, a rejection of the Christian concept of free will, and from the Christian point-of-view it is unconscious self-criticism. She abandons her faith in divine Providence when she blames her affliction on the stars.

If the bachelor knight's predicament is a comic inversion of the clerical problem of enforced celibacy, then the Wife exposes the dilemma that celibacy could cause for schoolmen: the means of control of the sensual will. Apparently their frailty in the face of sexual torments could be borne either by writing about the erotic, or by suppressing the erotic in writing about the wickedness of women. In this way the Wife achieves a double parody. The clerical anti-feminist conventions are seen in a new light, as well as the transposed conventions of scholastic debate. Such a challenge could not pass undisputed by a "clerke", and the pilgrim Clerk responds with a guarded yet outrageous rebuke, first telling a tale of a perfect wife, and then in his conclusion seeming to agree with the Wife's theme while managing to imply that, like the "olde wyf" of her tale, the Wife of Bath's ethic is fool's gold, or evil as the illusion of good.

Unlike the Wife of Bath, the Miller does not openly intrude upon the world of his tale, nor, like the Friar and the Summoner,

does he use the tale for malicious attack. He does attempt to "quite" the Knight's Tale, matching ritualized love and conflict with a parody that is carnal and unceremonious. The "gentilesse" and "largesse" of Theseus are reduced to prudent kindliness in John and foppish manners in Absolon. The Miller clearly ridicules the folly and vices of John, Nicholas and Absolon, and Robertson feels that the humorous as opposed to the merely farcical element in the tale is due entirely to the theological background, the theme of the three temptations, lechery, pride and covetousness, appearing as a framework for the tale.[29] The emotions of the pilgrims seem disturbed at the outburst of the Miller and the Reeve following the Knight's Tale. The Host has scarcely expressed his pleasure that "the game is wel bigonne" and asked the Monk for a tale to "quite" the Knight's, when the drunken Miller loudly and discourteously insists upon telling his "noble" tale. No polite appeal from the Host will prevent him. He playfully promises to:

> . . .telle a legende and a lyf
> Both of a carpenter and of his wyf,
> How that a clerk hath set the wrightes cappe. (I 3141-43)

This provokes real anger and a rebuke from the Reeve, which the Miller hardly mollifies. Thus the Miller's rejection of the Host's control of the game reveals an insolent rebelliousness in his character although he is without spite. From the description in the General Prologue we know that the Miller looks like a clown, with a great mouth full of lewd chatter: just the type of foil that can match a master of revels in buffoonery, although he will always give

[29] Robertson, pp. 382-386.

offense to the Reeve's austerity. Robert Miller has argued that the Miller's outburst reveals his antagonism towards his temporal and spiritual lords whose place he comically usurps with chivalric buffoonery and his "pastoral" advice to "leve brother Osewold".[30] The tone of the advice is, of course, mimicry of the Reeve's preaching tone of rebuke as much as it is taunting of the clergy, and his antagonism is shown more in the spirit of "game" than in rancour. But the short sententia with which he concludes his advice, offered seemingly in drunken jest, provides the theme of his tale:

> An housbonde shal nat been inquisityf
> Of Goddes pryvetee, nor of his wyf.
> So he may fynde Goddes foyson there,
> Of the remenant nedeth nat enquere. (I 3163-66)

The principal subject of his tale is not the cuckolding of a carpenter but adultery in love both sacred and profane.

Parody is the Miller's foremost means for "quitting" the Knight's Tale but it is not limited to transposing the courtly love and chivalry of the Knight's world to the provincial environment of Oxford. As Robertson says, the tale's humour depends on its theological background. It lies in the parody of religious mysteries. Absolon is as much a caricature of the Sponsus of the Canticum Canticorum as he is of the courtly lover, in Kaske's view.[31]

30 Robert P. Miller, "The Miller's Tale as Complaint," ChauR, V (1970), 147-160

31 R.E. Kaske, "The Canticum Canticorum in the Miller's Tale," SP, LIX (1962), 479-500, suggests that the echoes from the Canticum in the tale produce a contrast between the caritas to which the Sponsus-Christ allegorically exhorts the sponsa-Church and the sentimental and purely carnal affection which motivates Absolon's exhortations to Alisoun.

Nicholas travesties the courtly lover in action, and also the angel of the Annunciation and the devil of the Temptation, bringing a perversion of God's word to Alisoun and John. Alisoun is both pastoral courtly lady and the virgin sponsa, as well as a figurative Mary and Eve. John, as a burlesque of Adam and Noah listens to the perverted word of God, while as jealous old husband he travesties Joseph. The knitting of these parodic allusions is achieved by repeated word-play upon "pryvetee" and its cognates. Just as the Miller creates a comic effect by the repeated association of the epithets "hende" with Nicholas, "joly" with Absolon, and "sely" with John,[32] he provokes amusement by repeated associations of "pryvetee" with the idea of God's mystery and the mystery of Alisoun's "queynte". This incongruous alliance of the spiritual and the physical is comic because of the varying use made of both the figurative and the literal sense of the one word.

Although the Miller may be insolent and his parody indecent, he excites a positive sense of comic exhilaration by his art, at the same time minimizing the sense of sinful behaviour in his characters. This exhilaration is achieved partly by the effect of Nicholas' powers of creation in making the illusory world of regeneration that thoroughly deceives John, and partly by the Miller's own creation of an illusory world in which events seem to come together fortuitously and surprisingly in a design that concludes with justice distributed so evenly. Thro argues that the Miller's Tale persistently focuses

[32] Paul E. Beichner, C.S.C., "Characterization in The Miller's Tale," unpublished paper printed in Chaucer Criticism Vol. I: The Canterbury Tales, eds. Schoeck and Taylor (Notre Dame, Ind., 1960), pp. 117-129.

upon human constructiveness, upon the triumph of wit rather than the deflation of pretension, and attests man's divine likeness through Nicholas' act of imaginative creativity.[33] If this is Chaucer's intention it is as well to remember that Chance, and not Providential design, is shown to govern both of these illusions, although Nicholas gives order to his fantasy by claiming that he is party to "Goddes pryvetee", while the Miller, who says he will tell a saint's legend, actually uses the perverted order implicit in parody.

In fact, it is probable that the Miller does not make a clear distinction in his mind between Providential design and Chance any more than he distinguishes between the figurative and the literal senses of the word "pryvetee". This is apparent in his brief moral sententia to Osewold, where the line, "So he may fynde Goddes foyson there" (I 3165), tacitly equates love as caritas with love as cupiditas. Since each of his four principal characters commits adultery in either the spiritual or the physical sense the only kind of love with which they are truly familiar is cupiditas, and that seems also true for Robyn, so that his sententia becomes an unconsciously ironic criticism of himself. Unlike John, who wants to pry into God's "pryvetee", the Miller is blind to the spirit of the Logos, his mind so disordered by drunkenness that he shrugs off responsibility for his language by blaming "the ale of Southwerk" (I 3140). His tale arouses pleasure in the perception of contrast provided by parody, and in the degradation of his principals,

33 A. Booker Thro, "Chaucer's Creative Comedy: A Study of the Miller's Tale and the Shipman's Tale," ChauR, V (1970), 97-111.

accompanied by our sense of liberation from social constraints. The Miller himself is comic because he allows his audience an increased sense of self-esteem at his expense.

The Shipman's Tale reveals less of its narrator than any other comic tale.[34] If we exclude the notatio, more than two-thirds of the narrative is given to dialogue and in the remainder there is little comment upon the action. The comic occurs in this tale as a result of the ambiguity of design and of word-play, through punning, double entendres and repetition of words. All of the play with words may be included in the rhetorical class of significatio, or leaving more to be suspected than has been expressed. Word-play depends for its comic effect upon our perception of a contrast or incongruity between two connotations of the same, or very nearly the same, word. Repetition of a word can create the same effect as parody, a word that naturally appears in one environment, upon being transposed to an unexpected context, giving a sense of incongruity by the dissolution of our habitual thought patterns. Ambiguity naturally lends itself to irony as well as humour, yet the seasoned Shipman scarcely betrays ironic intention any more than he betrays character.

All three characters in this tale show that one may profit by one's creditability which relies upon good reputation or the

[34] Richardson, Blameth Nat Me, p. 100, says: "Much of the commentary on the Shipman's Tale has been devoted to questions evoked by the incongruous opening lines in which the "hardy", brown-hued Shipman of the General Prologue calls himself a woman. . . .Because the subject matter resembles the Wife of Bath's prologue. . .scholars generally agree that Chaucer at one time intended the wife to be the narrator of the tale." Arguments against this conclusion have been advanced by Tupper, JEGP, XXXIII (1934), 352-72, and Chapman, MLN, LXXI (1956), 4-5.

security of one's good word: the merchant explains this to the monk when he says "We may creaunce whil we have a name" (VII 289). Reputation depends upon steadfastness of word, for if a man is to accept another's word in order to extend him credit he must know that he can trust him on his oath and in good faith. Against this business doctrine the Shipman shows his characters engaging in duplicity of speech, double entendres and false oaths, the monk and wife deliberately and the merchant unwittingly. After stressing in the notatio the friendship of the merchant and the monk, based upon the monk's claim of their "cosynage" and their sworn brotherhood, his first dramatic scene reveals the duplicity of the monk who disclaims the relationship as soon as he perceives the drift of the wife's design. She, in turn, uncovers her artfulness in her ambiguously worded promise to reward the monk for his loan:

> For at a certeyn day I wol yow paye,
> And doon to yow what plesance and service
> That I may doun, right as yow list device. (VII 190-192)

Both profane divinity throughout the conversation so that solemn oaths are transposed from their proper expression and degraded because they are used without sincerity. In their later conversations with the merchant, both the monk and the wife use language with deliberately shifting meanings so that, while the merchant accepts it at face value, to the audience its worth is cast in doubt. The monk's explanation for the need of a hundred franks shows his typical and intentional use of innuendo:

> For certein beestes that I moste beye,
> To stoore with a place that is oures.
> God helpe me so, I wolde it were youres! (VII 272-274)

The wife has little to learn from the monk, as she discloses in her final discussion with her husband. Her pun upon "taille" is an open display of ambiguity, but her pretended assumption of the monk's reason for giving her the franks is wilful dissimulation:

> For, God it woot, I wende, withouten doute,
> That he hadde yeve it me bycause of yow,
> To doon therwith myn honour and my prow,
> For cosynage, and eek for beele cheere
> That he hath had ful ofte tymes heere. (VII 406-410)

The ambiguity upon "honour" and "prow" may be slight but there is no mistaking the double entendres on "cosynage" and "beele cheere".[35] Deliberate ambiguity of meaning by the monk and the wife, while it is amusingly ironic at the merchant's expense, reveals a hypocritical moral disorder but not a spiritual blindness. The unwitting ambiguities in the merchant's speech, however, as he explains his business philosophy first to his wife and then to the monk, betray his slavery to pretence because he is in bondage to words and the social conventions of putting on a good appearance, which is little removed from valuing and defining himself by transient forms--in effect, he is spiritually blind. Although the merchant is in some respects a pathetic clown, the dramatic irony of his self-deception is incongruously amusing. As he himself says to his wife, he has submitted his life to mutability, "For everemore we moste stonde in drede/Of hap and fortune in oure chapmanhede." (VII 237-238).

35 Ruth M. Fisher, "'Cosyn' and 'Cosynage': Complicated Punning in Chaucer's 'Shipman's Tale'?" N&Q, CCX (1965), 168-170, traces the use of these words to their French ancestry giving three meanings which she feels are played upon in this tale: ". . .the familiar and affectionate meaning of 'friend' (which is ironic in any event); that of 'dupe' or 'cuockold'/sic/ or 'cheated husband'; and that of 'mistress' or 'prostitute'."

Since the narrator makes no obvious judgment upon his characters and seems to approve of their actions through his benediction, there also exists an unconscious irony in his relation to his narrative. Richardson writes of the Shipman's Tale that it sets forth a penetrating moral insight by ironic juxtaposition of sacred and mundane themes. She argues that Chaucer implies the positive standard from which his characters deviate by an ironic use of imagery, the first simile and its surrounding context introducing both the paradox which renders all monetary endeavours vain and the spiritual alternative: to attain something which will not pass as a shadow, man must concern himself with the "endelees blisse of hevene". Richardson feels that Chaucer ironically allows the narrator to reveal this Christian concept unwittingly by applying it to trivial social behavior.[36] Actually, the Shipman's detachment from the world of his tale contributes to the atmosphere of meaningless activity, while his apparent sanction of his characters' clever duplicity is an implicit condemnation of his own depravity.

Manly, in his discussion of Chaucer's use of rhetoric, was sadly puzzled that the master poet should make a tale so "entirely devoid of life" as the Manciple's: he blames the poet for padding the tale mechanically with rhetoric, enumerates sententiae, exempla, exclamatio, sermocinatio, demonstratio, applicatio, and concludes, "If the tale had been written as a school exercise, to illustrate the manner in which rhetorical padding could be introduced into a narrative framework, the process of composition could not have been

[36] Richardson, pp. 115-116.

more mechanical or the results more distressing."[37] Had he applied responsibility for the inept usage to Chaucer's character, the Manciple, he might have discovered the tale to be comic rather than dull.

Bobbe-up-and-doun[38] could be a symbol for the pattern of feelings stirred in the listener by the Manciple's Prologue and Tale. The Host's teasing of the Cook, while it is intended to be derisive, arouses some compassion in the Manciple who offers, if the Host will agree as master of their game, to relieve the Cook of the necessity to tell his tale. But the Manciple is a straight-talker, as he says himself, "Of me, certeyn, thou shalt nat been yglosed" (IX 34), and he tactlessly speaks the plain truth by reproving the Cook for his blind drunkenness and yawning, at the same time saying that the devil may enter the Cook's open mouth and his cursed breath will infect the company. The Host, while agreeing that the Cook is too drunk to tell his tale and allowing the Manciple to replace him, reminds the Manciple that he too is a sinner, and if he reproves the Cook for his vice he may well be requited. The Host's rebuke is unintentionally ironic: as Shumaker says of this dialogue, "The vituperation is so excessive that it calls forth protest from the

[37] John Matthews Manly, "Chaucer and the Rhetoricians," Warton Lecture on English Poetry XVII, Proc. Brit. Acad. (London, 1926), 16-17.

[38] Robinson says in his Explanatory Notes, p. 762: ". . .the action is said to take place under the Blean Forest, at a point identified as either Harbledown or Up-and-Down Field in Thannington. It has usually been assumed, then, that the pilgrims had passed Boughton on their last day's journey toward Canterbury."

Host, himself a man overmuch given to jangling."[39] However, the Manciple admits the justice of the Host's words, maintaining that he spoke only in jest, and to prove his sportiveness he takes part in the revelry and tries to placate the angry Cook by offering him more wine. When the Cook accepts it and thanks the Manciple, the Host laughs in wonder at the power of wine to settle conflict, then offers a blessing to Bacchus, god of the vine and revelry, "That so kanst turnen ernest into game!" (IX 100). As patron of the arts, Bacchus shared the Delphic shrine with Apollo, so the Host's blessing forms an intriguing prelude to the tale which shows the god of poetry disparaged.

The audience is now relieved of fear of an open conflict, and the Manciple's opening in high rhetorical style and with so exalted a person as Phoebus Apollo may be received in a spirit of ease that is rapidly raised to delight in his incongruous application of rhetorical precepts. The Manciple tells his tale at his own expense. As Donaldson observes, he expands on the moral implied in the Host's rebuke.[40] But the Manciple also insists upon, and digresses at length to demonstrate, the sententia:

> The wise Plato seith, as ye may rede,
> The word moot nede accorde with the dede.
> If men shal telle proprely a thyng,
> The word moot cosyn be to the werkyng. (IX 207-210)

39 Wayne Shumaker, "Chaucer's Manciple's Tale as part of a Canterbury Group," UTQ, XXII (1953), 151.

40 E. Talbot Donaldson, Chaucer's Poetry: An Anthology for the Modern Reader (New York, 1958), p. 947: "The moral is that one ought never to reveal one's knowledge of other people's misdemeanors—which is precisely what at the end of the introduction the Host tells the Manciple and the Manciple admits."

Or, men should not play with the meaning of words but speak their intention. As a plain dealer, the Manciple is the same comic type as Justinus of the Merchant's Tale, the agroikos who acts as a foil to the buffoon by railing at absurd speech and mannerisms or refusing to take part in the revelry of an absurd society. Frye's comment on the history of the buffoon illuminates the nature of the Manciple's dialogue with the Cook and the Host in his Prologue:

> The oldest buffoon. . .is the parasite, who. . .does nothing but entertain the audience by talking about his appetite. He derives chiefly from Greek Middle Comedy, which appears to have been very full of food, and where he was, not unnaturally, closely associated with another established buffoon type, the cook, who breaks into several plays of Plautus. . . .In the role of cook the buffoon or entertainer appears, not simply as a gratuitous addition, like the parasite, but as something more like a master of ceremonies, a center for the comic mood.[41]

The Manciple is speaking in the Prologue against the absurd society of tale-tellers, here represented by a pair of buffoons as the Cook and the Host, the latter being the center for the comic mood of all the tales. In the sententia and digression of his tale he is railing against the misuse of words and, by extension, the pilgrims' game of rhetoric. At the same time, he appears to acquiesce by jesting and acting the role of self-deprecating eiron, apologizing for his unlearned and "knavyssh speche", explaining that he is a "boystous man", disclaiming learning, "But, for I am a man noght textueel,/I wol noght telle of textes never a deel" (IX 235-236), although he quotes an abundance of authorities such as old books, "olde clerkes", proverbs and figures. He even mocks himself with

[41] Frye, "Characterization in Shakespearian Comedy," p. 275.

a significatio per abscisionem, "What nedeth it his fetures to discryve?" (IX 121), when the enormous amount of his description and digression slows the pace of his narration to a crawl, while his "boystous" speech leads him to pun lewdly at the end of the digression against ambiguity in speech. The whole posture is made farcical by his parody of high rhetorical style, a mode unfit for one whose social class would normally restrict him to the humble. The rhetorical padding and incongruous mingling of styles in a brief fable is as comic in effect as the mingling of the chivalric and godly with the ignoble and mundane. His portrayal of Phebus, the supreme artist, as a jealous husband with a "blered" eye who could be absurd and vengeful with a plain-talking crow, is as surprising to the listener as it is degrading to the god.

Certainly, the moral of the tale seems to be more than "if you carry a tale you will lose your feathers". Shumaker has discussed the wider application of the Manciple's moral to the whole conclusion of The Canterbury Tales. The moral thesis of the tale, he says, is that a careful watch ought to be put on the tongue at all times and in all circumstances, the stress in the conclusion being by no means on "tidynges" (gossip) but on "janglyng" (loose or excessive speaking) in all its forms: the exhortation is limited in only one way, be careful what you say. Further, says Shumaker, the Parson speaks in the only way not condemned by the Manciple, in "honour and preyere", and finally we hear the undisguised voice of Chaucer himself, still speaking immediately to the Manciple's

point.[42] The Manciple's intention seems to be a guarded criticism of the pilgrim's game of rhetoric--either the Bacchanalian or the Apollonian use of language--and his role ironic, as the advocate of a moral norm counter to that of the Host as master of revels. In effect, he demonstrates that it is usually best to say nothing because language is the source of misunderstanding.

The Host himself does not seem to recognize the change of tone introduced by the Manciple's tale. At its conclusion and as he is accustomer "to gye" the company, he expresses satisfaction that his "sentence" and his "decree" is almost fulfilled, but for one tale, which he asks of the parish Priest while instructing him not to break their "pley". Delasanta, who argues that Chaucer parodies the Last Judgment at the conclusion to the Tales, reminds us of the nature of this "pley" and the "ernest" which often appears ancillary to it:

> . . .the Host is early characterized as judge whose decrees must be obeyed upon pain of punishment, but who will reward the most meritorious with a supper upon completion of the journey. . . .In one sense the tales have served as a necessary prelude to the judgment of the Host, but in another sense the tales, by being inadvertently confessional, will serve as prelude to the absolution of the Parson and to the greater Judgment beyond for which the pilgrimage is itself preparation. . . .And the Host too by the end of journey comes to intuit that earnest has indeed emerged from

[42] Shumaker, "Chaucer's Manciple's Tale as part of a Canterbury Group," 147-150: "'I biseke yow mekely, for the mercy of God, that ye preye for me that Christ have mercy on me and foryeve me my giltes; and namely of my translacions and enditynges of worldly vanitees, the whiche I revoke.' The poet intends to sin no more in that way. . .Everything hangs beautifully together if the Manciple is recognized to have aimed his remarks not at gossiping or lying but at loose speaking generally, including frivolous story-telling like that of which the Manciple's creator had himself so often been guilty"(150).

> these games and that his function as ironic judge over humanity in microcosm enjoins him to fulfill his sentence somewhat more seriously. . .the Parson. . .now becomes the delegate of his "sentence." Nor does the real significance of the Host's offer of a "soper" in the General Prologue escape the attention of the holy priest, for he agrees to "knytte up al this feeste" (X 47) by insisting on "the sentence" of his "meditacioun" and preaching to the pilgrims of sin, confession, and judgment.[43]

Critics have often observed that several of these pilgrims are engaged in personal conflicts apart from the rhetorical contest of the frame-story. Comedy is produced by these discordant interactions as much as by ordinary relationships among the pilgrims. The Friar and the Summoner reduce the rhetorical game to a ritualized combat of words with revenge as their motive, each angrily ridiculing the other and inviting his audience to feel malicious pleasure in his antagonist's degradation. But the audience may easily perceive the incongruity between the public stance of these two pilgrims and their private motives, and so feel pleasurable superiority to the narrators who betray themselves in betraying each other. The Reeve also loses sight of the rhetorical game in avenging himself upon the Miller for an imagined slight, while publicly claiming to make objective moral comment upon him. As a hypocrite who bears grudges and attempts to conceal envy, he is, like the Friar and the Summoner, an alazon who becomes the victim of his own self-righteous exposure of the Miller. The Merchant, an unusual combination of eiron and agroikos, in railing against women and self-deceiving old men reveals his own wilful

43 Rodney K. Delasanta, "The Theme of Judgment in The Canterbury Tales," MLQ, XXXI (1970), 299, 302.

blindness about the nature of marriage. The Wife uses the contest as a means for furthering her battle for sovereignty over men, especially "clerkes". As an alazon, eiron and buffoon, she entertains her audience with her amazing powers of rhetoric and confident scheming, and arouses a sense of incongruity as well as superiority in inviting exposure by the Clerk. The Miller plays honestly in the contest and attempts to match fairly the Knight's Tale. But in doing so, he reveals himself as a buffoon, allowing his audience an increased sense of self-esteem at his expense, as well as encouraging sympathetic superiority with his insolent rebelliousness and flouting of conventions, and relief from social constraints through the ribaldry of his tale. The audience may also be tempted to sympathize with the Shipman's insolence and veiled mockery of merchants and worldly monks and unchaste wives, but as an eiron he is a type of Vice in disguise whose trickery in language is veiled, even from himself. Each of these narrators reveals that he is in mental bondage. The moral norm for which the Manciple is advocate is the deliverance from bondage to these humours who lack self-knowledge, and the comic resolution of the Tales should be the renewed sense of social integration expressed in their joyous feast, both worldly and divine.

CHAPTER IV

THE COMIC DESIGN OF THE NUN'S PRIEST'S TALE

To this point my study has been of the comic in the structure and the character-types of several of The Canterbury Tales, has compared their general design to that of the fabliaux and the pattern of classical New Comedy, briefly sought some influence from the English popular literary tradition, and then considered the nature of the comic in the relation between a narrator and his tale and with the other pilgrims. Before drawing any conclusions about Chaucer's comic vision, it will now be useful to examine the ways in which these artificially separated aspects of the comic operate as a whole. I propose, therefore, to take up the Nun's Priest's Tale in order to discover in what way these sources of the comic function when Chaucer is writing at his highest poetic drive. This chapter will be devoted entirely to a study of the comic in that tale.

Earlier in this study I called the structure of the fabliau a simple architecture: to paraphrase Nykrog once more, it recounts a single incident humorously, using elementary situations and a comedy which is farcical in nature. Two of its basic situations, a conflict between a married pair and a display of folly at grips with guile, are used in the Nun's Priest's Tale. I have attempted to show that a tale can have a simple design but, as with a joke, there are various ways of telling it that may make it much more intricate. Basic types of character are used again and again in humorous stories although we do not recognize a character-type until we see how it is made to function in the design of the story, so that it is not until

we have heard the whole that we are able to typify the roles. Chauntecleer's vanity and pedantry show him to be an alazon of the courtly coxcomb species, full of ideas that have little relation to common sense, and one who easily becomes the butt of the fox, an eiron as trickster and clever opportunist. Pertelote is a true bluestocking and so a female alazon, while the widow who represents the moral norm of the tale is an agroikos in its literal sense, a rustic plain dealer.

A storyteller builds variation into his tale according to the voices he uses, the design taking his personal shaping as he establishes the relations between the different types of voices. When he allows his characters to speak, they vary the tone of the tale from that of the narrator's voice, so introducing a contrast. For example, the dialogue in the Reeve's Tale reveals the differing attitudes and intentions of the miller and the two students, and their emotional responses at being tricked. Even the home-county of the students is exposed by their accent, which explains the miller's stereotyped response to their countryfied manner. Offsetting the dialogue, the Reeve's commentary and narration convey the nature of his own feelings, and from this we see that tone is more varied when the artist assumes a special voice to portray a narrator, that is, a persona. By these means, a variety of attitudes towards an event are revealed to the listener who must try to understand the motives of each speaker in the situation, and from the interplay of their behavior achieve an insight more penetrating than that provided by a single narrating voice. The reactions among

the voices and the event force the listener to overleap the boundaries of the individual character's understanding and see the formation of the whole compound arising from the process. This is the effect achieved by any one of the comic tales, so that we can say, for example, that the simple fabliau design used in the Merchant's Tale is complicated by the particular development and interplay of basic comic types and the tone of voice of a cynical narrator who casts the color of his own mind across the world of the tale. The result is a narration devised with such skill that its perspectives seem to extend from the distant Fall of man, through the Redemption, into the foreground of the actual pilgrimage of the Merchant and his audience. When the narrator complicates his character-types by making them stand for certain abstract principles as well as humans, they become symbols, so that he is telling two or more stories at the same time and is said to be using allegory. The fable, of which the Nun's Priest's Tale is an example, is a kind of allegory, telling its second story by humanizing animals and, as we see in this tale, its meaning can become quite involuted, depending upon the communal understanding of the conventions implied by the symbols. In sum, the tale teller can use a number of different voices to convey his meaning, each varied by a veneer of personality upon character-type, or by the complexity of principles that they personify.

The narrator who is a virtuoso is capable of conveying a number of interpretations of an event by changing the style of his own narration so that serious, or humble, or highly ornate styles,

> and blending of these much of the humour depends. Where the whole machinery of mock-heroic treatment would be too artificial, and the simple story of a farmyard incident too plain, he had to combine the interests of both. If the mock-heroical element gave him an opportunity to display his curious learning, it was on condition that he also displayed its vanity. Above all, he must resist the temptation to fall into serious satire, which would break the fantasy.[2]

These statements may give us a curious idea of the nature of the tale. It is comic although it has a tragic plot; the subject is whimsical yet is an allegory of the Fall. There is in these two comments, however, a fair indication of the most frequently discussed comic attributes of the tale—a beast fable and allegory treated in the mock-heroic style, parodying learning, in a lightly satiric, or ironic, vein. Here it is proper to point out that Muscatine did not consider this tale was an animal fable. "Fable", he said, "respects the boundary between animal fiction and the human truth it illustrates. But the whole spirit of this poem is to erase or at least to overleap the boundaries."[3] Without considering here the nature of medieval fable, it is as well to point out that the parody used by this type of story relies for comic effect upon frequent overleapings of the boundaries Muscatine mentions. Perhaps allegory depends upon the same acrobatics to gain its effect, which is why the tale is seen to be both fable and allegory: furthermore, this is what happens in irony.

The peculiar nature of the tale is owing in part to the

2 Kenneth Sisam, ed. The Nun's Priest's Tale (Oxford, 1927), pp. xxxii-xxxiii.

3 Muscatine, p. 239.

when juxtaposed, will convey different nuances just as one sentence in English will convey various meanings according to the word which is stressed by the speaker. Such virtuosity is displayed in the narration of the Nun's Priest. When it is combined with the voices of the characters and the allegorical effect of fable as well as dream, one is given such a variety of inflections on the relationships, and perspectives into the incident, that, in the dissonances and harmonies, the listener may achieve an illumination that is almost omniscient. The artistry of the narration may then begin to impinge upon the listener's consciousness, forcing him to consider the effect upon the tale, not just of the more complex design and character-types, but of the language used. The narrator of the Nun's Priest's Tale is both eiron and buffoon, using a pose of innocence or ironic naivete, while he entertains with a swelling rhetoric that almost bursts out of his control. In doing so, he achieves the allegory, irony, parody and comic mood of the tale by means of the inherent ambiguity of meaning in the language.

> The Nun's Priest, whose "foul and lene" horse bespeaks a poverty much fitter for gloom, and whose anonymity prepares us for nothing more, tells a superbly humane tale, perhaps the best of all. The plot is tragic, until it ends happily. It is an allegory of the Fall--leaving Man, somewhat wiser, still in possession of his paradise, or his chicken yard.[1]

This was Muscatine's conception of the Nun's Priest's Tale in 1957. Thirty years earlier Sisam had concluded:

> The whimsical subject called for all [Chaucer's] subtlety. He had to keep a nice balance between the natural characters of the animals and their human attributes, for on the clash

[1] Muscatine, pp. 241-242.

pilgrims' response to the Monk's tale: that was evidently quite painful to the Knight and, having interrupted the series of tragedies, he gives his simple definition of the tragic and the comic:

> I seye for me, it is a greet disese,
> Whereas men han been in greet welthe and ese,
> To heeren of hire sodeyn fal, allas!
> And the contrarie is joye and greet solas,
> As whan a man hath been in povre estaat,
> And clymbeth up and wexeth fortunat,
> And there abideth in prosperitee. (VII 2771-77)

The Host, self-chosen arbiter of literary taste, agrees with the Knight, remarking that the tale annoys the company and is worthless, "For therinne is ther no desport ne game" (VII 2791), and as the Monk refuses to tell another he turns to the Priest and demands a comic tale. Several critics have suggested that the Nun's Priest tells his tale to "quyt" the Monk's, not with the open antagonism of the Friar and the Summoner, or the Reeve for the Miller, but more in the spirit shown by the Clerk to the Wife of Bath.[4] If this is so, the Priest has set himself the task of relating a "myrie" tale that will eclipse the Monk's tragedies—that will show a "sodeyn fal" reversed and a protagonist who "clymbeth up and wexeth fortunat". Whether or not the Priest is "quytting" the Monk, the tale, as Manly

[4] Rodney K. Delasanta, "'Namoore of this': Chaucer's Priest and Monk," TSL, XIII (1968), 118-119, suggests that the Priest's aim is to demolish the one other ecclesiast who deserves his erudite mockery—the Monk, who "represents the very antithesis of his own mien, personality, and sacerdotal destiny." Delasanta points out that their functions have become reversed: ". . .it is the cloistered Monk who is the 'outridere' and 'prikasour', and the uncloistered Priest who is humiliatingly conventualized." Moreover, ". . .as a member of the monastic clergy. . .the Monk would traditionally have been considered the intellectual superior to the Priest. . . .What the Priest hears, therefore, after the Monk proceeds to recite a few of his tragedies, is the opposite of what he would have expected to hear."

says, is so full of rhetoric and so amusingly parodies the style of the Monk's Tale as to invite the suggestion that the 'high style' and its parody were purposely juxtaposed.[5]

The Priest begins sedately in the humble style with a description of a widow and her household. Her life is governed by poverty, patience, temperance and good health. By the use of litotes, or negative understatement, in the account of her meals, the Priest shows the kind of excesses and ill-health she does not endure, certain words inviting contrast with the diet of the Monk and also of the Prioresse: "Of poynaunt sauce hir neded never a deel,/No deyntee morsel passed thurgh hir throte" (VII 2834-35). These words remind the listener of the Prioresse's "sauce depe" and her daintiness in carrying a "morsel", and of the Monk who is "ful fat" and loves to eat fat swan roasted. And when we hear that the widow was satisfied with "Milk and broun breed", we recall that the Prioresse fed her "smale houndes. . .With rosted flessh, or milk and wastel-breed" (I 146-147). The Priest indulges in faint humour through the transposition of the courtly terms "bowr" and "halle" to the widow's "narwe cotage", but introduces them mainly for contrast in anticipation of their connexion with Chauntecleer. In effect, the widow is used as a yardstick by which to measure the mock-heroic beast's world.

The humour of the mock-heroic form arises from the incongruity of bringing together the fields of the splendidly god-like and the petty and mundane. Of the properties of the mock-heroic,

[5] Manly, "Chaucer and the Rhetoricians," p. 15.

it is the heroic character which is most noticeably parodied in the tale. Noble humans are impersonated by birds and suffer by application of the grandiose to the trivial. The comparison has its most telling effect through Chauntecleer, the hero of the tale. Apart from the use of epic simile and Pertelote's long catalogue of "laxatyves", there are none of the usual conventions of the heroic poem in Chaucer's parody, such as the invocation of the muse, the formal statement of theme, the plunge in medias res. However, the dialogue is in the heroic manner of long, set speeches and the narrator occasionally employs the mock-heroic anticlimax. For Steadman, the mock-heroic quality of the poem is mainly attributable to the disparity between the content and Chaucer's rhetorical style.[6] The incongruity is exaggerated by juxtaposition of the plain picture of the widow with the rhetorical high style used for the cock. The gentle irony in the description of the widow probably made the pilgrims slightly apprehensive for the sake of the Prioresse and the Monk, but it would hardly prepare them for the change in tone to the mock-heroic in the excessive magnificence of the description of Chauntecleer. His portrait is done in ironic hyperbole, highlighted by similes to exaggerate the quality of his crowing, his colour and

6 John M. Steadman, "Chauntecleer and Medieval Natural History," Isis, L (1959), 236: "For so commonplace an incident as a fox's raid on a hen-coop, so humble a setting as a barnyard, personae so insignificant as a cock and a hen, medieval poetic theory demanded an answerable style. Instead of the stylus humilis, however, Chaucer amplifies his base material with all the resources of the stylus altus or gravis. Though he begins with the low style appropriate for his subject and returns to it briefly at a crucial moment to describe the pursuit of the fox, he usually employs the loftier style suitable for persons of the courtly sphere and the subject matter of tragedy."

his form. Unfortunately, the effect of the crowing similes is only to stress its unlifelike and mechanical regularity, its comic repetition. Chauntecleer's colours are heraldic and, with his comb "batailled as it were a castel wal" (VII 2860), he has the aspect of a knight arrayed for pageant. The portrait of Pertelote is a caricature of a courtly lady in which over-emphasis is achieved by the choice of attributes:

> . . .the faireste hewed on hir throte
> Was cleped faire damoysele Pertelote.
> Curteys she was, discreet, and debonaire,
> And compaignable, and bar hyrself so faire,
> Syn thilke day that she was seven nyght oold,
> That trewely she hath the herte in hoold
> Of Chauntecleer, loken in every lith. (VII 2869-75)

The adjectives "faireste" and "faire" are applied as tags to Pertelote henceforth. There is also a sly contrast in line 2873 with the widow who had patiently led a simple life "Syn thilke day that she was last a wyf" (VII 2825). Connexion with aristocratic qualities is intensified by the courtly euphemisms, "This gentil cok hadde in his governaunce/Sevene hennes for to doon al his plesaunce" (VII 2865-66). These lines exaggerate Chauntecleer's sexual vigour and, by contiguity with the narrator's revelation of the cock's role as husband, are an ironic reflection on the relationship of the courtly hero and heroine. The narrator's "joye" to hear the cock and his wife singing in duet is not only comic exaggeration of the quality of henyard clucking but a hovering over the ambiguity of this courtly yet domestic relationship.

What is basically comic about the characters is that they are, as Robertson says, "grotesque" characters,[7] that is, they are

[7] Robertson, pp. 251-252.

comically distorted. Not only are they distortions of birds, but they are distortions of vital human nature. As with many comic characters, they are basic types, with dominant traits which serve as indices to the text of personality. Moreover, the ironic naivete in the narrator's small reminders of the double existence of the characters heightens the amusement just as it establishes his posture towards his story:

> For thilke tyme, as I have understonde,
> Beestes and briddes koude speke and synge. (VII 2880-81)
>
> "For when I se the beautee of youre face,
> Ye been so scarlet reed aboute youre yen,
> It maketh al my drede for to dyen" (VII 3160-62)

Chauntecleer's dream dominates the first half of the tale. Actually, as Elliott says, "by far the greater part of the poem does not strictly deal with the fable at all. It deals with dreams."[8] The dream permits ironic comment upon marriage and courtly love, and the position of women in medieval society and is itself ironic because the cock's fear for his future does not sharpen his perception. He does not perceive when he meets the fox that it was the "beest" of his dream. Thus, the dream sequence allows opportunities for comedy in multiple perception, as well as in degradation of a character-type. The courtly tone is maintained by the cock and the hen in their forms of address and terms of endearment. The narrator's location of their perch "in the halle" (VII 2883) reminds the listener momentarily of the sooty "halle" of the widow's cottage. Courtly style has been parodied in the opening

[8] Ralph W.V. Elliott, The Nun's Priest's Tale and The Pardoner's Tale (New York, 1965), p. 10.

description of Chauntecleer and Pertelote, and in the cock's courtesy to "his wyves alle". During the dialogue the lover of romance is burlesqued and courtly love is reduced to an absurd parade of language. The narrator seems to be showing what will happen to the "lusty bacheler" when he finally secures his lady's favour--his courtly wooing grown to garrulity, his humble servitude replaced by vain condescension, his princely valour turned to domestic cares and copulatory duties. In fact, the analogy to a courtly hero exaggerates Chauntecleer's first timidity after the dream. Nevertheless, he retains the semblance of his romantic past in an appearance gayer than Chaucer's "yong Squier", and in "syngynge. . . al the day".

Pertelote's emotional response to Chauntecleer's account of his dream, and also her learned argument, challenge his sovereignty, both as her husband and as a scholar. Her dominant traits of scepticism and empiricism are comic because of their juxtaposition with her burlesque role of courtly lady. The narrator has raised certain expectations in the minds of his audience when he has spoken to Pertelote in courtly terms, and her own opening words do not belie these expectations: "Herte deere,/What eyleth yow, to grone in this manere?/Ye been a verray sleper; fy, for shame!" (VII 2890-92). Certainly, Chauntecleer's reply, beginning in high rhetorical style with a courtly "Madame", bears his listeners along on this same stream of expectation when, suddenly, they are stopped by:

> "Avoy!" quod she, "fy on yow, hertelees!
> . . .
> I kan nat love a coward, by my feith!" (VII 2908, 2911)

The incongruity between the courtly and the colloquial is maintained as she continues to describe in wifely manner the ideal husband who is cast in the mould of a romantic lover. But as she begins her explanation of dreams, the voice of the sceptic prevails, and the rime riche on "swevenes" and "swevene is" draws attention both to her sententious remark that dreams are only "vanitee", and to the change of tone from scorn to instruction. Pertelote is convinced that her husband's dream is merely a visum, or somnium naturale,[9] caused by surfeit. "Swevenes engendren of repleccioums" (VII 2923), she says, calling to mind the widow's diet, and that "Repleccioun ne made hire nevere sik" (VII 2837). Her advice begins with a strange alliance of the courtly, the fabulous and the practical: "Now sire," quod she, "Whan we flee fro the bemes,/For Goddes love, as taak som laxatyf" (VII 2942-43), and descends rapidly into the tone of the housewife as she proposes the treatment and cure of his malady.

There is a certain inflexibility in the character of

[9] Walter Clyde Curry, Chaucer and the Mediaeval Sciences, 2nd ed. (New York, 1960), pp. 219-220: "The fair 'damoysele Pertelote,' however courteous, debonair, and companionable she may be, is by nature practical of mind and unimaginative; from the top of her coral comb to the tips of her little azure toes she is a scientist, who has peered into many strange corners of medical lore. That egotist, Chauntecleer, imaginative and pompously self-conscious, would like to pass as a philosopher and a deep student of the occult. As might be expected, when they come to classify a particular dream, each does it in accordance with his temperamental and characteristic way of looking at things. And with the perversity of human disputants. . .each presents only one aspect of the question, that which appeals to him and with which congenial study has made him most familiar, and ignores practically all other facts which he may know to be true. Pertelote's contentions are well founded when the dream is a somnium naturale; Chauntecleer's claims are undeniable when the vision is a true somnium coeleste."

of Chauntecleer's voice and the regularity of his crowing depended largely on his choleric temperament. It is, therefore, quite understandable that he should resent Pertelote's suggestion that he purge himself of excess choler by taking laxatives and thereby conceivably marring both his song and his valor."[10] Having listened to that voice for one hundred and eighty-six lines, the audience, too, probably suspects that motive, particularly if it recalls Pertelote's ambiguum on the word "prow": "I shal myself to herbes techen yow/That shul been for youre hele and for youre prow" (VII 2949-50). Indeed, it is his valour that next comes to the cock's mind and when he announces that he will "diffye bothe sweven and dreem" (VII 3171), his ruffled feathers are smoothed, his self-esteem restored, and he is ready to feather Pertelote twenty times.

There is much humour in the image of husband and wife sitting up in bed at dawning to argue so learnedly and at such length over so frail a subject, and it is evident that the Priest is ridiculing both learned argument and a married pair who allow their feelings to sway them in trivial dispute. One impression Chauntecleer leaves with the listener is that he is determined to maintain his sovereignty in marriage. He defends his position by an attack with supposedly superior learning based on the weight of authority, by outright rejection of Pertelote's empirically acquired store of knowledge, and finally by flattery. Part of the humour of this situation is his display of self-satisfaction at having reasserted his sovereignty: at least we may conclude he has from the heroics

10 Steadman, "Chauntecleer and Medieval Natural History," 238.

Chauntecleer which is an obvious target for ridicule: the comic distortion of his character is revealed, not only through juxtaposition of two incongruous roles, but also through repeated demonstrations of rigid attitudes--vanity and pedantry. Because an audience would expect normal human flexible reactions to varied situations, it is amused at the automatism of Chauntecleer's fixed response. His vanity is apparent before he begins the dialogue with Pertelote: her practical explanation of his dream wounds him. It is further revealed in his condescension, in his exhibition of pedantry, and in the assumption that he has received an avisioun, or somnium coeleste. He argues learnedly and creditably from authority on the theme "dremes been significaciouns". His method is to discredit Pertelote's one authority by the number and fame of his own. Amassing of authorities is a method of the medieval sermon and would be appropriate for a priest-narrator, but it is pompous for a domestic argument, and ludicrous for a cock. His exempla accumulate in a geometric development that is out of all proportion to his subject. In all his garrulity Chauntecleer qualifies his argument only once, "dremes be somtyme--I say nat alle--/Warnynge of thynges that shul after falle" (VII 3131-32). Because he builds his self-confidence with his own magnificent oratory, he ultimately ignores the point of his theme instead of convincing himself that he should be on his guard. He concludes in a dictatorial tone that he knows from his dream he will suffer adversity, and refuses Pertelote's laxatives because he does not like them. Steadman, however, suggests that the cock has another motive: "Both the timbre

of the epic simile upon the "woful hennes" later in the tale: "Sovereynly dame Pertelote shrighte" (VII 3362), no longer "sovereynly" in argument, but distraught above all woeful wives when she fears the loss of her husband. A comment by Langer throws an interesting light upon the image of the cock that Chaucer has given us: ". . .the Fool is a red-blooded fellow; he is, in fact, close to the animal world; in French tradition he wears a cockscomb on his cap, and Punchinello's nose is probably the residue of a beak."[11] Chauntecleer is a fool, not a buffoon, but one who gains his laughs by comic repetition.

Owen, speaking of the last fifteen lines of Chauntecleer's oration, says that it is the crucial passage in the tale. Not only does he reveal a pedant's triumph and use the deceitful flattery on his wife that is later to be used by the fox on him, but he unwittingly gives himself a further warning of his own declining reason in attesting by the words of St. John's Gospel--In principio, in the beginning:

> . . .and in the beginning Eve was Adam's confusion. So far is he from heeding the warning that the passage which contains it is full of the uxorious passion usually attributed to Adam. . . .Here in effect is another Adam, succumbing to the attractions of his wife when he should be using his reason. The Adam-and-Eve parallel, thus suggested for the cock-and-hen story, contributes to the mock heroics.[12]

Chauntecleer's understanding of God's grace is comically awry. To him it is the gift of a beautiful wife. Yet the meaning of the Latin

[11] Susanne K. Langer, Feeling and Form (New York, 1953), p. 343.

[12] Charles A Owen, Jr., "The Crucial Passages in Five of The Canterbury Tales: A Study in Irony and Symbol," JEGP, LII (1953), 307.

text he has quoted is "woman is man's ruination", so that the logical conclusion of his discussion is that God's gift of grace is man's ruination. This conclusion, however, reveals dramatic irony because Chauntecleer says that the sight of Pertelote's beauty makes his fear die and it is, in truth, the dying of his fear which is almost his ruination. His morning activities in the henyard reveal him in all his heroic pride, a caricature of a courtly prince in his "halle",[13] looking like a "grym leoun", full of "joye", and at the zenith of his fortune, as he says to Pertelote, "Ful is myn herte of revel and solas!" (VII 3203).

Until the climax of the tale, the narrator's comments are brief. He is involved in designing the setting and developing the characters, and merely reminds the pilgrims occasionally that his tale is a fable. But now he begins to intrude so frequently upon his narrative that he, rather than Chauntecleer, seems to be the principal player; and, as his protagonist has successfully overwhelmed his wife with an oration, so the narrator successfully upstages Chauntecleer with rhetorical display. The day and time of the crucial misfortune are treated in the highest style, almost to the point of confusion. Then, when the audience has been manipulated into an emotional tension, combining both condescension towards Chauntecleer's foolishness and exasperation at his smugness, the narrator ushers in the climax of his tale with three astonishing lines:

13 Steadman, "Chauntecleer and Medieval Natural History," 241-242.

> But sodeynly hym fil a sorweful cas,
> For evere the latter ende of joye is wo.
> God woot that worldly joye is soone ago; (VII 3204-06)

The word "cas" implies a chance happening as if by a turn of Fortune,[14] and it seems that the Priest is assenting to the Monk's view of tragedy. He stresses the idea by the emphasis he gives to "joye" and the inevitability that it is followed by sorrow. He has played upon the word "joye" almost as a descant to the motif of Chauntecleer's crowing but here it is mentioned for the last time. Delasanta is convinced that the Nun's Priest's Tale is aimed at demolishing the Monk's, assuming that the Monk's concept of tragedy—that man is subject to Fortune and nothing, neither the operation of Divine Providence nor of free will, can save him from "adversitee" in Fortune—is heresy. He concludes, therefore, that when the Priest attributes the cock's forthcoming fall to Fortune he is parodying the phrase that the Monk has used repeatedly.[15] Apparently Chauntecleer would assent to the Monk's view that life is governed by Fortune, as he shows in his first exemplum on "avisioums":

> That oother man was logged wel ynough,
> As was his aventure or his fortune,
> That us governeth alle as in commune. (VII 2998-3000)

[14] As noted in my discussion of the Miller's Tale in Chapter III, this is a Boethian definition of tragedy. Cf. Boece, Bk II, pr. 2.

[15] Delasanta, "'Namoore of this': Chaucer's Priest and Monk," 125: "The Nun's Priest's Tale answers in general the Monk's simplistic and heretical contention that when 'Fortune list to flee' no 'remedie' can bring man out of his 'adversitee.' Such a contention implicitly denies the operation of Divine Providence (along with its corollary 'function'—Divine foreknowledge) and explicitly denies the operation of free will. . . . The Nun's Priest's Tale in its major intention dramatizes the operation of Divine Providence—Divine foreknowledge in the world and the possibility of free will operating within that mystery."

Considering the Priest's mock-heroic treatment of his protagonist, Delasanta's argument seems reasonable. Besides, after the colfox has been introduced, the Priest properly supports the Christian concept of the operation of Providence over Fortune when he confirms that the cock's dream was an "avisioun", "By heigh ymaginacioun forncast" (VII 3217). However, this small jest at the Monk's expense has been introduced so casually as to pass almost unobserved, except that it is followed immediately by a naive comment that a "rethor" would be able to expand this precept into a "sovereyne notabilitee". The Priest maintains this pose of innocence, which is purely ironic naivete, during his assurance that his story is as true as the romance of Launcelot de Lake, and, after the introduction of the colfox in the humble style, he again attempts a rhetorical flight with an epic simile and two epic apostrophes. Unfortunately, he overreaches himself in the first apostrophe by applying names of famous traitors to a false murderer, but manages to maintain the heroic tone in his moral observation addressed to Chauntecleer during the second apostrophe, and is able to make a smooth transition into a digression on predestination and free will.

The digression on free will and God's foreknowledge is an example of ironic hyperbole and, of course, the whole tale is a travesty of this hoary philosophical knot. In fact, the narrator is probably using the device of <u>significatio per abscisionem</u> in his refusal to tangle his wits in this labyrinth: he says enough to arouse suspicion that he does understand the argument just as well as "any parfit clerk". Critics have remarked that either the narrator

narrator satirizing the Prioress and revealing "evidences of dissatisfaction with his position in life as a servant to a group of women."[17] The Priest does, however, recover and dissociate himself from the "cokkes wordes" and those of "auctours" who discuss this matter, ending in comic irony, "I kan noon harm of no womman divyne" (VII 3266). But his confusion seems to reveal a gradual loss of control of his rhetoric as his subject swells in significance.

The lyrical image of Chauntecleer and his ladies bathing in the sun contains ironic hyperbole in the simile comparing his song to that of "the mermayde in the see" (VII 3270). Owst says the simile is borrowed from contemporary medieval preaching where it is applied to the flatterer,[18] an apt description of the cock who flatters both his wife and himself. It also provides a proper prelude to the climactic meeting and conversation with the fox, whose courtly address with its exaggerated similes on Chauntecleer's singing is totally flattering in tone. It seduces the cock, who fails to see the ironic understatement in the fox's reference to Chauntecleer's father and mother, as he fails to see that the

17 Arthur T. Broes, "Chaucer's Disgruntled Cleric: The Nun's Priest's Tale," PMLA, LXXVIII (1963), 156-162. Owen also believes that the Nun's Priest is "presenting in the contrast between the widow and Chauntecleer a veiled comment on his position vis-à-vis the Prioress", "The Crucial Passages in Five of The Canterbury Tales" 309.

18 G.R. Owst, p. 201: "Among mythical beasts must be reckoned also that 'mermayde of the see' which Chaucer borrowed for a simile from the same source as the contemporary preacher. . . .In the preacher's case it is the flatterer who is 'to be likened to a merveilous beste of the see that is cleped a mermayde,..that hath body as a woman, and a taile as a fisshe; and syngeth so mery that it makith schipmen, that hyreth it and taketh tent thereto, falle in slepe and perisshe in the see.'"

or Chaucer is ridiculing learning and pedantry in this tale.[16] The Priest has already parodied learned argument by the absurdity of allowing a cock to apply it to dreams, and it seems possible, by analogy with that earlier travesty, he is implying that here is another learned argument on illusory matter. This is comedy at the expense of scholastic learning and argument, at men's attempts to order the unknowable by rational discussion.

Having humbly reminded his audience once more that his tale is a fable, the narrator now falls inadvertently into criticism of women, saying that the cock "tok his conseil of his wyf, with sorwe" (VII 3253), when the truth is that Chauntecleer rejected his wife's advice. As a "clerk", the narrator has probably expounded on the theme of anti-feminism before, and here is carried away, like Chauntecleer, with the sound of his own voice. His analogy between Adam and Chauntecleer mirrors the cock's complaint: both "rethors" blame women for man's tragic fall. If the Priest is a misogynist, and his attack on "wommennes conseil" may give this impression, then it is reasonable to think that Chaucer was critical of medieval anti-feminism and that he is making fun of it by placing the Priest in a position where he compromises himself, for it is ironical that he is a convent priest. On the subject of woman's position in medieval society, Broes offers an interpretation of the tale that shows the

[16] Sister M. Joselyn, "Aspects of Form in the Nun's Priest's Tale," CE, XXV (1963-63), 568, says that "Chaucer may well be spoofing both 'lernynge' and the Monk's lugubrious narrative," while according to Owen, "The Crucial Passages in Five of The Canterbury Tales," the narrator, who ridicules pedantry in the portrait of Chauntecleer and in his criticism of the rhetoricians, "falls into the pedantry that he is ridiculing"(309).

fox is the beast of his dream. The fox hints at the direction of his persuasion in his seemingly casual tag, "So moote I brouke wel myne eyen tweye" (VII 3300), for it is by closing his eyes, both physically and mentally, that Chauntecleer allows himself to be ensnared. But the Priest's exhortation to "ye lordes", warning them against flatterers, suggests that he has been transported into dramatizing a familiar sermon since the counsel is inept for the pilgrims.

Chauntecleer's catastrophe is treated in rhetoric of the highest style. In his first epic apostrophe, the Priest astutely blames as many causes as possible for the misfortune--Chauntecleer's choice in flying from the beams, Pertelote's misguided advice, and the bad luck of the day being a Friday. One can hardly agree with the Priest and blame Pertelote because Chauntecleer did not accept her advice. He is closer to the truth in blaming the cock's own choice. Obviously Chauntecleer did have a prophetic dream but he defied the revelation and exercised free will in choosing to fly from the beams. However, the Nun's Priest elects to rest the final blame upon Friday, as he shows by his second and third apostrophes, not because of its tragic associations with Easter and the Fall of Man, but because he remembers that Friday is Venus's day and Chauntecleer is a true servant of the goddess of erotic love.[19]

[19] W.F. Bolton, "The Topic of the Knight's Tale," ChauR, I (1966-67), 219, shows the significance of Friday for medieval man: "Friday, when subject to Venus, is changeable, although in its duality may also be seen the contrast of the two feasts it observes; Bad Friday recalls Good Friday, and this characteristic extends to the month of May too, traditionally the month of Venus as well as of the other Passion. Because the crucifixion was a death for love, the day--and the month--provided a useful locus for juxtaposing holy and profane love, celestial and mundane, eternal and temporal."

When the narrator reproaches Venus, accusing her of allowing her servant to suffer when he had done all in his power, "Moore for delit than world to multiplye" (VII 3345), he indulges in ironic charientism, for such an intention is a reversal of the proper Christian purpose of marriage, which is to multiply the world. The Priest also is giving credence to a pagan frame of reference entirely out of keeping with his own vocation. Each pilgrim in the Priest's audience should know that Chauntecleer falls because of his pride. He surrenders his reason when he becomes a servant of Venus and submits to sensuality, a willing reversal of the proper order of his wits. As Dahlberg observes, by his wilfulness Chauntecleer blinds himself to the kind of understanding which would make him free and thus he loses his free will.[20] Proudly he has set himself against God's Providence and become a victim of Fortune. By placing himself at the mercy of chance rather than clinging to reason he must accept the turn of Fortune's wheel, and the possibility of a tragic fall. The wheel turns while he "wynketh. . .wilfully", the fox-fiend seizes him, and he falls.

The Priest's sly apostrophe to Gaufred, the master rhetorician, reveals his intent to parody in his use of the topos of modesty, "Why ne hadde I now thy sentence and thy loore" (VII 3350), an intention made more obvious by the inflation of the hens' lamentations to heroic proportions. Beginning with comparisons to the "ladyes" of "Ylion" and "Hasdrubales wyf", he rises through apostrophe to full epic simile between the "Woful hennes" and the

[20] Charles Dahlberg, "Chaucer's Cock and Fox," JEGP, LIII (1954), 289.

"senatoures wyves" who cried for their dead husbands when Nero burned Rome. This heroic illusion is shattered instantly by a descent into the humble style as the narrator shifts his listeners' perspective sharply to the world of the widow and her family, and their clamorous chase. Once again, in the midst of our enjoyment at the Priest's parody, we are caught by surprise in remembering that his tale is of a cock who was ravished from his Garden of Delight, a chicken yard. Not only is the juxtaposition of the hens' lamentations with the women's homely cries ironic, but the tone of the chase passage is farcical. The pursuit is made both chaotic and comic by the succession of hyperbolic similes from "They yolleden as feendes doon in helle" (VII 3389) to the comparison with "Jakke Straw and his meynee" (VII 3394), by the mechanism implied in the rapid succession of physical activities, and by the fast pace of the language achieved through the use of balanced lines and alliteration.

Suddenly, the Priest changes his tone again, addressing his audience with a standard sermon locution, "Now, goode men, I prey yow herkneth alle" (VII 3402). It has the effect of focussing attention on his following words which, surprisingly, once again use the Monk's concept of Fortune as an arbitrary force and not the result of the misuse of reason: "Lo, how Fortune turneth sodeynly/ The hope and pryde eek of hir enemy!" (VII 3403-04). It seems as though the Priest is continuing his jest at the expense of the Monk, who would interpret the concluding event as a turn of Fortune against the fox. But the Priest has a wider vision than the Monk, and his conclusion reveals more than Chauntecleer's "sodeyne fal"

reversed: it shows a Christian awareness of the effect of humility on the understanding. Evidently Chauntecleer has learned a lesson from his experience with the fox because he gains his freedom by flattery, deceiving the artful deceiver with his own ruse. However, we ought to remember at this moment that the cock is no novice to this device, and has flattered his wife and himself. What he indicates in his final words to the fox is that he now recognizes his faults:

> Thou shalt namoore, thurgh thy flaterye,
> Do me to synge and wynke with myn ye;
> For he that wynketh, whan he sholde see,
> Al wilfully, God lat him hevere thee! (VII 3429-32)

He was, like Januarie of the Merchant's Tale, wilfully blinded by his vanity, but has checked the decline of his reason in discovering some humility.

The Nun's Priest has been able to meet the Knight's standards for the tragic and the comic. In doing so, he has employed a structure which many have interpreted as an allegory of man's Fall and eventual redemption. Such an interpretation assumes that a Christian priest, in telling an elaborate fable with obvious moral content, would be too sophisticated to limit his meaning to the two structural levels of that genre, the animal world and the human. The design of the plot is comic in terms of Frye's argument: the comic resolution of the tale implies both individual release and social reconciliation, the new moral norm being set by Chauntecleer's deliverance from bondage to his own lack of self-knowledge. But Frye also suggests that from the Christian point of view, tragedy is a prelude to comedy, an episode in the scheme of

redemption and resurrection. Provided the listener feels that the mock-heroic treatment of Chauntecleer's self-deception and abduction gives him the illusory status of a tragic protagonist, then one can say that the allegory of the Fall may be a structural element in this comic tale. The allegorical structure seems loosely connected to the narrative, however, the fiction hardly giving a representation of the idea of the moral, which is ambiguously expressed at the tale's conclusion. Because the narrator is using language to convey more than the two parallel meanings of simple allegory, the structure is complex, the personifications represent more than one abstract idea, and at times the whole fabric threatens to tear apart even as the narrator struggles to contain it.

The subtlety of style used in the tale has occasioned frequent comment from critics. Sister Joselyn has demonstrated ten overall shifts in style.[21] The tragic exempla and the many digressions of the narrator have bothered some who feel that they break the artistic unity of the tale. Sisam, however, suggests that they are a way of creating both suspense and irrelevance: suspense to hold back the important final scene of the chase, and irrelevance to tease the audience. "In fact," he says, "description and digression were the vices of narrative in Chaucer's day. . . .It may be said that in the Nun's Priest Tale he is laughing at this literary vice." He concludes that since these interpolations were to the taste of both Chaucer and his audience they would be laughing at themselves.[22] Lenaghan suggests that there is a significant

[21] Sister M. Joselyn, 568-569.

[22] Sisam, pp. xxx-xxxi.

shift in the tone in the last nine lines of the tale, from irony and complacency and the world of the fable to directness and humility and the world of prayer. He proposes that there are two voices in the tale: one, a naive, spouting rethor and a caricature who exists to be laughed at, the other, the acute teller, the Nun's Priest, who is a sophisticated fabulist. The shift in tone makes clear disparaging implications about the complacency, not only of the characters in the tale, but of the rethor in the display of his rhetorical skill. Speaking of the three morals to the tale, Lenaghan says:

> . . .the Nun's Priest, in failing to specify which moral was to be taken, . .has implicitly invited us to examine the rethor's moral and to consider the alternatives. . . The moral the rethor draws from the fable—the perils of flattery—is certainly implicit in the actions of Chauntecleer, but, since the perils of flattery depend on a perilous complacency, the source of Chauntecleer's trouble is also the source of the rethor's trouble,as it appears in his smug schoolboy presentation of the fable. A moral about the dangers of complacency is also implicit in the fable, and therefore the bypassed moral of the fox makes apparent the unconscious irony of the rethor's moral. Because he is "recchelees" he "jangleth when he sholde holde his pees.[23]

Such an interpretation, by suggesting that the Priest is commenting on the relation of his narrator to his tale, hints at the parallel relationship of Chaucer to his own pilgrim narrator of The Canterbury Tales. Both narrators, as personae of their creators, are naive and complacent so that we need to be constantly evaluating their perceptions. Furthermore, if we laugh at a rethor who loves the sound of his own words and voice—as does Chauntecleer, or the

[23] R.T. Lenaghan, "The Nun's Priest's Fable," PMLA, LXXVIII (1963), 306.

Priest's persona--we may discover we are laughing at the artist Chaucer.

What is conveyed by means of the parody and the irony and the shifting style? Each depends for its effect on a sudden shift in the audience's perspective. This is achieved by making us leap boundaries between separate fields of ideas. It is while we are mentally in mid-air that the artist reveals to us a vision from his own elevated viewpoint. The Nun's Priest has a criticism to offer of his listeners' values, for the things that he ridicules reflect a failing common to mankind, cupidity. He shows men loving the creature for itself and not for love of God, and he also shows what it is they love. In the comically distorted characters we see self-loving vanity that also extends beyond the tale, showing itself in the rethor and in the prioress whom he satirizes. Chauntecleer's servitude to Venus is the wrong kind of love for a fellow creature. Pertelote's pursuit of natural science is as wrongly motivated as the pedant's pursuit of pure learning for its own sake. This convent priest offers a lesson as fitting as that of his pastoral counterpart, the "povre Persoun", when he emphasizes the relativity of man's view of his small world. He shows that the extent of man's perspective becomes a measure of his moral position. Even the artist's elevated vision may not be large enough to see that a love of rhetoric and style for itself is also loving the created rather than God. So that if we see the Nun's Priest laughing at his own complacent rethor, we may see Chaucer deriding the artist who loves his own work of art for itself.

CHAPTER V

COMIC VISION IN THE CANTERBURY TALES

In this study, I have attempted to generalize upon the comic qualities of several of The Canterbury Tales. It is difficult to draw conclusions about the range of Chaucer's comic vision without first searching for some similarities in the designs of the various tales. That is why I have begun with a definition of the characteristics of fabliaux. They employ the comic in an elementary way and, as the sources of some of Chaucer's tales, enable us to define in what manner he diverges from them and reveals his own comic perception. Limiting myself to the comic in action as portrayed through structure and character-types, I concluded that while Chaucer used basic fabliau situations, he elaborated them by combining two situations in a single tale, or by transposing them into the world of fantasy, or by complex development in the structure of a single basic situation. Burlesque of the conventions of courtly love, scholarly pursuits or religious doctrine occurs frequently in his comic tales. Chaucer also used basic character-types, enriching them with fuller characterization than was customary in the fabliaux. This was achieved by combining the qualities of two or more types in one of his characters, and by developing those eccentricities which were once called "humours" but are known today as neuroses. In sum, the comic action of these tales always borders upon farce, which specializes in outrageous or fantastic situations and exaggeration of character, accompanied by buffoonery, repetitive physical action and burlesque.

Chaucer has also used basic comic character-types for the individual narrators of the comic tales, but in spite of their fuller characterization they do not function as unique human personalities. The Wife of Bath is a complex portrayal yet, as Robertson says, she is just "an elaborate iconographic figure designed to show the manifold implications of an attitude."[1] The world of Chaucer's frame-story is peopled in part by eccentrics whose "humours" are often revealed in dialogue with other pilgrims or by their intrusion to provide comment upon the world of their tales. This adoption by Chaucer of a series of _personae_ enables him to set the audience at a distance from the comic action of each tale at the same time as it is drawn into the illusory world of the pilgrim audience. It is the commentary by the Host, and the pilgrim Chaucer's occasional intrusion, that creates detachment from this illusory world of the frame-story and places us at a double remove from the individual tales. In particular, the Host's amusing attempts to control the contest as a master of revels remind us of the fictitious nature of the pilgrimage.

Nothing much can be made of the comic action of a tale until we see it compounded with the reactions among the various voices, of its characters, its narrator, and even that of the Host. To return to an earlier explanation, it is through the variety of attitudes and points-of-view of the voices towards the comic action that the listener achieves a more penetrating insight than would be provided by a single narrator, and we have to include among the voices the

[1] Robertson, p. 330.

abstract principles represented by characters in allegory as well as the inflections created by shifts in rhetorical style in the voice of the narrator. Should the narrator use the pose of ironic naivete, we are obliged to look for the two attitudes implied by irony. We might expect that, as our own perspective is widened by the variety of attitudes, so too the understanding of the pilgrims should be enlarged in observing the interactions between the various voices: yet the response to the Nun's Priest's tale demonstrates the nature of his "sentence", the relativity of man's view of his small world. When several of the narrators of comic tales do not show such enlightenment, we can infer that these pilgrims are less perceptive than ourselves, or incapable of understanding ambiguities of meaning because of a certain inflexibility in thought, or that they are showing the lack of self-knowledge that is typical of "humorous" characters. When the pilgrim Chaucer seems obtuse we need to remember Donaldson's observation:

> In his poem the poet arranges for the moralist to define austerely what ought to be and for his fictional representative--who, as the representative of all mankind, is no mere fiction--to go on affirming affectionately what it. The two points of view, in strict moral logic diametrically opposed, are somehow made harmonious in Chaucer's wonderfully comic attitude, that double vision that is his ironical essence.[2]

This concluding chapter must examine Chaucer's comedy as a moral art since moral art in Chaucer engages not simply practical ethics but the creation itself. For the present, however, I shall discuss the treatment of the narrator and artist, and the ambiguous use of

[2] E. Talbot Donaldson, "Chaucer the Pilgrim," Speaking of Chaucer, p. 11.

language, and the subject of moral art will be treated later in the chapter.

Traditionally, the humorist or the clown indulges in self-abasement to the level of naivete or obtuseness. From this position he views life without evident discrimination between the real and the unreal. His artless understanding simplifies the complexity of all circumstances. He will weep as easily for a fallen flower as for the death of a saint, and accept with equal felicity the authority of old "textes", the illumination of prophetic dreams, or the experience of life. The self-deprecating posture of the Manciple in his role as eiron lies in the tradition of the humorist, although he only assumes it in order to play in the rhetorical contest. But while he is telling his tale at his own expense as a "janglere", and apologizing for his naivete and lack of learning, he is disparaging Phoebus, the sovereign artist. This "Phebus", whose description is made in extravagant hyperbole, acts most unheroically by slaying Phitoun, the serpent, "as he lay/Slepynge agayn the soone upon a day" (IX 109-110).[3] Ridicule of the artist permeates the Manciple's pose as humorist, coming from the "ernest" side of his character as plain dealer who rails at misuse of words and at revelry. It is also the "ernest" voice of the Nun's Priest that seems to be slyly disparaging the "game" of his complacent and buffoonish persona, the rhetor whose artistry comes close to

[3] Hazelton, "The 'Manciple's Tale': Parody and Critique," 12, discusses in detail the comic art in this description which he says makes the god a parodic caricature of the chivalric lover, who is "subjected to a series of comic reductions that reveal him successively as a "jaloux," a comic cuckold, a villainous wife-murderer, and a horned fool."

"janglyng". The Nun's Priest's duplicity invites a comparison with that of Chaucer, behind whose voice as the naive pilgrim narrator lies the voice of the "ernest" poet. We may elaborate upon this comparison most readily by examining the pilgrim Chaucer's narration of his two tales, Sir Thopas and The Tale of Melibee. The substance of modern criticism on Sir Thopas is that it is a parody of the poorer romances of the fourteenth century and a burlesque of the behaviour of the typical knight because of the effeminate nature and bourgeois associations of the hero. Moore feels that the parody goes beyond the tale, that the poet Chaucer has plainly and derisively focused attention on the reciter, and that the "burlesque taken as a whole condemns the minstrel on the grounds of sheer ignorance and ineptitude".[4] Chaucer's recitation of Sir Thopas is boldly interrupted and ridiculed by the master of revels because of Chaucer's "verray lewednesse" and his "drasty speche". Part of the Host's irritation is, of course, caused by his own misjudgment of the pilgrim Chaucer from whom he had expected "som deyntee thyng", but his criticism certainly is of the narrator's artistic performance. The pilgrim Chaucer's lack of artistry is not transposed to The Tale of Melibee, although there is some naive posturing by the narrator in calling it "a litel thyng in prose", when it contains almost one thousand lines and the listener may lose sight of the allegory during the long course of the debate. Furthermore, the formal apology by the pilgrim Chaucer at the outset for his manner of recitation of

[4] Arthur K. Moore, "Sir Thopas as Criticism of Fourteenth-century Minstrelsy," JEGP, LIII (1954), 532-545.

this "moral" and "murye" tale is suspect because it is reminiscent of his other formal apology in the Miller's Prologue. That was deliberately naive and of questionable intent in its shifting of responsibility for the telling of "harlotrie", and so is the apology before Melibee, by shifting responsibility for any apparent difference in "sentence" from his source onto the ambiguities of language. When we consider that the pilgrim Chaucer's complacent but inept judgments of his fellow pilgrims in the General Prologue also depend to some extent upon the ambiguities of language, it seems reasonable to assume that the "ernest" voice of the poet Chaucer is ridiculing the artistry and understanding of his humorous persona. As with his creation, the Nun's Priest, Chaucer uses duplicity in his own self-portrayal.

The mask of naivete is undoubtedly connected to the narrator's ambiguous use of language. Self-revelation is intentional with those pilgrims whose prologues constitute a sort of confession, such as that of the Wife of Bath, the Reeve, the Pardoner, the Merchant and the Canon's Yeoman. It is inadvertent with the Miller, the Friar and the Summoner, but for this reason funnier because they unknowingly reveal so much of themselves. But the naive narrator's ambiguity of language suggests conscious duplicity: he says enough to imply a better understanding than shows on the surface of his speech. The story of the Manciple's Tale is almost overwhelmed by the narrator's digressions on a moral that is ambiguously expressed and reiterated senselessly, but concerns "janglyng" or debasing and excessive speech. A similar statement could be made of the other

fable in The Canterbury Tales, the Nun's Priest's Tale. In both cases the narrator is using language to convey more than the two parallel structures of simple allegory and seems to struggle to hold the fabric together under its burden of meaning. More than do these two, the naive persona adopted by the poet Chaucer introduces ambiguities and complexities into the whole narration of The Canterbury Tales. As I said of the effect of the frame-story, it allows comic interaction between levels of narration through this ambiguity of meaning in language, by means of which multiple voices and variations in meaning are achieved.

Any ambiguity in language, whether that sustained through allegory and parody, or the intermittent uncertainty of irony and word-play, demands of the audience a readiness to accept various kinds of modulation in meaning, a spontaneous apprehension of different wave-lengths of perception. This effect is easily observed in the Nun's Priest's Tale where the shifts in style require rapid shifts in the listeners' perspectives. Comic incongruity is inherent in these juxtapositions, even in the final pairing of the sober tones of the Priest with his declaiming rhetor.

The frequent use of parody in these comic tales suggests a turn of mind that delights in degrading the exalted by playing it in the key of the trivial. Parody of scholarly, scriptural and liturgical language, and of aristocratic literary forms, is conspicuous. Lanham argues that the poet's relationship to a literary genre can become a game. The imitative poet is involved in a contest with his source and he must out-do it by transcending the

theme or by playing his own poem off against it by varying the theme: Chaucer relished this contest, a new genre presenting itself to him as a new patterning of human emotion whose rules he must master.[5] Chaucer's admission of this pursuit is revealed in Sir Thopas in which his persona ludicrously parodies aristocratic romances by using the excess the clichés of the genre and by exaggerated distortion of its subject and manner. Of course Chaucer's use of parody is not only for his own gratification. In the mouths of the pilgrims, parody of scriptural and liturgical language, like burlesque of religious mysteries, betrays deliberate abuse of God's order and is manifest, although unknowing, self-censure. However, parody of scholarly debate and learning such as is used by the Wife of Bath and the Nun's Priest shows a wish similar to that displayed by their creator Chaucer, to out-do the original work.

The intermittent use of irony and word-play by the pilgrims generally has no more than a playful intent. But the ambivalent power of discourse is shown in several of these comic tales through word-play or specious glossing of scripture that is intended to persuade for perverted as well as playful ends. Both the Friar's and the Summoner's Tales show the effect of perverted human wilfulness upon the pure reason of God that takes shape in the Logos. The fiend of the Friar's Tale argues from a theological standpoint, just as the Manciple argues from a rational standpoint, that the word must accord with intention, implying that man should order his words

[5] Lanham, "Game, Play, and High Seriousness in Chaucer's Poetry," 7.

and intentions in accord with pure reason. Yet both Friar and Summoner abuse language by using it to try to gain power over the other. The Wife of Bath and Nicholas of the Miller's Tale also pervert reason through language, she in order to upset a system of ideas, and he for cupidinous love. Moreover, the Miller by his word-play upon "privetee" reveals the perverted wilfulness of each of the characters in his tale. The ambivalence of discourse can be equally damning when it is used for self-persuasion. The Shipman's Tale exemplifies this deceptive use of language. The merchant appears to lead a good life, believes he is a Christian, practises what he thinks is brotherly charity, is free of dispense, yet confuses the letter with the spirit. Like the apprentice of the Cook's Tale, who also "was free/Of his dispense, in place of pryvetee" (I4387-8), his "largesse" is designed to enhance his reputation, so that his sense of responsibility for his actions is limited. His business methods are of the same quality as Perkyn Revelour's pilfering from his master's box. As the merchant believes that his good business depends upon reputation, saying "We may creaunce whil we have a name" (VII 289), so he apparently assumes that his continued success in business in an indication that his manner of life and belief are sound—that his name is in good standing with God too. Because he is in bondage to words, and words are shown in this tale to be fickle by the way in which his wife and the monk play with their meanings, he has based his business and religious ethics upon transient forms, and his perception of his actions is obscured. Reputation can be as fickle as the meaning of words—as Chaucer shows in The House of Fame.

The ambivalent power of discourse to be rationally persuasive or poetically inspiring is crucial to the poet because discourse is the mediator between his intention as a creator and the effect of his creation. Apparently the Middle Ages discriminated between the poet and the "janglere" according to the intention of each, the "janglere" merely feigning or imitating, the poet making for "sentence" and "solaas". Chaucer shows, through the parody of learned argument in the Nun's Priest's Tale the comedy in men's attempts to order the unknowable by rational discussion, a theme developed more fully and comically in the eagle's scholarly lesson to Chaucer in The House of Fame. His explanation of the nature of speech is an analysis of the quality of words which shows, in the process of his discussion, the absurdity of his own argument: from experience he knows that words are merely "matter" in motion, yet he uses this "matter" to convey meaning. But as an artist Chaucer uses the ambivalent power of words to counterfeit creation by being poetically inspiring, and the artist may be as self-deceived as any man--hence his posture towards the role of the artist and the problems inherent in placing a value on his own creation. Donaldson explains the problem in his discussion of the Nun's Priest's Tale:

> . . .rhetoric here is regarded as the inadequate defense that mankind erects against an inscrutable reality; rhetoric enables man at best to regard himself as a being of heroic proportions--like Achilles, or like Chauntecleer--and at worst to maintain the last sad vestiges of his dignity. . . rhetoric enables man to find significance both in his desires and in his fate, and to pretend to himself that the universe takes him seriously. And rhetoric has a habit, too, of collapsing in the presence of simple common sense. Chauntecleer is not an alert Christian; he is mankind trying to adjust the universe to his own specifications and failing. . .[6]

[6] Donaldson, "Patristic Exegesis. . .The Opposition," Critical Approaches to Medieval Literature, ed. Bethurum (New York, 1960), p.20.

The poet also has a propensity for ordering and binding his perception by words and may, therefore, distort his spontaneous awareness. It is perhaps to overcome this problem that the poet Chaucer adopts a double vision. Donaldson identifies the two voices as austere moralist and affirming representative of mankind, and, while the voice of mankind may reject responsibility for his words, the voice of the moralist cannot. Unlike the theologian, his words lack the authority of the words of Scripture. Furthermore, should he openly censure mankind's faults in his artistic creation he is in danger of showing arrogance and pride, and wanting to be god-like.[7]

[7] In this respect Chaucer shows himself to be still a medieval poet and not a poet of the Renaissance. Less than two centuries later Sidney would say in An Apologie for Poetrie, ed. J. Churton Collins (Oxford, 1907), p. 9: "Neyther let it be deemed too sawcie a comparison to ballance the highest poynt of mans wit with the efficacie of Nature: but rather giue right honor to the heauenly Maker of that maker, who, hauing made man to his owne likenes, set him beyond and ouer all the workes of that second nature, which in nothing hee sheweth so much as in Poetrie, when with the force of a diuine breath he bringeth things forth far surpassing her doings, with no small argument to the incredulous of that first accursed fall of Adam, sith our erected wit maketh vs know what perfection is, and yet our infected will keepeth vs from reaching vnto it. But these arguments wil by fewe be vnderstood, and by fewer granted. Thus much (I hope) will be giuen me, that the Greekes with some probabilitie of reason gaue him the name aboue all names of learning." Sidney claimed earlier in his work that nature has never brought forth men as excellent as the types of great men imagined and delivered to the world by the poet, that other men might learn from their example. Sidney's concept of the poet's role as educator, as well as creator, shows sympathy with the classical Greek attitude towards didactic literature. In his discussion, "The Culture and Education of the Homeric Nobility," Paideia: the Ideals of Greek Culture (New York, 1939), pp. 15-34, Jaeger refers to the poet's role as educator, showing by instances drawn from the Homeric epics the importance attached to the appeal to example provided by model heroes.

In my introduction, I tried to synthesize three general theories of humour, suggesting that a raconteur manipulates the emotions of the audience prior to the crucial moment of humour so that they are adequately tense and of an appropriate quality to allow a feeling of superiority, or a liberation from social constraints. I also proposed that liberation may be not only the relief from social constraint upon sexual and aggressive impulses but also the feeling associated with the moment of insight accompanying incongruous juxtapositions. Part of the purpose of this study, therefore, has been to show in what way a narrator generates tension in his audience and what is the general nature of its response to a comic situation--superiority or a sense of relief. The narrators of these comic tales all employ incongruity to achieve laughter and all encourage a sense of superiority in the listener. Several, the Friar, the Summoner, the Reeve, the Miller, and the Shipman, encourage a feeling of relief from the social constraints upon sexual and aggressive impulses. These five ought to remind us of the Manciple's words, "If men shal telle proprely a thyng,/The word moot cosyn be to the werkyng" (IX 209-210), and the word-play upon "cosynage" in the Shipman's Tale, for we can say that in these latter tales the audience may be cozened into "cosynage" with the narrator through the duplicity of his speech, so that when it feels superiority which is malicious pleasure in another's degradation, or pleasure in successful impropriety, it lies in the same moral danger as does the narrator of the tale. We cannot make the same accusation against the poet Chaucer because if he beguiles his audience into a sense of

superiority, it is superiority of a different kind. As a medieval artist he bases his comic vision upon the ideal of the Christian image of the cosmos, and as a moralist he can assume that his listeners accept the Christian moral code even when they may flout or ignore it. When he portrays men's evil actions or limitations in perception he is not encouraging a comfortable sense of self-righteousness, but intending to enlarge his listeners' awareness of the meaning of the Christian ideal. As I said in concluding Chapter Four, he shows that the extent of man's perspective becomes a measure of his moral position.[8] This is why, when the pilgrim Chaucer tries to shift responsibility for the telling of "harlotrie" in the Miller's Prologue, saying, "For Goddes love, demeth nat that I seye/Of yvel entente" (I 3172-73), we cannot confuse him with the poet Chaucer. The sense of superiority that the poet Chaucer arouses is explained by Sypher:

> At the radiant peak of "high" comedy. . .laughter is qualified by tolerance, and criticism is modulated by a sympathy that comes only from wisdom. Just a few writers of comedy have gained this unflinching but generous perspective on life, which is a victory over our absurdities but a victory won at a cost of humility, and won in a spirit of charity and enlightenment. . . .

[8] It is not enough to conclude with Corsa that Chaucer's mirth reveals his moral premises while it celebrates the struggle of the individual to maintain equilibrium in spite of two potentially warring elements: the assertion of the self and that of what he called the "common profit". Desire to assert the self reveals an attempt to increase power over, or dominate, a world that is impermanent, so that one becomes involved in frustrating instability or disorder. It arises from a lack of self-knowledge that is reflected in lack of perception of the true nature of the "common profit", which is properly ordered by God. Chaucer's morality does proclaim an order, but it is one which illustrates the true nature of man's relationship to God.

> "High" comedy chastens men without despair, without rancor, as if human blunders were seen from a godlike distance, and also from within the blundering self.[9]

And again:

> At the height of comedy the whole situation "opens" in many directions. . .expanding, scattering itself from situation to situation always farther abroad, opening toward other possibilities, holding all in suspense. . . .The act of forgivenss is the moral pole of this comedy. . .the godlike charity of understanding, thus enduring, all.[10]

Chaucer's comic tales are fragments in an agglomerate whose other fragments are entirely serious in tone or rarely leavened with the temper of humour. The work is unfinished but the design and tone of the matrix is significant. Although The Canterbury Tales is a frame-story of a pilgrimage, the spirit by which it is pervaded is not wholly religious. The physical and spiritual journey of the pilgrims should properly be patterned upon Christ's life: man, turning from himself and his attempts to become the mover of his own destiny, acts in accordance with the will of God, wanders through the wilderness of life confronting and defying the devil, and finally returns home with renewed spiritual integrity, capable of being summoned, judged and found prepared in his regeneration for the passage to eternal bliss. At the outset, however, these pilgrims place themselves in a dubious position. They agree that the course of their pilgrimage will be a contest with each other, under the guidance and eventual judgment of their inn host. The

[9] Sypher, p. 212.

[10] Ibid., pp. 249-250.

journey has metaphoric shape in the model of pilgrimage, but it is substantially like a procession of masquers and revellers led, partly by a drunken miller with a bagpipe, and partly by a master of revels who, near its destination, offers a blessing to the god of revelry. Differing concepts of the proper object of worship and love coexist within the gathering. One might even say that there is something equivocal about the earthly subject of their veneration, for the martyrdom of the "hooly blisful martir" is distorted ambiguously by its political associations--the battle for power between the Church hierarchy and the English monarchy. Whether or not the conclusion of the pilgrimage is a parody of the Last Judgment, as Delasanta suggests--and an actual pilgrimage should be a preparation for Christ's final judgment of man--this procession ends with a sermon, or address, to the whole audience upon the serious theme of penitence, and the metaphoric idea of a feast. A procession concluding with an address, or parabasis as it would be called in ancient Greece, and with provision for a feast infers a comic resolution similar to that of the old Greek komos associated with the worship of Bacchus and the forerunner of Attic comedy.[11] This, then, seems to be the design and tone of the matrix of The Canterbury Tales: a procession or pilgrimage, of very ordinary humans masked as character-types, with an essentially comic resolution. It is, however, patterned upon what Frye calls the Christian "scheme of redemption and resurrection to which Dante gave the name of commedia." This is also the design and tone of the

[11] Duckworth, pp. 20-22.

English mystery cycles, and, as I remarked at the beginning of my third chapter, there is a similarity between the patterns of The Canterbury Tales and those of the cycle-dramas.

I have been trying to show that The Canterbury Tales creates a tremendous sense of perspective. The audience is carried, as was Troilus, to some heavenly sphere where space and time are related to a godlike view, from which it laughs at the absurdity of mankind's desires. Farcical situations provide a foreground only. By the use of "iconographic figures" such as the Wife of Bath a wide variety of human attitudes are portrayed. At the same time, the contiguity of many voices in the narrative creates multiple perspectives, the observer constantly having to change his position until gradually he not only observes with the narrator but, through the ambiguity of the art, comprehends much more than him. In addition, the pilgrim Chaucer and the Host lead the audience from one plane to the next, framing the action in commentary like cycle-drama's Expositor, which, to repeat Kolve, "puts the playing unmistakably at a distance from reality." Kolve explains that such "playing" had an ethical purpose:

> The aim of the Corpus Christi drama was to celebrate and elucidate, never, not even temporarily, to deceive. It played action in "game"--not in "ernest"--within a world set apart, established by convention and obeying rules of its own. A lie designed to tell the truth about reality, the drama was understood as significant play.[12]

Chaucer's comic vision also has an ethical purpose. His Tales are a "game", a lie designed to tell the truth about reality and to create an enlarged vision of man's position, in the Christian cosmos and in his relationship to God.

[12] Kolve, p. 32.

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