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INNOCENCE, SUFFERING, AND SENSIIBILITY: THE NARRATIVE FUNCTION OF THE PATHETIC IN CHAUCER'S TALES OF THE CLERK, PRIORESS, AND PHYSICIAN

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INNOCENCE, SUFFERING, AND SENSIBILITY:
THE NARRATIVE FUNCTION OF THE PATHETIC IN CHAUCER'S
TALES OF THE CLERK, PRIORESS, AND PHYSICIAN

by

M. CATHERINE TURMAN WILDERMUTH

A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

In the Middle Ages, when men were urged both to know and to love truth, pathos frequently participated in a narrative strategy and a larger philosophical vision which attribute to motive and will as much importance as to specific acts. In particular, the emotions aroused by the details of innocent suffering had become part of the communal understanding of the relationship between the physical and the spiritual realms. This study examines how the pathos of three Canterbury Tales functions in the reader's apprehension of these tales' fictional worlds.

The Clerk's Tale juxtaposes the narrator's insistence on the unreasonable cruelty of Walter's tests to his absolute approval of Griselda's response. In addition, the narrator, by invoking the human responses of his audience, juxtaposes that response to Griselda's, thus encouraging the audience to question her motivation and the source of her strength. The humanizing of Griselda's suffering, far from detracting from the religious significance of the tale, enables the audience to recognize its true significance. For it highlights the nature of the Christian moral virtues which shape her responses.

The emotionalism of the Prioress's Tale is both a controlled and functional part of a sincere devotional response that seeks to fuse feeling and understanding into a moment of joyous understanding. The Prioress's intrusions
into the tale are not those of a "thwarted mother," weeping
over pathetic suffering, but those of an instructress intent
on revealing the true spiritual significance of all that
transpires.

The narrative strategy of Physician's Tale, on the other
hand, suggests that it is intended primarily not as a moral
exemplum but as a troubling vision of the world which moves
its audience to self-awareness and scrutiny. The
Physician--through a tale which dramatizes the dangers of
the world, the ideal human nature against which each is
judged, the uncertainty of mortal life, and the certainty of
death for just and unjust alike--stimulates each of his
listeners to get his spiritual house in order.

Act and motive, thought and feeling, the temporal and
the timeless--all become part of the narrative event.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

I.

Chaucer's pathetic tales, perhaps more than any others, challenge the sympathies, the imagination, and the understanding of the modern reader. Can we restore the original life of a poem which deliberately evokes and incorporates emotional responses based on assumptions about love, death, and suffering that are no longer universally accepted? For it is one thing to understand an idea we no longer credit, quite another to appreciate, when we are not moved by, an appeal to emotions that may now make us uncomfortable, embarrass or even repel us, or—perhaps worst of all—simply bore us. Yet, as Elizabeth Salter argues:

Rather than limit the number of medieval English poems which may be expected to interest and move us, we should, surely, wish to extend that number. But here some conscious effort is needed; few medieval poems have any chance of becoming "something experienced... contemporary with the reader" if we are not first disposed to prepare ourselves for a new range of experience... If we are not to provide ourselves with a narrow and entirely predictable range of enjoyment, we have to arbitrate between our own literary tastes, as they have been shaped by post-Renaissance poetry, and our obligations to those of the past. This need not lay too much stress upon a sense of duty, but upon imaginative curiosity—a desire to widen our reach in poetry.

1 Notes for this chapter begin on p. 46.
Two major challenges face the modern reader who wants to widen his reach to include a sympathetic understanding and appreciation of medieval pathetic narratives. First, because we usually perceive the rational and the emotional as radically different, even incompatible, responses to an event, many assume that an emotional response is inherently irrational. Such an assumption often leads us to dismiss pathos as "sentimental" or "self-indulgent," or to look for its source in the personal sensibilities of an author and/or narrator. Yet, the rational and the emotional were not so radically split in the Middle Ages, when men were urged both to know and to love truth. Hence, pathetic elements which may to us seem purely emotional frequently derive from, as well as contribute to, a symbolic strategy and a larger philosophical vision, one which attributes to motive and will as much importance as to specific acts. In particular, the emotions aroused by the details of innocent suffering had become a part of the communal understanding of the relationship between the physical and the spiritual realms and of how man bridged the gap. The head might point out the bridge, but the heart took one across. Examining the spirituality of the period reveals that its increasingly affective character grew out of a theology of the Redemption which emphasized the personal relationship between man and a loving God and the importance to man's salvation of the human as well as divine natures of Christ.
The increasing focus on the innocent suffering of Christ was largely a response which made concrete the spiritual meaning of his physical life.

Second, pathetic details, usually concrete and intensely personal, can create a sense of familiar reality which tempts us to treat the concrete details naturalistically or to apply the interpretive criteria of modern realism. Taken too literally, this 'pathetic realism' may seem to work against the symbolic, allegorical, or homiletic force of a narrative, particularly in those narratives which depict what seems to be the unnecessarily cruel or purposeless suffering of an innocent victim. Yet one must not extrapolate the literal details from their place in the narrative and treat them as "real" independent of their context. Instead we must treat them as part of the narrative world created by the text, and attempt to evaluate what role they play in the voice of that text—to examine how each narrative selects its emphasis and deliberately limits its vision for the sake of focus and unity of the particular effect it is aiming at. For pathos is only part of a work's total vision, and it is toward the total vision that we must strive.

Charles Muscatine has recently argued that pathos "must be by all odds the most persistent alternative to irony that Chaucer felt, so persistent that no account of Chaucer's character and stance would be complete without recognizing
it." If this is indeed true, it becomes all the more important for us to examine just how the pathetic elements of the Clerk's Tale, the Prioress's Tale, and the Physician's Tale function in the reader's apprehension of these tales' fictional worlds and in the process of shaping and making significant the other parts of each narrative itself, in short, to examine how the audience's emotions are deliberately exploited and made a part of the text's narrative voice.

The pathos of each of these Chaucerian tales has caused various critical problems. In the Clerk's Tale, the pathetic elements seem to many critics in some ways incompatible with, or even threatening to, what they admire about the tale. Muscatine notes that

perhaps what bothers some readers of the Clerk's Tale is not the relatively restrained pathos it employs, but that the pathos threatens not to fit. The poem is extremely dense and powerful in its design and extremely well fitted to the ethos of the speaker. But the speaker is a lean, philosophical man, and the design is clear, sharp and uncompromising. The uncompromising virtue of Griselda . . . fits this design better than do the extremes of pathos. Fortunately the few stanzas of it [pathos], centering mostly around the loss and recovery of her children, hardly mar the poem.

But careful examination of the way the pathetic functions in this tale reveals that, not only does it indeed fit the tale's design, it is central to the audience's perception of that design.
In the *Priestess's Tale*, on the other hand, most critics find the pathos of the tale compatible with its narrator and well integrated in the tale itself. Yet there is a tendency to admire the tale's skillful narration while dismissing its sensibility as that of a sentimental woman, as Muscatine suggests:

Some of [the tale's] power must be due to the fact that the pathos is extraordinarily well enfolded in the characterization of the Priestess and allows even the most hard-boiled of us to take just as much of it as he wishes. The rest can be attributed to the delicate, feminine, maternal nun who tells the tale. 4

Negative perceptions of the Priestess's sensibility have even occasioned some recent attempts to read the tale as exposing her spiritual limitations. Examining the ways in which the pathetic elements function in the tale reveals, however, that the Priestess's sentimentality and "maternity" have been exaggerated, and her liturgical spirituality not always fully appreciated.

Finally, the *Physician's Tale* is perhaps a classic example of the sort of pathetic tale which evokes animosity rather than sympathy from the modern reader. For it seems that the reader's emotions are exploited in support of a distasteful moral vision. Yet studying the narrative strategy of the tale suggests that it is not intended primarily as a moral exemplum but as a troubling vision of the world which moves its audience to self-awareness and
To appreciate medieval pathetic narratives more fully, we must also seek to understand what assumptions about love, death, and suffering a medieval audience might share. So before turning to Chaucer's tales, I want to provide some context for my readings by briefly examining the change in religious feeling in the twelfth century which led to an increasingly affective, christocentric spirituality focused on the sufferings in his Passion--a pathetic vision, as it were, of the death of Christ--and by examining in three late-thirteenth and early-fourteenth century vernacular Passion narratives examples of how this spirituality manifested itself in religious narratives aimed at laymen.

II.

The increasingly affective and christocentric nature of medieval spirituality can be seen in the changing focus of the doctrine of Redemption itself, where there developed a new sense of a personal relationship between God and man as manifested in the human life of Christ. In early doctrines of the Redemption, the Resurrection was the supreme moment in salvation history, that moment when Christ won the possibility of eternal life for man by triumphing over sin and death. The Redemption was a drama in which God and the Devil each fought for the soul of man and in which God, through the Incarnation, outwitted and defeated the Devil. By contrast, after the eleventh century, instead of
emphasizing the divinity of Christ as the power who overcomes sin and death through the strength evidenced in the Resurrection, the medieval church turned to the Saviour who, as perfect man, suffered and died to save sinful man. The Crucifixion itself, the act of atonement, became the supreme moment in salvation history; and Good Friday, as the day that Christ freed man from sin's eternal debt by paying its penalty, became the center of the liturgical year.

The Redemptive drama, moved from earth to heaven, featured the conflicting demands of God's justice and God's mercy. Its imaginative and emotional appeal can be seen in a sermon of St. Bernard's, On the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin, reported in the thirteenth century Meditations on the Life of Jesus Christ of the pseudo-Bonaventura. Taking its text from Psalm lxxxiv, Mercy and truth have met each other; justice and peace have kissed, this sermon dramatizes how the Redemption resolves the discord which sin had originally introduced among these Virtues. Truth and Justice insist that man deserves severe punishment; Mercy and Peace argue for leniency. Each pleads her case in a heavenly conference before God:

When they had been called, Mercy began to speak: "The rational being needs divine mercy, for it has become vile and wretched. The time for mercy has come; indeed it is already past." But Truth spoke contrarily: "It is proper that the admonition you delivered be fulfilled, that Adam perish completely, with all who were in him, when, trespassing against your commandment, he tasted the forbidden apple." Mercy said, "Lord, why did
you then create Mercy? Truth knows that I shall perish if you will never again be merciful." Truth replied in opposition, "If the transgressor escapes the punishment you foretold, your Truth will perish and not abide in eternity." 6

The dispute is finally submitted to the Son of God, to whom all judgment has been given. Jesus writes his decision: "The one side says, 'I perish if Adam does not die,' and the other, 'I perish if he does not receive mercy.' Let death become good and each one will have what she desires." 7 When asked how death can be made good, he replies,

The death of sinners is noxious but that of saints is precious and a door of life (Psalms xxxiii, 22, and cxv, 15). Let there be found someone prepared to die out of charity, yet not guilty of death. Death will not be able to keep the innocent man, and he will make a passage through which the freed can pass. 8

Truth searches earth and Mercy the heavens for this just Redeemer, but cannot find him. Then the Son of God calls Gabriel and says, "Go and say to the daughter of Sion, 'Here is your King who is coming.'" 9 And so the world is saved.

This dramatic account of the Redemption proved very popular in the later Middle Ages, becoming in the Mystery Plays the famous "Trial in Paradise" which ended the prologue. Such a view of the Redemption stresses primarily the restoration of man to God, with love as its motive. When man begins to focus on salvation as an act of profound love, it is only natural that he respond reciprocally. So it is not surprising that St. Anselm, whose theological
speculations on the Redemption are the first to stress the sacrificial significance of Christ's death and passion, is also a key figure in the increasingly affective response to Christ's humanity, for the doctrines which fill his mind, fill his heart as well.

In *Cur Deus Homo*, Anselm seeks to explain rationally why it was necessary for God to purchase man's redemption through His suffering and death. The traditional argument that the devil had a just claim to man's soul, which bound God and which he had to outwit, does not satisfy Boso, Anselm's questioner in this dialogue:

Moreover, I do not see the force of that argument, which we are wont to make use of, that God, in order to save men, was bound, as it were, to try a contest with the devil in justice, before he did in strength, so that, when the devil should put to death that being in whom there was nothing worthy of death, and who was God, he should justly lose his power over sinners; and that, if it were not so, God would have used undue force against the devil, since the devil had rightful ownership of man, for the devil had not seized man with violence, but man had freely surrendered to him.  

He argues that, since the Devil, like man, is God's own creature and so subject to God's power and since the devil's seducing of Adam and Eve is unjust in itself, the devil can make no appeal to justice, nor does God owe him anything but punishment for his thievery.  

But how, then, can the death of the Son be proved reasonable and necessary?

For Anselm, the answer lies not in looking at what God owes the devil but at what sinful man owes God. "Man was
made for happiness, which cannot be attained in this life," he asserts; "no being can ever arrive at happiness save by freedom from sin," and "no man passes this life without sin." Consequently, "in order that man may attain happiness, remission of sin is necessary." 12 Now, sin is nothing else than not to render God his due," and this debt owed God is to be subject to his will. "He who does not render this honor which is due to God," Anselm continues,

robs God of his own and dishonors him; and this is sin. Moreover, so long as he does not restore what he has taken away, he remains at fault; and it will not suffice merely to restore what he has taken away, but, considering the contempt offered, he ought to restore more than he has taken away. 13

In short, man must atone for his sin, yet that is impossible for him to do.

At best, all he can do is render to him the original debt owed. As Bosco admits, "If in justice I owe God myself and all my powers, even when I do not sin, I have nothing left to render him for my sin." 14 Since man has dishonored God by yielding to the devil, he cannot be restored to God until man himself has overcome the devil. "Decide for yourself," Anselm says to Bosco,

if it be not contrary to the honor of God for man to be reconciled to Him, with this calumnious reproach still heaped upon God; unless man first shall have honored God by overcoming the devil, as he dishonored him in yielding to the devil. Now the victory ought to be of this kind, that, as in strength and immortal vigor, he freely yielded to the devil to sin, and on this account justly
incurred the penalty of death; so, in his weakness and mortality, which he had brought upon himself, he should conquer the devil by the pain of death, while wholly avoiding sin. But this cannot be done so long as from the deadly effect of the first transgression, man is conceived and born in sin.

From this analysis of sin and the debt which it imposes on man, the fully human nature of Christ becomes as important as his divine power over death: "If it be necessary, therefore, as it appears, that the heavenly kingdom be made up of men, and this cannot be effected unless the aforesaid satisfaction be made, which none but God can make and none but man ought to make, it is necessary for the God-man to make it." Since Christ is a man without sin, he is not obliged to die; by freely giving up his life, he renders to God the atoning gift: "For God will not demand this of him as a debt... Therefore, he who wishes to make atonement for man's sin should be one who can die as he chooses." But Christ saves men not only by his death but by his life on earth as well:

There are also many other reasons why it is peculiarly fitting for that man to enter into the common intercourse of men, and maintain a likeness to them, only without sin. And these things are more easily and clearly manifest in his life and actions than they can possibly be shown to be by mere reason without experience. For who can say how necessary and wise a thing it was for him who was to redeem mankind, and lead them back by his teaching from the way of death and destruction into the path of life and eternal happiness, when he conversed with men, and when he taught them by personal intercourse, to set them an example himself of the way in which they ought to live?
But how could he have given this example to weak and dying men, that they should not deviate from holiness because of injuries, or scorn, or tortures, or even death, had they not been able to recognise all these virtues in himself?  

So Christ's suffering has both a sacramental and a hortatory efficacy. It is, as it were, doubly saving.

In his Meditations, Anselm's heart is full of sorrowing love for Christ who paid his debt to God by suffering and dying for him. "O Christian soul," he exclaims in one of his Meditations,

O soul, raised from a dreadful death, O soul, redeemed and delivered from a miserable slavery by the blood of God, awaken and call to mind thy resurrection, ponder on thy redemption and on thy deliverance! Ask thyself again wherein lies the value of thy salvation and what its price is; meditate thereon at length, contemplate it with joy, shake off thy torpor, do violence to thy heart, give it thine attention, taste the goodness of thy Redeemer, burn with love for thy Saviour!  

... There, O Christian soul, there is the price of thy salvation, there the cause of thy deliverance, there the cost of thy redemption. Thou wast a captive, but thou hast been delivered. Thou wast a slave, and hast been set free. Thus, exiled, thou hast been brought back; lost, thou hast been found; dead, thou hast been raised again.

Emotions flood his heart at the thought of what Christ has done for man:

And now, Lord Jesus, my Redeemer, I adore thee as true God, I believe in thee, hope in thee, aspire to thee, as far as I am able, with all the ardour of my desire. Help my weakness; I bow myself deeply before the wonders of thy passion, by which thou hast wrought my salvation.
The crucifixion captures the mystery of salvation to which
the heart responds with love, sorrow, gratitude, guilt,
thanksgiving, awe:

What has thou done, O most sweet Jesus, thus to be
judged? What hast thou done, O Friend most dear,
to be treated thus? What is thy crime, what thy
misdeed, what is the cause of thy death, what of
thy condemnation? I am the blow which pained thee
in thy passion, I that laboured to torture thee.
It is I that earned for thee this death and
committed the crime revenged on thee. O, how
wonderful are the terms of the judgment of God,
how ineffable the dispositions of the divine
mystery. It is the fool that sins, and yet the
just is punished; the guilty commits the fault,
and the innocent is smitten; the impious offends
God, and the pious is condemned; that which the
wicked deserves is suffered by the good; that
which the slave contracts, the master pays; for
that which man commits, God is charged. How far
has thine ardent charity brought thee! How far
has thy goodness gone! How far thy kindness! How
far has reached thy love! How far has thy
compassion extended! For it is I who have sinned;
it is thou who art punished.

Such ardent outpourings of emotion as a response to
spiritual truth, very influential to the developing
affective spirituality of the late Middle Ages, are
characteristic of Anselmian spirituality.

With the increasing theological emphasis on the
Passion, there developed as well an increasing willingness
to give man's natural feelings a lawful place in his journey
to God. For St. Bernard, carnal love, *amor carnalis*, is the
necessary first stage in man's restoring of the order of
charity, *ordinatio caritatis*, by which he proceeds from "the
region of unlikeness" to the likeness of God:
Since we are carnal and born of concupiscence of the flesh, our cupidity or love must begin with the flesh, and when this is set in order, our love advance by fixed degrees, led on by grace, until it is consummated in the spirit, for "Not what is spiritual comes first, but what is animal, then what is spiritual" [1 Cor. 15, 46]. It is necessary that we bear first the likeness of an earthly being, then that of a heavenly being. Thus man first loves himself for himself because he is carnal and sensitive to nothing but himself. Then when he sees he cannot subsist by himself, he begins to seek for God by faith and to love him as necessary to himself. So in the second degree of love, man loves God for man's sake and not for God's sake. When forced by his own needs he begins to honor God and care for him by thinking of him, reading about him, praying to him, and obeying him, God reveals himself gradually in this kind of familiarity and consequently becomes lovable. When man tastes how sweet God is, he passes to the third degree of love in which man loves God not now because of himself but because of God. No doubt man remains a long time in this degree, and I doubt if he ever attains the fourth degree during this life, that is, if he ever loves only for God's sake.

Man can approach the mystery of God who is love by meditating on the person and work of Jesus Christ. He can, again, begin with a "carnal love" for Christ's humanity and the mysteries of his mortal life and proceed from there to true spiritual love of God himself. "Notice," he says,

that the love of our heart may be sensible when it has as its object the humanity of Christ; that which Christ did or taught when he was here below specially touches our human heart. The faithful soul, filled with this love, is easily impressed with sorrow by all that reminds him of Christ. He listens to nothing more willingly, he reads nothing with greater attention, he thinks of nothing more often, he meditates on nothing more sweetly than the life of Christ. . . . To the Christian who prays the image presents itself of the God-Man being born, fed with milk, or
teaching, dying, rising from the dead or ascending to heaven. Reminders such as these necessarily attract the soul to virtue or purify it from vice, free it from sensuality and calm its passions. For my part, I think that the chief reason which prompted the invisible God to become visible in the flesh and to hold converse with man was to lead carnal man, who are only able to love carnally, to the healthful love of his flesh, and afterwards, little by little, to spiritual love.  

As Woolf notes, "In other words, natural human feeling does not have to be suppressed in order that a man may love God, but encouraged and ordered in a fresh direction."  

We see this attitude expressed in a late medieval religious poem, *The Times Whistle: or A New Daunce of Seven Satires*:  

Farre be it from me all passion to exclude  
Out of mans soule, my meaning's not so rude;  
For 'tis an axiome not to be withstood,  
"He that is void of passion's void of good."  
Love of that love deserving Diety,  
Which doth produce the effectes of charity,  
And kindles in mans heart devotion,  
Once to extenuate were a sinfull motion  
Of a pestiferous braine; noe, I desire  
To ad more fewell to that holy fire.  

Neither will I restraine the heart from joy  
So that with moderation we imploy  
This passion to good uses; harte rejoysce,  
But let the cause be singular & choice.  
Grief likewise must abounde in every man  
That will indeed be a true Christian,  
Sorrow the badge of true repentance weares,  
Sinne must be purgde by a whole flood of teares.  
Vertuous boldenesse, with religious ire,  
Are heavenly passions not to be denide,  
But as accesion serves, to be applide  
To their true endes.  

St. Thomas Aquinas also developed a theory of the passions which was widely drawn upon by spiritual writers. When ruled
by reason, he taught, the passions are good; only when they are out of harmony with reason and the law of God are they a spiritual threat. Wisely controlled, they enable a man to give himself forcefully to that which is good.

St. Bernard's spirituality was grounded in the Scriptures and the Liturgy. To meditate on the Scriptures, to participate in the Liturgy, was to focus on the historical life of Christ and its mysteries. Not surprisingly, Bernard's devotion to Christ's humanity is chiefly set forth in his Sermons for the liturgical year. In these sermons Bernard seeks to move his audience to implore the grace which corresponds with each mystery in Christ's life. The Christ child, for example, should both teach and move us to fear God no longer. "Why fearest thou, O man?" cries Bernard:

Why dost thou tremble before the Lord because he comes? he does not come to judge the earth, but to save it. . . . Flee not, be not afraid. He does not come armed; he seeks thee not to punish thee, but to save thee. And now thou must no longer say, I have heard thy voice and I hid myself (Gen. iii, 10). See, this Child, the Virgin his mother binds his little limbs in swaddling clothes, and dost thou yet tremble with fear? Know then well that he does not come to work thy ruin, but to save thee; he comes to free thee, and not to bind thee in chains. 26

Everything about the Nativity speaks to man of his salvation, consoles him, and fills him with hope. Meditating on the Passion could be equally efficacious:
To meditate on these mysteries is wisdom. For my part, I see in them the perfecting of justice, the fulness of knowledge, the riches of salvation, the treasures of merit. I sometimes draw therefrom a healthful draught of bitterness, and at other times a sweet oil of consolation. They sustain me in adversity, calm me in prosperity, and in the midst of the joys and sorrows of this present life they provide me with a sure guidance, since I walk in the royal way of the cross, avoiding the evils which threaten me from right and left. They gain for me the Sovereign Judge of the world. . . . My highest philosophy is to know Jesus, and Jesus crucified. 27

As with St. Anselm, the Passion is, for St. Bernard, a witness to God's love for man:

Because of his exceeding charity wherewith he loved us (Eph. ii, 4) neither hath the Father spared the Son, nor the Son himself, in order to redeem the slave. Love truly excessive, for it surpasses all measure, it exceeds the ordinary rule, it is, indeed, superior to all. Greater love than this no man hath, says Jesus, that a man lay down his life for his friends (John xv, 13). Thou hast had, O Lord, a love still greater in dying even for thy enemies. For whilst we were as yet thy enemies, by thy death thou hast reconciled us with thee and with our Father. What love, then, has there been or will be like to this? 28

For Bernard, meditation on the Christ's earthly life was the beginning of the movement toward God. 29 After St. Bernard, meditation on the principal events in the earthly life of the Saviour came more and more to comprise devotion.

When St. Bernard meditated on Christ's life, he meditated on the words of the Scripture and of the Liturgy. His contemplations, as Dom Cuthbert Butler points out, involved "no framing of images of the scenes of the Passion,
nor any portrait presented to the mind of Our Lord's human form." The Franciscans, on the other hand, urged the Christian to visualize the events of sacred history as if they were present at the very places. His devout love of the humanity of Christ brought him to believe that everything in heaven and on earth has been reconciled with God through Christ. Christ's Passion aroused in St. Francis not simply feelings of love and compassion, but a passionate desire to participate emotionally, symbolically, and quite literally in Christ's pain. For St. Francis, the imitation of Christ demands a continual effort to identify with him, an effort which is impossible unless one is internally purified and guided by the Spirit of the Lord. In other words, the following of Christ is primarily due to an interior conversion inspired and sustained by the Holy Spirit coupled with an external and literal imitation of the Word become flesh.

Much has been written about the influence of Franciscan spirituality in the latter Middle Ages. The Franciscan movement was influential not simply because its spirituality touched a responsive emotional chord but because, with the Dominicans, theirs was a movement which combined the spiritual and the active lives. The Church had long taught that the spiritual life was possible only in the monastery, removed from the world. Yet in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, lay piety became more and more important, and many people who could not, for various
reasons, withdraw from the world, desired a more developed spiritual life, wanted more intensely to know, love and follow Christ in their hearts. 35

These centuries saw the production of many narrative and vernacular lives of Christ, aimed at the layman and intended both to instruct him morally or spiritually and to move him to a more fervent love of Jesus who has suffered so much for his sake. While these narratives "historicize" much symbolic (and apocryphal) detail and thereby often provide a sense of the familiar and sometimes naively literal in their depictions of Christ's life, they provided a bridge across which the average Christian, often moved by his affections, could come to a better understanding of the Christian mysteries of love and redemption. This is true also of the many Franciscan devotional writings, the best-known (and probably most influential) of which is the pseudo-Bonaventura's Meditation on the Life of Christ, which has been called "a life of Christ, a biography of the Blessed Virgin, the fifth gospel, the last of the apocrypha, one of the masterpieces of Franciscan literature, a summary of medieval spirituality, a religious handbook of contemplation, a manual of christian iconography, one of the chief sources of the mystery plays." 36 It recounts Christ's life chronologically, beginning with God's plan for the redemption of the world and ending with the mission of the Holy Spirit after Christ's Ascension, including many
non-Gospel details and episodes, as well as long homilies on Franciscan virtues, and exhortations to the reader to meditate upon the events narrated. Through these, its author urges his reader to an emotional and reflective participation in events recreated in the visual imagination. For example, in Chapter LXXIV, Meditation on the Passion of the Lord, in General, the author explains:

He who wishes to glory in the Cross and the Passion must dwell with continued meditation on the mysteries and events that occurred... To him who searches for it from the bottom of the heart and the marrow of his being, many unhoped-for steps would take place by which he would receive new compassion, new love, new solace, and then a new condition of sweetness that would seem to him a promise of glory. I, as an ignorant person and a stammerer, believe that in attaining this state it is therefore necessary to be directed by the whole light of the mind, by the eyes of the watchful heart, having left all the other extraneous cares that man keeps for himself for all those things that occur around this Passion and Crucifixion of the Lord, by desire, wisdom, and perseverance, not with slothful eyes or with omissions or with tedium of the soul. Therefore I exhort you that, if you have studiously considered the things said above on His life, you much more diligently concentrate the whole spirit and all the virtues, for here is shown more especially this charity of His that should kindle all our hearts.

As one studies these texts, he becomes conscious of the degree to which the spiritual significance of each event in Christ's life has come to be perceived as a <i>real</i> part of the event itself, and therefore often subject to narrative "literalization." Sometimes such a process is explicit, something to which the narrator calls attention; other
times, however, idea and event seem fused naturally and unself-consciously, so that a modern reader may not realize that the details provide a literal depiction of traditional symbolism. F. P. Pickering has argued very convincingly in *Literature and Art in the Middle Ages* that most of the late Medieval Crucifixion iconography—*with its often graphic depiction of Christ's stretched and suffering body*—*has as its source not the religious feeling of the age, but patriarchic biblical commentary on the Psalms and the Prophets*. Noting that most Crucifixion pictures are from illustrated Psalters, he reasons that

> if, in the whole of the Pre-Reformation period, the Church said with one voice that the Passion Psalms described the Crucified (and his Passion), while the Evangelists confirmed the fulfilment of the Old Testament Prophecy... then the Crucifixion picture is logically (historically too, I think) in the first place a Psalm illustration... Christian art in fact evolved many of its images in the context of Old Testament prophecy of New Testament events. 38

His study of Christian iconography has convinced him that "Crucifixion iconography has two main sources, Psalms xxi [AV xxii] and lvi [AV lvii], the Psalm for Good Friday and the Psalm for Easter." 39 Consider, for example, the pseudo-Bona Ventura's description of the crucifixion. We are provided a wealth of "realistic" detail not found in Gospel accounts and asked to imagine the event as it happens:
Here pay diligent attention to the manner of the Crucifixion. Two ladders are set in place, one behind at the right arm, another at the left arm, which the evil-doers ascend holding nails and hammers. Another ladder is place in front, reaching to the place where the feet are to be affixed. Look well now at each thing; the Lord Jesus is compelled to ascend the cross by this small ladder; without rebellion or contradiction He humbly does what they require. When he reaches the cross, at the upper part of this small ladder, He turns Himself around, opens those royal arms, and extending His most beautiful hands, stretches them up to His crucifiers. 40

The poet seems quite concerned that his reader visualize the precise method whereby Christ was affixed to the cross:

Then he who is behind the cross takes His right hand and affixes it firmly to the cross. This done, he who is on the left side takes His left hand and pulls and extends it as far as possible, puts in another nail, drives it through, and hammers it in. After this, they descend from the ladders, and all the ladders are removed. The Lord hangs with the weight of His body pulling Him down, supported only by the nails transfixing His hands. Nevertheless, another one comes and draws Him down by the feet as far as he can, and while He is thus extended, another most cruelly drives a nail through His feet. 41

A modern reader, struck by what seems to be a naturalistic concern with the physical details of the crucifixion, might wonder just how such attention to the nailing of Christ to the cross really necessary in a devotional meditation. But the poet is not even satisfied with this, for he goes on to present a second way to imagine the crucifixion:
There are, however, those who believe that He was not crucified in this manner, but that the cross was laid on the ground. If this suits you better, think how they take Him contemptuously, like the vilest wretch, and furiously cast Him onto the cross on the ground, taking His arms, violently extending them, and most cruelly fixing them to the cross. Similarly consider His feet, which they dragged as violently as they could. 42

Such willingness to allow the reader to choose the way he visualizes the scene suggests that the poet is not concerned with realism in the modern sense, with recreating historical reality for its own sake, but rather with enabling the reader to visualize the scene in such a way that his attention is focussed on the spiritually significant event. In this case, the spiritually significant "historical" event is the stretching of Christ's limbs (which may have been accomplished in more than one way). Indeed, the pseudo-Bonaventure specifically asks his readers to picture the fulfillment of that prophecy: "Behold, the Lord Jesus is crucified and extended on the cross so that each of His bones can be numbered, as He complained by the prophet (Psalm xxi [AV xxii], 18)." 43 Pickering argues that the pulling of the limbs, and other details of physical cruelty, in narratives of the Crucifixion are "clearly not primarily the expression of a readily definable religiosity. What various writers intend is to show how the words of the Psalmist came to be fulfilled: whether the cross was on the ground or erect." 44 He cites as further evidence the Passion Play of Brixen, in which "David himself goes onto
the scene at the completion of the Crucifixion and 'rhymes' as follows:

Als ich am 21. psalm zwar
Gesprochen hab frey offenwar:
Seine hend und fues sy haben
Gar jemerlich durch graben,
Das im alle seine gepain
Gezelt sein worden allain:
Secht Nu all zu diser frist,
Ob ietz solichs nit geschechen ist!

As I said indeed clearly and openly in my 21st Psalm, 'They have pierced his hands and feet,' so that 'every single bone has been counted.' Look now, all of you, has it not all now happened at this very moment? 45

The two ways of visualizing the crucifixion scene may seem contradictory to a modern reader (we are too conscious of the demands of "what must have really happened"), and "no doubt there were occasions when the alternatives were held to compete with one another, but the record we have is not one of debate and dispute. Truth resided evidently in the fulfilment of prophecy, the moment of 'consummation.' The two rituals were tolerated side by side because either of them allowed the faithful (finally) to see the one fulfilment." 46 The point here is that the "reality" which the medieval author is concerned to recreate is a concrete spiritual reality. Not that spiritual truth may be accessible to the average man only through the familiar details of physical reality, but those details are there to move him on to understand and embrace the truth. We must not underestimate how spontaneously a medieval reader might
move from the natural to the spiritual order and how integrally connected are his perception and understanding of God's love and God's truth and the movement of his heart in response. Pickering goes on to conclude that the "story" of Christ's life was "therefore naturally not the work of the late medieval writers, nor of any individual writer, but the result of the combined endeavours of the Fathers of the Church from earliest times to harmonise the various prophecies of the Crucifixion in one 'historical' sequence. These narratives become for the reader an experience of a physical reality informed by a spiritual one, an experience in which the knowledge of the promise of salvation is fused with an awareness of the emotional costs of the working out of that promise in everyday existence.

III.

A comparison of three vernacular Passion narratives, The Stanzaic Life of Christ, The Southern Passion, and The Northern Passion reveals how variously contemporary narratives could draw upon didactic, homiletic, and emotional traditions to structure and inform their versions of the same "story." Each one provides the participating reader with a different narrative experience of the structures of language, religious doctrine, daily life, and emotion.

The narrative stance of the Stanzaic Life's story of the Passion is primarily didactic, its account structured by
the doctrines revealed in each event and by the teachings of
learned authorities—quite carefully cited (though mostly
borrowed second-hand from Higden's Polychronicon and the
Legenda Aurea). The poet addresses an audience composed, on
the one hand, of unlearned listeners who can benefit from
his exposition of the teachings on the Redemption and of the
connections between events in Christ's life and Church
ritual and, on the other, of learned readers who can
appreciate the Latin documentation and his collection of
authoritative citations. Yet, while the narrative is
organized as an analysis of the Passion, it still freely
combines devotional responses with rational explication, and
both become part of the event being narrated. Christ's
Passion, we are told, was bitter (doloris), insulting, and
fruitful.

It was bitter for five reasons. First, it was shameful
(ignominiosa), since it was an execution among thieves on
Calvary, a place of punishment for the guilty. No detail
concerning Christ's life lacks meaning. His story is a
story of deeds and their meaning—past, present, and future:

_Therfor Austyn witnes pis,_
"the croyes that er was theues wo
on emperoures heyes sett is,
And in world now worshippide so._

_Sithen God ordeynt so perchore
sich honour for he henget her-on,
hit semus he ordeynt mich more
In heuen of ioy & blis for mon,
As he did for hym that was wys,
that thef pat leuest on his lore,
that he se[n]de first to Paradys
bifore alle sayntes pat wer bifore. 48

Not only is such an interpretation based on the "facts" of the fate of the contrite thief, it has been prefigured in the prophecies which Christ's death fulfills:

therefore sais be prophecy
with wiccut men wo suffrid he,
And theues that diden gret any honget by hym on rode tre.

(ll. 5441-44)

The poet reports the "testament" of Christ, on the authority of Augustine. Christ gave persecution to his apostles; peace to the disciples; his body to the Jews; his spirit to his father; a protector to his mother; Paradise to one thief; hell to the other; hell to sinful man as well; his cross to repentent Christians:

But to expoun apertly
qvy he his croys assignet so,
hit was forto gete mon mercy,
And for trespas to suffre wo.

For as Bede beres wittenesse,
a cr[os]ce ys penaunce, leue 3e me,
for what thing that may synne restresse,
a verray croscce may callet be.

(ll. 5477-84)

Second, the Passion was bitter because Christ was falsely accused three times. Because of these accusation, the poet explains, "opon Gode Friday syngen we / thre excusaciouns him present" (ll. 5499-500).
Third, the Passion was bitter because Christ was condemned by friends. Here the poet is concerned not only that his audience understand but that they be moved as well. Pointing out how this fulfills the Prophecies, he then cites not an explication of, but a devotional response to this aspect of Christ's Passion:

And of his frende als sufride he that of on rote comen wer, therfore he Sauter 3e shyn se to hor dede wel acores her.

"Frendes & neghburs in gret rede Agayn me stoden ful stifly." And frendis flouen, as Iob con rede, As vncoth men in most any.  
(11. 5549-56)

"Swete Ihesu," said sayn Bede, "how swetely to monnus likyng with mon to help hym in gret rede thi-self mon was with hom wonyng!

"Hou mich gode &quat plente syuen hom graciously pou has, hard & sharp with hert fre suffret forto gete hom gras,

"Harde wordes, harder betyng, And, that hardest of alle was, gret tourment on croice hongyng after al this gret manas!"  
(11. 5569-80)

This response provides a logical and emotional transition to the fourth cause of the Passion's bitterness: the delicacy of Christ's body. To develop this point, the poet turns again to the Old Testament:
ffor, as we reden in holi writte,
Boke of Kynges þat calde is,
In liknes as to monnus witt
bi Crist to Davuid was saide þis:

"Most tender worm," he sais, "is he;
for more tendre thing ther nys
thenne worme that breedes in a tre,
therfore he likenet hum so i-wys.
(11. 5585-92)

Christ's body suffered in each of his five senses. His sight was pained by tears, which he shed three times during his life: tears of pity at pronouncing woe on Jerusalem, tears of love at the raising of Lazarus, and tears of sorrow on the cross. The reason Christ cried on the cross, as Bede agrees, was "for mon, that muche hade done amys, / might haue compassion hym to se" (5619-20). The details of the event are intended to shape man's response to it—for his own spiritual good.

Christ's hearing was pained by the Jew's blasphemy. At this point, the poet takes care to explain how the Jews' claim that Christ "could not save himself" was not true, citing as evidence the power of his voice at his capture and Augustine's explication of its significance:

"How hope þe siche a kyng con do,
gven he shal sitt on iugement,
That so his iugement goygng to
with voice his enmys shamely shent?

"Quat hope þe that he be of myȝt
to do in his reveyme quen he is
that to þe deth goygng that myȝt
so foule feride hom as in this?"
(11. 5761-68)
Christ's sense of smell was pained by the "gret styynk" of the bodies of criminals on Calvary. One can imagine how many rotting and headless bodies must have been lying on that place of execution. His sense of taste suffered when he was given vinegar and gall to drink. His sense of touch suffered in battering of his body.

Finally, Bernard is offered as proof that "alle wittes nyet wer": for it is he who has detailed how Christ's head was pricked with thorns, how his face was spit upon, how his ears heard the rejoicing of sinners, how his mouth tasted gall and vinegar, how his feet and hands were nailed to the cross, his body beaten, his side pierced with a spear.

Now the poet moves to his "secunde principal poynt," that the Passion was insulting. Christ was mocked three times. First, in the house of the "bishop" Annas where he was first taken to be examined, he was struck and spit upon and blindfolded. Again, the poet draws upon Bernard's devotional response to such treatment:

Therfore with the grete deuocioun
Bernarde spakes to Crist expresse,
hauyng of hym compassion
and thinking how he pynet was:

"Thi semblaunt," he says, "lourd Ihesus,
that awngeles wilnen forto me,
harmet was bothe huyde and hew
whit sputtyng that was cast on the,

"Wiht hor hondes smytten thi face
and hilden it wit a vaile a-boue,
and bitter woundis pe giuen was,
al pis Bou tholid lورد for me loue."
(11. 5893-904)
Christ was mocked a second time in Herod's house, and clad in white because he would not "onswere after his wilnyng." Again, Bernard is quoted, this time speaking as Christ, explicitly contrasting the worldly behavior of his accusers with his coming Passion:

"Thow mon" sais he, "garlond þou hast of flouris faire & bryght schynynge, and for me, God, a crowne þou hast of thornes strong & scharp stingynge.

Also Bernard in Cristis nome sais, "gloues þou hast, mon, on þi honde, & I þurgh myne with mikul schome haue nailis drieben wit bittir bonde.

"Thow daunces aboute in quite clethynge, and I in quite agayn was sent ffrom Heroude to Pilate in hethynge, siche harms for þi hele I hent.

"þou daunces wit fetse in grete likynge, And my feete arn schomely schent for tene on rode tre traeuleynge, to vntegh þe is myn entent.

"Thow in þo ryng of carolyng spredis þin armes furth from þe, And I on croice have hom spredynge schamely, as men movn see.

"þus on croice I was sorowyng of thraldam, mon, to make þe fre, And þou in croice grete mirth makyng, I mynde on þe, þou noon on me.

"Thow has side opon for vayn-glorie, And I side stongen, sene it is, neuerþe-latter to me þou hie and I wil take þe to my blis." (11.5921-48)

With this kind of meditation, the worldly acts so enumerated can function both to remind one of the contrasting model of
Christ (and so induce guilty penitance), and to remind one that "neuer-pe-latter," he can be saved through Christ's sacrifice. The poet proceeds to explain Christ's silence before Herod: he was silent because they were unworthy to hear his answer, because he must amend by silence Eve's sin of speech (asking Adam to eat), and because they mocked his answers. Christ was mocked for the third time in Pilate's house, where he was dressed in purple, crowned with thorns, and hailed as king of the Jews. Bernard teaches how sharp were the thorns and how they pierced his head "to the brayne." The poet now shows how the sufferings inflicted on Christ can be understood as his enemies' attempt to destroy his soul, which was believed by some to dwell in his heart, by others in the blood, by yet others in the head. So the Jews pierced his head with the crown of thorns, shed his blood by nailing his hands and feet, and pierced his heart with the spear. Again, we see how all physical details have—or are made to have—a place in the meaning of the event.

Finally, Christ's Passion is fruitful in three ways:

ffor mon-kynde bi his passioun
of Adam syn vnbounden was,
that calle I syn remissioun.
the secunde poynt was gift of gras,

The thrid is ioy with-out endyng
that by his deth [h]e wonen has,
qven that we of this world shul wende
And mendet be of our trespas.

(11. 6041-48)
Thus Augustine teaches that Christ washed away the sins of the past when he died, the sins of the present by his preaching, and the sins of the future by his grace. His passion was "most might-ful in al thing / to drawe mon to hym that he wroght." He could not better have made men love him:

how he drogh vs to hys loue
Bernarde telles, as ge schun se,
спекing to hym in heuen aboue,
in grete deucocioun that hade he.

"Ouer a thing, swete Ihesu,
the penaunce that thow toke for me
mas the louet in hert trewe,
for with that wo for-boght wer we.

"And that werke chalenget witerly
vs to loue hym of dewete,
and our deucocioun kyndly
drawes in hert ay to-ward te.

"also hit chalanges skilfully
and distreynes vs gode to be,
wiht ful hert and ferently
to loue the ay with hert fre."

And how he drogh vs with his dede
in hym to hawe effeccioun,
the appostel, as I rede,
prove hit by good resoun.

Paule says, "the hegh keng of blisse
his owen sone ne sparet noght,
but for vs alle that deden amys
send hym doun and vs forb[o]ght;

"and when he send hym adoun so,
With him he gaf vs al thing;"
therefore to truste hym and nomoo
mater we han to our likyng.
(11. 6309-36)

Through suffering, love has become a remedy.
Reading the *Stanzaic Life*, one becomes intimately aware of how naturally the events of the Passion could evoke at one moment the most complex doctrinal explication, at the next a devotional response. What Bernard or Augustine or Anselm or Ambrose or Gregory has said about the Passion is, for this poet, inextricably bound to the event itself.

The narrative stance of the *Southern Passion*, on the other hand, can best be described as homiletic. It is a narrative interrupted by explanations, emotional apostrophes and reproachful addresses to the reader. An examination of the scene depicting the death of Jesus, beginning just after Jesus has commended his mother to John’s keeping, reveals how these elements function in the narrative:

Oure lord ne spak to ham namore, bat we owher rede,  
Ak po he was overcome ney, and his lymes ney alle dede,  
Wip dreori chere we pytouslich, "a-purst ich am," he seye.  
Pe gyewes mengde vynegre & galle, & to drinke hit him bede.  
Per-of he nom his moup ffol, ak yn ne dronk he hit nouzt.

The first line here is typical of this poet’s self-conscious faithfulness to biblical accounts when quoting his characters (this is particularly true of his treatment of Mary, whose speeches are pointedly limited to those found in the Bible. Just before this scene begins, he has said “We ne ffyndeþ nouzt wyrite bat oure lady in al hure sore / Spak nouzt bote made deol ynow, ne migte no womman more” [ll. 1515–16]). He is not simply telling the story of Christ’s
Passion, he is providing Biblical instruction. He is, therefore, more concerned with controlling his audience’s response to his narrative than he is with maintaining narrative continuity or telling an entertaining story. He continually interrupts his narrative account to reflect, exhort, instruct, as he does here by presenting an impassioned apostrophe to Jesus which explores the spiritual significance of the physical sufferings of Jesus:

O, Ihesus, to al pin oper wo, whuch drinke þe was ybrouȝt!
ffor þer nas non of þine lymes wipoute, þat deore ve
nap ybrouȝt
Bote þi tonge and þi moup, þat þe gywares nadde outsonȝt.
Þin heued ffor-wounded of þe crowne, þat þi hadde þer-
on ydo;
Cheken and eren al fforbete, wip boffettes were al-so;
Þi body al by-neope fforþ, wip skourges hardde y-bete;
ffet and honden þer-on ofte ysmyte, wip þreþo nayles
grete.
Þe ne bylesuede no lyme vpyned, bote þi tonge al-one,
Wip þwan þou toke þi moder, to him þa ne knew no
wommannes mone.
Ak þut noide þe lúbere gywes þat hit were wipoute
pyne,
Whanne hi þe zeue byter galle, wip vinegre atte ffyne.
Lorde þat vs þus deore a-bouȝtest, a nouȝt onlich wip
þin heued
Ak wel byter e wip ech lyme, þat þer nas non bylesued,
Þi dep was dep of alle deþes, þat to any man euer e com,
ffor as þe bok vs seip, hit passede alle Martyrdom.
(11. 1524-38)

The giving of gall and vinegar is represented as the climax of Christ's physical agony, the consummation of the Passion which has "vs þus deore a-bouȝtest": "Po þe gywes brouȝte ourle lord, galle and vinegre al-so, / Wel pytousliche ourle lord sede, 'now hit is ydo'" (11. 1539-40). In enumerating
the sufferings of one part of Christ's body after another, the poet follows the general plan of a passage attributed to Bernard in the *Legenda Aurea* 50. That the intensity of Christ's physical suffering was a necessary part of his Passion is supported by reference in 11. 1537-38 to Lamentations 1, 12: "behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow, which is done unto me, wherewith the Lord hath afflicted me in the day of his fierce anger" (KJV). Though the connection between this verse and the Passion was first made in the ninth century, it was probably borrowed in the later Middle Ages from Bernard's *Meditatio in Passionem*. 51 The reader is invited to meditate not simply on Christ's suffering but on its necessary place in the act of love which wins man salvation.

Christ not only suffers physically for man, he suffers the agony of being betrayed by those who love—or should love—him, abandoned by all those for whom he dies. In the ninth hour comes the climax of this spiritual suffering and his death:

"My god, whi hastou me fforsake," po be goost sholde out go.  
"My god, whi hastou me fforsake," eftsonen he sede so. 
fforsake he hold him ffor no man, ffor alle his woundes 
stronnghe. 
Ne turnde to him bot o peof, bat by him was an-honge, 
And bat greuede him sorere ban his deb, and per-fføre 
his he sede. 
"Hely, Hely," asge in his passioun, in holy chirche 
shurep rede.
"My ffader," Ihesus se de po, myd wel softe brebe,
"Ich by-take my gost in þin hond," and po closede his
eye,
And his heued heng a-doun, and myd þat word gan to
deye.
(11. 1569-74; 80-82)

The narrative accounts of Christ's suffering and death are
restrained, even understated. It is in the apostrophes that
he dwells on the enormity of what has occurred. Having
placed before his reader the extremes of physical suffering
and emotional anguish which Christ willingly undertook for
man, the poet now reflects passionately on the anguish which
the rest of created nature has shared so spontaneously and
which should speak as naturally to man's heart:

O, Ihesu, who may þis yhure wipoute wob of heorte?
Hard is þe heorte þat þis hureþ, bote he wepe & smerte,
þat þou sholdest ffor vs so byters wepe, and so bytere
grede,
And ffor vs lete þi swete lif, allas þe wrecchede!
Pe corpe ne migte bere þi dep, þat is þing wipoute
rede,
þat geþ grisliche no quakede, as who-so seip ffor
drede.
(11. 1583-96)

His stance toward his audience is reproachful, that of a
reform-minded preacher, determined to move his audience to
recognize the error of their ways. The inadequacy of most
men's response to the Passion appalls him; they seem to take
for granted the sacrifice which Christ has made for them by
their placid response to it. But if they meditate on the
extreme suffering, both physical and spiritual, which Christ
undertook for them, they will be shocked from their
complacency; they will be moved to share that anguish:

Allas, man, wher is pin heorte, how mistow hire pis
Bote dou quake ffor sorwe, gret deol of pe hit is.
ffor treas ne stones ne bolde do nought, pat his heorte
breke atwo,
Aboute pe stede in mony places, pat hi ne to-borste
al-so,
Clobes pat in pe temple were, to-clowe al-so a-mydde.
Dede mennes browes to-borste ek, as merci ffor to bydde.
O, Ihesu, hard was pi depe, whanne harde trees & stones
To-borste do pin heorte to-brak, and browes of Mannes
bones,
Man, how mistou pis yhure, pat pin heorte ne brekeb
anon?
Allas, Man, whuch is pin heorte, hardour pean any stone?
Pi lord deyp in strong pyne, and in so strong depe
ffor pe, and hou pat art his lyme, sory art vnppe.
(11. 1589-1600)

The poet is clearly striving not simply to arouse an
emotional response but to intensify and direct that
response, to fuse an intensely felt love with the reader's
faith in the promise of salvation and his understanding of
how that promise has been fulfilled and of what that
fulfillment requires of him. To this end he meditates at
length on what Christ has suffered:

A prophete spak of oure lord, longe byffore pis dede,
And bow oure lorde moue, benes wordes he sede:
"A ffox de a stey, and a turtle a nest al-
so,
Whar-yenne hi sitte movre a walwy, a hare ese do,
Ak Ihesus nys on sorpe noug, so muche goed byleued
Whe-r-vp he movre enes, resthe his very heued."
O, Ihesu, swete ping, were dou so pouere po
Nere dou kyng of alle kynges, whoder was pi goed y-do?
Pou nas so muche goed ygraunted, whervpe pou myghtest
deye
Ne a wrecche torf of pe sorpe, bote henge in pe eyr
heye;
Ne pi sey lymes, nere ygraunted to pe na-mo
Pat eny mygte oper helpe, how mygte pe beo more wo?
Pine armes were wyde ystreyt, pine hondes y-nayled ffaste,
Pate thou ne migtest in al bi wo, to pin heued ones caste.
Ne thou ne migtest bere vp pin heued, so strong was bi depe,
Ne what-ve hit lenye, wel harde thou leta bi brep.
Rei hit migte to bi shuldres com, bi croune of bornes bo
Per-on wolde deope wade, and pat hadde yuet ybeo more wo.
How migte so pouere depe, eny man here y-seo?
Byter and strong and eke pouere, Ihesu yhered pou beo.
(11. 1603-22)

Such an emotional appeal, though fervently felt, is, nevertheless, controlled and directed toward reflection on the truths of Christianity, truths which speak inherently to man's heart as well as his mind. Man is moved by Christ's love—and the poet's homilies and exhortations concerning such—fervently to embrace the truth.

As far as narrative stance goes, nothing could be farther from The Southern Passion than The Northern Passion's narrative treatment of the same story. While the southern poet preaches to an audience whose primary needs (as he sees it) are for homiletic instruction and spiritual exhortation and whom he seeks to impel to sympathetic meditation on the facts of the life of Jesus, the northern poet seeks to make the narrative of Christ's life itself more vivid, absorbing, and dramatically compelling. In short, he seeks to involve his audience not in meditation on the story, but in the story itself. There is little self-conscious narrative commentenary or exhortation to
interrupt the narrative's dynamic movement, which is paced largely by the directly quoted speech of the story's participants. Scenes come alive, and there is little wonder that this narrative has been connected with so many of the major drama cycles. But while the poet has created an entertaining and absorbing story, he has also created an instructional one as well, despite the fact that he rarely makes such an intent explicit. The organization of the narrative itself, largely through quoted speeches and their contexts, focusses the audience's attention on and moves it to respond to the doctrinal and spiritual significance of what is happening.

An examination of The Northern Passion's version of Crist's death will help clarify the key differences in the way these two narratives work. What appears largely in the narrative apostrophes of the southern poet and the authoritative analyses of the Stanzaic Life is put by the northern poet into the mouth of Christ himself, who speaks directly to his audience as he hangs dying on the cross:

Pan spak Ihesus full myldely
Vn-to pe pople dat past him by:
"The folk dat passes bi pe strete,
Lukes vp and se my woundes wete,
And whatkyn turmentes I here take,
And suffers sorows for yhour sake.
Be-halde if any other pyne,
May be lykkend vn-to myne,
Or if any other thing
Sufferd euer so hard pyneyng."
(11. 2927-36)
Christ's sorrows, it might be said, here do quite literally teach to audience. Another important difference between these two poems is their narrative points of view. As we have already seen, the southern poet makes a quite explicit distinction between what he reports from the Bible, which mainly comprises the narrative sections of the poem, and what is interpretation and explanation, which usually appears in his homiletic interruptions of the narrative. The northern poet, on the other hand, adopts the narrative point of view of fiction which allows him access to the thoughts as well as the words of his characters, so what are in truth explanatory details drawn from patristic and popular tradition are incorporated into the narrative itself as unself-conscious exposition of the motive or significance of the actions being recounted. For example, following Christ's exhortation to behold his wounds and recognize that he has suffered more than any man, the narrator simply agrees with him, and provides the scriptural confirmation of Christ's words:

    I dar say pare was neuer nane
    With so mykell sorows slane.
    Haly writ sais it was slyke
    Pat no payn may be to it lyke;
    All other payn es bot a play
    Till doel pat he sufferd pat day.

(11. 2937-42)

The narrator's words here become the natural response of one in Christ's audience, reflecting on what he has just said.
Similarly, the narrator provides what is essentially a doctrinal explanation of Christ's refusing to drink the vinegar and gall (Bernard, for example, had interpreted his thirst as a thirst for man's salvation, hence his refusal to drink after saying he was thirsty), as if he were simply reporting Christ's thoughts, rather than his words:

"Drynk," bai said, "for no-thing spare,  
After this pou sall haue mare."  
Thesus wist how pay had wroght,  
Of pat drynk pan wald he noght.  
His meneyng was no drynk to tast,  
Bot to help man saule had he hast.  
Parfore he said with wordes hende:  
"Pis dede es done and broght till ende."  
(II. 2951-58)

At the moment of his death, Christ again takes center stage, and in a long prayer to God and in a long aside to himself, explains the spiritual significance of his suffering and manifests his anguish in words sure to elicit the sympathetic compassion of his audience (again, Christ speak words that appear in the southern poet's meditative response):

"ffader, I haue wroght bi wyll,  
Done I haue efter bi rede,  
Sakles here I suffer dede.  
Bot fader, for-gyf bam pair gylt  
Pat sakles here my blode has spylte.  
ffor whi bai wate noght what bai do,  
Parfore bai tak no tent pare-to.  
fforgyf bam, if bi willes be,  
be desee bai haue don to me."  
Pan his heused on his schulder he layd,  
And bus vn-to him-self he sayd:
"ffox has den, and fowles has nest
Where-in pai may tak pair rest,
And I pat am godes son so dere
O-bouen all bestes and fowles in fere,
Place vn-to me es nane leued
Where-on I may rest my heued,
Bot anely on my schulder bane,
Other esement haue I nane."

(11. 2998-3016)

Interestingly enough, Christ's second speech here does come from the Gospels, but not from the account of the Passion. Since tradition had associated it, as prophecy, with the events of the Passion, it is given a natural place in that sequence by the northern poet. The southern poet includes it in his apostrophe, specifically identified as prophecy.

Finally, Christ's death does not evoke any impassioned apostrophes from this narrator. Instead, the words of the Centurion provide the natural response of the good man to what has just occurred:

"ffader myne, pat all may mend,
I gyf my gast in-to bi hend."
Pan lowted he doune his heued styll
And yhalde gast, als was his will.
Centurio pan stode bi-syde,
And toke full gud tent in pat tyde
How pat Crist had gyfen pe gast,
And on his wise he said in hast:
"Suthly," he sais, "with-outen mys:
Verray god son of heuen was pis;
Bi myynes pat here er sene on raw,
at he was godes may we knaw."

(11. 3019-29)

And the narrative promptly dispatches Christ to harrow Hell.

Another brief example will show how effectively this poem can exploit its dialogue in the construction of narrative
which is at once vivid, natural, familiar, and instructive, in this case, the response of Simon when asked to carry Jesus's cross. He refuses at first, because he is in a hurry:

"nay,  
I may nought bere it bi þis day,  
And hasty thinges I have to do,  
So þat I may nought tent þare-to."

(1l. 2728-30)

But he is warned of what will be the consequences if, because he is wrapped up in worldly affairs, he fails to aid Christ:

"ffor-sakes þou to bere þe tre,  
When þat we haue bydden þe?  
Tak it vp and tary nought,  
Or full dere it sall be boght."

(1l. 2733-36)

Such language, echoing as it does the Christian injunction to take up the Cross and follow Christ, cannot help having apocalyptic overtones for a Christian audience. More immediately, "full dere it sall be boght" brings to mind, as well, the motive of Christ's Passion, towards which the narrative is moving.

Act and motive, thought and feeling, the temporal and the timeless—all become part of the narrated event. Even though the Northern Passion lacks the doctrinal and homiletic apparatus of the Southern Passion and Stanzacic Life, it nevertheless still speaks dynamically to both heart
and head. Its well-paced narration and skillful manipulation of dialogue points the way to the Chaucerian narratives which we will next take up.
I. NOTES


3 p. 140

4 Muscatine, p. 139.

5 As Rosemary Woolf notes in *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), p. 21, "... in the drama of the Redemption, therefore, God and the Devil played the two chief parts and man had a subordinate role. He was reconciled to God, but as a result of an issue between God and the Devil; thus there were no immediate personal and emotional implications for him in the Incarnation and Passion. This doctrine can be seen very clearly reflected in the iconography of the Crucifixion up to the eleventh century. In this Christ stands firm and alive upon the Cross, kingly, and His head is adorned by a royal crown. The scene is a self-sufficient expression of a dogmatic truth, complete within itself, and demanding no specific response from those who look at it."


7 p. 8.

8 p. 8.

9 p. 9.


11 "... what cause ought God to try with his own creature (de suo, in suo), or what should he do but punish his servant, who had seduced his fellow-servant to desert their common Lord and come over to himself; who, a traitor, had taken to himself a fugitive; a thief, had taken to himself a fellow-thief, with what he had stolen from the Lord. For when one was stolen from his Lord by the
persuasions of the other, both were thieves. For what could be more just than for God to do this? Or, should God, the judge of all, snatch man, thus held, out of the power of him who holds him so unrighteously, either for the purpose of punishing him in some other way than by means of the devil, or of sparing him, what injustice would there be in this? For, though man deserved to be tormented by the devil, yet the devil tormented him unjustly. . . . in my opinion, those who think that the devil has any right in holding man, are brought to this belief by seeing that man is justly exposed to the tormenting of the devil, and that God in justice permits this; and therefore they suppose that the devil rightly inflicts it. . . . There was no reason, therefore, as respects the devil, why God should not make use of his own power against him for the liberation of man" (pp. 187-89).

12 P. 201.
13 P. 202.
14 P. 227.
15 P. 231.
16 P. 245; italics added.
17 P. 258.
18 P. 259.
20 Meditatio IX, de humanitate Christi, cited by Pourrat, p. 16.
21 Oratio II, cited by Pourrat, pp. 16-17.
23 In Cantica, sermo XX, 6, cited by Pourrat, p. 33.
24 Pp. 22-23.
26 In Nativitate Domini. sermo I, 33, cited by Pourrat, p. 44.

27 In Cantica. sermo XLIII, cited by Pourrat, p. 48.


29 Yet, as Dom Jean Leclercq points out in The Spirituality of the Middle Ages, vol. II of A History of Christian Spirituality (New York: The Seabury Press, 1968), "Bernard's devotion to Jesus must, however, be seen in its true light: it rests neither in a sensible love for his humanity, nor in mystical contemplation of the Word. It would be truer to say that St Bernard points out above all the divine descent in which the Word, who since the fall of Adam was beyond our reach, is offered us in the flesh, thus once more becoming accessible to us. By Christ in the flesh the treasures of lovingkindness hidden in the bosom of the Father are made manifest, to excite us to confidence, to give us a greater knowledge of the goodness and mercy of God and to draw us to imitate him and to love him. All this is connected with Christ "according to the flesh" in his first coming. The Ascension leads us higher still, to the contemplation of Christ in glory, and, reminding us of his second coming, to a conformity and union with his spirit (pp. 197-98).


31 Perhaps the most famous instance of this in the life of St Francis of Assisi is his literal recreation // reenactment, on 23 December 1223, of the nativity scene (the first living creche), because he wanted to feel himself at Bethlehem before the crib, mingling with the shepherds.

32 Eric Doyle and Damian McElrath, "St. Francis of Assisi and the Christocentric Character of Franciscan Life and Doctrine," in Franciscan Christology: Selected Texts, Translations and Introductory Essays, ed. Damian McElrath (St. Bonaventure, N.Y.: The Franciscan Institute of St. Bonaventure University, 1980), p. 3. "He dedicated himself to Christ absolutely, loved as really and truly present in creation, in the scriptures, in the eucharist and in the church. The presence of Christ was all but visible and tangible to him. So deep was his faith in Christ and so ardent his love of him, that Francis longed to do what he had done, to say what he had said, to suffer as he had suffered, above all in his passion and death."

33 Ibid. p. 11.
Two extremes can be seen in the claim of Heiko A. Oberman, "Fourteenth-Century Religious Thought: A Premature Profile," *Apologetum*, 53 (1978), 811, that "For the fourteenth-century, however, St. Bonaventure and the Franciscan tradition prove to be the main source of inspiration, so much so that when the later Middle Ages are viewed as a whole, they can be called the Franciscan Middle Ages," and in Muscatine's comment that "Franciscanism may be more a symptom than a cause" (p. 129) of the shift in sensibility.

As LeClercq notes: "In the twelfth century, popular piety had been characterized by an effort to live the life of the Gospel more fully outside the traditional monastic setting. Christians for whom the old forms of religious life were impractical, or who felt that they were called to another kind of work, had sought a new solution. It goes without saying that the same basic characteristics and the same tendencies are seen in the thirteenth century.

But the pastoral concerns of the clergy became more practical...to raise the moral and religious level of the people. Writings point out the vices, abuses, temptations and superstitions that afflict the world—those which threaten society, the parish, the family, and the individual (p. 344).

"Introduction," to the *Meditations*, p. xxii.

pp. 317-18


p. 307.

pp. 333-34.

p. 334

Ibid.

Ibid. This psalm also prophecies the torments which Christ must undergo in his Passion:

My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring?

But I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the people.

All they that see me laugh me to scorn; they shoot
out the lip, they shake the head, saying,
He trusteth on the Lord that he would deliver him;
let him deliver him, seeing he delighted in him.

Many bulls have compassed me: strong bulls of Bashan
have beset me round.
They gaped upon me with their mouths, as a ravening
and a roaring lion.
I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out
of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted in the
midst of my bowels.
My strength is dried up like a potsherd; and my
tongue cleaveth to my jaws; and thou hast brought me
into the dust of death.
For dogs have compassed me: the assembly of the
wicked have enclosed me: they pierced my hands and my
feet.
I may tell all my bones; they look and stare upon
me.
They part my garments among them, and cast lots upon
my vesture.

(KJV, Psalm xxii, 1, 6-8, 12-18)

44 P. 242.
45 P. 242-43.
46 P. 243.
47 Ibid.

48 A Stanzacic Life of Christ, ed. Frances Foster,
E.E.T.S., no. 166 (London: Humphrey Milford, Oxford
University Press, 1926), ll. 5429-40.

49 The Southern Passion, ed. Beatrice Daw Brown,
E.E.T.S., no. 169 (London: Humphrey Milford, Oxford
University Press, 1927), ll. 1519-23.

50 See the "Introduction" to The Southern Passion, pp.
lxxxvi-vii. As Brown points out, "The emphasis of the
passage cited from Bernard is, however, different from that
of the metrical passage in that the former represents the
tongue to be the only member preserved from injury; the gall
and vinegar are mentioned in the catalogue of sufferings,
but not as affecting the tongue" (p. lxxxvii).

51 See the "Introduction" to The Northern Passion, ed.
Frances A. Foster, E.E.T.S., no. 147 (London: Kegan Paul,
Trench, Trubner & Co. and Oxford: Oxford University Press,
The opening lines of the poem do make it clear that he perceives as the primary purpose of the poem to make people love Christ and understand how he has saved them:

All cistmen men both more and les,
Pat in pis werld he was wonand es,
Aw for to think both day and nght,
And to haue mynd with mayn and might
How Ihesu Crist, our God so gude,
Boght vs with his precious blode,
And sufferd ded for our mysdede.
Here-to suld ilk a man tak hede,
And louve him euer both loud and styll
Pat slyke kyndnes wald schew vs tyll.
And, for the passyoun of Ihesu Crist
Es medefull for till be puplist
And nedefull to all cistmen
Clerely fo to kun and ken,
Parfor pus es it ordand hee
In ynglysch, lawd men for to lere.

(ll. 1-16)

CHAPTER TWO

CONTRADICTION OR PARADOX?: THE CLERK'S TALE

One element of a work's narrative structure is the internal normative system which evaluates the world of the work by placing it within "a general system of viewing the world conceptually." As Boris Uspensky notes in *A Poetics of Composition*, point of view at this level "is least accessible to formalization, for its analysis relies, to a degree, on intuitive understanding." An analysis should, therefore, focus primarily on "the compositional aspect of point of view on this level," asking

whose point of view does the author assume when he evaluates and perceives ideologically the world which he describes. This point of view, either concealed or openly acknowledged, may belong to the author himself; or it may be the normative system of the narrator, as distinct from that of the author (and perhaps in conflict with the author's norm); or it may belong to one of the characters. Various ideological points of view may be involved in the composition of the text. ¹

Identifying the system of values which underlies the Clerk's Tale, or perhaps reconciling competing systems, is one of the sticking points in interpreting this tale. Many critics find what A. C. Spearing calls an "apparent disharmony between teller and tale." ² For him, the narrator (Clerk),

¹ Notes for this chapter begin on p. 83.
becomes "a moral critic of his source." Spearing argues that the Clerk intervenes in a way that directly invokes the natural human responses of the women in his audience. It is almost as if he were urging his female listeners to rebel against the monstrous acts that the story he is telling would force them to accept. In becoming a partisan for Grisilde and against Walter, the Clerk seems to have stumbled into being a partisan in the sex war itself.

He concludes that the tale "is about a world divided against itself, and articulates a view of human life of which a distinctive feature is precisely that it feels the pull of more than one single set of moral standards." Other critics have asserted even more strongly that the Clerk/Chaucer mishandles this tale.

Unquestionably, the narrator insists that Walter's testing of Griselda is cruel because unnecessary. We must ask, however, what place that insistence has in shaping the normative system that unifies the tale. Does the narrator, in criticizing Walter's testing, criticize the tale that presents such testing, as Spearing suggests? Does the tale, by drawing a Christian moral from the narrative, thereby endorse Walter's actions on the allegorical plane? Does the narrator's admiration for Griselda jar with the Clerk's attitude toward the Wife of Bath which emerges in the Lenvoy? An analysis of point of view on the ideological plane suggests that the answer to each of these questions is
'No.'

Such an analysis clarifies the functional relationship between the narrator's and the characters' perspectives. To begin with, the narrator makes no blanket condemnation of Walter. He approves of certain choices and the acts which they produce, while he disapproves of others. In addition, far from encouraging his female listeners to rebel "against the monstrous acts" in the tale, the narrator admires Griselda precisely because she does not rebel:

> For which it semed thus, that of hem two
> Ther nas but o wyly, for, as Walter leste,
> The same lust was hire plesance also.
> And, God be thanked, al fil for the beste.
> She shewed wel, for no worldly unreste
> A wyf, as of hirself, nothing ne sholde
> Wille in effect, but as hir housbonde wolde. 7

He condemns Walter for testing Griselda needlessly, but not for expecting her to obey. In fact, the salvation of all (as represented by the restoration of the marriage and the acknowledgement of an heir) is possible only because of Griselda's perfect obedience. Had she rebelled, she would have only compounded the evil. She is admired not for what she does, but for her faithfulness to the principle by which she acts. And finally, one consistent moral standard unifies the praise and criticism of Walter, the admiration for Griselda and her actions, the religious moral drawn by the narrator at the end of the tale, and the concluding Lenvoy.
The narrator's commentary alone does not constitute the normative framework which shapes the tale. While it is commonplace to speak of the strongly felt presence of the narrator in this tale, he frequently disappears for long sections of dialogue. The characters' directly quoted speech comprises forty percent of the tale; almost every major plot element is conveyed through dialogue rather than through narrative paraphrase or summary. Most of the lines spoken in the narrator's voice are strictly functional—setting the scene, linking speeches, identifying speakers, moving us from scene to scene. Few are explicitly evaluative; nevertheless, the narrator's attitude toward speeches that he quotes at length is usually clear. His method is straightforward. He endorses or criticizes the characters and actions that he describes, and then steps back to let his characters speak for themselves. Many of these speeches play an important part in establishing the norms which shape the tale. In short, the moral implications of speeches which the narrator endorses and of actions which he approves, and the juxtapositioning of contrasting points of view are just as important to analyzing the moral framework of the tale as is his explicit commentary on events. The narrative itself juxtaposes the narrator's insistence on the unreasonable and cruel nature of Walter's tests with his absolute approval of Griselda's responses to those tests. In addition, the narrator, by
invoking the human responses of his audience, juxtaposes that response to Griselda's. This juxtapositioning shapes the reader's evaluation, not so much of the "unreasonable" Walter (whose motivation, the narrator insists, is irrational), but of the "reasonable" Griselda. By this juxtapositioning, the narrative encourages, nay forces, the audience to question her motivation and the source of our admiration for her. For if Walter's testing is unreasonable and cruel, why should we admire Griselda's obedience? If any mother would be emotionally overcome by Walter's demands, why should we admire Griselda's equanimity? These questions are not unfortunate adjuncts to the narration; they are functionally central to the tale's thematic development. For it is by recognizing the answers to these questions that the audience arrives at the central theme of the tale. The insistence on the unreasonableness of Walter's actions and the evocation of the potential pathos of Griselda's suffering, far from detracting from the religious significance of the tale, enable the audience to recognize what that significance truly is. They clarify the nature of the moral virtue—within a specifically Christian world view—which shapes her responses.

Hence, if the Clerk's Tale may be called a parable, it is a parable about life in this world, one which illustrates the sort of human activity which leads man to God. In this world, where sin has inverted God's order, living a moral
life often requires choices which seem paradoxical (at best) when judged from the world's perspective. In this parable, Walter does not represent God. The narrator tells us as much, nor is it necessary to so interpret him to make sense of the model which Griselda offers to Christians. While the trials of Griselda dramatize the difficulties that this world places in the way of the man who would follow Christ to God, more importantly, they clarify the nature of their threat to man's spiritual well-being. For the true impediments are not external but internal—part of each man's human nature. What specifically happens is ultimately irrelevant; it is the state of mind which shapes Griselda's responses that counts. In particular, Griselda's behavior illustrates how the virtues of humility, patience, and obedience lead man to salvation by removing those impediments in the human personality which can separate him from God, for Griselda's virtues are the moral virtues, the merit of which consists in "putting aside the attraction of creatures and holding fast to God." The tale is fixed firmly in this world, where all men who would be good must choose to live according to right reason.

The marriage motif, which provides the context for the tests, places the action of the tale very firmly in this world, for marriage becomes important precisely because in this world we are subject to time and to death, the products of sin. It also introduces, by implication, the two
principles according to which a man can choose to act in this world: his actions can be guided by the present, with its focus on the world and its pleasures, or by the future, with its knowledge of our certain death and the impermanence of this world. Walter, the narrator tells us, will not marry because he is foolishly concerned only with the present:

I blame hym thus, that he considered noght
In tyme comynge what myghte hym bityde,
But on his lust present was al his thought,
As for to hauke and hunte on every syde.
Wel ny alle otheres cures leet he slyde,
And eek he nolde—and that was worst of alle—
Wedde no wyf, for noght that may bifalle.
(ll. 78-84)

The narrator endorses the people's reminder that Walter's knowledge of his inevitable death should shape his actions in this world:

Boweth youre nekke under that blisful yok
Of soveraynetee, noght of servyse,
Which that men clepe spousaille or wedlok;
And thenketh, lord, among youre thoghtes wyse
How that oure dayes passe in sondry wyse;
For thogh we slepe, or wake, or rime, or ryde,
Ay fleeth the tyme; it nyl no man abyde.

And thogh youre grene youthe floure as yit,
In crepeth age alwey, as stille as stoon,
And deeth manaceth every age, and smyt
In ech estaat, for ther escapeth noon;
And al so certain as we knowe schoon
That we shul deye, as unceteyn we alle
Been of that day whan deeth shal on us falle.
(ll. 113-26)

Yet, though we must constantly live our lives prepared to
die, by so doing we can overcome death in some ways. By submitting to marriage, his people argue, Walter can deny death's victory by ensuring order and continuity in the state:

Delivere us out of al this bisy drede,  
And taak a wyf, for hye Goddes sake!  
For if it so bifelle, as God forbede,  
That thurgh youre deeth youre lynage sholde slake,  
And that a straunge successor sholde take  
Youre heritage, O, wo were us alyve!  
Wherfore we pray you hastily to wyve.  
(11. 134-40)

By agreeing to wed, Walter accepts, of his own free will, the moral obligations which this view of death's relationship to life imposes on his actions in this world. What this view demands, in essence, is his voluntary restriction of his present freedom to achieve a future good:

"Ye wol," quod he, "my owene peple deere,  
To that I nevere erst thoughte strayne me.  
I me rejoyced of my liberte,  
That seelde tyme is founde in manriage;  
Ther I was free, I moot been in servage.

"But natheles I se youre trewe entente,  
And truste upon youre wit, and have doon ay;  
Wherfore of my free wyl I wol assente  
To wedde me, as soone as evere I may."  
(11. 143-51)

Having made the right choice to wed, Walter proceeds to choose his bride rightly as well.

Walter declares his intention to choose his wife, not according to material values but according to spiritual ones. While his people offer to
Chese yow a wyf, in short tyme atte leeste,
Born of the gentilleste and of the meeste
Of al this land, so that it oghte seme
Honour to God and yow, as we kan deeme . . .
(11. 130-33)

Walter rejects this approach and insists that God alone is
the source of true value in this world, a value that may not
always correspond to worldly appearances:

For God it woot, that children ofte been
Unlyk hir worthy elders hem bifoare;
Bountee comth all of God, nat of the strene
Of which they been engendred and ye bore.
I truuste in Goddes bountee, and therfore
My mariage and myne estaat and reste
I hym bitteke; he may doon as hym leste.
(11. 155-61)

The narrator approves of Walter's choice of Griselda because
such a choice reveals that he can judge rightly. Walter
recognizes Griselda's virtue as an inner quality which
reflects "Goddes bountee" and which transcends worldly
appearances. As long as he can recognize—and trust—her
virtue, the narrator admires and praises him:

For thogh the peple have no greet insight
In vertu, he considered ful right
Hir bountee, and disposed that he wolde
Wedde hire oonly, if evere he wedde sholde.
(11. 242-45)

Thus Walter lowely—nay, but roially—
Wedded with fortunat honestete,
In Goddes pees lyveth ful esily
At hoom, and outward grace ynoth had he;
And for he saugh that under low degree
Was ofte vertue hid, the peple hym heellede
A prudent man, and that is seyn ful seelde.
(11. 421-27)
"Goddes pees," St. Augustine tells us, is the tranquillity of order. But, as it transpires, Walter apparently has no faith in that "pees"; he must know Griselda, an act of will which abuses that "wit" which recognized her virtue. That desire "fully to han experience and loore / If that she were stidestast as bifoor" is actually a sign of ignorance and sin. After rejecting appearances in choosing a wife, Walter inexplicably desires to prove her by insisting on "experience." Yet, paradoxically, the more he sees, the more difficult it is for him to believe, since nothing he does can alter Griselda. Her very virtues, for which he wed her, now drive him to test her. Such, the narrator comments, is the paradoxical yet common response of this world to true virtue:

O needeless was she tempted in assay!  
But wedded men ne knowe no mesure,  
Whan that they fynde a pacient creature.  

(11. 621-23)

It is essentially Walter's wilfullness, a wilfullness which can be nothing but unreasonable, which most appalls the narrator. Walter's unreasonable wilfullness contrasts Griselda's own "will-lessness," yet, significantly, both states of the will are acts of free will.

Griselda, the one character whom the narrator never criticizes, is the ideological lynchpin of the tale. The unmistakably Christian overtones to the introduction of Janicula and his daughter provide the context which defines
Griselda's virtues:

Amonges thise povere folk ther dwelte a man
Which that was holden povere of hem alle;
But hye God somtyme senden kan
His grace into a litel oxes staale.
(11. 204-07)

Hers are the virtues exemplified by the life of Christ—
humility of spirit and rejection of the pleasures of this
world, manifested in hard work and the service of others and
fostered by the life of poverty:

But for to speke of vertuous beautee,
Thanne was she oon the faireste under monne;
For povreliche yfostered up was she,
No likerous lust was thurgh hire herte yrone.
Wel ofter of the welle than of the tonne
She drank, and for she wolde vertu plese,
She knew wel labour, but noon ydel ese.
(11. 211-17)

A fewe sheep, spynnynge, on feeld she kept;
She wolde noght been ydel til she slepte.

And whan she homward cam, she wolde brynge
Wortes or othere herbes tymes ofte,
The whiche she shredde and seeth for hir lyvynde,
And made hir bed ful hard and nothyng softe.
(11. 223-28)

The narrator calls particular attention to her piety,
commenting on it three times:

And in greet reverence and charitee
Hir olde povere fader fostred shee.
(11. 221-22)

And ay she kepte hir fadres lyf on-lofte
With everich obeisaunce and diligence
That child may doon to fadres reverance.
(11. 229-31)
The peple cam unto the hous withoute,
And wondred hem in how honest manere
And tentifly she kepte hir fader deere.
(ll. 332-34)

Clearly, Griselda is characterized in ideal terms. But her virtues are defined by her responses to the world in which she lives.

The foundation of Griselda's virtues is her humility, which, according to St. Thomas Aquinas, "considered as a special virtue . . . mainly concerns a man's subjection to God, for whose sake he also submits himself to others." 10 In the tale, this humility might seem initially to be the normal response of someone in Griselda's social class. The juxtapositioning of Janicula's and Griselda's responses to Walter, however, reveals that Griselda's humility transcends social relationships. Walter's request to Janicula is predicated on their relationship as subject and lord:

If that thou vouche sauf, what so bityde,
Thy doghter wol I take, er that I wende,
As for my wyf, unto hir lyves ende.

Thou lovest me, I woot it wel certeyn,
And art my feithful lige man ybore;
And al that liketh me, I dar wel seyn
It liketh thee, and specially therfore
Tel me that poynt that I have seyd bifoire,
If that thou wolt unto that purpos drawe,
And take me as for thy sone-in-lawe.
(ll. 306-15)

Janicula answers in kind:
"Lord," quod he, "my willynge
Is as ye wole, ne ayeynes youre likynge
I wol no thyng, ye be my lord so deere;
Right as yow lust, governeth this mateere."
(ll. 319-22)

Griselda's assent, however, is predicated upon her conviction of her own inherent unworthiness:

Lord, undigne and unworthy
Am I to thilke honour that ye me beede,
But as ye wole yourself, right so wol I.
And heere I swere that nevere willyngly,
In werk no thought, I nyl yow disobeye,
For to be deed, though me were looth to deye.
(ll. 359-64)

Walter may transform Griselda's worldly state, but spiritually she remains unchanged, so that, when Walter tells her that their marriage is dissolved, she still says:

"My lord, . . . I woot, and wiste alway,
How that bitwixen youre magnificence
And my povertie no wight kan ne may
Maken comparison; it is no nay.
I ne heeld me nevere digne in no manere
To be youre wyf, no, ne youre chamberere.

"And in this hous, ther ye me lady maade—
The heighe God take I for my witnesse,
And also wysly he my soule glaade—
I nevere heeld me lady ne mistresse,
But humble servant to youre worthynesse,
And euer shal, whil that my lyf may dure,
Aboven every worldly creature."
(ll. 814-26)

Griselda takes no pride in her worldly state, for it is but temporary, not part of her "true" nature:
That ye so longe of youre benignitee
Han holden me in honour and nobleye,
Where as I was noght worthy for to bee,
That thonke I God and yow, to whom I preye
Foryelde it you; . . .
(11. 827-31)

So far, the tale makes perfectly good sense on any level. The interpretive problem lies in the narrator's handling of the tests themselves. Many critics consider his humanizing of the sufferings of Griselda, achieved by prompting his audience's emotional identification with her plight and by condemning Walter's actions, to be incompatible with the figurative idealism of Griselda's characterization and the concluding moral, 11 which many critics believe requires the symbolic equating of Walter with God. But Griselda, as the tale demonstrates, transcends suffering as we know it in this world—-that is the awesome nature of her behavior. The narrator is the character who suffers, and he encourages his audience to empathize with Griselda by projecting their own "natural" emotional response onto the scene. Even Walter responds more emotionally than does Griselda—-although he hides those emotions:

Somwhat this lord hadde routhe in his manere.
(1. 579)

But wel unnethes thilke word he spak,
But went his wey, for routhe and for pitee.
(11. 892-93)
And when this Walter saugh hire pacience, 
Hir glade chiere, and no malice at al, 
And he so ofte had doon to hire offence, 
And she ay sad and constant as a wal, 
Continuyng evere hire innocence overal, 
This sturdy markys gan his herte dresse 
To renen upon hire wyfly stedfastnesse.  

(ll. 1044-50)

This emotional response—"pitee"—is contrasted to Griselda's behavior. The focus on the increase in human torment—for torment is indeed inflicted by Walter and perceived by the narrator yet handled with equanimity by Griselda—highlights the moral theme which the tale develops. To understand it, one cannot simply focus on the deed itself, but must recognize that moral choice lies in the condition of the individual will. In fact, the temptation to judge and act emotionally is one of the stumbling blocks to moral choice which the moral virtues remove. These virtues, according to St. Thomas Aquinas, "are directed towards good in that they preserve the good of reason against the pressure of the feelings." 12 They, in short, reverse the action by which man fell. The narrative strategy of the tale establishes that the principle of Griselda's actions lies not in an assertion of her own will nor in "the pressure of the feelings" by explicitly contrasting the "natural" human response with hers. As the concluding moral tells us, moral choice is exercised in hardship, so the Christian should actually welcome worldly adversity, since that strengthens his spiritual state of
mind. Griselda’s three most visible moral virtues—humbility, obedience, and patience—are closely related.

St. Thomas Aquinas’ discussion of the moral virtues reinforces this reading of the narrative strategy of the tale. He argues that these virtues are most clearly at work when the situation is such that there is no “human” reason to so act. He explains that Christ chiefly proposed humility to Christians “because it especially removes the obstacles to our spiritual welfare, which lies [sic] in our striving for spiritual and heavenly things, from which we are held back by preoccupation with earthly greatness.” 13 And he quotes St. Gregory: “There is nothing particularly creditable about being humble with those who treat us with regard, for even worldly people do this; but that we should be humble towards those who make us suffer.” 14 Griselda’s humility towards Walter does not reflect his own deserving; rather it reflects Griselda’s disposition to humility, which is to be emulated. To humble ourselves towards those who make us suffer is the purest exercise of spiritual humility. Such humility is a disposition “to man’s free access to spiritual and divine blessings.” 15

Just as we humble ourselves to others for God’s sake, “to obey superiors is something required of us in keeping with the order which God has established . . .” 16 Now, such obedience consists not so much in specific actions as in the disposition of the will. Hence, “the virtue of
obedience is more praiseworthy than other moral virtues, seeing that by obedience a person gives up his own will for God's sake, and by other moral virtues something less." 17 St. Gregory says that "in sacrifice it is the flesh of another being that is immolated; in obedience, one's own will." 18 Griselda's obedience to Walter is depicted as just such a sacrifice of the will, which is an act of her free will:

Ther may no thyng, God so my soule save,
Liken to yow that may displese me;
Ne I desire no thyng for to have,
Ne drede for to lease, save oonly yee.
This wyl is in myn herte, and ay shal be;
No lengthe of tyme or deeth may this deface,
Ne chaunge my corage to another place."
(11. 505-11)

"Ye been oure lord, dooth with youre ownene thyng
Right as yow list; axeth no reed at me.
For as I lefte at hoom al my clothyng,
When I first cam to yow, right so," quod she,
"Lefte I my wyl and al my liberte,
And took youre clothyng; wherfore I yow preye,
Dooth youre plesaunce, I wol youre lust obeye.

"And certes, if I hadde prescience
Youre wyl to knowe, er ye youre lust me tolde,
I wolde it doon withouten negligence;
But now I woott youre lust, and what ye wolde,
Al youre plesance ferme and stable I holde;
For wiste I that my deeth wolde do yow ese,
Right gladly wolde I dyen, yow to plesse.
(11. 652-65)

This last stanza, in particular, closely resembles the following comment of Aquinas:
Note that no matter how it becomes known, the will of a superior amounts to a silent precept, and obedience looks to be the more willing, when its action does not wait for a spoken command, provided the superior's will is really known. 19

And the narrator, admiring such unity of will between Walter and Griselda, attributes to it the ultimately happy outcome of her trials:

For which it semed thus, that of hem two
Ther nas but o wyl; for, as Walter leste,
The same lust was hire plesance also.
And, God be thanked, al fil for the beste.
She shewed wel, for no worldly unreact
A wyf, as of himself, nothing ne sholde
Wille in effect, but as hir housbonde wolde.
(ll. 715-21; italics added)

Aquinas insists that the virtue of obedience lies not in doing what our superiors wish, but in the contemning of our own will which motivates that obedience:

If, then, as in the case of the agreeable, a task commanded is itself desirable, apart from having the quality of being commanded, a person would want to do it anyway and to all appearances carries it out not because he is commanded but because he wants to. On the other hand, as in the case of the disagreeable, the task commanded has nothing to recommend it and is of such a nature as to go counter to personal preference, clearly it is carried out solely because of the command. This is what Gregory has in mind, saying obedience which contains anything of self in congenial matters is non-existent or minimal—i.e. because the person's will would seem bent mainly not on carrying out the command but on seeking self-satisfaction; in trying or difficult matters it is greater—i.e. personal will is concerned wholly with the command. 20
Griselda's obedience, incomprehensible if we look to Walter's actions to justify it, reflects just such an act of will. The narrator's insistence on the cruelty of Walter's actions clarifies the nature of Griselda's response. Ironically, from this perspective, the more unreasonable the order, the better we please God by obeying, for such obedience can only be for His sake: "Therefore because a man out of love of God subjects himself through the vow of obedience to the necessity of doing certain things which of themselves do not please him, by that very fact the things he does are more acceptable to God . . . because a man can give nothing greater to God than to subject his own will to the will of another on account of God." 21

Finally, both Walter and the narrator comment on Griselda's patience in the face of her trials. In particular, the humanizing of those trials clarifies the specific nature of that virtue. Patience, says St Thomas, "[has] a perfect work to do in enduring hardships, from which arise, first, grief, which patience controls . . ." 22

As a moral virtue, patience safeguards the good of reason against the pressure of the feelings. . . . as St Paul says, worldly grief produces death, and Ecclesiasticus. For sadness has killed many, and there is no profit in it. So it is essential to have some virtue which preserves the good of reason against dejection, to ensure that reason does not yield to it. This is the work of patience, and so Augustine says that human patience is what enables us to bear
hardship with tranquillity (that is, without being troubled by dejection), so that we do not abandon, through mental unbalance, the goods by which we may attain a better state. 23

Giving way to sorrow—even sorrow which is, in terms of this world, legitimate sorrow—threatens our spiritual health, for "a man is said to possess his soul by patience in so far as he utterly uproots the feelings, aroused by hardships, which trouble the soul." 24 It is not the fact that Griselda endures evil which so amazes us, but the fact that she bears such evil "with an equal mind." Even Walter is less concerned with the fact of her turning over her children and more concerned with her state of mind in so doing (and just as admiring of it as we are encouraged to be):

For now gooth he ful faste ymaginyng
If by his wyves cheere he myghte se,
Or by hire word apercvey, that she
Were chaunged; but he nevere hire koude fynde
But evere in oon ylike sad and kynde.

As glad, as humble, as bisy in servyse,
And eek in love, as she was wont to be,
Was she to hym in every maner wyse;
Ne of hir doghter nought a word spak she.
(11. 598-606)

Adversity does not alter, because it does not disturb, her state of mind.

The narrator's encouraging of the audience to respond to the potential pathos of each scene simultaneously highlights Griselda's own calm response and the distance
that separates our state of mind from her own. A few passages will illustrate the way that the narrator juxtaposes these contrasting points of view:

[The sergeant said]
"This child I am comanded for to take,"--
And spek namoore, but out the child he hente
Despitously, and gan a cheere make
As though he wolde han slayn it er he wente.
Grisildis moot al suffre and al consentes;
And as a lamb she sitteth make and stille
And lest this cruel sergeant doon his wille.

Suspicious was the diffame of this man,
Suspect his face, suspect his word also;
Suspect the tyme in which he this bigan.
Allas! hir doghter that she loved so,
She wende he wolde han slawen it right tho.
But nathless she neither weep ne syked,
Conformynge hire to that the markys lyked.
(11. 533-46; italics added)

I trowe that to a notice in this cas
It had been hard this reuthe for to se;
Wel myghte a mooder thanne han cried "allas!"
But nathless so sad stidefast was she
That she endured al adverstee.
(11. 561-65; italics added)

This ugly sergeant, in the same wyse
That he hire doghter caughte, right so he,
Or worse, if men worse kan devyse,
Hath hent hire sone, that ful was of beautee.
And ever in oon so pacient was she
That she no chiere maade of hevynesse.
(11. 673-70; italics added)

The rude peple, as it no wonder is,
Wenden ful wel that it hadde be right so,
But whan thise tydynges came to Grisildis,
I desme that hire herte was ful wo.
But she, ylike sad for everemo,
Disposed was, this humble creature,
The adverstee of Fortune al t'endure.
(11. 750-56; italics added)
The folk hire folwe, wepynge in hir weye,  
And Fortune ay they cursen as they goon;  
But she fro wepynge kepte hir eyen dreye,  
Ne in this tyme word ne spak she noon.  
Hir fader, that this tidynge herde anon,  
Curseth the day and tyme that Nature  
Shoop hym to been a lyves creature.  
(ll. 897-903; italics added)

Given the pathos of these scenes, the audience is compelled to wonder how a woman can behave so calmly. The narrator makes it clear, however, that the source of her calm is not heartlessness. Walter himself raises and dismisses this potential explanation:

This markys wondred, evere lenger the moore,  
Upon hir pacience, and if that he  
Ne hadde soothe knowen therbifoore  
That parfitly hir children loved she,  
He wolde have wend that of som subtiltee,  
And of malice, or for cruel corage,  
That she hadde suffred this with sad visage.

But wel he knew that next hymself, certayn,  
She loved hir children best in every wyse.  
(ll. 687-93)

Indeed, any remaining suspicions of Griselda's coldheartedness must be dispelled by her very real and very human joy; when she finally learns the truth:

When she this herde, aswowne doun she falleth  
For pitous joye, and after hire swoynyng  
She bothe hire yonge children to hire calleth,  
And in hire armes, pitously wepyng,  
Embraceth hem, and tendrely kissynge  
Ful lyk a moorder, with hire salte teeres  
She bathed bothe hire visage and hire heeres.
O which a pitous thyng it was to se
Hir swownynge, and hire humble voys to heere:
"Grauntmercy, lord, God thanke it yow," quod she,
"That ye han saved me my children deehe:
Now rekke I nevyr to been deed right heere;
Sith I stonde in your love and in your grace,
No fors of deeth, ne whan my spirit pace!"
(ll. 1079-92)

Far from detracting from the seriousness of the tale's theme, this description—at length—of very human joy reveals that Griselda is no inhuman symbol; she emerges as a woman fully capable of feeling as deeply as any of us, but whose emotions have been ruled by right reason. Hers is more than a calm surface; she has indeed borne her trials "with an equal mind" which has safeguarded "the good of reason against the impulse of the passions":

Thus with hire fader, for a certeyn space,
Dwelleth this flour of wyflyn pacience,
That neither by hire wordes no hire face,
Biforn the folk, ne eek in hire absence,
Ne sheved she that hire was doon offence;
Ne of hire heighe estaat no remembrance
Ne hadde she, as by hire contenaunc.

No wonder is, for in hire grete estaat
Hire goost was evere in pleyn humylitee;
No tendre mouth, noon herte delicaat,
No pompe, no semblant of rolialtee,
But ful of pacient benyngnytee,
Discreet and prideless, ay honorable,
And to hire housbonde evere meke and stable.
(ll. 918-31)

Such a state of mind transforms the pain of this world into the glory of the world to come.

John P. McCall's analysis of the tests supports this interpretation of the function of the humanizing elements.
He argues that, in the scenes in which Griselda's children are taken,

the human pathos of the scene is overwhelming, but so are the spiritual implications. For Griselda, the child is like Christ, an innocent victim for her sake; but even more significant that that, because it is freely and fully willed, is Griselda's obedience—the death of her own will. Thus concomitant with what might otherwise be viewed as only a highly effective sentimental scene, the action takes on clear and certain supernatural meaning. The sufferance of mother and child becomes analogous to that of Christ, the model of all obedience, who "humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even to the death on the cross" (Phil. 2:8). 25

Christ's whole life on earth, St. Augustine tells us, "gave a moral lesson through the manhood he assumed." 26 If Christ's sufferings provide a context in which to understand Griselda's, what role does Walter play in such a reading?

The narrator's assessment of Walter's acts, we should note, emerges from the specific context of this tale. The narrator criticizes Walter not simply as a husband (any husband) testing a wife (any wife); he criticizes him for testing this Griselda, whose perfect virtue renders such testing unnecessary. It is Griselda's nature which motivates the specific charges that the narrator levels against Walter, for the recurring insistence that such testing is unnecessary is valid only when the woman is a Griselda:
Nadeless, God woot, he thoghte hire for t'affraye.

He hadde assayed hire ynogh biforn,  
And foond hire evere good; what naded it  
Hire for to tempete, and alwey moore and moore,  
Though som men preise it for a subtil wit?  
But as for me, I seye that yvele it sit  
To assaye a wyf when that it is no nade,  
And putten hire in angwyssh and in dred.  
(ll. 455-62; italics added)

This hardly constitutes a call for rebellion. In fact, the structural effect of this repeated criticism is to highlight Griselda's admirable submission--it is the narrator's knowledge of Griselda's perfect obedience (after all, he knows how the tale ends, as he reminds us), which is the source of his insistence that the trials are unnecessary! But, one might ask, might not this criticism translate allegorically into a condemnation of husbands and a support of wives in general (hence, as some critics have suggested, a tale which actually supports the Wife's critique of the married state)? After all, he does generalize the paradox of her trials:

But wedded men ne knowe no mesure,  
Whan that they fynde a pacient creature.  
(ll. 622-23)

And he clearly admires women (when they are humble like Griselda):
Men speke of Job, and moost for his humblesse, 
As clerkes, whan hem list, konne wel endite, 
Namely of men, but as in soothfastness, 
Though clerkes praise wommen but a lte, 
Ther kan no man in humblesse hym acquire 
As womman kan, ne kan been half so trewe 
As wommen been, but it be falle newe.  
(II. 932-38)

But does such admiration translate into becoming "a partisan in the sex war itself"? In fact, the tale demonstrates that when a woman is like Griselda, there is no "sex war"! No conflict exists between Walter and Griselda, as amazing as that may be for an audience that cannot help imagining what they would do in the same situation. Why, Griselda herself condemns the Wife of Bath. Almost every line she speaks must gall the Wife, particularly:

Ther I was fostred of a child ful smal, 
Til I be deed my lyf ther wol I lede, 
A wydwe clene in body, herte, and al. 
For sith I yaf to yow my maydenhede, 
And am youre trewe wyf, it is no drede, 
God shilde swich a lordes wyf to take 
Another man to housbonde or to make!  
(II. 834-40)

If, as I have argued, the tale dramatizes the moral virtues in the responses of Griselda, it cannot support the Wife of Bath, whose responses are the opposite of Griselda's. The Wife of Bath asserts her will; Griselda sacrifices hers. Yet, in this tale, Griselda wins a spiritual sovereignty through slaying her will that the Wife can only dream of:
Walter hire dooth so feithfully plesaunce
That it was deyntee for to seen the cheere
Bitwixe hem two, now they been met yferre.
(11. 1111-13)

Ful many a yeer in heigh prosperitee
Lyven thise two in concord and in rest,
And richely his doghter marylde he
Unto a lord, oon of the worthieste
Of al Ytaile; and thanne in pees and reste
His wyves fader in his court he kepeth,
Til that the soule out of his body crepeth.
(11. 1128-34)

What hope does the Wife have to achieve such happiness when her actions prove that she does not understand its very foundation? The Lenvoy, jokingly, drives this point home, for it encourages the Wife to persist in that very behavior which denies all that we have been encouraged to admire in Griselda 27 (and which, according to the narrator, makes women worthy of praise by clerks):

O noble wyves, ful of heigh prudence,
Lat noon humylitee youre tonge naille,
Ne lat no clerk have cause of diligence
To write of yow a storie of swich mervaille
As of Grisildis pacient and kynda,
Lest Chichevache yow swelwe in hire entraille!
(11. 1183-88)

Ye archewyves, stondeth at defense,
Syn ye be strong as a greet camaille;
Ne suffreth nat that men yow doon offense,
And skilandre wyves, fieble as in bataille,
Beth egre as is a tygre yond in Ynde;
Ay clappeth as a mille, I yow consaille.
(11. 1195-1200)

In addition, while Walter's testing of Griselda was unnecessary because she was perfectly virtuous, now husbands should not test their wives because they do not have her
virtues; that is, they don't have the state of mind with which one triumphs over adversity:

Grisilde is deed, and eek hire pacience,
And bothe atones buryed in Ytaille;
For which I crie in open audience,
No wedded man so hardy be t'assaille
His wyves pacience in trust to fynde
Grisildis, for in certein he shal faille.
(11. 1177-82)

The Wife's triumph over the tribulations of marriage is limited to this world. This tale rejects this narrow perspective for the perspective of eternity which transforms our attitude toward this world and our understanding of its tribulations. The spiritual implications of the Lenvoy are clear; to emulate Griselda--however imperfectly--is the way to spiritual life; to emulate the Wife separates one from God. The tale calls on all men, "every wight, in his degree," to follow Griselda, for the significance of Griselda's behavior transcends the marriage relationship which dramatizes it.

One final problem remains. Walter's cruel treatment of Griselda is condemned as "wikked usage." Does this condemnation undercut a religious moral which asserts that

For, sith a woman was so pacient
Unto a mortal man, wel moore us oghte
Receyven al in gree that God us sent; ... 
(11. 1149-51)

Can this tale simultaneously condemn Walter's actions as evil and promote Griselda's patient endurance of them
without falling into moral contradiction or suggesting that God's testing of us is also "wikke usage"? Such a reading mistakes the relationship between this moral and the action of the poem. The moral does not impose a symbolic reading on the tale (i.e. Walter = God); it simply identifies the perspective from which the significance of the action should be judged. The moral reminds us that our actions in this world should be motivated by God's promises to us (promises which are specifically contrasted to Walter's motivation). For worldly adversity has its place in God's plan for our salvation. Hence the narrator proposes for our emulation, not Griselda's perfect humility ("for it were inportable"), but her constancy in the face of adversity, since it is through adversity in this world that we exercise that in our nature which binds us to God, and mortify that which separates us. Walter's actions may be unreasonable, but God's are not. Our faith in God's promises should prevent us from being distracted by this world—attractive or evil—from our path to salvation. What obstacles must we overcome?—our own passions which, as a consequence of original sin, threaten to rule us. How do we overcome these obstacles?—by submitting to others, by humbling the will, by refusing to give way to sorrow in the face of evil. And the more we exercise these virtues, the stronger they become; hence we should not only endure adversity but welcome it. God, unlike Walter, knows us absolutely and
sends us only what we can endure—for our own good:

For greet skile is, he preeve that he wroghte.
But he ne tempteth no man that he boughte,
As seith Seint Jame, if ye his pistel rede;
He preeveth folk al day, it is no drede,

And suffreth us, as for oure excercise,
With sharpe scourges of adversitez
Ful ofte to be bete in sondry wyse;
Nat for to knowe oure wyl, for certes he,
Er we were born, knew al oure frelete;
And for oure beste is al his governaunce.
Lat us thanne lyve in vertuous suffraunce.
(11. 1152-62)

Walter's testing of Griselda is not an act of knowledge but an act of ignorance, hence it is "wikked." Yet, it can still be part of God's plan; God's perfect knowledge defeats evil and shows us the way to overcome it too. The narrator cites as his authority the Epistle of James (1, 12-14 in particular):

Blessed is the man, that suffrith temptacioun; for when he schal be preued, he schal resseyve the coroun of lijf, which God biheste to men that louen hym. No man whann he is tempted, seie, that he is tempted of God; for whi God is not a temptere of yvel thingis, for he temptith no man. But ech man is temptid, drawun of his owne coveiting.

The commentary accompanying this 15th century translation adds to "for why God is not a temptere of yvel thingis" the explanation "but of good thingis oonly, as in xxijc of Genesis, God temptide Abraham, that his obedience schulde be maad knowne to other men, as be geuene to hem in to
enimple." Such is also the result of Walter's testing, regardless of his "wikked" intentions. Indeed, Walter's intentions, even his specific actions, become irrelevant. For Griselda transforms his temptations into proofs of her virtue, which the tale offers as "enimple" to us all. The more irrational and emotionally impossible we perceive Walter's tests to be, the more clearly we see that the significance of Griselda's constancy lies in the nature of the response itself. Through this response to the world, we overcome evil. McCall notes that "the trials and triumphs of Grisilde are, then, an imitation not only of the Passion and Resurrection, but more important, of the daily tests and victories, great and small, which God providentially sends to all, 'as for our exercise.'" 28 But these two imitations are, finally, the same imitation, for it is by the first that we accomplish the second. This tale is no more, and no less, symbolic than the life of every Christian should be.
II. NOTES


3. P. 81.

4. P. 83.

5. P. 103. This is also Elizabeth Salter's argument in Chaucer: The Knight's Tale and the Clerk's Tale [London: Edward Arnold Ltd., 1962], p. 61: "Basically, the trouble originates in an inability to decide upon and abide by one single set of moral standards for the Tale."

6. Robert Jordan, for example, criticizes the tale's moral and narrative discontinuities, claiming that "thinly textured and relatively unequivocal as it is, the Clerk's Tale plainly displays its broken back . . ." (Chaucer and the Shape of Creation: The Aesthetic Possibilities of Inorganic Structure [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967], p. 198). Robert P. Miller complains that "there can be no real correlation between such spiritual truth and the human terms employed by the Clerk to represent it." ("Allegory in The Canterbury Tales" in Companion to Chaucer Studies, ed. Beryl Rowland [Toronto / New York / London: Oxford University Press, 1968], p. 281). Salter concludes that "Chaucer does not seem to recognize the problem he sets himself and his readers by attempting to juxtapose, rather than to relate, both perspectives [of the ideal world and the 'world of actuality'] upon the narrative" (p. 62).


8. While no one has yet observed either how the narrative shapes our perception of the interconnectedness of all three of these virtues or, more importantly, how the pathetic elements of the narrative function thematically by juxtaposing the reader's passions to Griselda's, obedience, humility, and patience have each been proposed as the central theme of the tale by John P. McCall in "The Clerk's Tale and the Theme of Obedience, Modern Language Quarterly,


10 Sum. Theol., II-II, Qu. 161, Art. 1, Ad 5. "Humilitas autem, secundum quod est specialis virtus, praecipue respicit subiectionem hominis ad Deum, propter quem etiam aliis humiliando se subilicit."


12 Sum. Theol., II-II, Qu. 136, Art. 1, Resp. "Dicendum quod, sicut dictum est supra, virtutes morales ordinantur ad bonum, inquantum conservant bonum rationis contra impetus passionum."

13 Sum. Theol., II-II, Qu. 161, Art. 5, Ad 4. "Ad quartem dicendum quod ideo Christus praecipue nobis humilitatem commendavit, quia per hoc maxime removetur impedimentum humanae salutis, quae consistit in hoc quod homo ad coelestia et spiritualia tendat, a quibus homo impeditur dum in terrenis magnificari studet. Et ideo Dominus ut impedimentum salutis auferret, exteriorem celsitudinem contemnendum monstravit per humilitatis exempla."

14 Sum. Theol., II-II, Qu. 161, Art. 6, Ad 3. "... quia, sicut Gregorius dicit in Registar, "non grande est his nos esse humiles a quibus honoramur, quia et hoc saeculares quilibet faciunt; sed illis maxime humiles esse debemus a quibus aliquid patimur."
15 Sum. Theol., II-II, Qu. 161, Art. 5, Ad 4. "Et sic humilitas est quasi quaedam dispositio ad liberum accessum hominis in spiritualia et divina bona."


17 Sum. Theol., II-II, Qu. 104, Art. 3, Resp. "Inter virtutes autem morales tanta aliqua potior est quanto aliquid majus aliquid contingit ut Deo inhaerat. Sunt autem tria genera bonorum humanorum quae homo potest contemnere propter Deum: quorum infimum sunt exteriora bona; medium autem sunt bona corporis; supremum autem sunt bona animae inter quae quodammodo praeceptuum est voluntas, inquantum scilicet per voluntatem homo omnibus aliis bonis utitur. Et ideo per se loquendo laudabilior est obedientiae virtus, quae propter Deum contemnit propriam voluntatem, quam aliae virtutes morales, quae propter Deum aliqua alia bona contemnunt. Unde Gregorius dicit quod obedientia victimis iura praeponitur, quia per victimas aliena caro, per obedientiam vero voluntas propria maestatur."

18 Sum. Theol., II-II, Qu. 104, Art. 3, Ad 1. "Unde secundum hoc laudabilius est obedire Deo quam sacrificium offerre.—et etiam quia "in sacrificio immolatur aliena caro, per obedientiam autem propria voluntas," ut Gregorius dicit."


20 Sum. Theol., II-II, Qu. 104, Art. 2, Ad 3. "Ad tertium dicendum quod obedientia, sicut et quaelibet virtus, debet habere promptam voluntatem in suum proprium objectum, non autem in quod repugnans est ei. Proprium autem objectum obedientiae est praeceptum, quod quidem ex alterius voluntate procedit. Unde obedientia reddit promptam hominis voluntatem ad impendium voluntatem alterius, scilicet praeceptum. Si autem id quod ei praeceptitur sit propter se ei volitum, etiam absque ratione praecepti, sicut accidit
in prosperis; iam ex propria voluntate tendit in illud, et non videtur illud implere propter praecipit, sed propter voluntatem propria. Sed quando illud quod praecipitur nullo modo est secundum se volitum, sed est, secundum se consideratum, propriae voluntati repugnans, sicut accidit in asperis; tunc omne manifestum est quod non impetur nisi propter praecipitum. Et ideo Gregorius dicit quod obedientia quae habet aliquid de suo in prosperis, est vel nulla vel minor, quia scilicet voluntas propria non videtur principaliter tendere ad impleendum praecipitum, sed ad sequendum proprium volitum; in adversis autem vel difficillimus est major, quia voluntas propria in nihil aliud tendit quam in praecipitum.

21 Sum. Theol., II-II, Qu. 186, Art. 5, Ad 5. "Et ideo, quia necessitati aliqua faciendi quae secundum se non placent, per votum obedientiae homo se subiicit propter Deum, ex hoc ipso ea quae facit sunt Deo magis accepta, etiam si sint minora quam nihil majus homo potest Deo dare quam quod propria voluntatem propere ipsum alterius voluntati subiiciat.


23 Sum. Theol., II-II, Qu. 136, Art. 1, Resp. "Dicendum quod, sicut dictum est supra, virtutes morales ordinantur ad bonum inquantum conservant bonum rationis contra impetus passionum. Inter alias autem passiones tristitia efficax est ad impediendum bonum rationis: secundum illud II ad Cor. Sacculi tristitia mortem operatur, et Eccl. Multos occidit tristitia, et non est utilitas in illa. Unde necessae est habere aliquam virtutem per quam bonum rationis conservetur contra tristitiam, ne scilicet ratio tristitis succombat. Hoc autem facit patientia. Unde Augustinus dicit, quod patientia hominum est qua mala aequo animo toleramus, idest sine perturbatione tristitiae, ne animo iniquo bona desideramus, per quae ad meliora perveniamus."

24 Sum. Theol., II-II, Qu. 136, Art. 2, Ad 2. "Et ideo per patientiam dicitur homo suam animam possidere, inquantum radicitus evellit passiones adversitatum, quibus anima inquietatur."


26 As quoted by St. Thomas Aquinas, Sum. Theol., II-II, Qu. 161, Art. 5, Obj. 4. "Sicut Augustinus dicit, tota vita Christi in terra, per hominem quem suscipere dignatus est, disciplina morum fuit."
27 McCall concludes that "the Clerk's argument with the Wife of Bath . . . assumes the contours of a disagreement between humility and pride, obedience and self-will" (p. 269).

28 McCall, 269.
CHAPTER THREE

THE "LITEL CLERGEOUN": SENTIMENT AND NARRATIVE PURPOSE

IN THE PRIORESS'S TALE

"The problem of reading medieval affective texts," concludes Michael Stuhrin from his study of late medieval religious texts, "is nothing less than attempting to understand how the register of human emotions functions in an individual's--and culture's--continuing activity of knowing." ¹ This statement well defines the problem which faces the critic of the Prioress's Tale.

Many of the Prioress's critics have felt uncomfortable with--even embarrassed by--the "emotive intensity of her moving yet simple language." ² Some have solved the problem by downplaying the affective dimension of the tale. ³ But most view the emotionalism of the Tale as proof of the Prioress's limitations, intellectual and religious.

Beverly Boyd argues in Chaucer and the Liturgy that the Prioress's "Prologue and her Tale use her liturgical orientation to show the emotionalism of her personality." ⁴ This use of liturgical language is not, however, "a parody on the liturgy, for the liturgical materials are handled reverently, and the Prioress's traveling companions appear moved by what she has said." Yet Boyd believes nonetheless that the tale is satirical and the Prioress hypocritical.

¹ Notes for this chapter begin on p. 118.
Since the Prioress's "allusions to the children saints" and "her liturgical paraphrases . . . are highly emotional materials in their original contexts," Boyd argues that

by presenting the Prioress's Tale in liturgical language, [Chaucer] adds to its emotional impact and expresses it in a manner which would well be characteristic of someone of that day whose life was surrounded by the literature of religion. But in this particular case, the intent must be satire, for the portrait in the General Prologue . . . shows the Prioress as worldly, sentimental, and indeed rather silly. Her preoccupation with the liturgy stresses not virtue but sentimentality, and hence is the type of hypocrisy decried by Wyclif in "Of Feigned Contemplative Life." 5

Boyd is not the only critic who, faced with an apparently serious and sincere tale, turns to the General Prologue for proof that the tale "must be" satire.

Alan T. Gaylord is even harder on the Prioress in "The Unconquered Tale of the Prioress", for he insists that

There is no love within the Prioress's Tale, except the Prioress' towards the "clergeon" and the widow's towards her son; . . . The narration of the Prioress is full of sentimentality . . . Although it sounds harsh, I think we may say that the tale is a case of arrested development. That is, the Prioress not only identifies herself with the "litel clergeon," she keeps the whole Tale at the emotional and intellectual level of child. 6
In short, he concludes, "Her Tale appears to be peculiarly unconquered by the amour that is charity, by mercy, by emotional control, and by the mature intellect." 7

E. T. Donaldson argues in Chaucer's Poetry that the Prioress is guilty of an "emotionalism that excludes the intellect" and that such emotionalism "can be a dangerous thing, for the psychological transition from exquisite sensibility to bloodshed is an easy one." 8 For Donaldson, the Prioress's emotionalism excludes the intellect in the sense that she harbors a "harsh, un-Christian attitude to the Jews" which ill accords "with a tone of tender piety." 9 That the Prioress is sentimental and that the emotionalism of her tale "excludes the intellect" have been accepted by many critics who have written since Donaldson, but not necessarily in the sense that Donaldson originally intended it.

Edward H. Kelly, though sympathetic to the Prioress in his "By Mouth of Innocentz: The Prioress Vindicated," seems to see an exclusion of the intellect, not so much in the Prioress's anti-semitism, but in the nature of her religious belief itself: "The attitude of a speaker expressing 'heartfelt' religious belief or faith in miracles would indeed be apart from any consideration of a logical rhetorical approach." For him, the "real miracle of the tale [is] the miracle of its language, which communicates through emotional reaction what cannot be stated
intellectually—in other words, pure poetry." Such conclusions are close to those of Robert O. Payne in *The Key of Remembrance*. He sees the Prioress's Tale as part of what he calls Chaucer's "sentimental experiment" in which it is almost as though he is, in a typically detached dispassionate manner, working toward a medieval version of *poesia pura*—a moral statement which will be immediately apprehensible emotionally and nearly incomprehensible by any rational or intellectual faculty.

In this tale, "the story is in effect frozen into a kind of basic situation and the major effort is in the rhetorical elaboration of its emotional implications." It is, in short, "a purely affective narrative . . . ." In arguing that the Prioress's emotionalism excludes the intellect, it is one thing to accuse her of irrational hatred of the Jews and quite another to speak of communicating "through emotional reaction what cannot be stated intellectually" or of moral statements "which will be immediately apprehensible emotionally and nearly incomprehensible by any rational or intellectual faculty." It is difficult to understand precisely what this means. Emotion for emotion's sake? Irrational emotion? Irrational morality?

Carolyn P. Collette, declaring in "Sense and Sensibility in the Prioress's Tale" that "of all the sorts of religious tales the Prioress could tell, surely the
miracle story is the one least rational," turns to late fourteenth-century trends in spirituality for an explanation. She argues that "the answer may lie in the fact that Chaucer's fashionable Prioress and her little tale were more fashionable than most modern critics realize." Thus, Collette concludes that

the child's martyrdom is not a static, intellectual ikon, a symbol to be understood, but a moving temporal image which we contemplate with emotion and through which we come to understand in our hearts if not our heads the message of Christianity. . . . The point of the story, then, is the power of emotion, of touching, overwhelming emotion exemplified by the child's faith and by the martyrdom of his "litel body swete." But precisely what is this "power of emotion"? By speaking of coming "to understand in our hearts if not our heads the message of Christianity," Collette misses, I think, as do Payne and Kelly, the true power of the tale's affective dimension. For I believe that the tale does not, as Gaylord asserts, remain at the intellectual level of a child, that the focus of the Prioress's love is on God (Christ and Christ's mother) not the "litel clergeon," and, most importantly, that the emotionalism of the narrative is both a controlled and a functional part of a sincere devotional response that includes the intellect as well as the emotions. (That such a devotional response may be simple or unsophisticated does not make it necessarily
"immature" or "irrational.") The tale both evokes a sincere devotional response and makes us understand what should be the true source of such a response, fusing emotion and intellect into a moment of joyous understanding. It is a part of "a central idea that can be found throughout all the works of the Franciscan School, which has been very well expressed by Saint Bonaventure: *Ideo oportet iungere cum scientia caritatem, ut homo habeat simul scientiam et caritatem.* With knowledge should be joined love, so that a man should acquire at the same time both knowledge and love." 17 The narrative strategy of the *Prioress's Tale* does join love and knowledge, each enriching the other. As Stugrin suggests, ". . . perhaps it is in considering the experience of a spiritual text as an act of knowing, rather than an a finished event and 'piece' of knowledge, that we come closest to understanding." 18

That "knowing" is not necessarily simplistic, although its nature is certainly popular rather than scholarly; it is part of a devotional response that lies somewhere between the Scylla of theological discourse and the Charybdis of mystical rapture. Pourrat notes that medieval spirituality manifested itself in basic "schools": a practical and affective spirituality removed from intellectual reasoning and interested in emotion, a speculative spirituality concerned with theological preoccupations, and an affective and speculative spirituality which tends to unite and
reconcile reason and feeling. It is in the last of these categories rather than in the first that I think the Progress's Tale most naturally fits. For we must be careful to recognize that the "penitential response" is but a part (albeit an important part) of late medieval spirituality. This penitential response can be seen most clearly in the development of the Middle English lyric, influenced strongly by "the radical evangelical spirituality of St. Francis of Assisi." In this body of writing "a distinctive spirituality, with primary emphasis on contrition and personal repentance, is everywhere apparent." It is in this context that the Franciscan preacher-poets, "keenly aware of the impetus given to repentance by an awareness of the decay of the flesh ... were to see the most powerful appeal of the atonement as emotional, and envision the basis of that appeal as concretely manifested in the physical details of the crucifixion." The reader of Franciscan literature is "deliberately invited to imagine himself present at Calvary, and to recreate mentally each detail so as to achieve the most realistic visual and emotional effect." The attention to Christ's suffering provides, in short, contrition-producing detail. But this is not at all the tone or focus of the Progress's Tale. Details of the child's suffering are neither dwelt on nor even provided (indeed, if we are to believe some critics, the Jews'
suffering stands out more than the child's); the impetus of the emotionalism is not towards that sort of contrition-producing sorrow. Consider, in contrast to the Prior's Tale, the personal remorse and penitential response to thoughts of death encouraged by the author of Jacob's Well:

... hit thynke of deth! Whanne
erthe is full goure mouth, banne be
poorest beggere lyvynge is more in body of
pryce ban se. Late pus be wyndas of
goure mynde turnyn dowward to thynken of
deth, and, in be roop of goure belieue,
seeth be doom & paynys of helle to be
dampnyd, & be mede of blysse to be sauysd
banne, be boket of your desyre schal
bownyn in lownes, a receyvin water of
dreed in god, a be drawyn vp fro synne to
penaunce be hope of mercy, a reysed vp be
love to verteyws. Banne, of your boket
of desyre se schul drynke, here watyr of
grace, and in goure ende be swete wyne of
ioye!

The same remedial effects of such personal remorse as the natural response to concrete reminders of death and to thoughts of Christ's passion is also recommended in John Misc's Instructions for Parish Priests:

Contra superbia
Agaynus pruyde wythowte les,
Pe forme remedy ys mekenes,
Ofte to knele and erpe to kys,
And knowlache wel pat erpe he ys,
And dede mennus bonus ofte to se,
And penke pat he schal syche be.
Pe paynys of helle haue gerne in thougt,
And domes day for-get thow noght,
Crystus passyone haue in mynde,
Pat sleth pruyde, as wryten I fynde,
And who so penketh pus in stedfast thougt,
Pruyde he schale sette at nogt.
The **Prioresse's Tale** neither dwells on nor encourages sorrow for man's shortcomings. It focuses instead on God's gifts, reminding us of future joys in a way that makes us consider the source of those gifts and thus moves us to renewed devotion. In much the same spirit the author of the *Speculum Sacerdotale* instructs priests:

For the honestlier and holier that they [priests] make here proclamation unto the peple, the more they stet and shuld stet the peple to that they bydde hem. They schulden commend and praye the solemnities of God and of his seyns excellently with all here myghtes. And the cause wherfore they ben ordyned openly to schewe, and for to declare schortly some myracles that perteyneth vn-to the festes that the peple of God may be lyghtened with vn-to the knowlidge of sothfastness, and to the loue therof be inflamyd and styred.

Hence it is important that priests know the

solemnytees of alle seyntes the which schulden worshipfully ech eonneiday be schewid vn-to youre peple that God may be glorified in youre chyrches be the maters iwritten aftar, and deuotion and wytt of the peple may be the more informyd to worschepynge and glorifynge of him that is almyghty, here god.

Such, too, is the end of the narrative strategy of the **Prioresse's Tale**, a strategy which emerges more clearly when we examine closely two aspects of the tale's emotionalism: the Prioresse's response to the child and the source of her emotions and the distinction that must be made between the
emotions of the "povre widwe" and the Prioress. We will also briefly consider how the need to understand the miracle itself is a functional part of the narrative strategy.

Whether one goes so far as to cite "thwarted motherhood" as the source of Prioress's feelings for the clergeon, most critics see those feelings as "creaturely" and excessively sentimental—a product not of any rational response to the child but of some humanly instinctive (i.e. maternal) response to the small and dependent. But the Prioress's feelings for the boy and, more importantly what motivates them, have never been adequately analyzed. Nor has the role they play in the narrative strategy of the tale itself. For the Prioress does more than simply introduce a small human child. By the time she characterizes her "litel" hero, she has already provided a liturgical context that makes it difficult for a Christian audience not to respond to the spiritual implications of both the child's characterization and the Prioress's enthusiasm for him.

To support their claim that the Prioress's attachment to the clergeon and his story is sentimental and excessive, most critics point to her diction, with its frequently repeated adjective "litel" and its emphasis on his youth and innocence, and to the extended description of the mother's emotional search for her lost child. Let's consider these arguments one at a time.

First, in the Prioress's extended characterization of
the clergeon, she repeatedly uses the adjectives "litel," "smale," "yong," "tendre," and "innocent." Such repetition is, I agree, not a matter of chance. But does that make it merely a stylistic mannerism with no narrative function but to reveal the Prioress's unconsciously sentimental motivation? It does, perhaps, if one chooses as his interpretive context the Prioress's characterization in the General Prologue, where her sensibilities are evidenced by tears shed "if that she saugh a moue / Kaught in a trappe" or by the "smale houndes" which she

    fedde
With rosted flessh, or milk and wastel-breed.
But moore wepte she if oon of hem were deed,
Or if men smoot it with a yerde smerte;
An al was conscience and tendre herte.
(11. 146-50) 30

"No one can fail to see the ways the tale reflects the Prioress's personality," claims Charles A. Owen, "The woman whose tears flow for mice and little dogs has here found the ideal creature to lavish her affection on." 31 Because the Prioress's feelings for her dogs (and mice) are generally deemed excessive and false charity, so, by extension, must be her feelings for other "little" things. Gaylord comments on

the small scale of the Tale's diction; that is the Prioress repeatedly dwells on the youth of the "litel clergeon,"
his innocence and his diminutive size. .  
. The amount of emotion lavished on him 
is in correspondence with the 
extravagant reactions of the Prioress to 
poor dumb beasts. 32

But the Prioress's sentimental affection for her dogs is not 
necessarily the same emotion she feels for the small child.

One problem in dealing with the Prioress's Tale is the 
extent to which critics allow interpretations of her 
portrait to determine how they understand the tale. If 
there were no other reasonable way to account for the 
'small' diction in her Tale, an appeal to her 
characterization in the General Prologue might be valid. 
But the tale itself offers us a reasonable context for 
interpretation of this diction. For what is unnoticed by 
those who point out how frequently these adjectives occur is 
that their occurrence is just as noticeably circumscribed. 
If the Prioress's calling the boy a "litel child" were 
primarily indicative of her attitude toward him, one would 
expect the usage to remain consistent throughout the tale. 
But it does not. This diction is concentrated in the first 
ten stanzas of the Tale which characterize the boy and 
establish the narrative situation. After the Jews begin 
plotting their murder, the narrator calls the clergeon a 
"litel child" only twice, both times in the description of 
his mother's distracted search for him:

This poure wydwe awiteth al that nyght  
After hir litel child, but he cam noght;
(ll. 586-7)
With moodres pitee in hir brest enclosed,
She gooth, as she were half out of hir mynde,
To every place where she hath supposed
By liklihede hir litel child to fynde;
(ll. 593-96)
To the "poure wydwe," the child is still "hir litel child."
The Prioress, however, no longer sees him as from this
perspective. He is, in her apostrophe, "This gemme of
chastite, this emeraude, / And eek of martirdom the ruby
bright," and this apostrophe, we should note, is her
response to the imagined sight of the child's body lying on
the bier:

O grete God, that parfournest thy laude
By mouth of innocents, lo, heere thy might!
This gemme of chastite, this emeraude,
And eek of martirdom the ruby bright,
Ther he with throte ykorven lay upright,
He Alma redemptoris gan to synge
So loude that al the place gan to rynge.
(ll. 607-13)

Far from being lost in her pity at the sight of the murdered
body, she responds to the significance of what she knows is
about to happen. Consequently, she does not magnify the
humanly pathetic possibilities of the scene: to her the
child is no longer simply human and certainly not pathetic
(if indeed he ever had been in her eyes). But even
better evidence, I think, is that she does call him a child
several times, without adding any adjective:
This child with pitous lamentacioun
Up taken was, syngynge his song alway,
And with honour of greet processioun
They carien hym unto the nexte abbay.
(ll. 621-24)

An whan they hooly water on hym caste,
Yet spek this child, whan spreyn was hooly water,
And song O Alma redemptoria mater!
(ll. 639-51)

"My throte is kut unto my nekke boon,"
Seyde this child, "and, as by wy of kynde,
I sholde have dyed, ye, longe tyme aghon.
(ll. 649-51)

In each instance, the child is actively a part of the miracle taking place, and the Prioress is aware, at the very least, of the dignity which that gives him. She does not, therefore, trivialize the narrative with sentimental attention to any physical characteristics of the child. Indeed, the child has, as it were, grown in her eyes, again suggesting that his physical description is to some extent a rational rather than purely emotional choice. Before the murder, the Prioress never refers to him simply as "this child"; in fact, every time "child" appears it is preceded by "litel." After the murder, the reverse is true, with the two exceptions noted above. Albert B. Friedman remarks that because the Prioress is given to sentimentalizing, the language of pathos—the constant repetition throughout the tale of "litel," "yong," "tendre," "smale," etc. and the many allusions to innocence and sweetness—comes as readily to her lips as salt tears to the eyes of those who hear the boy’s miraculous valedictory. 14
But if this were true, would not the murder itself and the murdered child's body evoke such sentimentality even more than the living child? Yet, not only is the account of the murder brief and straightforward, the Prioress refrains from using the "small diction" to heighten the pathos:

An homycide therto han they hyred,
That in an aleye hadde a privee place;
And as the child gan forby for to pace,
This cursed Jew hym hente, and helde hym faste,
And kitte his throte, and in a pit hym caste.
(11. 567-71)

What, then, is the significance of this usage? First, it shows that the Prioress as a narrator has control of her diction, not vice versa. Second, she is responding, not "realistically" as she might to a living human being, but to a character who is defined by his role in the narrative she unfolds. The way she initially characterizes her hero and how that changes are a part of what she thinks her tale means.

For I believe that the 'small' diction is intended not so much to characterize the child in human terms as to reinforce the spiritual context in which we comprehend what happens to him. And, indeed, the Prioress does provide such a context in her Prologue:

"O Lord, oure Lorde, thy name how merveillous
Is in this large world ysprad," quod she;
"For noght oonly thy laude precious
Parfourned is by men of dignitee,
But by the mouth of children thy bountee
Parfourned is, for on the brest soukyng
Somtyme shewen they thyng heryeinge."
(11. 453-59)

The opening lines of this same Psalm are repeated in the
tale, just before the child's miraculous singing is heard:

O grete God, that parfournest thy laude
By mouth of innocentz, lo, heere thy myght!
(11. 607-08)

The child's singing is both praise and proof of the might of
God—both in his words and in the fact of his singing at
all. We see here a dramatization of one of the central
mysteries of Christianity: that Go.1, because of his great
love and goodness, gives man the very thing that He, in
turn, requires of him, for man's ability to praise—and
love—God comes from God himself. Psalm 8 itself celebrates
this paradox—speechless and powerless children can
nevertheless praise Him and so effect His might:

Lord, thou art oure lord, thy name is
ful wondurful in al erpe! For thy great
doyng is raisid aboue heuenes.
Of the moup of zonge children
not spekinge a soukyng mylk, thou madist
perfitlie heriyng for bin enemyes; bat
thou distrie the enemye a avengere.
For y schal see bin heuenes,
be werkis of thy nyngris; be moone a the
sterris whiche thou hast foundid.
What is man bat thou art
myndeful of hym? eper be sone of a
virgyn, for thou visitist hym?
Thou hast maad him a litil lasse ban angelis; thou hast corounned him wip glorie & honour, & hast ordeyned him aboue be werkis of pin hondis.

Thou hast maad suget alle bingis vndur hisse feet; alle scheep & oxis: fepermore & be beestis of be feeld.

The briddis of be eir, & fischis of be see bat passen bi pappis of be see.

Lord, thou art oure lord: bi name is ful wondurful in al erpe!

For some wonderful reason, God loves man, and because of that all else is possible. If the glory that is the mighty love of God is seen even more clearly when performed "by the mouth of innocents," then the Prioress will, through the characterization of the clergeon, emphasize those details which magnify the glory of God in his praise of Him. She also makes it clear that even the two things which the child has to offer, his devotion to and love for the Virgin Mary (one might add a third—his life itself), have been given to him, the first by his mother’s teaching which is itself a gift of Christ’s body—the church:

... where as he saugh th’ymage
Of Cristes mooder, hadde he in usage,
As hym was taught, to knele adoun and seye
His Ave Maria, as he goth by the weye.

Thus hath this wydwe hir litel sone ytaught
Oure blissful Lady, Cristes mooder deere,
To worship ay, and he forgat it naught,
(11. 506-12)
the second a gift of the Virgin herself:

The swetnesse hath his herte perced so
Of Cristes moder that, to hire to preye,
He kan nat stynte of synging by the weye.
(ll. 555-58)

And, of course, the Incarnation, and the role of a human
woman in that, are a part of this same wonderful mystery, in
which divine and human love and will become joined. 36

O mooder Mayde! o mayde Mooder freel
O busshe unbrent, brennynge in Moyses sightes,
That ravyshedest doun fro the Deitee,
Thurgh thyn humblesse, the Goost that in th'alighte
Of whos vertu, whan he thyn herte lightes,
Conceyved was the Fadres sapience,
Helpe me to telle it in thy reverence!
(ll. 467-73)

The "it" which the Prioress here asks help to tell is both
the Christian mystery she has just described so lyrically
and her tale itself; through the one she hopes to "tell" the
other. Through the grace of heavenly love, she can tell her
tale; through telling her tale, she can show the grace of
heavenly love. That the details of the clergeon's
characterization are intended to magnify the glory of the
praise that he both sings and becomes, the Prioress's own
identification with them reinforces:

My konning is so wayk, o blisful Queene,
For to declare thy grete worthyness
That I ne may the weighte nat susteene;
But as a child of twelv month oold, or lesse,
That kan unnethes any word expresse,
Right so fare I, and threfore I yow preye,
Gydeth my song that I shal of yow seye. (ll. 481-87)
All understanding, as all triumph and all truth, is due to God's grace and is evidence of his glory.

The 'small' diction also occurs in two other places in the last part of the Tale, both occurrences reinforcing, I think, what I have just said. First, the boy tells us that Mary has called him such:

And after that thus seide she to me:
"My litel child, now wol I fecche thee,
Whan that the greyn is fro thy tonge ytake.
Be nat agast, I wol thee nat forsake."
(11. 666-69)

But doesn't this reinforce the argument that the 'small' diction is the diction of 'motherhood'? Yes and no. 'Yes' in the sense that the Prioress has quite consciously chosen to emphasize those details through which man perceives his relationship with Mary and her son as an expression of God's goodness and love for the world and to which he responds with a renewed sense of joyous love. 'No' in the sense that it is unconscious response of her own "thwarted motherhood," a point of view which trivializes the love which the tale seeks both to evoke and make us understand. We have already seen that the Prioress has avoided this diction in other contexts where it could be ascribed to a purely emotional response on her part.

Second, after the boy's body has been removed from his bier, the Prioress tells us:
And in a tombe of marbul stones cleere
Encloisen they his litel body sweete.
Ther he is now, God leve us for to meete!
(ll. 681-83)

His body, indeed, is still "litel." But what (and where) is he? The juxtapositioning of these last two lines is a brilliant narrative stroke, for he is neither with his body nor "litel," having been transformed by both his death and the miracle associated with it. Having just told us where his "litel body" is, the Prioress forces us immediately to look away from it for the true significance of what has just happened, and for its relationship to sinful souls still living:

O yonge Hugh of Lincoln, slayn also
With cursed Jewes, as it is notable,
For it is but a litel while ago,
Praye eek for us, we synful folk unstable,
That, of his mercy, God so merciable
On us his grete mercy multiplie,
For reverence of his moode marie.
Amen . (ll. 684-90)

The 'small diction' of the Tale does not, then, account for the Prioress's emotional commitment to the clergeon's story. The Prioress does not love the child because he is small and helpless but because he is devoted to Mary in an exemplary way. In addition, her running commentary on the story reveals a narrator quite conscious that her story dramatizes the central truths of Christian faith, taught by the Church and celebrated in its liturgy, and intent on stirring her audience to recognize and to respond to those
truths. Her intrusions into the narrative consistently call attention to the universal significance—and validity—of the story she tells.

To begin with, the child’s capacity for devotion is evidence of man’s natural capacity for learning the truth: "For selly child wol alday soone leere" (l. 512). And there is "authority" for its exemplary nature:

By sa, when I remembre on this mateere,
Saint Nicholas stant evere in my presence,
For he so yong to Crist dide reverence.
(11. 513-15)

In addition, for all the child’s innocence and simplicity, the Prioress is careful, through the addition of the schoolmate to the narrative, to make the child’s singing a conscious, "informed" choice: 37

"And is this song maked in reverence
Of Cristes moode?" seyde this innocent.
"Now, certes, I wol do my diligence
To konne it al er Cristemasse be went.
Though that I for my prymer shal be shent,
And shal be beten thries in an houre,
I wol it konne Oure Lady for to honoure!"
(11. 537-43)

His act must not be perceived as an act of ignorance. She is equally at pains to clarify what moves his attackers, whom she characterizes as those whose very means of living opposes them fundamentally to God’s law. 38 This, in turn, makes them the perfect instruments for "Oure firste foo, the Serpent Sathanas" temptations and false interpretations.
Like the child, they cannot understand the Latin text of the *Alma redemptoris*; unlike the child, they cannot understand its substance either:

"O Hebrayk peple, ala! Is this to yow a thynge that is honest, That swich a boy shal walken as hym leste In youre despit, and syng of swich sentence, Which is agayn youre lawes reverence?"

(11. 560-64)

The Jews want to silence the "sentence" which, lacking the light of faith, they cannot understand.

Following an account of the murder which is unemotionally straightforward, the Prioress's apostrophe expresses an indignation aroused, not by a consciousness of the child's suffering, but by her understanding of the attack's motivation:

O cursed folk of Herodes al newe, What may youre yvel entente yow availle? Mordre wol out, certeyn, it wol nat faille, And namely ther th'ounor of god shal sprede; The blood out crieth on youre cursed dede.

(11. 574-78)

She calls attention to their "entente" as she celebrates its certain defeat, in the physical sense that they will not escape judgment for their deeds (the body will be discovered) and in the spiritual sense that the witness to God's truth cannot be silenced. She then celebrates the triumphant end of the faithful Christian:
O martir, sowded to virginitee,  
Now maystow syngen, folwynge evere in oon  
The white Lamb celestial—quod she—  
Of which the grete evangeliist, Seint John,  
In Pathmos wroot, which seith that they that goon  
Biforn this Lamb, and syngge a song al newe,  
That nevere, flessshly, wommen they ne knewe.  
(11. 579-85)

Even here, she takes pain to explain why the child becomes one of the elect and to cite holy scripture to support her interpretation. While the child is the immediate victim, the Prioress sees the conflict in universal terms. 39 The assassins seek to silence and defile the glory of God.

The Prioress has also been accused of sentimentality in her attitude toward the "povre widwe." But if we look carefully, we note that, as with the account of the child's murder, the Prioress does not choose to develop the most obviously sentimental possibilities of a mother's sorrowing over the body of her child. In fact, just as the murder is "interpreted" in a biblical, allegorical context ("O cursed folk of Herodes al newe), so is the mother's response to the discovered body:

His mooter swownynge by the beere lay;  
Unnethe myghte the peple that was theere  
This newe Rachel brynge fro his beere.  
(11. 625-27)

The mother disappears from the narrative after this. 40 What the Prioress does expand is the mother's frantic search for her missing son. But this expansion is not merely sentimental indulgence. Ian Robinson has commented that "at
the end of the tale the pious tenderness about the martyr comes into surprising adjacency to the rancour and injustice towards the Jews." 41 But an even more noticeably abrupt emotional contrast occurs in the juxtapositioning of the Prioress's triumphant, affirmative response to the child's murder with her account of the "povre widwe's" distress. 42 Because she gives an extended account of the mother's frantic search for her son, the Prioress is usually credited with sharing the mother's feelings. But nothing could, on closer examination, be farther from the truth. In fact, the Prioress frames this account of the mother's search with two joyous intrusions: "O martir, sowed to virginitie, / Now maystow syngen . . . " (ll. 579-80) and "O grete God, that parfournest thy laude / By mouth of innocenz, lo, heere thy myght!" (ll. 607-08). While the Prioress certainly pities the mother, she does not share her distress in this scene for the very simple reason that the mother's feelings in this search are aroused by, not just love for her son, but her ignorance of what has become of him. (Even when she finds the child she remains, in a certain sense, ignorant of what has become of him.) Because of the context provided by the Prioress's comments, her audience is as eager for the mother to discover the body as the mother is anxious to delay it. Indeed, the Prioress skillfully retards the discovery of the body by exploiting the mother's natural reluctance to discover the tragedy she expects to find:
She hat at scole and elleswhere hym soght,
Til finally she gan so fer espie
That he last seyn was in the Juerie.
(ll. 590-92)

Yet she doesn't go to the "Juerie" to look. Instead,

With moodres pitee in hir brest enclose,
She gooth, as she were half out of hir mynde,
To every place where she hath supposed
By liklihede hir lital child to fynde;
And erere on Cristes moodre meke and kynde
She cride, and atte laste thus she wroghte:
Amonge the cursed Jues she hym soghte.
(ll. 593-99)

Still the Prioress delays the moment of discovery:

She fayneth and she preyeth pitously
To every Jew that dwelte in thilke place,
To telle hire if hir child wente oght forby.
They seyde "nay", but Jhesu, of his grace,
Yaf in hir thoght, in with a lital space,
That in that place after hir sone she cryde,
Where he was casten in a pit byde.
(ll. 600-06)

The Prioress's audience, at this point, stands somewhere
inbetween the narrator and the mother in terms of knowledge.
We know that the child's throat has been slit; the Prioress
has declared that the truth will come out and that the child
is a martyr, one of the elect. We suspect that another
miracle has occurred. But what kind of miracle is it? The
delay of discovery heightens suspense and involves the
audience in anticipating just what the mother will find. We
pity the mother because we think she will find her child's
body, yet we also eagerly anticipate that discovery because
the Prioress has prepared us to expect good news too. In
short, we expect her to find more than a dead child. And
the child's sudden miraculous singing confirms our hopes.
So we are somewhat distanced from the mother's lamentations
and prepared to recognize the inadequacy of a perspective
that can see only a physically dead child. For the mother
and the congregation seem intent on treating this singing
child as if he were dead. It is as if their understanding
of the miracle at this point were limited to only the most
literal level: the child sings so that his body can be
discovered. For that they thank God; beyond that they do
not think, lost as they are in their recognition that a
crime has been committed and in the funeral procession and
mass:

The Cristene folk that thurgh the strete wente
In coomen for to wondre upon this thyng,
And hastily they for the provost sente;
He cam anon withouten taryng,
And herieth Crist that is of hevene kyng,
And eek his mooder, honour of mankynde,
After that the Jewes leet he bynde.

This child with pitous lamentacioun
Up taken was, syngynge his song alway,
And with honour of greet processioun
They carien hym unto the neste abbay.
(11. 614-24)

Unlike the Prioress, they are neither excited or gladdened
by what they find. Both the clergeon and the Prioress, on
the other hand, sing a joyous song that contrasts
dramatically with the lamentations of those carrying the
body. The narrative here moves back and forth between the
Prioress's "heavenly" perspective and the congregation's "earthly" one. As our sense of that contrast grows, we begin to realize that the folk in the tale seem almost blind to the spiritual significance of the miracle which has occurred. Certainly in their grief they focus on what has been lost rather than what has been won. (This is just the opposite of the response encouraged of us by the Prioress's intrusions.) They punish the villains and want to bury the body; they mourn.

But the miracle itself is not complete until they understand what has happened and their tears of sorrow become tears of joy. In a sense there are two miracles in the tale, first that the child lives, continuing to sing with his neck cut, second that he dies when the grain is removed from his tongue; and the second is by far the more important. For he can die only after the congregation finally understands what has happened (and so knows to remove the grain) and can rejoice at his death! The sorrowing mother sought her child. Now that he is found, we must move beyond the sorrow of loss to the joy of understanding what has been won. So the sorrowing mother disappears, replaced by a puzzled abbot who, having more emotional distance, can ask the question that has been growing on the minds of all:
"O deere child, I halse thee,
In vertu of the hooly Trinitee,
Tell me what is thy cause for to synge,
Sith that thy throte is kut to my semyne?"
(ll. 645-48)

The child's response contains more than a hint of exasperation at the literal-minded perspective of the question. The "hooly man," of all people, should have the resources to understand what is happening:

"My throte is kut unto my nekke boon,"
Seyde this child, "and, as by wey of kynde,
I sholde have dyed, ye, longe tyme agoon.
But Jesu Crist, as ye in bookes fynde,
\textit{wil that his glorie laste and be in mynde.}
And for the worship of his Mooder deere
Yet may I synge \textit{O Alma} loude and cleere.
(ll. 649-55, italics added)

The child, however, now explains why the miracle has occurred. It is not to reward his devotion, for that reward is heaven, not earth. In fact, when he quotes the Virgin Mary's reassuring words to him:

"My litel child, now wol I fecche thee
Whan that the greyn is fro thy tonge ytake.
Be nat agast, I wol thee nat forsake."
(ll. 667-69)

we realize that the miracle actually delays that reward, is in a sense an additional "sacrifice" required of him, a delay of the bliss which will be his among the elect:

And whan that I my lyf sholde forlet,
To me she cam, and bad me for to synge
This anthem verraily in my deynges,
\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots
Wherfore I synge, and synge moot corteyn,
In honour of that blissful Mayden free,
Til fro my tonge of taken is the greyn . . .
(11. 658-60, 63-65)

The miracle has been performed out of love for those left behind, to make God's "glorie laste and be in mynde," to comfort them and move them beyond their earthbound grief, to stir in them the devotion which releases the merciful grace which the tale celebrates. When the abbot removes the grain from the child's tongue and so effects the "second" miracle, he is overcome by what he has just witnessed, understanding as he now does what he has become a part of:

And whan this abbot hadde this wonder seyn,
His salte teares trikled doun as reyn,
And gruf he fil al plat upon the grounde,
And stille he lay as he had ben ybounde.
(11. 673-76)

Gaylord says the he finds "the very sound of 'and gruf he fil al plat upon the grounde' suggestive of a calculated effect of the slightly overdone." 43 It reminds me, however, of the description in a roughly contemporary prose piece, The Abbey of the Hooly Ghost, of the effect of the "oyle" of God's consolation (which follows the "whete" of meditation and the "wyne" of devotion):

. . . than sendys he [God] þe oyle of consolacion, þat guffes þam [tears] sauour, a lyghtnes his knaweliggynge, and scheues to þam of his heuenely priuatyse, þat es hide from þam þat folowes fleschely desyris, and guffes þam selve alle to þe wyse dome of þe worlde and his fantasyse, and so enflymmes þam with þe blysse of his lufe þat þay taste somedelle, a fele how
swete he es, how guð he es, how luffande he es--bot noghte alle fully. I wote wele þat none may fele it fully, bot if his herte sulde bryste for lykyng of Ioye. Sayne Austyn talles of a preste þat, when he harde any thyngs of God þat lykyng ware in, he wold he no rauschehe in Ioy þat he valde felle dawn, and lygge als he ware deade... So dote our Lorde to his chosen. When he will, he opynis his handes and lyghtenes þam with heuenly gladness; ... als if God sayde to us, "be þis comforthe and this lykyng þou þis schorte tym hase of me, þou may taste & fele how swete, how guðe I ame to my chosyn in my blysse, in þe werlde withouten ende"; and þus he dote, for to drawe vs fro worldly beayynes, and þe lykyng þer-of, and for to enflawme our hertes with lufe-gerni-ynges...

E. Catherine Dunn, studying "Popular Devotion in the Drama of Medieval England," comments:

The final aspect of popular spirituality that strikes me in the cycle plays is a psychological one: the joyous vitality there captured.... It is not easy for us to define a spirituality of joy because post-Tridentine devotional phenomenon have a different texture from those of the Middle Ages. The spirit of medieval religious drama seems to be an affirmative perspective on the faith, a rich intermingling of intelligence and emotion creating confidence and hope in a vale of tears.... There is a rhythmic pattern of returning joy victorious over loss and sadness, of light piercing through somber shadows.

This, too, is the spirit of the Priora's Tale:

That, of his mercy, God so merciable
On us his grete mercy multiplie,
For reverence of his moother Marie.
III. NOTES


3 For example, Sherman Hawkins, "Chaucer's Prioress and the Sacrifice of Praise," Journal of English and Germanic Philology, 63 (1964), 599-624. He argues in that "read literally, it seems merely an exercise in pathos or the expression of a crude racial prejudice. Read figuratively, it becomes much more than that. And clearly the Prioress' Tale--like the other Canterbury Tales written in rhyme royal--belongs to a world of the allegorical and supernatural rather than the world of literal reality. . . . When we begin to explore the figurative implications of this tale of death and resurrection, interpreting its scriptural allusions as Augustine and his medieval successors might have done, problems of sentimentality and prejudice recede" (599). Or Donald W. Fritz, "The Prioress's Avowal of Ineptitude," Chaucer Review, 9 (1974), 166-81. He says that "The Prioress's intent is to speak of eternal realities--those which lies beyond the personal and the individual. To obscure that intent, which the Prioress so explicitly announces in her Prologue, is to lose our direction with regard to the language and meaning of the Tale itself. We would be in error to take the words of the Tale as having their co-reference in time, since they signify that which is not subject to time" (167).


5 P. 72.


7 P. 635.


9 Ibid.

10 P. 372.


15 P. 138. As a foundation for her reading, Collette notes that "In literary criticism, art history, or historical analysis of the mid- to late-fourteenth century one hears sounded again and again the note of ritual and the ascendency of the emotional over the rational. Obviously a simplification of a complex process not restricted to that century, this shift in emphasis produces the impression that the Late Middle Ages valued emotion—intense, devout, almost sensual, religious emotion—as man's surest path to the knowledge of God. The reasons for such a stress remain obscure, too complicated to explore in a paper devoted to the reading of a single tale. Suffice it to repeat what is already well known, that the 'triumph of nominalism,' as David Knowles calls the Ockhamite revolution in medieval thought, denied the possibility of rational demonstration of the truths of natural religion, while at the same time it declared God's revelations to be arbitrary, to be accepted without comment or explanation . . . Charles Muscatine characterizes the thought of the age in a similar fashion: 'The cleavage between reason and faith, characteristic of post-Ockhamite thought, not only generated an unsettling scepticism, but also drove faith itself further and further into the realm of the irrational.' The quotation from Muscatine is taken from Poetry and Crisis in the Age of Chaucer (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1972), p. 22.

16 P. 147.


18 P. 147.

19 P. v.

20 Collette, on the other hand, seems to place it into the first category.


22 Ibid., p. 32.


29 Collette argues that the Prioress "focuses on the physical, tangible, often diminutive--mice, dogs, and little children--as objects of her 'tendre herte' and symbols of her understanding of understanding of Christian doctrine . . . (138), but she goes on to conclude: "In both the form and content of her narrative the Prioress, by concentrating on the diminutive, on the detail, not so much for its symbolic significance, but for its emotional value, gives literary expression to the attitudes and assumptions we have traced in religion and art" (139-40).


32 P. 632.

33 Collette notes that late fourteenth-century "art is no longer metaphor, or vehicle, but the image, the focus; it no longer symbolizes, it is. Fourteenth-century art . . . focuses on scenes, on moments that speak to the heart" (140). Yet the Prioress's focus in this apostrophe speaks to the mind, and its affective qualities result from our understanding of what has happened rather than any direct appeal to human emotion. Discussing this scene, Collette says that "the focus in on the little boy himself." But certainly not on him as little boy. She continues: "The child is imaged in those brilliant hues one so often associates with manuscript illumination; the gems here signify the refraction of the pure white light of God. In the midst of the miracle what emerges as central is not God
but the Child's perfect, albeit uncomprehending faith." Yet this description of the boy appears in context as proof of the opening lines of the apostrophe: "O grete God, tha parfournest thy laude / By mouth of innocentz, lo, heere thy might!" God, in essence, sings this song through the boy, who has become his perfect instrument. Collette concludes, "The grandeur of the miracle lies not in God's awful power but in the little boy's touching song. The effect, not the cause, is central; our attention is once more directed to the physical, the emotional, rather than to the grand conception behind the action of the tale" (145). But just the opposite is true. The very structure of the apostrophe draws both our mind and our mind's eye away from the physical, away from the effect to the cause of it all. The Prioress is excited over the miracle precisely because she understands what has truly happened—and its implications for all Christians.


36 G. H. Russell comments that the Prioress's prologue "offers a reverent attempt to evoke the magnitude and the depth of the mystery of God, a mystery which, as the second stanza recalls, is further deepened by the fact of the Incarnation's being made possible by the consent of an ordinary young woman who, by this consent, is exalted . . . This motif of the accessibility of the transcendent to the humble will . . . play[s] an important part in what is to follow.

37 Hawkins believes that "Chaucer's clerigeon makes an authentic moral choice, though its dimensions are exquisitely scaled to the story of a 'litel child, his litel book lernynge'" (610).

38 She is careful to explain that the Jew the city were "For foule usure and lucre of vileynye, / Hateful to Crist and to his companiynge" (11. 491-92), and that "Oure firste foo, the serpæt Satanas," for that reason "hath in Jues herte his waspæs nest . . . ." The Prioress, of course, has been accused of unjustifiable anti-semitism for her treatment of her villains. But as Hawkins argues, "This accusation results from a confusion of literal and figurative meanings, and it is appropriate that the tale itself concerns a dramatic conflict between these ways of interpreting a poem. The 'litel clerigeon,' who is just learning to read, understands the 'Alma Redemptoris' in one
sense, the Jews in quite another. This difference in interpretation reflects the crucial issue between Church and Synagogue in apostolic times and throughout the Middle Ages. The antagonism between Jew and Christian was not primarily racial or economic but doctrinal. The Jews remained faithful to their law. They refused to accept the Christian interpretation of Old Testament types and prophecies as referring to Christ and his Church. Hence Christians maintained that they understood the allegorical 'spirit' of Scripture, while the Jews read it only literally or 'carnally' (602). Attention to her narrative intrusions shows that, indeed, the Prioress is concerned to keep her audience's understanding focussed on the "spirit" of her tale.

39 As Hawkins has points out: "Opposed to the Jews, as so often in medieval legend, is the Virgin, type of the spiritualia they deny. She stands for the wisdom of the spirit: in her 'Conveyed was the Fadres sapience.' Thus the Prioress's Tale dramatizes one of the oldest and most familiar antinomies of Christian thought and symbolism, the opposition of Ecclesia and Synogoga, the new and old testaments, grace and law" (305).

40 Gaylord complains of this, especially since he identifies the Prioress's and the mother's points of view: "For in terms of Christian faith, after all, the 'litel clergeon' s story should not be considered a tragedy, although its ending in Chaucer's version has been so described. The unhappiest person should be the widow who is left childless, but she is not mentioned at all beyond one effective stanza where she is anxiously searching for her son" (632-33). This, I think, is clear evidence that the mother does not provide the emotional center of the poem. Certainly she is the unhappiest person in the Tale. I see no evidence that the Prioress is ever saddened by the story she tells, though she is briefly indignant.


42 Russell comments: "For all this, the child's disappearance and death, in human terms, remain both tragic and pathetic, and they are surrounded by the normal human reactions. From the height of the contemplation of his newly won glory we are brought abruptly back to the world of human experience, in a deliberate juxtaposition of the supernatural and the natural" (p. 222).

43 p. 632.

CHAPTER FOUR

"FOR THIS IS NO FABLE":

THE PHYSICIAN'S EXORTATION TO THE WILL

The Physician's little tale of Appius, Virginius, and Virginia has not been very popular among critics. Until the past decade, it was little criticized, largely because, as Richard L. Hoffman notes in "Jephthah's Daughter and Chaucer's Virginia":

Chaucerians traditionally have considered the tale sufficiently inferior to their author's best and most mature work as not really to merit inclusion in the Canterbury Tales.... [and] there has seemed no way of moralizing or allegorizing Chaucer's version on the grounds that such a reading of the story was "traditional" or "conventional" in the Middle Ages. Chaucer's tale seems to be pure "sense"; or, at least, if there is a level of "hy sentence," no one has yet dared to rush in and tread upon it." ¹

Moreover, recent attempts "to rush in and tread upon" the tale's "hy sentence" have yielded discomfiting views of the Physician's (and Chaucer's?) moral vision in the tale. Chaucer's audience could have read versions of the original story, taken from Livy's History of Rome and popular during the Middle Ages, in Jean de Meun's portion of Le Roman de la Rose (which was Chaucer's immediate source) and in Gower's

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¹ Notes for this chapter begin on p. 163.
Confessio Amantia. Just what is so troubling about Chaucer's adaptation of this narrative which he assigns to his physician?

The plot itself is simple and straightforward. Briefly, Appius, a powerful judge and governor, is overcome by lust at the sight of the beautiful and virtuous Virginia, daughter of the knight Virginius. Knowing that he cannot seduce her, Appius contrives a false legal claim to be brought to his court by the churl, Claudius. He will swear that Virginia is really his servant, stolen from his home. When Claudius appears in Appius's court to present this "pitious bill," Appius sends for Virginius; then, without allowing him to speak in his own defense, awards Virginia to Claudius (and hence to himself). Sent to fetch her, Virginius (with her swooning assent), cuts off her head and presents that instead. Although Appius orders him executed immediately, "a thousand peple," suspicious of Appius and apparently inflamed by "routhe and pitee" for Virginius, throw Appius into prison, where he kills himself. Claudius is also condemned but, through Virginius' intervention, merely exiled.

As told by Livy, the tale is designed to show how the decemvirs' outrages brought about their downfall and to place that downfall in historical perspective:
This outrage [a shameful assassination] was followed by another, committed in Rome, which was inspired by lust and was no less shocking in its consequences than that which had led, through the rape and the death of Lucretia, to the expulsion of the Tarquinius from the City and from their throne; thus not only did the same end befall the decemvirs as had befallen the kings, but the same cause deprived them of their power.

Livy, therefore, focusses on Appius's actions (Appius's intentions are never in question among those who oppose him) and on the resistance which these acts arouse. Although he comments that this outrage is "inspired by lust," he is concerned primarily with demonstrating the "shocking" political consequences of his acts. Gower retains this largely political perspective in his adaptation of the tale, which he uses to illustrate that a good king must be able to govern his own body in order to govern the body politic. Like Livy, Gower focusses on the consequences of Appius' lust, a breaking of natural law which leads to political disorder.

Jean de Meun, on the other hand, is not interested in the larger political question. Instead, he has Reason narrate the story to expose the true nature of corrupt men, those who serve Venus rather than true love, injustice rather than justice. Reason, intent on persuading the Lover to abandon the God of Love, has promised to show him the true nature of that love. As a part of this larger discourse, this tale is aimed at both head and heart. On
the one hand it is part of her argument that "justice were destructive without love"; on the other, it is part of her strategy to move the Lover to reject the world of lust and corruption and to embrace her vision of men living together in "true love," needing no justice because this love produces no injustice. Chaucer, drawing his tale largely from Jean de Meun's version, has not only retained the emotional logic of this version, but added to its emotional impact. Yet unlike Reason, the Physician offers no alternative vision, at least not explicitly, of that community of love "which all men may attain." What can be the Physician's purpose in telling his tale?

We must begin by examining the ways in which the Physician has chosen to compress, expand, and focus his narrative. For one thing, the plot proper does not begin until line 118 of a tale which has only 286 lines in all; roughly forty-one percent of the entire narrative is devoted to a brief portrait of Virginius (ll. 1-4), an extended portrait of Virginia (ll. 7-71), an address to "maistresses" (ll. 72-92), an address to parents (ll. 93-104), and an additional portrait of Virginia (ll. 104-17). Almost all of this represents material added by Chaucer to his sources. The effect of these added portraits is to focus the audience's sympathies on Virginia and to involve them emotionally in the action of the tale, as do the added exhortations to "maistresses" and to "ye fadres and ye
modres." These exhortations sharpen the audience's emotional perspective on the tale's action, for not only do they provide the context within which we admire her virtues—a world in which virtue is constantly under attack and which therefore requires unceasingly diligent attention to its survival—they charge that perspective with implications for the listener's own moral accountability.

In addition, in the recounting of the plot itself, the two most emotionally compelling scenes comprise fifty-seven percent of the remaining 169 lines, the scene in court (ll. 160-202) and the scene between Virginia and her father (ll. 203-55). The latter is, of course, another Chaucerian addition to his sources. Developed dramatically, both of these scenes consist largely of directly quoted speech, the words of Claudius and Appius in the first scene (sixty percent), those of Virginius and Virginia in the second (fifty-seven percent). With the exception of Nature's apostrophe on the creation of Virginia and Appius's one line to himself—"This mayde shall be myn, for any man!"—these two scenes contain all the directly quoted speech in the tale. The resulting effect on the audience is one of heightened immediacy and intensified emotional appeal: not only does the narrator tell us repeatedly that Appius is a "false juge," that Claudius is a "false churl," and that the bill is a "cursed bille," we participate (albeit passively) in the trial along with Virginius, and like him, suffer in
silent frustration. The only outlet provided for these frustrations is the even more immediate and emotionally demanding scene between Virginia and her father. Both of these scenes compel from the tale's audience, in effect, an intensely emotional participation. And neither, it might be added, offers a satisfying way for the audience to vent the emotions which it arouses. (Indeed, as I shall argue, we are not supposed to be "satisfied."

According to the Physician, this tragic story should lead us to the sentiment with which he concludes his tale:

Heere may men seen how synne hath his merite.
Beth war, for no man woot whom God wol smyte
In no degree, ne in which manere wyse
The worm of conscience may agryse
Of wikked lyf, though it so pryve be
That no man woot therof but God and he.
For be he lewed man, or ellis lere,
He noot how soone that he shal been afered.
Therfore I rede yow this conseil take:
Forsaketh synne, er syne yow forsake.
(11. 277-86)

Since this concluding paragraph begins and ends with sententious statements, since the narrative is both brief and stylistically simple, and since the story as told by Chaucer's sources seems suited to moral treatment, critics of the Physician's Tale have assumed that the Physician intends his tale to be primarily an exemplum, designed to clarify some moral concept or to exemplify some abstract assertion about moral behavior. If we grant this assumption, we will answer our questions about the Physician's
purpose by seeking the assertion he is confirming, or the
abstruse statement he is attempting to clarify. But assum-
ing that the Physician's Tale has a primarily didactic
purpose, that it is addressed principally to the intellect
of its audience, neither simplifies the critical task nor
yields satisfactory results. If one assumes that the
Physician's conclusion is a didactic "interpretation" of his
tale, he is faced with serious critical problems, for the
Physician's moral does not seem to fit the emotional shape
of the tale he has just told, nor does it provide us with an
intellectually satisfying way to defuse the emotions which
the tale has evoked in us (by making us, for example, feel
that we have learned a useful lesson or that some admirable
principle has prevailed). 7 Ann Middleton has effectively
summarized the reasons why it is so difficult to extract a
lesson from his tale:

Considered as an exemplum of injustice,
Chaucer's tale is severely flawed. It
is vacillating in moral focus and
uneconomical. It lapses into irrelevant
preaching and sentimental scenes. It is
difficult to find an action singled out
for praise and emulation, or to regard
the fable as a whole as showing what
Samuel Johnson called "the observation
of justice." Johnson's phrase for the
essential quality he found lacking in
King Lear aptly describes what this tale
fails to provide: a set of
understandable definitions, derived
through particular actions for the moral
absolutes it is supposed to illustrate. 8
But perhaps we have erred in assuming that the Physician's purpose is primarily didactic, that the tale is intended simply as an exemplum of injustice—or of anything else. Indeed, the tale becomes much more manageable if we posit just the opposite: that it is aimed primarily at the will rather than the intellect; that is is intended not to provide an illustration of moral behavior but to move us to a shared consciousness of sin and its consequences—both immediate (the destruction of Virginia, of virtue) and ultimate (everyone's eventual accountability, divine judgment)—and thus stimulate remorse for and fear of our own sinfulness; that the concluding paragraph does not "interpret" the tale's lesson but exhorts us to respond personally to what we have just seen. The tale provides this impetus to contrition by dramatizing the weakness of the flesh, the uncertainty of Fortune and the certainty of death; by placing a figure which embodies the end to which all men are created and endowed in a setting which vividly reveals how far most have fallen from that ideal and which reminds us that everyone will be held responsible not simply for his acts but for their consequences. But in this tale it is not the literal facts that count; what is important is the audience's response to these truths so dramatized. The "worme of conscience" is not something the Physician has just demonstrated but something he hopes to set at work in the hearts of his listeners. By vividly reminding us of not
only man's capacity for vice but his capacity for—and obligations to—virtue as well, the narrative provokes an emotional response for the inherent spiritual value of the response. Thus he arouses those emotions which dispose one to the workings of conscience and to contrition: humility, fear, remorse, and love. In short, the narrative purpose which emerges from the tale is not to teach a lesson about morality but to move its audience to a subjective moment of emotional introspection and spiritual reevaluation. 9

In the one hundred seventeen lines which precede the beginning of the narrative proper, the Physician not only arouses our interest in and sympathy for Virginia; he also carefully establishes the emotional context of the action he is to narrate and shapes the perspective from which we will respond to what we see dramatized in the tale's two central scenes.

To begin with, the Physician makes Virginia not simply a beloved daughter but an only child:

This knyght a doghter hadde he by his wif;
No children hadde he mo in al his lyf.
(11. 5-6)

Livy mentions Verginius's wife and children. Both Gower and Jean de Meun say simply that Virginia is Verginius's daughter. So it is the Physician, not his sources, who chooses to make Virginia an only child and who chooses, as well, that this will be the first thing we learn about her.
Both Livy and Gower comment, but only briefly, on Virginia's beauty. The Physician, however, specifically placing that beauty in a context, makes it superlative:

Fair was this mayde in excellent beautee
Aboven every wight that man may see
(ll. 7-8)

He then, unlike any of his sources, provides a lengthy portrait of this "mayde," one which not only describes her physical and spiritual virtues, but which sets those virtues in the context of a real—and morally threatening—world.

Virginia's opening portrait presents her not as an abstract ideal but as, preeminently, a natural creation. She represents, as it were, the sum of nature, the fulfillment of Nature's universal purpose, testimony to the potential harmony and natural perfection of the created world. To dramatize this perspective, the Physician presents us the figure of Nature and what she must have said when she formed Virginia:

"Lo! I, Nature,
Thus kan I forme and peyne a creature,
Whan that me list; who kan me countrefete?
Pigmalion noght, though he ay forge and bete,
Or grave, or peyne, or forge, or bete,
If they presumed me to countrefete.
(ll. 11-16)

As Geraldine Branca comments in her unpublished dissertation "Experience Versus Authority: Chaucer's Physician and Fourteenth-Century Science,"
Since the Physician deals with the stuff of Nature, with the flesh of these earthly creatures, and studies anatomy, which attempts to describe the marvellous working of Nature throughout this flesh, the Physician would have great respect for Nature's work, and high praise for her abilities.

In speaking of Nature as an artist like, but superior to, Pygmalion, Zeuxis, and Apelles, the Physician here echoes one of his greatest authors, Galen. Discussing the "natural faculties," Galen argues:

This Nature which shapes and gradually adds to the parts is most certainly extended throughout their whole substance. Yes indeed, she shapes and nourishes and increases them through and through, not on the outside only. For Praxiteles and Phidias and all the other statuaries used merely to decorate their material on the outside, in so far as they were able to touch it; but its inner parts they left unembellished, unwrought, unaffected by art or forethought, since they were unable to penetrate therein and to reach and handle all portions of the material. It is not so with Nature.

It is important, I think, to note that the Physician is careful to show us that while Virginia may be exceptional, she has not attained an unnatural excellence, hence she is both proof of man's potential as a natural creature with a divinely ordained place and role in God's plan for the universe and a reminder of how short he frequently falls from that potential. Nature's role is part of God's creation:
For He that is the formere principal
Hath maked me [Nature] his vicaire general,
To forme and peynten ertely creaturis
Right as me list, and ech thyng in my cure is
Under the moone, that may wane and waxe;
And for my werk right no thyng wol I axe;
My lord and I been ful of oon accord.
(ll. 17-23)

Hence, Nature here is not merely recounting her role in
Virginia’s creation but in that of the creation of all men:

I made hire to the worship of my lord;
So do I alle myne othre creatures,
What colour that they han, or what figures.
(ll. 24-26)

So the opening lines of the Physician’s Tale present not
merely the portrait of an exemplary girl but a quite
optimistic view of man’s potential. He proceeds to contrast
this potential implicitly with what that world too often
makes of it.

While Nature’s speech has affinities with Galen’s views
of her function, its most immediate literary source is
probably the prelude to Nature’s confession in a later part
of the Roman de la Rose and Jean de Meun’s source of that
confession, Alan de Lille’s Plaint of Nature. In fact, the
Physician describes Virginia physically in terms very much
like those in which Alan de Lille describes Nature herself.
Of Virginia we are told:
This mayde of age twelve yeer was and tweye,  
In which that Nature haad swich delit.  
For right as she kan peynte a lilie whit,  
And reed a rose, right with swich peynture  
She peynted hath this noble creature,  
Er she was born, ypon hir lymes fre,  
Where as by right swiche colours sholde be;  
And Phebus dyed hath hire tresses grete  
Lyk to the strems of his burned heete.  

(11. 30-38)

Of Nature, in The Plaint of Nature, we are told:

Her hair shone with no borrowed sheen but with one special to itself  
and, presenting an image of light-rays,  
not by mere resemblance but by a native  
lustre surpassing the natural, it made  
the maiden's head image a star-cluster.  
. . . Her forehead, spreading to a  
smooth surface of generous width, lily-like  
in its milk-white hue, seemed to  
vie with the lily. . . . The brilliant  
fire of her cheeks, set aglow by tint of  
roses, by its charming radiance gave her  
face a friendly expression. For, with a  
pleasant lustre, the red of her face, wed  
to the white of muslin, showed the  
effects of a harmonious mixture.  

In addition, Nature, like Virginia, is chaste, appearing to  
the dreamer with her face "turned towards the ground in  
chaste modesty" (p. 75). That the figure who is responsible  
for sexual generation is presented as chaste has  
implications significant for our understanding of Virginia  
as well. These same physical details are also echoed in the  
descriptions of Chastity, of whom we are told that
there shone forth in this maiden's beauty the sacred care of a craftsmanship so great that in no detail had the finger of refining Nature slipped. The maiden's face did not beg the hypocritical aid of any adventitious colouring; rather the right hand of super-powerful Nature, by a miracle of grafting, had planted on her face roses vying with lilies" (Prose 8, p. 198). 13

God intends and enables Nature to create physical beings capable of both physical and spiritual beauty.

For Virginia is, of course, ideal in more than just physical beauty:

And if that excellent was hire beautee,  
A thousand foold moore vertuous was she.  
In hire ne lakked no condicioun  
That is to preyse, as by discrescioun.  
As wel in goost as body chast was she;  
For which she floured in virginitee  
With alle humylitee and abstinence,  
With alle attemperaunce and pacience,  
With mesure eek of beryng and array.  

(ll. 39-47)

Livy's Virginia is also virtuous. Appius must resort to force because "her modesty was proof against everything . . . ." But Livy has already given Verginius implicit credit for her virtuous behavior—she has been well brought up, just as have all members of her family from Verginius down: "His wife had been brought up in the same [exemplary] principles, and his children were being trained in them" (p. 145). 14 The Physician's Virginia, however, reflects credit first on Nature, who, in full "accord" with God, has
"made hire to the worship of [her] lord," and then on herself, for she has acted according to the end toward which she has been "formed."

In the *Plaint of Nature*, Nature addresses the Virtues as "O sole lights for man's darkness, morning stars of a world going down, planks specially devised for the shipwrecked, outstanding harbours for those tossed on the waves of the world . . . " (Prose 8, p. 205). The description of Virginia's virtues contains implicit reminders of the alternatives readily seen in the world:

Discreet she was in answeryng alway;  
Though she were wis as Pallas, dar I seyn,  
Hir facound eek ful wommanly and pleyn,  
No countrefeted termes hadde she  
To seym wys; but after hir degree  
She spak, and alle hire wordes, moore and lesse,  
Sownyng in vertu and in gentillesse.  
Shamefast she was in maydens shamefastnesse,  
Constant in herte, and evere in bisynesse  
To dryve hire out of ydel slogardye.  
(11. 48-57)

If Virginia is unusual, it is not that she possesses unnatural virtues but that she has not been seduced from them by the world in which she lives. Her portrait defines her exemplary character in part by reminding us of that world of vice which threatens without.

In both the *Roman de la Rose* and the *Plaint of Nature*, the description of Nature's role as God's "vicaire general" is placed in the context of man's almost wholesale betrayal of that purpose. In the *Roman*, Nature complains:
Jesus, our Lord, knows how I've worked for man,
As what I've said would indicate. I've had
That labor for the wretch; he is the end
And consummation of my work. And yet
The traitorous renegade is satisfied
With nothing I can do, and he alone
Thinks he's ill paid. Against my rules he works.
What further can I say? What's the use?
I've honored him more than I can recount,
Yet countless and immeasurable shame
He heaps upon me, thus repaying me!

(88, ll. 135-45) 16

And in the Plaint of Nature, Nature laments:

Alas, what headlong fall has virtue
suffered that it struggles under the
dominion of vice? Virtue of every kind
is in exile, the reins of madness are
being loosed for vice. The day of
justice fades; scarcely a shadow of its
shade remains to survive it; ... In
the realm of customary behaviour,
accepted practices are lacking in
morality. Laws lack legal force; rights
lose their right of tenure. All justice
is administered without justice and law
flourishes without legality. The world
is in a state of decline ... (Metre
6, p. 167) 17

This is just the world in which Virginia finds herself and
which the Physician fears as threatening to young girls like
her. It is true that such a description does not apply to
Virginia, but the Physician's account of her virtues makes
clear at the same time the nature of the society in which
she lives as well as its temptations. In fact, he seems
careful to define her virtues as resisting the temptations
to which they are constantly put. She does not drink wine,
of which the world has demonstrated its evil consequences:
Bacus hadde of hir mouth right no maistrie;
For wyn and yotthe dooth Venus encrese,
As men in fyr wol casten oille or greesse.
(ll. 58-60)

Alan de Lille, too, blames Bacchilatrix (worshipping the God of Wine) for robbing man of "his little spark of reason, expos[ing] him to the darkness of brutish sensuality . . . " (Prose 6, p. 170). 18 In fact, Virginia's best defense, frequently, is to flee human society:

And of hir owene vertu, unconstreyned,
She hath ful ofte tyme syk heire feyned,
For that she wolde fleen the compaignye
Where likly was to treten of folys,
As is at feastes, revels, and at daunces,
That been occasions of dalisunces.
(ll. 61-66)

Such a description suggests not only Virginia's admirable strength of will but also that such behavior flies against normal custom--she must invent a socially acceptable way to escape. The Physician, however, does not present her as one opposed to sexual activity. It is a question of proper order. For his explanation of her fleeing such society is that

Swich thynges maken children for to be
To soone rype and boold, as men may se,
Which is ful perilous, and hath been yoore.
For al to soone may she lerne loole
Of booldnesse, whan she woken is a wyf.
(ll. 67-71)

These lines suggest a number of interesting observations. First, the problem is one of becoming "to soone rype and
bold," not of avoiding becoming "rype." The best way to
ripen sexually is as a wife, and the suggestion here is that
to ripen prematurely is dangerous and that society offers
much evidence of its dangers. This also suggests that
Virginia's chastity is not so much a devotion to virginity
per se as a devotion to the proper role of sexual activity
in the world (not lust but generation in marriage.) Such is
the chastity of Nature.

The digression on maistresses which follows underlines
a pessimistic view of the nature of human society. Because
the violation of natural chastity is so widespread, most
young girls need to be guarded from being too soon
"ripened," and hence those with experience, both successful
and unsuccessful, are urged to guard the as yet "unripened"
girls in their charge:

And ye maistresses, in youre olde lyf,
That lorde's doghtres han in governaunce,
Ne taketh of my wordes no displesaunce.
Thenketh that ye been set in governynges
Of lorde's doghtres, oonly for two thynges:
Outher for ye han kept youre honestee,
Or elles ye han falle in frelesee,
And knownen wel ynough the olde daunce,
And han forsaken fully swich meschaunce
For everemo; therfore, for Cristes sake,
To teche hem vertu looke that ye ne alake.
(11. 72-82)

This is not as cynical as it might sound at first. In both
cases, he is speaking of "maistresses" who are, regardless
of past actions, committed to "forsaken fully swich
meschaunce / For evermo." And the tone of the apostrophe is
urgent: the danger is real and compelling:

Now kepeth wel, for if ye wole, ye kan.
Looke wel that ye unto no vice assente,
Lest ye be dampe for youre wikke entente;
(ll. 86-88)

It is commonly argued that this exhortation to governesses, as well as the one to parents which follows it, is an inappropriate digression, particularly since immediately following them we are told that Virginia "So kepte hireself [that] hir neded no maistresse." Yet, these exhortations do have an important shaping function in how we perceive and respond to what we have been told about Virginia. For the Physician here turns to his audience and earnestly insists that each one has a personal stake in what he is talking about. Almost everyone is responsible in one way or another for the spiritual well-being of the innocent, even those who have failed to be perfectly virtuous themselves. And this responsibility is intensely serious, for one lies in danger of being "dempe for [his] wikke entente." In addition, this exhortation is aimed not at the intellect but rather at the will. In *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine explains:

But if those who hear are to be moved rather than taught, so that they may not be sluggish in putting what they know into practice and so that they may fully accept those things which they acknowledge to be true, there is need for greater powers of speaking. Here entreaties and reproofs, exhortations and rebukes, and whatever other devices are necessary to move minds must be used.
The Physician wants his audience not simply to admire Virginia but to be moved by her to amend their own ways.

In both exhortations he insists on the importance of the example each person sets by his own actions. Indeed, it is by that example that both "maistresses" and parents can do considerable damage. Indeed, so important is how one acts rather than what one simply believes that, to a certain extent, those who "knowen wel ynough the olde daunce" and have forsaken it not simply from principle but from experience of "swich meschaunce" may make the best guardians of the innocent. We see here a tension between "knowing" and "doing." In his exhortation to parents as well he argues that they must "practice what they preach." Again, it is not simply a problem of knowing but of acting. The world is full of wolves waiting to devour the innocent:

Ye fadres and ye moodres eek also,  
Though ye had children, be it oon or mo,  
Youre is the charge of al hir surveiaunce,  
While that they been under youre governaunce.  
Beth war, that by ensample of your lyvynge,  
Or by youre negligence in chastisyng,  
That they ne perisse; for I dar wel seye,  
If that they doon, ye shul it deere abeye.  
Under a shepherde softe and negligent  
The wolf hath many a sheep and lamb torent.  
(11. 93-102)

Those who admire Virginia are reminded of their own responsibilities for the protection of those like her.

Indeed, he firmly grounds our admiration of Virginia and our appreciation of her virtues in our dismay at what
we recognize the world to be really like. In his closing description of Virginia, the Physician tells us that

This mayde, of which I wol this tale expresse,
So kepte hirself hir neded no maistresse;
For in hir lyvyng maydens myghten rede,
As in a book, every good word or dede
That longeth to a mayden vertuous,
She was so prudent and so bounteuous.
For which the fame out sprong on every syde,
Bothe of hir beautee and hir bountee wyde,
That thurgh that land they preised hire echone
That loved vertu, save Envye allone,
That sory is of oother mennes wele,
And glad is of his sorwe and his unheele.
(The doctour maketh this descripcioun).
(11. 105-17)

This is a rather ominous way to close the portrait. Virginia may be a book in whose text we can be instructed—but only if we are already moved to love virtue. It does not work the other way around; that is, those who love vice do not learn from Virginia's example. Indeed, the Physician closes the portrait, not by celebrating how widely she is loved but by reminding us that not all praise her, that "Envye" is both a consequence of vice and an enemy of virtue. As Nature says in the Plaunt of Nature:

This is Envy which lets the darts of her raging detraction lie idle in regard to those whom the vices of hell are sucking down, whom the plan of Nature excludes from bodily endowments, whom mad Fortune sends forth to poverty. But if anyone swims in a flood of riches with Croesus, scatters his wealth abroad with Titus, thunders in vehemence with Turnus, contends in beauty with Narcissus, casts Hercules into the shade in strength, is intoxicated by Pegasusan nectar with
Homer, stands face to face in philosophy with Plato, is stamped as a mirror of chastity with Hippolytus, on this one she uses up her entire store of distraction. (Prose 7, p. 188, italics added) 20

Such envy is further evidence of the sinful and morally threatening nature of the world, and it is with a reminder of this that the Physician closes his portrait of Virginia and introduces Appius and his plot.

The court scene is also designed to shape and intensify the audience's emotional involvement. Chaucer's Appius, while unjust, is scrupulously "legal," at least up to the point of passing judgment without letting Virginius speak in his own defense. In Livy's tale, this is not at all the case. In fact, what Livy dramatizes is Appius' open disregard for plebeian legal rights, a disregard which, threatening their hard-won liberties, prompts their insurrection: "The men, and especially Icilius, spoke only of the tribunician power; of the right of appeal to the people which had been taken from them, and of their resentment at the nation's wrongs" (p. 161). 21 Livy's patrician Appius has denied plebeian Virginius his rights to judgment by his peers, rights which provided protection against patrician despotism as well as acknowledged Rome's need for plebeian services. As a fearful Roman patrician later says:
Do you wish the downfall of the City to be the end of your rule? And yet, either we must have no plebs, or we must have plebeian tribunes. We will sooner dispense with patrician magistrates than they with plebeian. It was a new and untried power when they extorted it from our fathers: now that they have once been captivated by its charm, they would be even less willing to forgo it, especially when we on our side do not so temper the exercise of our authority that they stand in no need of help. (pp. 173, 175)

Chaucer's Virginius is a knight, a member of the same class as Chaucer's Appius. Despite his abrupt sentencing, Appius does not deny Virginius access to the institutions set up to protect him from such abuses. As the trial itself so dramatically reminds us, there is no institution which provides such protection, for it is not simply the judge who is corrupt, but the very system of justice itself, a system where it lies in the power of one man to rule on his own interpretation of the evidence and where that evidence is the swearing of "witnessess," who can be easily found to "prove" any "truth" desired.

The trial scene intensifies the audience's sense of Appius' power and Virginius' apparent legal vulnerability, despite having truth on his side. Livy, in contrast, recounts a series of conflicts over Virginia, in and out of court, between Appius and Virginius, Licius and the Roman people. Livy's Appius is no match for the support and respect which Virginius and Licius have won among the people
and no match for their resolve, and in each attempt his obviously corrupt intent is thwarted. In this context, Virginia's death is just the climax of these acts of successful resistance, finally moving the people to overthrow this corrupt government to save their own liberties. In the Physician's version, on the other hand, Virginius is allowed no active role in the trial. It is not just that his conflict with Appius is unsuccessful; Appius appears to have preempted that conflict altogether by scrupulous adherence to legal formality. Although refusing to rule on Claudioius's "bills" until Virginius has been called to court, Appius not only prevents him from defending himself at the trial, but he summons him without telling what he is being called to defend:

Virginius cam to withe the ju ges wille,
And right anon was rad this cursed bille;
(11. 175-76)

The defendant is at the mercy of the law. In short, the Physician not only heightens the audience's sense of the unfairness of the transaction but makes us aware of the extent to which the institutions of justice are just as much a party to the tragedy as is the corruption of Appius himself. The forms which justice has assumed in human society threaten all, not just Virginia. In addition, the trial is not merely recounted; it is reinacted before our eyes. The extended dialogue, as Beryl Rowland comments, "enlivens the court scene, heightening the impact of the
perjury through plausible use of legal terminology.\textsuperscript{23} It also makes the scene very realistic, believable—and disturbingly familiar, I suspect, to a fourteenth century audience. Anyone who had been in a contemporary court of law—and certainly that was a large number of Chaucer’s middle and upper class audience—would immediately recognize not only the language itself but also the general tenor of the scene: the language of justice serves injustice just as conveniently. And the Physician takes care to the language of justice into the mouths of Appius and his "cherl." Claudius first petitions Appius:

"Lorde, if that it be youre wille,  
As dooth me right upon this pitous bile,  
In which I pleyne upon Virginius;  
And if that he wol seyn it is nat thus,  
I wol it preve, and fynde good witnesse,  
That sooth is that my bile wol expresse."

(11. 165-70)

That we find this speech hypocritical does not prevent us from believing that he, indeed, can present "good witnesse" and can prove his case. In fact, its very believability makes it that much more frustrating. Again, we are reminded that in this world many people are willing to swear to lies.

Hence, Appius can, with confidence, respond "justly":

"Of this, in his absence,  
I may nat yeve diffynnyf sentence.  
Lat do hym calle, and I wol gladly heere;  
Thou shalt have al right, and no wrong heere."

(11. 171-74)

In Livy’s tale, this delay to allow Virginius to appear in
court is forced on Appius; here he can volunteer it, confident that "justice" will prevail.

Once the trial is reconvened, Chaucer gives us in full Claudius' statement of his claim against Virginius. Since we have already been told the details of Appius's plan, there is no need, at least as far as the plot goes, to present them again. Livy simply says that Appius interrupts and decrees in favor of slavery before the claimant could finish or Virginius reply. In Gower's version, Claudius does not even seem to get started, for Appius has hoped that Virginius will not be able to appear in court, and once he sees him enter, knowing "that no sleihte mihte availe," he gives immediate sentence. Jean de Meun has only one trial scene and only one recounting of the charges against Virginia. The Physician, however, is concerned with more than just his audience's understanding of what the plot is. He is not only dramatizing the injustice of the trial but forcing his audience, in effect, to experience that (familiar) injustice along with Virginius, an experience which is emotionally intensified by the shock of hearing how easily the language of justice can be applied to such odious ends. So Claudius reiterates, at length, his false legal claim in full legal dress:

"To you, my lord, sire Apius so deere,
Sheweth youre povre servent Claudius
How that a knyght, called Virginius,
Agayns the lawe, agayn al equitee,
Holdeth, expres agayn the wyl of me,
My servant, which that is my thral by right,  
Which fro myn hous was stole upon a nyght,  
Whil that she was ful yong; this wol I preeve  
By witnesse, lord, so that it nat yow greeve.  
She nys his doghter nat, what so he seye.  
Wherfore to yow, my lord the juge, I preye,  
Yeld me my thral, if that it be youre wille." (11. 178-89)

In short, we not only understand what happens, but we also perceive in a quite visceral way just how it happens. And while we are moved to sympathize with the victims and blame the guilty, we are also encouraged to respond both to the suffering and the sense of guilt which the sight of "innocence betrayed" arouses in those who are not so innocent.

The Physician's version of this court scene differs in another fundamental way from all its sources: Virginia is not in court during the trial. This change, of course, is necessary to make possible the scene between Virginia and Virginius which follows. But this change radically affects the way the audience responds to the scene, forcing us, as it were, to participate in its almost unremitting sadness. By having Virginia in court and by having Virginius kill her there, Livy presents that killing, it is usually argued, as unpremeditated and as a demonstrably last resort. Perhaps it is not as emotionally shocking to consider a father's killing his daughter in a moment of desperate passion as it is to see him do so as a consequence of a rational choice, initiated from within rather than forced from without.
But the Physician's narrative makes us conscious of both Virginius and Virginia as moral agents who act rather than are acted upon (whatever we may feel about their actions). Other versions of the story also deflect our attention from the killing itself to its consequences. The Roman describes the scene as follows:

Now when Virginius, the noble knight,
Renowned as honest man, the judgment heard
And knew that he no longer could defend
His daughter from the lust of Appius,
But that she must her body yield to shame,
By resolution simply marvelous
Transforming the disgrace to tragedy
(If Titus Livius do not lie), for love
And not for hate his daughter's head cut off
And gave it to the judge before the court.
(27, 11. 23-32) 25

Keeping the location of the killing deliberately vague, Reason presents the act as Virginius' triumph over Appius; even though that triumph is in "transforming the disgrace to tragedy," she calls her listener's attention to the glory of the transformation rather than the sadness of the tragedy. The Physician, however, does just the opposite. The Roman, by providing a much more external, objective account of Virginia's death, short circuits the emotions which it might arouse. Reason assesses the consequences of the act even before she tells us what it is, and such an approach enables us to feel some sense of satisfaction without requiring us to consider very carefully the emotional implications of the act itself. The Physician, on the other hand, leaves his
audience in the grip of the strong emotions he has aroused. But what can be the point of such emotional shock tactics? What can be the benefits of dwelling on suffering rather than on triumph? Such a sensibility is similar to that which focusses on Christ's Passion rather than on his Resurrection. David Jeffrey, discussing in *The Early English Lyric and Franciscan Spirituality* the graphic detail into which Franciscan meditations on Christ's death could go, argues that "such explicit treatement [of the Passion] was calculated to inculcate empathetic response to Christ's pain... for the most part the gruesome details were intended as an emotional shock to produce contrition." 26 If the Physician's scene does not move us this far, it prepares us, emotionally, for the Physician's final warnings about the workings of the "worme of conscience," for his exhortation to forsake "synne, er synne yow forsake" (l. 286). For what both Virginius and Virginia do here is, in essence, assert the radical necessity of moral choice in this world, while at the same time making it clear how very difficult these choices are for living human beings to make. It is the final step in an "argument" which has asserted the inexorable demands of virtue and the seductive temptations of the world. What is dramatized here is a scene of radical love and radical sacrifice designed to move one, through sympathy for and identification with innocent suffering, to feelings of remorse and love which in turn stimulate one to
a humility and fear for one's own shortcomings. And whether one "approves" or not of Virginius's choice, the emotional tenor of the scene itself must bring to mind another, more important, innocent sacrifice.

The Physician focusses on human love and human suffering in this scene; thus, through his audience's sense of shared humanity—the intensely-felt love and suffering which is familiar from personal experience—the narrative draws them emotionally into the radical sacrifice which is dramatized, making them experience the universal tension between Love and Death of which Christ's sacrifice is the supreme exemplar. No matter what we may later think, looking back once the tale is over, the scene itself does not let the audience remain an objective outsider. Jeffrey remarks that "the spirituality manifested in Franciscan art is double-edged: vividly portrayed, man's fear of death moves him toward penance, and vivid manifestations of the greatest love and pity move him towards love" (p. 32). This scene speaks to both that fear of death as well as that love.

In this scene, both father and daughter are portrayed as very human indeed. If one has trouble identifying with a father who would kill his child, he can nevertheless recognize the love and suffering dramatized here. Neither father nor daughter relishes the exemplary roles which have been thrust upon them. Virginius, announcing Virginia's
fate to her, cannot refrain from lamenting his own sufferings:

"Doughter," quod he, "Virginia, by thy name, Ther been two eyres, outhir deeth or shame, That thou most suffre; alas, that I was bore! For nevire thou deservedest wherfore To dyen with a sword or with a knyf. O deere doughter, endere of my lyf, Which I have fostred up, with swich plesaunce That thou were neverse out of my remembraunce! O doughter, which that art my lasse wo, And in my lyf my laste joye also, O gemme of chastitee, in pacience Take thou thy deeth, for this is my sentence. For love, and nat for hate, thou most be deed; My pitous hand moot semyten of thy n heed. Alas, that evere Apius the say!"

(ll. 213-27)

As has been noted, by the time Virginius speaks to his daughter, he has already decided what must be her fate. But this speech really functions to give the audience insight into Virginius's very human state of mind. It is his love for his daughter that determines him to save her from shame; it is that same love that laments her loss.

Virginia, too, is very humanly loath to die:

"O mercy, deere fader!" quod this mayde, And with that word she bothe her armes layde Aboute his nekke, as she was wont to do. The teeres bruste out of hir eye new tow, And seyde, "Goode fader, shal I dye? Is ther no grace, is ther no remedye?"

(ll. 231-6)

Yet Virginia does not remain a passive victim. She, along with the audience, must grow self-aware and assent to the act her father has determined to perform. Virginius's
decision is now tested by his daughter's emotional appeals to his paternal love for her. Even as Virginius denies her appeal, he caresses her. Whatever others may think of fathers who determine to kill their children, Virginia's tender epithets and her immediate belief in the truth of his answer do not suggest that she feels herself in any way unloved. She complains about her fate, but not about her father:

"No, certes, deere doghter myn," quod he.
"Thanne yif me leyser, fader myn," quod she,
"My deeth for to compleyne a litel space;
For, pardee, Jepte yaf his doghter grace
For to compleyne, er he hir slow, alaa!
And, God it woot, no thyng was hir trespas,
But for she ran hir fader first to see,
To welcome hym with greet solemniteit." (ll. 237-44)

Virginia cannot change her fate; yet she is responsible for how she faces it. She must move from dwelling on its unfairness, a judgment which tends to forget that death is ultimately all men's fate, to accepting what is about to happen because she now sees it from the perspective of death's ultimate certainty:

And with that word she fil aswowne anon,
And after, whan hir sownynge is agon,
She riseth up, and to her fader sayde,
"Blissed be God, that I shal dye a mayde!
Yif me my deeth, er that I have a shame;
Dooth with youre child youre wyl, a Godde's name!"
(ll. 245-50)

Jephthah's daughter was granted two months' respite to
complain; Virginia gets two lines. But with the "death" and "resurrection" of her consciousness here, we see her rising to a changed perspective. She can now be thankful that she will die at a moment when she is spiritually ready. Because she has lived an exemplary life, she does not have to worry when death is so suddenly and unexpectedly thrust upon her.

Such portrayal of radical sacrifice as an expression of radical love cannot help but bring to mind another supremely human suffering and sacrifice. Richard L. Hoffman, although in a context critical of the intellectual validity of Virginia's analogy to Jephthah's daughter, points out that the Church Fathers:

look beyond the mere historicity of Jephthah and interpret him and his daughter allegorically as representing Christian configurations.

Some of the Fathers, for example, allegorize Jephthah's daughter as the Church, but even more of them interpret her as Christ's own flesh; Jephthah himself is taken, universally, to represent Christ. According to Isidore of Seville, Jephthah is Christ, and his daughter Christ's flesh, which was sacrificed by Christ to God in the Crucifixion for the salvation of the people of Israel. 27

Although Hoffman argues that this analogy does not work didactically, I think that it certainly does emotionally. The scene makes us aware of this as the same sort of radical sacrifice to which we respond similarly.

In addition, Anne Lancashire has pointed out in
"Chaucer and the Sacrifice of Isaac" the many similarities between this scene and the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, as presented in the drama of the period:

[All the plays dramatize] Abraham's sorrow at what he must do, a lengthy dialogue between Abraham and Isaac, which includes Abraham's announcement to Isaac that Isaac must be killed by his father, Isaac's (ultimate) acceptance of God's will (except in the Towneley play) . . . [Most plays dramatize] Isaac's extreme youth and innocence, Isaac's initial terror when told by Abraham of the necessary sacrifice, Isaac's request for a quick or easy death, and reference to a sword as the instrument of sacrifice. In every play, at the heart of the drama is the dialogue between Isaac and his father: a dialogue highly emotional, and emphasizing the mutual love of father and child.

Compare this behavior of Virginia:

"Dooth with youre child youre wyl, a Goddes name!"
And with that word she prayed hum ful ofte
That with his swerd he shold smyte softe . . .
(11. 250-52)

to this speech of the Brome Isaac:

Nay, i-wysse, fader, I wyll not let you.
Do on, for me, youre wyll . . .
Now yit, good fader, haue thyss in mynd,
And smythe me not offtyn with your scharp swerd.
(11. 247-48, 287-88)

It is difficult to believe that a fourteenth-century audience would fail to respond to the similarities between the dialogue of Virginius and Virginia and contemporary dramatizations of Biblical sacrifice (types of Christ's
sacrifice). Like the dramatists, the Physician's narrative shapes this scene to arouse the same spiritually beneficial emotions of compassion and love and to stimulate their spiritual actualization in the heart of the observer. As Jeffrey observes,

Nothing happens for the first time. There is nothing of spiritual significance in the Old Testament which does not recur in the New Testament, and again in the personal present. This is the concordia Scripturarum, the mysterious correspondence between the Scriptures to be seen by those who have eyes to see. Its effect is to make Old and New contemporaneous; to transform time into eternity; history sub specie aeternitatis. Or history as poetry: it is . . . the time sense of medieval drama. (p. 68, emphasis added)

All human experience reenacts the same "spiritual syntax." Each man must die in order that he might live. And a loving sacrifice has purchased that life for each who returns that love. 29

Shortly before she narrates the story of Virginia, Reason tells the Lover:

What you within you have and know you have,  
That ever will remain and never leave  
To do another service; it is yours.  
External goods are not worth anything  
To you or any other man who lives.  
You really own naught but what is within;  
All other things are Fortune's property.  

(26; 11. 95-101) 30

In the Physician's Tale, neither Virginius nor Virginia nor,
finally, Appius, is given extra time to prepare for what Fortune deals them—they each are left with "naught but what is within." Both Appius and Virginia face death in ways which reveal their true nature: Virginia dies as she lived, in a state of spiritual innocence, blessing God and commending herself to him; Appius, damning himself by his life, reaffirms that with his suicide. Death comes to the virtuous and to the corrupt alike. It is precisely this warning that the Physician now turns upon his audience: "Beth war, for no man woot whom God wol smyte ..." (278). If anyone has been so foolish as to believe, based on the deceptive evidence of the world, that one need not suffer for one's sins, think of the moment of death, when each will be called to testify to his life:

The worm of conscience may agryse
Of wikked lyf, though it so pryve be
That no man woot therof but God and he.
(11. 280-2)

The Physician speaks here to those who, lulled by Fortune, forget to consider the future, to think beyond this world, which appears to punish virtue and to reward vice:

For be he lewed man, or ellis lered,
He noot how soone that he shal been afered
(11. 283-4)

No man escapes death and the testimony of his conscience, and few are as ready as Virginia to face that day. Hugh of St. Victor, in On the Sacraments of the Christian Faith,
speaks of those men who, intent on transitory things alone, never raise their minds to reflect upon the future. "But sometimes," Hugh explains, they "are stimulated to a consideration of themselves so that they inquire why man is born, whether another life follows after this life, whether rewards have been set aside for the just and torments for sinners, and whether after the end of labor a reward of just retribution follows." The Physician's Tale moves its audience to just such considerations, not by providing reassuring answers to these questions, as the Prioress would no doubt have done, but by forcing each to look for the answers in his own heart. "When such a consideration has arisen in the heart," Hugh warns, "presently the conscience itself is struck with a great feeling of alarm over the uncertainty of mortal life, and the more he perceives that danger threatens him as he errs, the more he struggles to arrive at the cognition of truth." 31 The Physician--through a tale which dramatizes the dangers of the world, the ideal human nature against which each is judged, the uncertainty of mortal life, and the certainty of death for just and unjust alike--stimulates each of his listeners to get his own spiritual house in order.

Indeed, the concluding paragraph of the tale, exhorting as it does a very personal response to what has just been narrated, has a tone and emotional force similar to many of the penitential lyrics which urge a similar sensitivity to
the spiritual implications of life in this world, especially when one places such considerations in the context of man’s certain death and coming judgment. Writing of the tendency of many lyrics to combine both secular and religious realms of expression and experience—Aquinas’s two kingdoms of “nature” and “grace”—David Jeffrey argues in *The Early English Lyric and Franciscan Spirituality* that to separate mechanically the two “kingdoms” in a medieval poem may obscure one of the most important premises of such a poem, which can be that there is no sharp discontinuity between secular and religious experience, or between the realm of God’s created nature, including his highest creation, and God himself. Especially during the early thirteenth century this idea was viewed not just typologically, but “naturally.” The realm of nature was God’s realm; ... Nature spoke to men about nature, about God, about sinfulness, and, when interpreted in the light of Scriptures, about grace. The ground of poetry, like the ground of experience, was spiritual, without a confusion between “religiousity” and “spirituality.” ... What is notable here is that the connection of the two realms is not made in a labored allegorical sense: ... the associations are emotional and natural rather than intellectual and artificial. (p. 14)

The Prioress, whose tale interprets human experience in the light of the scriptures, presents an account of suffering and sacrifice which exalts the triumph of grace and seeks to reassure the faithful. The Physician, whose “studie was but litel on the Bible,” does not address the realm of grace but
that of sin and accountability. His tale does not reassure but rather shocks the listener from his complacency. As we have seen, it focusses our attention not only on this world and on man's place in it, but also on the spiritual implications of man's created nature and man's responsibilities within that creation. By choosing an historical tale, one which he insists is true, the Physician dramatizes an instance of human behavior which speaks, naturally and emotionally, about human nature, about God, and particularly about sinfulness. It is, to use Jeffrey's phrase, "literal history infused with a spiritual syntax" (p. 71). Through his audience's natural emotional responses to such a history, he exhorts their assent to spiritual reorientation and personal reform.
IV. NOTES

1 Chaucer Review, 2 (1967), 21, 23.

2 Following Jean de Meun, Chaucer has eliminated many of the details found in Livy's original, such as Virgilia's fiancée and his delaying tactics, although he has restored some (Virginius's absence and the postponing of the trial to allow him to appear), and added others of his own invention.


5 Ja mes roi n prince n'avroient, ne seroit bailliz ne prevoz; donc vivroit li peuples devoz, ja mes juges n'orroit clamor. Donc si ge que mieuz vaut Amor simplement que ne fet Joutice . . . 11. 5528-33.

6 Livy's tale contains almost no directly quoted speech. Jean de Meun quotes the plaintiff's accusation in court.

7 So Nevill Coghill complains in "Chaucer's Narrative Art in The Canterbury Tales, in Chaucer and Chauceriana, p. 126: "Whatever allowances be made for the mystical values of virginity, now or then, they cannot be enough to excuse it; a story that extols the protective murder of a young girl by her father, to save her from violation, is a horrifying piece of savagery . . ." And Robert Longsworth concludes in "The Doctor's Dilemma: A Comic View of the 'Physician's Tale'" Criticism, 13 (1971), 231 that "in fact, moral perception is singularly lacking in the tale. If he has sought to celebrate virginity, he has failed for all the reasons that vitiate his analogy [to Jephthah's daughter]. If he has intended to display a significant encounter between goodness and evil, he has utterly failed to make
Virginia's goodness credible as goodness. She is merely pathetic, and the allusion to Jephthah's daughter that the Physician places in her mouth heaps upon pathos the insupportable indignity of absurd contrast." Thomas B. Hanson argues in "Chaucer's Physician as Storyteller and Moralist" Chaucer Review, 7 (1972), 138 that the Physician's "version of the Virginia story is appropriately amoral, in the sense that he frustrates our sympathy for his heroine by emphasizing her exemplary nature and then dismissing her without a word. . . . Whittock's notion that the tale 'asserts the cardinal importance of chastity (p. 179), which is only a slight exaggeration of the introduction to the tale, overlooks the Physician's conclusion; it is precisely because the end of the Physician's tale is inconsistent with its beginning that it is discomfiting." Equally frustrated, Lee C. Ramsey notes in "The Sentence of It Sooth Is": Chaucer's Physician's Tale Chaucer Review, 6 (1972), 196 that "For certain a corollary of the punishment of sin is the rewarding of virtue, yet Virginia's virtue is rewarded in the same way that Appius' sin is punished, by death. The ugly pathos of this tale lies in the fact that Virginia, who is not only without fault herself but is also quite innocent about the faults of others . . . falls victim first to the lecherous passion and scheming of a judge, then to the harsh if moral judgment of a father, and finally to pious but meaningless moralizing on the part of the narrator."


9 To the potential objection that such a purpose does not fit the character of the gold-loving man described in the "Prologue," I must argue, as I did in the case of the Prioress and her tale, that our understanding of a tale's narrative strategy must be grounded in the tale itself. It is in the sense that the Physician is narrating the tale that I attribute its purpose—as deduced from close study of the narrative itself—to him. We must be careful not to let assumptions about the character of the narrator, formed outside of the tale, do violence to our sense of narrative purpose which emerges from the tale itself or cause us to ignore or downplay elements which do not fit the assumptions we have brought to it. Thus, we should not assume, a priori, that because we have no reason—until we read the tale—to suspect the Physician of having such concerns, this tale cannot have a religious or spiritual purpose. In addition, our understanding of his character can draw on more than the details provided in the "Prologue." Both the tale and his portrait can contribute to our sense of the Physician's complex humanity. Perhaps a more legitimate
question is "Why might such a man tell such a tale?" He is, after all, on a pilgrimage, and even the weakest or most worldly of men is not automatically incapable of spiritual insight (the Pardoner might be mentioned here.) The Physician is indeed a man whose living brings him into frequent contact with suffering and with death. The earnestness with which he exhorts his audience about the "worme of conscience" may stem from a recent experience of his own.

10 University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1971, p. 90.


13 "In cujus pulchritudine tanti artificii resultabat solemnitas, ut in nullo claudicaret Naturae digitus polientis. Hujus facies nullius adventitii coloris mendicabat hypocrisim, sed rosam cum lilio disputantem in facie, insisione mirabili Naturae plantaverat dextera praepotentis" (504).

14 "Perinde uxor instituta fuerat liberique instituebantur. . . . Hanc virginem adultam forma excellentem Appius amore amens pretio ac spe perlicere adoitus, postquam omnia pudore saepta animadvertit, ad crudelem superbamque vim animum convertit" (144).

15 "O sola humanae tenesmositis luminaria, occidentis mundi sidera matutina, naufragorum tabulae speciales, portus mundialium fluctuum singulares!" (509-10).
Mes tout quan que j'ai dit desus
ce set nostr sires Jesus,
ai je por home laboure.
Por le chetif cest laboure,
cist est la fins de toute m'oeuvre;
ne se tient de riens a paiez,
il dellezus, li renaiiez;
n'est riens qui li puisse soffire.
Que vaut? Que porroit l'an plus dire?
les honours que je li ai fets
ne porroient estre retretes,
et il me refet tant de hontes
que ce n'est mesure ne contes.

(19161-74)

Heul quam praecipitem passa ruinam
Virtus sub vitio victa laborat!
Virtutis species exulat omnis,
Laxantur vitio frena furoria,
Languet justitiae lucifer, hujus
Vix umbrae remanet umbra superstes,
Extinctumque sui sidus honoris
Deflet, lucis egens, noctis abundans.
Dum fulgur scelerum fulminat orbem,
Nox fraudis fidei nubilat austrum;
Virtutumque tamen sidera nulla
Istius redimunt noctis abyssum,
Incumbit fidei vespera mundo,
Nocturnumque chaos fraudis abundat.
Languet fraude fides, fraus quoque fraudem
Fallit fraude, dolo sic dolus instat,
Mores moris egent moribus orbi,
Leges lege carent, jusque tenoris
Perdunt jura sui, nam sine jure
Fit jus omne, viget lex sine lege.
Mundus degenerat ...

(482-3)

"Bacchilatria haec suo amasio rationis furans
igniculum, eundem tenebris brutae sensualitatis exponit ..
. " (485).


20 "Haec est Invidia, quae in illos quos vitiorum
absorbet infernum, a quibus dotes corporis ratio naturae
proscribit, quos in paupertatem insanit fortunae evomit,
indignantis suae distractionis facit aculeos otiari. Sed si
quis in torrente divitiarum natat cum Caeaeo, opes spargit
cum Tito, in specie disputat cum Narcisso, cum Turno tonat
animositate, Herculi colludit in robore, cum Homero pegasaeo
nectare debriatur, cum Platone philosophiam facie ad faciem speculatur, cum Hippolyto castitatis speculo sigillatur, in hunc omnes suarum detractioneum acervos expendit" (496-7).

21 "Virorum et maxime Icili vox tota tribuniciae potestatis ac provocationis ad populum ereptae publicarumque indignationum erat" (160).

22 "Occasum urbis voltis finire imperium? Atqui aut plebs non est habenda aut habendi sunt tribuni plebis. Nos citius caruerimus patriciis magistratibus quam illi plebeius. Novam inexpertanque eam potestatem eripuere patribus nostris; ne nunc dulcedine semel capti ferant desiderium, cum praesertim nec nos temperemus imperiiis, quo minus illi auxilli egeant" (172, 74).


24 Cognhill comments that "had the murder been done in the heat of the moment, it might be endurable . . . " (p. 126). The implications, however, of such acceptance are interesting. I'm not convinced that it is really easier to accept, in truth, the impulsive killing of a daughter who has become a pawn in a power struggle between two men, both of whom would willingly sacrifice her rather than lose the fight. Whatever we may think of the judgment of Chaucer's Virginius, he kills Virginia for her sake. Livy's Virginius kills his daughter for his own sake. Besides, the real reasons, I think, that Livy's version is "more endurable" are narrative rather than moral ones. His Virginia never becomes a person to the reader (nor, one might argue, to her father or her would-be lover).

25 Et quant la chose a entendue
li beau preudon devant nomex,
bons chevaliers bien renomex,
c'est a savoir Virginius,
qui bien voit que vers Appius
ne peut pas sa fille deffendre,
ainz le convient par force rendre
et son cors livrer a hontage,
si change honte por domage
par merveilleuz apensement,
se Tytus Livius ne ment,
car il par amor sanws haine
a sa bela fille Virgine
tantost a la teste coupee
et puis au juige presenteze
devant touz en plein consitoire;
(11. 5594-609)
Hanson comments, "In most contexts his advice to forswear sin would be well taken, but as the reduction of his tale of Virginia it can be seen only as the cruellest of ironies: she forsook sin and was forsaken despite her virtue. Looked at from a slightly different perspective, she becomes a victim rather than an example, a martyr only to extremity" (p. 137). But looked at from this perspective, Christ's death reveals the same "cruel irony." In fact, that "cruel irony" was necessary to win man salvation. He is both victim and example. As victim, he took our place, yet provided an example for those who love him and wish to share in that expression of perfect love. Hanson goes on to say that "To end as the Physician began, that is, in Christian terms, would be to acknowledge, unlike Virginius, that while there is no 'remedye' in this particular case, there is, nevertheless, Grace" (p. 138). But the entire narrative presentation of Virginia's death reenacts that very act (just as do the Abraham and Isaac dramas) which made such Grace available to man. I do not think any medieval audience would doubt for a minute that Virginia was headed straight for heaven, nor would they think that the Physician has left her ultimate fate in doubt. Hanson concludes: "Without realizing it, certainly, the Physician has told the Virginia story in such a way as to suggest not that virtue will be rewarded in Heaven but that virtue leads inexorably to death." All life leads inexorably to death. But Virginia dies only physically, not spiritually. If one expects his reward on earth, he is in spiritual trouble—not the least because he will probably misread the significance of worldly reward.

30 touz les biens que dedanz toi senz
et qui si bien les connois enz,
qui te demeurent sans cesser
si qu'il ne te peuent lessier
por fere a autre autel servez:
cist bien sunt tien a droite guise.
Es autres bien, qui sunt forain,
n'as tu vaillant un vies lorain;
ne tu ne nul home qui vive
n'i avez vaillant une cive,
car sachiez que toutes vos choses
sunt en vos mèmes encloses.
Tuit autre bien sun de Fortune, ... (11. 5301-13)
CONCLUSION

Act and motive, thought and feeling, the temporal and the timeless—all become part of the narrated event at the center of each of these tales. These narratives do not simply arouse emotions; they seek to direct those human responses into the proper spiritual channels, to fuse love of virtue with an understanding of its demands and its costs in this world. For the physical world tests the man of faith in many ways, and not the least of his challenges is to see beyond concrete appearances, to overcome the very human tendancy to mistake the true nature of the trial and to perceive more readily physical rather than spiritual costs and rewards. Man must learn to know and be moved to love the truth in a world filled with violence, discord, and suffering, in which pride often seems more natural than humility, self-assertion better than submission, hatred stronger than love, virtue punished more than vice, and vice rewarded rather than virtue. By humanizing situations which dramatize extreme demands of love, faith, and virtue, these tales invite consideration of characters, their motives and states of mind, and the spiritual contexts which make their choices meaningful.
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