INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps.

ProQuest Information and Learning
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA
800-521-0600

UMI®
READING FOR THE MORAL: THE ETHICS OF EXEMPLARITY
IN MIDDLE ENGLISH LITERATURE

by

John Allan Mitchell

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

at

Dalhousie University
Halifax, Nova Scotia
July, 2002

© Copyright by John Allan Mitchell, 2002
The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author’s permission.
The undersigned hereby certify that they have read and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance a thesis entitled “Reading for the Moral: The Ethics of Exemplarity in Middle English Literature”, by John Allan Mitchell, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Dated: July 22, 2002

External Examiner: Russell A. Bock
Research Supervisor: Melina Farnoux
Examin ing Committee: Janet Hill
Rohan Thaitzer

John Baxter
DATE: July 26, 2002

AUTHOR: John Allan Mitchell

TITLE: "Reading for the Moral: The Ethics of Exemplarity in Middle English Literature"

DEPARTMENT: English

DEGREE: Ph.D. CONVOCATION: October YEAR: 2002

Permission is herewith granted to Dalhousie University to circulate and to have copied for non-commercial purposes, at its discretion, the above title upon the request of individuals or institutions.

[Signature of Author]

The author reserves other publication rights, and neither the thesis nor extensive extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author’s written permission.

The author attests that permission has been obtained for the use of any copyrighted material appearing in the thesis (other than the brief excerpts requiring only proper acknowledgement in scholarly writing), and that all such use is clearly acknowledged.
To Maureen
PART I -- CONTEXTS

1. Take for "ensample" . . . 2
2. Cases, Conscience, and Circumstances 40
3. Trajectories and Controversies 73

PART II -- TEXTS

CHAPTER 1:
All That Is Written: The Evidence of John Gower’s Confessio Amantis 83
1. Contrast and Congruence 88
2. Compilatio, Reader Response, and Gower’s Ethical Poetic 104
3. Via Media, Accommodation, and Gower’s Poetical Ethics 120
4. Proof, Remembrance, Conscience 128
5. Practical Reason: Meaning and the Mean 150
6. Gower’s Dialogic Imagination 167

CHAPTER 2:
Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales and the Problem of Exemplarity 173
1. Problems and Paradoxes 180
2. “This Hooly Bulle!” 186
3. “If Gold Ruste, What Shal Iren Do?” 219
4. Lay Exemplarity 228
5. “Whoso That First to Mille Comth, First Grynt” 233
6. “As Was Grisilde” 264
7. Measuring the Case 296
8. The Canterbury Compilatio? 300

CONCLUSION 312
WORKS CITED 318
ABSTRACT

I argue that John Gower and Geoffrey Chaucer engage in a case-based ethics, or moral casuistry, which has roots in traditions of Aristotelian ethics and Ciceronian rhetoric passed down through the Middle Ages in a wide variety of philosophical, rhetorical, and homiletic sources. Focusing on Gower’s Confessio Amantis and Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, I claim that the fourteenth-century poets presuppose an approach to discovering practical precepts that depends on both the rhetoric of exemplarity and the deliberation of readers. The thesis is therefore an interdisciplinary investigation into the ethical and aesthetic qualities of early English literature.

As a metaethical inquiry, my study inaugurates a critique of the notion that morality in the Middle Ages was invariably restricted to a uniform system of values, a naive conception of divine-command, or prescriptive ideological statements. A range of evidence suggests instead that there was considerable latitude, autonomy, and imagination involved in personal ethical decision making, because moral guidance was to be derived from exemplary narratives rather than by a deduction of rules from abstract norms. My research is therefore intended to contest the view that the moral rhetoric was strictly normative, reductive, or ideological. At the same time, I acknowledge that norms and reductive reasoning were indispensable to formulating practical precepts.

My particular literary-critical focus is the virtues and vices of exemplary narrative as Gower and Chaucer saw them. Exemplarity expresses a flexible and improvisatory approach towards moral deliberation, but while this pragmatic orientation is acceptable and useful to Gower and Chaucer, both are attentive to its abuses. I maintain that in their separate critiques the poets do not thereby renounce exemplary narrative ethics. Neither Chaucer nor Gower is as didactic or pragmatic as are many contemporary practitioners, yet finally both poets choose to conduct their different moral criticisms by employing paradigm cases to address practical concerns. An appreciation of the poets’ related metaethics therefore allows us to recover a sense of the many moral dimensions—so little emphasized in literary criticism today—of their exemplary art.
ABBREVIATIONS

MED . . . . Kurath and Kuhn, eds., Middle English Dictionary
MLTC . . . Minnis et al., eds., Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism
NE . . . . . Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics
PI . . . . . Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations
ST . . . . . Aquinas, Summa Theologiae
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am tremendously grateful to Melissa Furrow for applying her acute historical consciousness to my work, and for the particular benefit of lending me her keen editorial eye and, regularly, an ear to bend. Janet Hill, who fortified me against my doubts even as she never failed to offer candid criticisms of her own, I sincerely thank for the rigor with which she attended to my unexamined assumptions. I am indebted to Rohan Maitzen for posing critical questions that compelled me to discover further supports for my argument. I wish to acknowledge the diligence and exemplary caution that all my readers and examiners demonstrated when it came to estimating the significance of my work. Russell Peck deserves special notice for sharing so much enthusiasm and generous advice.

I am grateful for the various provisions of the Dalhousie Faculty of Graduate Studies and Department of English. My research was generously funded by the Killam Memorial Trust and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Others to whom less material credit is due for having inspired me to speculate about literature with courage and care include Patrick Grant, Jamie Dopp, Diane Tolomeo, Anne Higgins, and John Baxter. I have run up a debt of love to close friends and family members who, even if they could not always understand my zeal (or prose), consistently supported my efforts. My deepest personal gratitude is reserved for Maureen, whose love and companionship sustained me over the long durée.
PART I -- CONTEXTS
1. Take for “ensample” . . .

Cecile, a young Roman woman of patrician stock, was martyred for her Christian faith. She had been married but managed to remain chaste out of devotion to God. She produced many good works through preaching, thereby converting her husband and brother-in-law and many more pagans besides. Fatedly, Cecile one day rebelled against a Roman prefect by refusing to make a sacrifice to the god Jupiter. In the days that followed, she miraculously withstood a series of brutal tortures and continued to preach to those who came near. After death, Cecile’s house was made into a church in honor of her saintly life.¹

Suppose we are instructed to apply the life of St. Cecile, that is, to imitate her example, to put it in practice as we would have been expected to do in the later Middle Ages. Suppose we are to “transform what we read into our very selves, so that when our mind is stirred by what it hears, our life may concur by practicing what has been heard” (Gregory the Great, Moralia in Job 1, 33 [75, 542C]).² Imagine we are to heed the instruction, “ye oughte to beholde in yourselfe sadly whether ye lyve and do as ye rede or no, and what wyld and desyre ye have thereto” (The Mirror of Our Lady: Prologue to Book II).³ Assuming we ought to be inspired to conform our lives to what we read, to model our actions or thoughts on the exemplary narrative text, what exactly would we do after

---

¹ This in very reduced form is the tremendously popular exemplary life of St. Cecile, the standard Latin version of which can be found in Jacobus de Voragine’s Legenda Aurea, Cap. CLXIX [pp. 771-77]; a modern English translation is provided in Miller, Chaucer, Sources and Backgrounds, pp. 112-20. Middle English versions are included in The Early South English Legendary, EETS o.s. 87, pp. 490-96 (ed. Carl Horstmann); Bokenham’s Legendys of Hooly Wommen, EETS o.s. 206, pp. 203-25; The Golden Legend as Englished by William Caxton, London: J. M. Dent, 1900. The legend is most famously recollected by Chaucer and versified in his Second Nun’s Tale, which Florence H. Ridley claims, against a widespread critical underestimation of the tale, is “the finest saint’s life in Middle English verse” (Riverside Chaucer, Explanatory Notes, p. 942). I cite from Chaucer’s tale for the sake of convenience later. For an account of the history of the legend see Sherry L. Reames, “The Sources of Chaucer’s ‘Second Nun’s Tale.’”² Translated by Carruthers, Book of Memory, p. 164.

² Wogan-Browne, The Idea of the Vernacular, p. 262. The Mirror was intended for the Bridgettine nuns at Syon Abbey, but the sentiment is conventional.
hearing the life of Cecile? How would we put in practice or mirror “what has been
heard”? What after all is the good of the example to its audience?⁴

I will resist the assumption that it is possible to supply any definitive answers in
advance to such seemingly simple moral questions, for it will be my contention
throughout this thesis that the pragmatic orientation of exemplary rhetoric forestalls
generalities of the order we may be tempted to ponder in the academic context. The
rhetoric I have undertaken to study does not ask for moral generalities so much as for a
particular practical result, which is why, as it will become clear, I take as my topic the
ethics of exemplarity.⁵ The primacy of practice in the rhetorical sphere is what this
phrase is meant to invoke. Practice lies at the heart of the problem of deliberating about
the good, no less so in the medieval context of literary didacticism with its routine
reference to the singular case and its prospective realization in the dynamic life of an
individual. For reasons I will consider in greater detail later, it is therefore insufficient to
cite ideological determinants in answer to what it might be good to do with an example,

⁴ The metaphor of the looking glass or speculum and the intimately related idea of
imitatio represent standard conceptions of reading in the Middle Ages. East Anglian poet
John Capgrave prefaces his life of St Gilbert with the comment: “For her may þei loke as
in a glasse, who þei schal transfigure here soules lych on-to þat exemplary in whecþ þei
schul loke” (Munro, John Capgrave’s Lives, p. 61) The Middle Scots Spectacle of Luf
assures readers that the text will reveal “sum evillis & myschappis þat cunnys to men
þairthow as þe filth or [sp]ottis of þe face schawis in þe myrrour of glas” (Craige, ed.
The Asloam Manuscript, p. 272). The same metaphor-complex informs the anonymous
poet’s comment, “For Caton seip, the gode techer, / Òbere mannys liðf is oure shewer”
(Smithers, ed., Kyng Alisaunder I: 3). On the medieval and early modern history of the
mirror-metaphor consult Grabes, The Mutable Glass.

⁵ Ethics describes the recognition contained in the first-personal phrase, Now this is what
I ought to do (or become). It involves a process of practical reason and amounts, we can
say following Nelson Goodman, to adopting a system of reference in practice rather than
merely discovering philosophical grounds for one. To make a rough-hewn distinction we
could say that by contrast morality, in the medieval context, comprises the impersonal
norms informing ethical cognition in advance of any practice. Exemplary narrative
mediates between them.
as if general causal explanations would suffice to answer the ethical question.\textsuperscript{6} Such an approach to the problem would effectively eliminate the ethical subject, in more senses than one of course. The nature of the question, viewed from \textit{within} the practice of reading, or from the perspective of what it means to personally respond to an exemplary story, thus rules out many of the usual intellectual responses because they fail to take into account the particular conditions of practice—namely, personal agency and the very futurity of decision and action—internal to ethics. One main object of this thesis, then, will be to propose an account of subjective reader response that leaves exemplary texts open to ethical practice, whatever that may be in the event, despite the apparently closed and conclusive form of the rhetoric. Indeed, I propose to describe a practical ethical orientation which, while it does not delimit precise moral applications, should allow us to think medieval literary exemplarity anew, in such a manner as to return us to the moment of moral application with a heightened sense of what it can mean for individual moral cognition and conduct. My purpose is to draw attention to the manifold levels of moral generality and particularity to which exempla lend themselves to persons in practice.

A pragmatism in ethics is indeed typified by the hermeneutical appeals, Gregorian in origin, with which I began, calling as they customarily do for the conscientious

\textsuperscript{6} For recent discussions of the inadequacy of \textit{au courant} critical paradigms when it comes to addressing the ethical in the domain of the aesthetic there are a host of new “ethical critics” to consult. See the work of Wayne Booth, Charles Taylor, David Parker, Richard Freadman and Seumas Miller, Charles Altieri, and Andrew Gibson. If there is anything like a consensus among these diverse writers it would be the opinion that prevailing sociopolitical discourses in the humanities today are reductive with respect to the possibility of individual agency. Even Foucault, in one of his last remarks, would say that “it seems to me that contemporary political thought allows very little room for the question of the ethical subject” (“The Ethics of the Concern for Self” 294). Much current criticism is also conceptually blind to its own ethical commitments, hence remains inarticulate about its moral sources and its future vision.
internalization, rumination, and application of stories. Therefore, the second object of the thesis is to revise modern accounts of medieval didacticism that attribute a dogmatic moralism to the period, something I intend to do by locating and defining aspects of the ethics of exemplarity in Gower’s Confessio Amantis and Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales.

The evidence attests to a phenomenon I will place under the rubric ethopoeia, an old term of rhetoric meant here to be suggestive of both the ethical potentialities of the literature and the necessarily creative dimension of moral reflection—what I call “reading for the moral.” Reading for the moral, simply put, aims to describe an inclination towards the kind of case-analysis exemplary rhetoric allows. Above all, in this thesis I am surmising that an approach to narrative cases, underestimated in the modern critical literature but instantiated by the express claims of medieval writers as well as by the ubiquity of exempla throughout the period in poetry, pulpit oratory, and plays, presupposes an approach to morals that is ethical and poetical.7

---

7 For my understanding of medieval ethics I am indebted to Mary Carruthers, The Book of Memory, particularly Chapter 5, “Memory and the Ethics of Reading”; and John Dagenais, The Ethics of Reading in Manuscript Culture, pp. 3-108. Judson B. Allen’s The Ethical Poetic of the Later Middle Ages has proven to be of less use: his is a theory of the “ethical poetic” that fails to take account of the way ethics and poetics are reciprocal—hence he offers no theory of a corresponding “poetical ethic.” I have benefited from the work of others who bring to bear an ethical criticism on the literature, usually novels, of later periods. However, my critical approach differs from those of the celebrated major proponents of ethical criticism (i.e., Martha Nussbaum and Wayne Booth) to the extent that I am concerned not exclusively with the reading experience, but with the consequences or “after-effects” (Booth 10) of reading.
I. Medieval Morals and Literary Didacticism

Thinking through an ethics of exemplarity in late medieval culture one inevitably encounters stereotypes about the authoritarian nature of medieval morality, as well as routine assumptions about the supposed simplicity of literary exemplarity and didacticism. Let me situate my analysis in regard to this double prejudice straightaway. My characterization of the ethical potentialities of exemplary discourse will, first of all, fly in the face of a commonplace presumption about the teleology of Western morals. On this account, briefly, morality took an unfortunate turn in the Middle Ages when it assimilated itself to Church-dominated dogmatism, until moral thinking found its feet again in the autonomous ethics of Enlightenment reason and Reformist spirituality. The story gets more involved after that, partly because it depends on whether the historian is for or against the developments of modern ethical theory and the liberal individualism it generally presupposes, but also because it is felt that Enlightenment philosophy forever made morality difficult and complex. In the vicissitudes of history the episode of so-called medieval morality at any rate stands out for its inflexibility, severity, or naïve simplicity. We can discern the outlines of such an unfavourable teleology in the work of Michel Foucault. In his analysis the change from Hellenic to Christian morality is one of a shift to "a very strong ‘juridification’—more precisely, a very strong ‘codification’—of the moral experience" (The Use of Pleasure 30). The pagan morality of the Greeks is, so

---

8 I am not registering a complaint against the recent historical work of Alasdair MacIntyre, in After Virtue and Whose Justice? Which Rationality?, and Charles Taylor, in Sources of the Self, both of whom largely break with the stereotype and provide detailed treatments of late medieval ethics. Yet I must note that even their work charts a historical teleology from simple (premodern) to complex (modern), which is inauspicious for medieval developments.
Foucault argues, concerned with learning moderation in the use of pleasure, self-regulation of one’s virility, and a stylization of attitude; such an ethics suggests to him an “art of life.” Medieval Christian morality seems, by contrast, to offer only a cold, otherworldly “asceticism” in contrast to the warm “aestheticism” of the ancients, for the antique ethics is distinguished by a preoccupation with the use of pleasure rather than with what Foucault calls austerity practices, with the regulation of desire rather than the removal of it, with the goods of the community instead of the uncertain condition of the soul, and finally with care of the self more than care of others (“On the Genealogy of Ethics”). In other histories, medieval morality is made to epitomize a primitive “divine-command theory,” an archaic and no longer compelling “law conception of ethics” according to which moral principles were dispensed from on high rather than being sensibly derived from human reason or social consensus (Anscombe 216), and so it is deficient in comparison to modern as well as ancient ethics. Morality in the Middle Ages has been called rule-bound, legalistic, “heteronomous,” which is to say dependent upon divine authority (institutionally mediated) rather than availing itself of the progressive idea of individual, rational self-governance: it therefore antedates the great Kantian “invention of autonomy” (Schneewind 3-33). Medieval morals, if we consult earlier twentieth-century assessments, are further enthralled by superstition, subordinate to the eternally fixed ordinances of natural law, and under the sway of the “idea of papal-imperial absolutism” (Muzzey 35). In yet other accounts, a “formalism” and “idealism” characterized the old ways of thinking: “Every question which presents itself,” one

---

9 For, medieval people had a “deferential temper” (38) that made them utterly obsequious before such powers. “Even the imagination of the poets beat itself in vain against the bronze bounds of this papal-imperial vault which spanned the Middle Ages” (Muzzey 36).
famous medievalist has remarked, “must have its ideal solution, which will become
apparent as soon as we have ascertained, by the aid of formal rules, the relation of the
case in question to the eternal verities” (Huizinga 195-96, 212). Medieval ethics is, in
modern histories of moral philosophy, thus painted en bloc as absolutist, legislative,
unitary, programmatic, and, to say the least, rather uninteresting.

Perhaps it is due to the calumny attached to medieval morality generally that
literary exemplarity of the period has not fared well in modern critical appraisals either.
Medieval narrative of all kinds is distinctive for its blatant didacticism, a distinction that
has not endeared the old literature to later periods such as our own, for whom morality in
the realm of art can seem patronizing, unsophisticated, outright eviscerating. Exemplum,
not surprisingly, has become a term of invective in critical discourse. We have, as
Wayne Booth explains, come to prefer stories that speak to us less as teachers and more
as friends. 10 Exempla have a pedagogical purpose, and this is anathema to the modern
sensibility. Contemporary academic criticism of all kinds tends to prefer narratives that
are oblique, inexplicit, and irreducibly complex: “techniques or styles or plot forms that
‘close’ questions are always inferior, the very mark of the non-literary or non-aesthetic or
didactic” (Booth 61). 11 It remains a common critical opinion, as a result, that exemplary

10 See Booth’s The Company We Keep for the preferred image of texts as friends.
11 Recent ethical criticism reflects this preference. An example of an avant-garde ethical
criticism that privileges the irreducibly complex is that of J. Hillis Miller. He implicitly
speaks against didacticism when he observes that “ethics involves narrative,” but only “as
its subversive accomplice.” “Storytelling,” he argues, “is the impurity which is
necessary in any discourse about the moral law as such” (23). Another ethical critic who
is chary of declarative morals but nevertheless wants narrative to have an ethical
dimension ends up saying that “literary fiction . . . ‘infects’ better than it ‘teaches’”
(Newton 67). Why we should be so loathe to admit determinate valuations or clear
affirmations into the realm of literary discourse is unclear to me. Isn’t resolve just what
is needed sometimes, particularly where questions of practical ethics are concerned?
tales are little more than debased forms of literature—functions of hegemonic cultural authority, of some grande récit, or of local ideology. Schuler and Fitch offer a cogent historical explanation for the scale of values underlying the assessment: "The current predisposition is to equate poetry with lyrical utterance; long instructional poems on technical subjects are out of fashion, to say the least. Indeed, since the Romantic Movement many critics have believed poetry to be by its very nature alien to discursive reason and especially to science" (2). Poetry and morality are thereby pitted against one another. Another critic describes "the humanist’s disenchantment with imitative symbols of moral conduct" to explain our modern skepticism by tracing it back even further to the Montaignean Renaissance (Rigolot 559; cf. Hampton, Writing From History). Telling are the remarks of medievalist J. A. Burrow who owns that "stories which represent themselves as ‘examples’... are something of an embarrassment" (83):

There are good reasons for this. In a fiction which merely exemplifies an ethical concept (‘patience,’ ‘gluttony’) or an accepted truth (‘Women are fickle,’ Radix malorum est cupiditas), literature condemns itself to an ancillary role as the servant of the moral or political or religious beliefs of its age... in the literal mode of ‘exemplification,’ the story may do no more than illustrate slavishly idées reçues. (Ricardian Poetry 83)\textsuperscript{12}

It is a common sentiment that examples are intolerable because they are enslaved to expository paraphrase or statements of unquestionable general truth. Many accounts perpetuate this basic characterization of the exemplum. Speaking of the English friar preachers W. A. Hinnebusch says, "The anecdote was kept in proper subordination as an

\textsuperscript{12} Burrow offers a subtler analysis in his Medieval Writers and Their Work, pp. 82-84, 107-18.
auxiliary and not allowed to usurp the place of doctrine” (quoted in Kemmler, p. 169).

Joerg O. Fichte explains that the exemplum “has a definite meaning, which should be
accepted and not reflected upon” (198). And Alexander Gelley writes, “Since the truth of
Christian teaching was not open to question, exempla served to educate and persuade, not
to analyze or test doctrines” (“Introduction” 4).

For post-Romantic criticism, then, given prevailing views of what must seem to
be the tyranny of the exemplum, the moral rhetoric of exemplarity only becomes
interesting inasmuch as the reductive normative interpretations attempting to contain it
are subverted—either in practice or through narrative complexity.\(^\text{13}\) Thus Burrow goes
on to laud Chaucer for “his strong tendency to fictionalize the process of exemplification
itself” (\textit{Ricardian Poetry} 88).\(^\text{14}\) Fichte similarly heralds Chaucer, this time for his being
the first in England to transcend the exemplum form and experiment with a newfound
and much more interesting literary genre, the novella (203). The development of some
new and improved historical consciousness, reflected in a shift away from conventional
exemplarity to early modern generic innovations such as the novella, particularly
exercises one largely Continental group of modern historians to which Fichte belongs. It
is commonly observed that medieval exemplarity posits “uniformity in history” (Moos
258-59), that the inherent “reproducibility” of the example suggests not change but
correspondence over time (Lyons 11-12). Timothy Hampton, \textit{Writing From History}.

\(^{13}\) Cf. Scanlon, \textit{Narrative, Authority, and Power}, pp. 3, 26, 62, on the way moral authority
is ordinarily construed as “simple” vis-à-vis a perceived narrative “complexity.”
\(^{14}\) But as Burrow astutely observes in a later book, “If the exemplary mode breaks down
here [in the \textit{Canterbury Tales}] ... it is simply because people are too weak or too wicked
to heed the voice of history and traditional wisdom” (\textit{Medieval Writers} 112). As I will
later go on to argue, instead of debunking the didactic mode Chaucer critiques a lack of
regard for it.
generates a teleology of Western epistemology based in such notions: his main argument is that medieval exemplarity, with its leaning towards a conception of the simultaneity of past-and-present in eschatological time, was soon outmoded by the enlightened Renaissance humanism for which discrete historical events took on much greater singularity and originality. Karlheinz Stierle, in "Story as Exemplum: Exemplum as Story," made much the same argument in the seventies and more recently has written again that the exemplum "presupposes that over time, there is more analogy in human experience than diversity, or that in all situations of civil and political life the pole of equality is stronger than that of difference" ("Three Moments" 581). He goes on to describe a developmental evolution of exemplarity and human consciousness away from the demonstrative and prescriptive rhetoric of the Middle Ages with its moral certainties, to the more reflective and cautious rhetoric of Montaigne and Cervantes. Papers from the 1994 Renaissance Studies colloquium recently published in the Journal of the History of Ideas 59.4 (1998) indicate that Stierle and his colleagues remain fascinated by the idea of an early modern break with the past, what they call the crisis of exemplarity, despite now dutifully questioning "any teleological reading of history and literature" (see Rigolot 562).

II. Practical Rationality and Poetical Ethics

It is easy enough to appreciate how exemplification can come to be seen as authoritarian or doctrinaire, and, moreover, how it can seem to embrace a conservative orientation towards historical change. Many of the moralizations that accompany
exempla are indeed incongruous, reductive, crude, alien to the drama of the narrative; and the iteration of examples from the past surely indicates a belief in the meaningfulness of the past to the present. Medieval exemplarity in this context may only seem to veil diversity and singularity, to suppress contingency, and tyrannize difference. But as Larry Scanlon observes, criticism that focuses exclusively on such consequences tends to view exemplarity and literary didacticism only as a kind of "pure mystification" (29), and this, as I shall contend, is to underestimate the rhetoric and its practitioners. First of all, medieval literary activity that is overt in its pedagogical aims can be treated with less hostility for its at least being forthright about its potential motivations and effects.

Medieval literature generally was rarely an avowedly neutral or innocent occupation, anxious as it typically was with variously moralizing, instructing, correcting, indoctrinating, exhorting, edifying, and inspiring an audience. Furthermore, it is not simply the case that the exemplum forecloses on historical change and contingency. As I argue, exemplary narratives are open to a diversity of responses in the freedom of ethical practice. It will take some effort to think through the diversity of practices in the face of a common prejudice—to speak somewhat polemically—towards reflection rather than action in academic discourse. Accustomed to contemplating stories rather than using them, academic scholarship typically focuses on what texts mean rather than what they can do. Finally, the evident simplicity or crudity of didactic rhetoric is not in itself

---

15 We must of course also acknowledge the presence of literature for recreation, and indeed as Chaucer admonishes it would be impertinent to "maken ernest of game" (The Miller's Prologue l. 3186) where fun and disport are indulged. Nonetheless, medieval writers held that even poetry of pure delictatio or ludus had a profitable use; see Olson, Literature as Recreation. Art-for-art's sake it was not. Booth's generalization is not without merit: "Almost all writers until quite recently have claimed to teach virtue while giving pleasure" (211).
discreditable: "Crude thoughts," wrote Walter Benjamin, "should be part of dialectical thinking, because they are nothing but the referral of theory to practice. . . . a thought must be crude to come into its own in action" (Illuminations 15). Action after all has about it a kind of simplicity—choosing to do this, not that—which exemplary moral rhetoric may well do much to nourish and sustain given its own tendency towards moral determinacy. The value of exemplary rhetoric, then, may be seen as lying outside textuality and beyond the boundary lines drawn by current preoccupations with the subversion of mystifying, authoritarian rhetoric. Indeed, the limitation of a purely subversive interest in didacticism is that it confines itself to interpretation on the plane of the texte, the level of diegesis, while it leaves out considerations of the hors-texte, or those eventual postdiegetic moments lying outside strict questions of textuality. To combat the old stereotypes I therefore want to insist upon the pragmatic orientation towards life-application that constitutes an important potentiality in a certain kind of reading: reading for the moral.

Reading as an interpretive activity well describes the site of the ethical and the exemplary in medieval culture. In the traditional Gregorian outlook alluded to in my introduction, reading entails what the exegetes called a "tropological" response to exemplary texts, or what in plainer terms can be glossed as "reading for the moral."\textsuperscript{16} Hugh of St Victor set out what he conceived to be the basic adequation between the concepts of exemplarity and tropology:

All exposition of divine scripture is drawn forth according to three senses: story, allegory, and "tropology," or, the exemplary sense. . . . Tropology is when in that action which we hear was done, we recognize what we

\textsuperscript{16} I will use both terms interchangeably throughout.
should be doing. ("De Tribus Maximus Circumstantiis Gestorum," 264-65; emphasis added)\textsuperscript{17}

In this conception we need not confine ourselves to any single genre in speaking about exemplary narrative, because exemplarity is a \textit{function} rather than a \textit{form} of the rhetoric, which is perhaps just as well given the controversy over definitions of the exemplum.\textsuperscript{18}

The exemplary text is, simply, the one in which we recognize what we should be doing. Granted, Hugh is speaking about scripture, yet as I hope to establish, the use of texts to figure out what it is good to do represents a habitual approach to secular ethics vis-à-vis other kinds of texts. To keep this study manageable, I confine myself to Middle English narrative texts in my analysis of reading for the moral, though in principle many more

\textsuperscript{17} Excerpted in Carruthers, \textit{Book of Memory}, Appendix A. See Bonaventure for a similar definition in MLTC, ed. Minnis, p. 233-4.

\textsuperscript{18} Scholars have been divided over whether the exemplum must essentially have a moral rather than any other kind of point, a declarative paraphrase rather than injunction, a plot or just a brief allusion or quotation, be composed of empirical fact or fiction, consist of opaque doctrine \textit{sub integumentis} or a self-evident intentional meaning—or some hybrid combination thereof. The question of what sorts of narrative—e.g., history, bestiary, saints’ lives, Bible stories, fables, etc.—can be included in the category further exercises critics. A summary of opinions is given in Lyons, “Introduction,” and Notes, pp. 243-47; and Kemmler, “\textit{Exempla} in Context,” in a chapter appropriately entitled “The Evasive Genre.” A functionalist approach dispels many of the problems involved in trying to account for the diverse permutations and generic traits of exempla with a single formal or textual definition. Note that even \textit{deeds} can be exemplary (e.g., “This noble ensample to his sheep he yaf, / That first he wrought, and afterward he taughte,” General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales, l. 496-97) and so can \textit{people} (e.g., “And every man is othres lore,” Book VIII. 256 of Confessio Amantis). Thus Kemmler: “‘formal’ aspects of ‘exempla’ should only be considered in connection with the function of ‘exempla’” (154), because neither formal nor functional criteria on their own comprehend all the evidence. I follow Kemmler, Crane, ed., \textit{The Exempla or Illustrative Stories}, p. xviii, note, and Tubach, \textit{Index Exemplorum}, p. 523, in accepting the heterogeneity of exemplary materials. J.-Th. Welter’s definition, because it is so capacious, remains sound: “Par le mot exemplum, on entendait, au sens large du terme, un récit ou une historiette, une fable ou une parabole, une moralité ou une description pouvant servir de preuve à l’appui d’un exposé doctrinal, religieux ou moral” (\textit{L’exemplum} 1). Burrow, in \textit{Medieval Writers}, posits the useful distinction between \textit{exemplum} and \textit{exemplification}, the former defined generically by formal properties and the latter defined as a mode of meaning (hence defined functionally?) cutting across genres.
things besides texts (e.g., glass, sculpture, music, and so on) could and did serve an
exemplary purpose. Ethical action is, in truth, motivated by a limitless number of things.
Exemplary narrative is also the single focus of this study, however, because it may have
its own specific features and effects. In any event, medieval readers and writers seemed
to be especially cognizant of the potentialities of reading for the moral in the literary
sphere, and so I concentrate on narrative poetry that offer models for action and thought.

Suffice it to say that I do not just mean reading for some codified moral norm
when I invoke tropology to explain how exemplary texts work. Tropology is instead
founded in an individual and conscionable response to exemplified moral norms. In the
strongest terms, tropology implies the potential for conversion—of text and reader—as a
fully realized pragmatic reader response, as Hugh suggests when he unpacks the
metaphorical valence of the term:

Whence it rightly receives the name tropology, that is, speech that has
changed direction or discourse folded-back on itself, for without doubt we
turn the word of a story about others to our own instruction when, having
read of the deeds of others, we conform our living to their example. ("De

Thus tropology describes a change in both the text and the reader. For now the practical
potentialities of tropology can be comprehended by way of Michel de Certeau’s
discussion of reading as “silent production.” To explain the everyday practice of reading
he alludes to several analogous practices, describing for example the way reading “makes
the text habitable”:

Renters make comparable changes in an apartment they furnish with their acts and memories; as do speakers, in the language into which they insert
both the messages of their native tongue and, through their accent, through their own “turns of phrase,” etc., their own history; as do pedestrians, in
the streets they fill with the forests of their desires and goals. In the same
way users of social codes turn them into metaphors and ellipses of their
own quests. The ruling order serves as a support for innumerable productive activities . . . . (xxi)

Reading, empowered by personal agency, gives rise to silent production when the text is re-composed by means of individual enunciation (e.g., “turns of phrase”) that goes unheard at the level of official discourse. Reading for the moral similarly opens the way, by analogous turns of phrase, for the creative or improvisatory articulation of the text, below or beyond the level of the ruling order. The results are anything but predictable because the ruling order is always provisional: “Carried to its limit, this order would be the equivalent of the rules of meter and rhyme for poets of earlier times: a body of constraints stimulating new discoveries, a set of rules with which improvisation plays” (xxii). We can imagine the moral rhetoric as serving the same purpose as rules of meter and rhyme, enabling innumerable productive activities.

As other medievalists have theorized, the business of what I call reading in this context includes the “making one’s own” of what one reads (Carruthers, Book of Memory 164), the “projection” of oneself and one’s personal condition onto the text through selective interpretation (Dagenais 14), the “inventional” dislocation and appropriation of texts to new reading contexts (Copeland 7-8)—or as I prefer to put it, keeping the metaphor of tropology in mind, a reflexive and improvisatory receptive activity of turning a text back on oneself and then turning oneself out by means of a text. Of course, medieval didactic theory was signally preoccupied with the impact of the ethos of art upon the will and affections: the way art effects a change in persons.¹⁹ The didacticism of the ethics of exemplarity likewise gestures beyond or operates outside the

¹⁹ See Montgomery, The Reader’s Eye: Studies in Didactic Literary Theory from Dante to Tasso.
literal, the conventional, or the merely textual (of the texte) to engage substantive parts of an individual’s moral life (hors-texte). Thus exemplary texts come to order human action. But, as I am suggesting, tropology simultaneously effects a change in the order of the text. A contingent and highly individualized component of reading, involving the ethical intervention of the reading subject into the subject of the text, as well as the intervention of the text into the reading subject, is implied by the activity of textual “turning.” The reader is not to be thought of as put under duress by a coercive and conclusive discourse; still less is tropology a mechanical application of the moral system by passive consumers of the exemplary text. Rather, the exemplary text preserves individual agency and autonomy at the same time that it prompts moral agents and gives practical guidance concerning future action.20 Tropology, in my analysis, thus works on texts as well as on readers, which means again that it is not always easy to know how best to describe the phenomenon. Are we speaking of texts, or a type of reading practice? Are texts that are exemplary distinguished by properties intrinsic to them, or just by extrinsic uses or effects? The answer need not be as narrow as my questions might presuppose, given Hugh’s definition of reading for the moral as “recognizing what we should be doing.” Tropology thus aims to describe something that is good about both the text and the reader: namely, the possibility of self-examination and self-improvement enabled by texts open-ended and even palimpsestic, but with the power to change and

20 John Dagenais, in his study of the “ethics of reading in manuscript culture,” concurs when he observes that medieval readers were able to escape “the killing Letter and the miserable servitude to it that awaits those who seek its meaning, authorial or otherwise, or who surrender to the play of language alone.” The ethical reader “depends upon a system of values that directs the flow of the letter’s play and ultimately closes it off at the point at which the letter meets the life experience of the individual reader” (15). Whatever else may be said about the “system of values” here, reading for the moral will be less than systematic in practice.
challenge persons. The ethics of exemplarity should therefore be understood as a responsible practice—culminating in the movement of will or affection—going beyond the confines of the book even as it is stimulated by it.

Wittgenstein, upon whose later work we can profitably draw to make sense of the good of examples, makes one of the strongest modern cases for exemplarity as a mode of thought. It is no surprise that his influence is felt in many recent discussions of ethics and literature. If I want to know what anything is good for, he argues, it is senseless merely to adduce abstract definitions or general formulas, because rules and formulas are not self-interpreting or self-mobilizing. Nor, paradoxically, do they comprehend the specific consequences or practices actually derived from them. According to Wittgenstein, what one requires for everyday understanding—or for a basic grasp of the “grammar” of our ordinary “language games”—are examples, illustrations, descriptions: in other words, appropriate and perspicuous samples, specific instances of a rule being followed or of a form of life as it is ordinarily lived. In Wittgenstein’s pragmatic view, then, one acquires abstract knowledge (say, of the good) by seeing it put into practice, rather than by

21 Modern theorists of exemplification upon whom I have drawn include Nelson Goodman and Charles Altieri. Both are influenced by Wittgenstein. Moral philosophers who are taken with Wittgenstein’s “ordinary language philosophy” include Stanley Cavell, Cora Diamond, and Paul Johnston. In such recent developments there is a concerted effort to include rhetoric or literary expression in the field of ethics. Wittgenstein’s later method of “bringing words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use” (PI 48) is fairly exemplary, for he managed in his own idiosyncratic way to sustain far-reaching philosophical investigations by fleshing-out theory with descriptive examples, keen to ground speculative thought in ordinary language.

22 E.g., PI §§ 77, 190, 198, 201. For exposition see Cavell, p. 185, and Fogelin, p. 53. MacIntyre puts the idea succinctly when he says no abstract precept is a sufficient description of an action; see Whose Justice? Whose Rationality?, p. 194. John of Salisbury cites Aristotle’s Topics [2.5.112a] in reference to a related conceptual fact: “Whenever one says anything, he in a way says several things. For any statement necessarily involves several consequences” (Metalogicon 3.6; p. 178).
adducing formulas or precepts, because as he puts it “nothing has so far been done, when a thing has been named” (Pl I 24). It is seeing things in concreto that makes for understanding.

Medieval writers in the Aristotelian tradition I will have occasion to review later likewise accepted the limits of purely abstract understanding, or at least could recognize that a reliance upon material examples constituted the very possibility of conceptual knowledge of things per se nota. Even scholastic thought accommodated the basic idea. Aquinas argued that although “the rules which give us scientific knowledge of changing things must be considered in abstraction from this or that particular matter and from anything consequent on matter’s particularity,” the human mind is obliged never to detach itself “from the general notion of matter, since the very notion of a rule or form is that of something giving shape to matter.” Aquinas gave the following example: “Thus the rule or form of being human... abstracts from these bones and flesh, but not from bones and flesh as such” (Expositio). John of Salisbury expressed a similar opinion about the indispensability of particulars: “Nothing can be universal unless it is found in particular things” (Metalogicon 2.20 [p. 123]). In respect of ethics, as we will see, other medieval writers less philosophical in their thinking also insisted upon the particular usefulness of material images, figures, and examples in the communication of morals.

23 “Unde oportet quod huiusmodi rationes, secundum quas de rebus mobilibus possunt esse scientiae, considerantur absque materia signata et absque materia non signata, quia ex eius notione dependet notio formae quae determinat sibi materiam. Et ideo ratio hominis, quam significat diffinitio et secundum quam procedit scientia, consideratur sine his carnibus et sine his ossibus, non autem sine carnibus et ossibus absolute.” Expositio Super Librum Boethii De Trinitate, q. 5, a. 2 [pp. 176-77]; translated by McDermott, Selected Philosophical Writings, p. 15. For a fuller account of intellect in Aquinas see Bradley, Aquinas on the Twofold Good, chapters IV-VII; and Gilson, The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas, pp. 207-22.
Medieval exemplary rhetoric as a phenomenon assumes the same radical insight—one very close to the grammar of Wittgenstein's thoughts on language use, but in fact rooted in an age-old tradition of Aristotelian practical rationality and Ciceronian rhetoric that matured into moral casuistry, on which more in the next section—regarding the immanence of ordinary understanding where morals are concerned. This phenomenon I will intermittently designate as the site of *ethopoeia*, to enlarge the meaning of an ancient rhetorical term somewhat, where "character" and "custom" are, significantly, just as much made as they are made manifest. The ethics of exemplarity is in other words profoundly *poetical*, in the original pragmatic sense of the word (Gk. *poiesis*, "making"), which is also the sense that Middle English poets (*makers*) were wont to foreground in their self-descriptions. The point of the term is to keep before us the creative and reciprocal basis of exemplary rhetoric: in short, the way stories come to generate morals "from below" at the moment morality engenders them "from above."

III. For *ensample*

So far my claim has been that texts can be turned to good purposes. But what would tropology entail in a specific instance? It is helpful to refer to an example to show

---

24 For a definition of this term of rhetoric see Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies*, II. 14 (Miller, et al., *Readings in Medieval Rhetoric*, pp. 94-95). See further Henrik Specht's survey, "'Ethopoeia' or Impersonation: A Neglected Species of Medieval Characterization." *Ethopoeia* strictly denotes dramatic consistency in oratorical impersonation or monologue, but in view of its rich etymology (Greek "custom-" or "character-making") I grant the term a wider field of application. Brown posits a congenial "poetics of medieval didacticism" in describing the way "medieval didactic texts constantly and insistently show us this making of *doctrina* in textual and hermeneutic process" (9-10).
what that kind of conscientious reading might look like in its application, and it is to this end that I have put forward the exemplary legend of Cecile. The question is, What is Cecile an example of? What could one do with her story? 

I take up the question again in order to dispose of some of the basic issues that will crop up in my analysis. Now one reader’s response might be that the Cecile exemplum is neither specific nor explicit enough, since it has no accompanying directive indicating how the reader is to identify its implications, practical or otherwise. How are we to react to the life of Cecile, on the surface a bizarre sequence of biographical data, without some overt moral injunction telling us what we ought to do? What good is an example without the complementary presence of apodeictic imperatives or some disambiguating exposition of the underlying principle? Here one can begin by noting that, where it exists, this desire for explicit imperatives betrays something of the epochal difference between medieval and modern ethics, notwithstanding (paradoxically enough) a widespread prejudice against morality in so much modern literary criticism that presumes medieval morality in particular was already invariably rule-bound, authoritarian, programmatic. On the other hand, there is no denying that exemplary narratives often did have explicit monitory statements or maxims (yet not quite of the apodeictic kind) explicating what it is good to do. At present, though, I want to take up the morality of exemplary narrative in the absence of such maxims, and Wittgenstein’s remarks on the utility of the example should send us in

---

25 Many virgin saints were not meant to be emulated, but were rather thought to serve as helpers, intercessors, and protectoresses; see Eamon Duffy, The Stripping of the Altars, pp. 176-7, but also p. 170 where the Golden Legend is cited for what it says about saints as “examples.” I take it as read that the legend of Cecile, in which “busyness” and “faith without works” are such insistent concerns, is not only sacramental but does seek to address ethical praxis. Its particular urgency about practice is indeed what makes it such a fine example in the current discussion.
the right direction: “giving examples is not an indirect means of explaining—in default of a better. For any general definition can be misunderstood too” (Pl 34).

To be functional the example need not be condensed into a moral proverb or preaching, because an example is in itself just as intelligible, if as liable to mislead, as any general definition would be. We would therefore be mistaken to think that, on its own terms, the purely dramatic or descriptive aspect of a narrative example is an indirect or inexact means of elucidating itself, and that a convenient expository paraphrase is obligatory to moral interpretation.26 On the contrary, that one often must interpret the exemplary narrative should be counted as one of its strengths, as indeed it was by medieval exegetes.27 Interpretability after all implies adaptability, and if moral

26 “Only let us understand what ‘inexact’ means. For it does not mean ‘ unusable’” (Pl 41). Cora Diamond elucidates a similar notion when she says, “The idea that moral discourse is tied to moral predicates shows, I think, a false conception of what it is for our thought to be about something moral. Being about good and evil is a matter of use, not subject matter” (“Wittgenstein, mathematics, and ethics” 245). I will consider the widespread use of explicit moral predicates, i.e., proverbs, maxims, and sententiae, later on, though there is no assurance that such monitory statements will have the precise and axiomatic nature needed to stabilize a narrative exemplum (on the “piecemeal, asystematic character” of moral proverbs in the Middle Ages see Jill Mann, “Proverbial Wisdom,” p. 105). For now I want to be clear that it is not only because of some moralization that the exemplum has prescriptive or valuative significance; from this it follows that readers need not have supplied a formal moral predicate where one was absent. Prodesse is not distinct from detectare in this way, to invoke the Horatian commonplace.

27 Moos, p. 238. On the medieval exegetical embrace of polysemeity (diversa sed non adversa) see Catherine Brown, Contrary Things, Chapter 1. The greatness of Scripture was thought to consist in the fact that it accommodates itself to multiple interpreters—to use Brown’s analogy, “the Lord in his wisdom put apparently endless clowns in a single Volkswagen” (21). Compare Gregory the Great, Moralia in Job, 1, 4. Homiletics also insisted on the virtue of accommodation in the forma praedicandi. Henry of Ghent, in The Sum of Ordinary Questions, a. 14, q. 1 [trans. in Minnis, et al., MLTC, pp. 250-56], describes the proper mode of imparting Scripture: “But the mode used ought to be such that disparate teachings concerning different subjects and different tenets of belief should be contained in one and the same discourse, and that these should be tailored to suit
precedents are ever to be very useful they must surely be adjusted to unprecedented circumstances. Thus we can take it that a lack of explicitness in the exemplum is not an argument against its application, but is instead sometimes a recommendation of it insofar as specific cases and circumstances are always changing and require different cures.

In Wittgenstein’s parlance, we could say that reading for the moral is like being initiated into a form of life, and that the initiation involves imitation of patterns of action as much as the intellection of abstract ideas. Where ethics is concerned at least, moral generalities must be given a specific content (not a name or label) in order to become useful in practice. As Cora Diamond says, “the capacity to use a descriptive term is a capacity to participate in the life from which that word comes” (“Losing Your Concepts” 267). If, on the other hand, it were the case that definitions or rules are simply primary or ultimate, i.e., the object of reading in an ethical context, one would hardly know where to begin putting them in practice. Disembodied abstractions are in themselves quite impracticable, just as rules are not their own interpretation. What a given abstraction or various conditions of men . . . .” Sermon exempla are typically justified with reference to the same kind of ad status et populum reasoning, as we will see.

28 Stanley Cavell, pp. 169ff., has some relevant remarks about exemplification in the context of theories of language acquisition that help clarify the point. In his Wittgensteinian exposition, the notion that learning a word involves attaching names or labels to things is mistaken. Understanding is a matter of use, rather than of correspondence: “Instead . . . of saying either that we tell beginners what words mean, or that we teach them what objects are, I will say: We initiate them, into the relevant forms of life held in language and gathered around the objects and persons of our world” (178). Cavell, like Cora Diamond among others, allows us to see that all kinds of expression—not only didactic or pedagogical kinds—can be taken as exemplary. Charles Altieri too argues that canonical literary texts “do not ‘refer’ but project examples of grammatical beliefs and expectations that may be used in subsequent situations as terms of a referring statement” (101). Cf. Booth, The Company We Keep, pp. 13ff. and pp. 151-53.

29 On the paradoxical but constitutive indeterminacy, underdetermination, and incoherence of rules see Fogelin, “Wittgenstein’s critique of philosophy.”
rule avails in terms of use must always be exemplified, particularized, elaborated in the contingent realm of practice. Abstractions need the concrete.

In fact, abstract and concrete always already exist in a reciprocal relationship. Remarks Wittgenstein, “to have understood the definition means to have in one’s mind an idea of the thing defined, and that is a sample or picture” (PI 34). Hence abstractions, however attenuated they become, imply their opposite. Because definitions are always subtended in the reader’s mind by discrete samples of that to which they refer, one is perpetually involved in converting ideas into examples, and vice versa. All thought is in this sense exemplary, but medieval literary exemplarity seems to retain a special candour about the fact. In this case, discovering what Cecile is an example of will involve looking as closely at the events in the narrative as at the moral predicates attached to it. On one hand, then, abstract moral predicates (including those attributes that Chaucer’s Second Nun invents out of the etymology of Cecile), if taken exclusively apart from the life of Cecile, would fail to tell us what to do with her example. The specific utility, hence general lucidity, of the morality is located in the presence of the exemplary figure rather than in any assurances that the figure is, as in my laconic synopsis, “devout” or “saintly.” Those slender moral generalities are not the whole story, though they have their place. Moral predicates are nonetheless helpful because they tell us what Cecile is an example of, while the exemplification tells us what constitutes the

---

30 An Aristotelian insight, as we shall see. In anticipation of my argument, let me note in passing that Aquinas, following Aristotle in so many ways, presupposed as much with respect to both metaphysics and ethics. Bradley explains Aquinas’s position succinctly: “Unlike the angel who possesses innate and actually intelligible universal species of things, Thomistic man can only grasp the universal concepts of synderesis [i.e., the first principles of morality] in and through insight into a particular instantiation of the good in question” (302).
predication. Here we encounter a paradox at the center of exemplary rhetoric, and that is the apparent circularity of moral cognition. An exemplary life such as Cecile’s represents the fusion of conceptual boundaries, a both/and logic. One is subject to a bifocal viewpoint in the exemplum, obliged to see the general in the form of a particular, the ideal in the real, the rule in the behavior, as well as the reverse. Exemplary meaning never once-and-for-all prescinds from the particular life to universal normative predicates, at least not without a simultaneous and corresponding “downward” turn to the level of narrative specificity. Indeed a reciprocal movement—only apparently implying circularity, but in fact involving mutuality without total identity or tautology—will constitute the relations between singular and general, real and ideal.

“For a categorical system,” argues Nelson Goodman, “what needs to be shown is not that it is true but what it can do” (Ways of Worldmaking 129).31 Similarly, I am arguing, one needs to see what a moral value or concept “can do” in order to understand its exemplary value. Cora Diamond puts the matter succinctly: “grasping a concept . . . is not a matter of just knowing how to group things under that concept; it is being able to participate in life-with-the-concept” (“Losing Your Concepts” 267). What the exemplary narrative does is to show life-with-moral-concepts, what kind of life certain values and practical principles give rise to, what the practice of virtue would look like in the event.

---

31 Whence the true indispensability of examples to any system of morality. Alasdair Maclntyre rightly claims that moral reason “cannot be elucidated apart from its exemplifications” (Whose Justice? Which Rationality? 10). One observes at any time in history a pervasive use of philosophical examples: e.g., Gyges’s ring, the Cretan Paradox, the Trolley Dilemma, and Sophie’s Choice. Anglican divine and moral philosopher Kenneth Kirk corroborates my main premise here: “Every such [moral] principle is partially illuminated by the known instances in which it holds good; without such known instances it would remain a mere unmeaning formula endowed with all the terrors of the unintelligible. . . . Thus every principle, to be morally operative, must be accompanied by illustrations and examples” (107). Cf. Winch, “Who is my Neighbour?”
Edith Wyschogrod argues persuasively that saints' lives in particular "teach moral practice by way of practice" (52), and, to that critical extent, morality can be seen as constituted in the very process of its exemplification. Which is as it must be where poetry and ethics intersect and become ethopoetical. 32 The exemplary narrative is, accordingly, always after the particularizing question, How is virtue practiced in the here and now? What is the in bono or in malo signification of the specific events or persons described?

Even those exemplary narratives that have explicit maxims attached will adapt to circumstance—are, in other words, interpretable—because there remains a co-implication of abstract and concrete serving to ground morality. One of the Second Nun's etymologies suggests Cecile's paradoxical "incarnational" position in this very respect:

    this maydens name bright
    Of 'hevene' and 'leos' comth, for which by right
    Men myghte hire well 'the hevene of peple' call,
    Ensample of goode and wise werkes all. (VIII 102-05) 33

32 I agree with Larry Scanlon: "The exemplum illustrates a moral because what it recounts is the enactment of that moral" (33). My study departs from his Althusserian-Marxist analysis—though I think it complements it too—in that I am interested in practical ethics rather than in supposedly determinative social contests and ideology. My understanding has nevertheless been enriched by Scanlon's characterization of the exemplum as "a narrative enactment of cultural authority" (34).

33 Note that etymologies are wholly invented to accommodate the particular narrative circumstance, i.e., a story of one such incarnate Cecile who embodies such and such qualities. Carruthers explains that in the Middle Ages "the purpose of etymology is not primarily to find the true nature of an object (res) but to unlock and gather up the energy in a word" (Craft of Thought 156). She continues with comments relevant to the present legend: "Voragine's etymologies [in the Golden Legend, ca. 1260, source text for Chaucer's priest's tale] resolve themselves into a series of homophonies, puns on the syllables of the saint's name, and images derived from those puns that serve as mnemonics for some of her virtues... The moral common places summarized in the etymologies that accompany Cecilia's story should be used (if at all) as the beginning of our reading of her story, not as definitive statements of its meaning. The whole point is to invent as many variations on the basic syllables of the name as one's recollective ingenuity, working within its memory store, can manage... The purpose of reading
Cecile is given here as a material instance of heavenly virtue, a narrative "figuryng" (VIII 96) of spiritual ideals, a word-made-flesh embodiment of the invisibilita Dei. In less spiritual terms, we can say that the exemplary narrative is the intersection of general and specific, whether or not an interpretive morality is appended or a monitory construction is put on it. Made up of abstract and concrete, universal and singular, the exemplary narrative thus has a dualism which resists dualistic readings that would try to separate out the moral from the story, dividing the normative essence from the narrative accident, or using an old metaphor, fruit from chaff.

John Dagenais cogently argues that to think of medieval texts existing only "to signify" (xvii), as if meaning were static and a merely objective part of the text rather than the reader, is mistaken. There is in fact an integral personal or subjective process about Cecilia is, as Voragine says, 'ad imitandum,' 'as a role model.' The literal story of the saint must be turned ethically into one's life. And a major vehicle for this is etymological troping, 'turning' via homophonies" (158-59). The etymological associations, whatever their validity, makes Cecile easier to remember and imitate.

34 The typical way "a female saint is inevitably rooted in the body" is discussed by Elizabeth Robertson, "The Corporeality of Female Sanctity," p. 287; see also Wyschogrod, pp. 14-19 and pp. 49-52. Moos, p. 216 and pp. 240-41, discusses John of Salisbury's characteristically medieval view regarding the way historical examples (indeed "all things done and created") transpose and transmit the invisibilita Dei (Romans 1.20); cf. Augustine, On Christian Doctrine, 2.28 [pp. 63-65].

35 In defense of dualism one might ask, Isn't this precisely what is recommended in so many medieval exemplary texts? E.g., Robert Henryson: "The nuttis schell, thocht it be hard and teuch, / Haldis the kirnell, sueit and delectabill; / Sa lyis thair ane doctrine wyse aneuch / And full of frute, vnder ane ferneit fabill" (The Fables: The Prologue 15-18). There are numerous precedents for the so-called integumental exposition, Neoplatonic in essence, that reads for the moral pith. Exegetical criticism in the middle part of the last century of course insisted on this straight and narrow path. D. W. Robertson and company apply Neoplatonic principles à la Augustine to literature as if no significant developments had occurred in hermeneutics, philosophy, or rhetoric in the intervening centuries between the Fall of Rome and the Reformation. Judson Allen and Glending Olson take a very similar Platonizing (dualist) approach. See Carruthers for a relevant critique, Book of Memory, p. 180.
involved in reading for the moral that further ramifies the ethical potential of medieval exemplarity. Rhetoric since Aristotle has been conceived of as a practical science, with human action and edification as its end; late medieval exemplary rhetoric, as we shall soon see, is situated within this tradition of the rhetorical paideia. For now we need only observe that the end of exemplary rhetoric is not to find a determinate moralization, but to discover how to live a moral life.\textsuperscript{36} Thus, the ethics of exemplarity presupposes the additional (and what I will describe as casuistic) question, How will I practice the exemplified virtue? What is the concrete relevance of the moral signification for me? Practical elaboration of the text consequently cuts in two main directions at once: moral ideals are on the one hand demonstrated in, and desublimated by, the singularity of exemplarity itself, while on the other hand exemplary description motivates a singular response of a moral kind in the reader. In the same way that, as the Second Nun says, “feith is deed withouten werkis” (VIII 64), so reading exemplary discourse would be incomplete without the sometimes crude transition from text to meditation and action, or the projection of meaning from exemplar to reading subject. Until it is realized in the conscience or conduct of a reader, the text exists only in potentia. In this reader-oriented view, the objective text is best viewed as a springboard to reflection or moral action, even profound conversion. Cecile appropriately seeks converts by opening their eyes to the

\textsuperscript{36} The implications are worth pondering. A problem of interpreting the moral of a story is not necessarily a problem for exemplification, centered as it is on ethical response as the telos of reading. Textual indeterminacies may function in a variety of useful ways. Even irritation in the face of a truly opaque example might constitute a moral reaction, and however it goes that reaction may be just what is desirable in a specific case (as I hope to show it can be in my discussion of the Clerk’s Tale). Booth rightly insists “that the question of whether or not meaning is determinate is quite distinct from the question of whether or not values are determinately experienced” (83, n. 3). See Dagenais on the particular historical power of “incoherence” (16) and “functional uncertainty” (222, n. 6) in medieval literary experience.
truth through her own idiosyncratic example. Such is the virtue of exemplarity—again, rather than its circular or solipsistic vice—that following an exemplified moral may involve seeing in the text something of one’s own personal condition, and then turning the text to one’s own purposes.

So, appealing to a univocal definition, preachment, or principle is not necessarily what it takes to read for the moral, both because rigorous abstractions are in themselves empty and now for the additional but intimately related reason that they are idle. Here we encounter what Dagenais calls a “pragmatic, uniconic view of the nature of reading” (58). On this view, tropology is seen as fairly improvisatory in its responsive and creative practical engagements with the letter of the text. Chaucer’s Second Nun’s description—with its punning concern for the dangers of idolatry—is apropos: “That ydnelnesse is roten slogardye, / Of which ther nevere comth no good n’encrees” (VIII 17-18); her own exemplum is aimed at moving the audience to fruitful action or

---

37 For two views on conversion in the Second Nun’s Tale see Sherry L. Reames, “The Cecilia Legend as Chaucer Inherited It and Retold It,” and Benson, Chaucer’s Drama of Style, pp. 131-46. Benson remarks that the tale is “fundamentally a poem about conversion” (143).

38 It will be duly noted that several of Chaucer’s characters take the liberty of misapplying exemplary materials, often to comical effect, by turning them to their self-interested purposes (my phrase of course recalls Harry Bailey’s finding the Clerk’s Tale “to my purpos” [IV. 1212f]). The danger of partial interpretation is of grave concern, to Chaucer as to many of his readers, but for the moment I want to urge that a potential for abuse does not vitiate the very important uses to which partiality or presumption as such—i.e., a reader’s constitutive prejudice (Gadamer), requisite “horizons of expectation” (Jauss), or stock “repertoire” (Iser)—is put. Personal bias is essential to the realization of the moral text. Cf. E. G. Allen, pp. 32-35. Copeland’s comment is still valid: “One of the most important rhetorical actions that exegesis performs upon the text is to ‘rewrite’ it according to the significance that the interpreter discovers for the text” (76). And Dagenais: “To ‘discover’ one’s own values miraculously reflected in the letter or its veil is, of course, a quintessentially medieval move” (14). Discovery or inventio involved glossing the text in the most unexpected ways, taking texts out of context, reading “into” the text. Again, that individuals abuse the privilege of partial reading is not a sufficient objection to the genuine necessity of partiality.
“bisynesse,” away from the passivity of idleness and idolatry. The consequent ethical
troping of the text, by means of which exempla are internalized, mirrored, or imitated, is
the assurance that faith will not be without works, that the text will not be reified or
objectified merely, and that the dead letter will be actively rendered into a kind of living
spiritual “gloss.”39 To be converted in such a way is to be brought to see things
differently, as mentioned. One notes again that Cecile’s example is a cure for blindness
(VIII. 92-93), which loss of sight corresponds to idol worship (498-504); religious
conversion itself is presented as eye-opening experience (181-82, 230-31, 253-59).
Exemplarity in general is profitably viewed as operating by way of showing the virtues of
exemplified ideals, as achieved through detailed description and readerly insight. That
modern critics, particularly moral philosophers, might find such propositions difficult
should indicate how foreign the ethics of exemplarity has become.40 In the Kantian moral
universe moderns have inherited, the moral agent expects the rigour of rule-following
that depends upon apodeictic rules and axioms rather than upon stories.41

39 Cf. Dagenais, p. 38.
40 Much modern moral philosophy has gone on an extended vacation from prior ethical
practice: “For philosophical problems arise when language goes on holiday” (PI 19).
Recently, moral philosophers and theologians who have championed the “narrative turn”
have returned home with great enthusiasm to the richness and immanence of
metaphorical language; but talk about stories with morals is still likely to make post-
Leavisite literary critics uncomfortable. There are many areas in our life in which we still
learn about ethics by example or case-study (professional areas include business
education, psychotherapy, legal studies, and medicine; informally we all learn by
example from infancy), so that we certainly have the wherewithal to understand the
premodern practice and explain comparable kinds of exemplarity.
41 Modern applied ethics, bent on achieving the exactitude of formal logic, has rightly
been seen to be under the sway of “the tyranny of principles” and bewitched by a “dream
of the ethical algorithm” (5-7). See Nussbaum, “Introduction: Form and Content,
Philosophy and Literature,” pp.18-20, for related remarks on the distinctive “style” of
modern ethical inquiry: “a style correct, scientific, abstract, hygienically pallid.” Also
see Adamson, pp. 84-88, on the un-imaginative “tidiness” of philosophy as against the
Yet if reading for the moral does not inevitably involve an appeal to general predicates, nor a deduction of rules for conduct from pure moral axioms, it is nevertheless important to see that exemplary morality will entail a pragmatic reduction. In current academic usage the word “reductive” often signifies a negative value judgement, for example when it is used to disparage language that simplifies or falsifies the real complex nature of things. But reductiveness is not an intrinsic evil (nor is it unnatural), and it describes an aspect of the ethics of exemplarity which we should not ignore. Originally I was prompted to think through the problem of exemplarity in light of the apparent reductiveness of exempla, the way they close off meaning with a conclusive expository moral paraphrase. Indeed they often do, but I have since come to appreciate that the moralization might represent a valid and in fact indispensable way of putting narrative to practice. First, there is the epistemological point about reduction which I have already touched on. It is clear that we would not have an example so much as a cluster of discrete and meaningless data if it were not for the reduced reference we abstract from them.\textsuperscript{42} Examples, if they are to signify at all, will seem to bear aspects of their exemplarity within them insofar as they are examples of something. From this vantage

much-needed “messiness” of literature. Burrell and Hauerwas observe that a disparagement of “story” derives from the Enlightenment; but now a new kind of censure (as in Nussbaum and Adamson) is directed against literature that is neat, speculative, abstract. I want to keep the field open for an exchange between both kinds of discourse, since of course exempla usually combine them—and so like Cicero, \textit{De Oratore} 3.26.60, I effectively dispense with the Socratic dichotomy between philosophy and rhetoric.

\textsuperscript{42} Cf. Moos: “Like any other testimony the exemplum by itself is either meaningless or has many possible meanings. It is first and foremost ‘literal’ and gets its useful \textit{sensus} only by an act of reason or by an inspiration of grace relating it to ‘spirit.’” (231). Rhetoric is never neutral anyway, it being the case that there is no perception of fact without a prior conception of value, as Goodman puts it in \textit{Ways of Worldmaking}, Chapter 1, and \textit{Languages of Art}, pp. 7-10.
one observes that such features as Cecile’s celibacy, her preaching, and her
noncompliance with pagan ritual are suffused with moral relevance in the context in
which they occur; they are in a strong sense derivative and reductive because they are
thematized by the work. More obviously, idealizing descriptions of a “noble” and
“chaste” and “busy” Cecile seem to prejudice the evidence in advance. Facts and values
are thus clearly implicated, in the sense that particular events and persons have a
circumscribed moral meaning. But an ethical analysis takes us beyond this basic
epistemological point. Practically speaking, the exemplary narrative lends itself to
pragmatic reduction when it is given a purpose, because the reduction of complexity to
simplicity is in one way or another essential to the practices of everyday life.
In Middle
English the verb reducen had positive connotations. It meant to bring the mind back to
virtue, to restore, apply, summarize, and interpret. (In the Gesta Romanorum all
moralizations are headed by the Latin Reduccio making the relevance of the term clear.)
The restorative aspect of reduction is the way it makes narrative meaningful in the sphere
of practical ethics by finding a singular use for otherwise possibly intractable material. I

43 Is this not to concede that exemplary rhetoric operates under the aegis of conceptual
generality after all? If we grant, as the Second Nun does in prefacing her telling, that St
Cecile is the flower of virginity, conscience, good fame, holiness, wisdom, magnanimity,
perseverance, and charity, have we not finally specified the exemplary qualities (norms)
which transcend the exemplum (narrative)? Quite the opposite: a reciprocal transference
of meaning between particular facts and general concepts constitutes the very substance
of exemplary morality (even if it is not immediately perceived as such). Looked at from
the side of abstraction, then, we should still come to the same conclusion: exemplarity
preserves a phenomenology of morals which presupposes an intimate and variable
dynamic between morals and stories that is irreducible to one or the other side of the
equation. Generalities and abstractions cannot claim exclusive priority apart from their
particular instantiations and expansions.
44 We are reductive at the best of times, indeed must be so in order to live ethically, a
point that can be clarified in light of any important ethical choices we have made.
45 MED, “reducen,” (v.) q. v., I-3.
already observed Walter Benjamin’s adept phrase—“a thought must become crude to come into its own in action”—which gets at a vital aspect of reading for the moral: it yields a simplified point. A tropological reduction of a story to a moral therefore entails making it crudely practical. 46

My emphasis on the reduced point, or what I shall call the “punctuality” of reading for the moral (thus setting my study apart from Peter Brook’s Reading for the Plot with its emphasis on the way narrative plots generate a desire to keep reading; I emphasize when it is time to stop) should allow us to explore the importance, in the realm of ethical practice at least, of a certain reductionism. A reduced point, in whatever form it takes, may be arrived at through an open-ended or a closed text, but in any case the point is no longer open to negotiation once it is reached. What I have just described speaks to something that is characteristic of ethics generally: that it asks for decisive action as much as for careful reflection. But pointing is a profoundly medieval phenomenon. 47 Basically, it expresses an either/or proposition that reduces the both/and dimension of exemplary narrative for a practical end. Karlheinz Stierle describes very well the doubleness of exemplarity in this regard:

46 Cf. Aquinas’s definition of prudence as discovering “the ultimate point, that which is singular, because that which is to be done is singular . . .”; cited in Bradley, Aquinas, p. 189.

47 Middle English definitions of the word are salient. The verb “pointen” (MED, 1a-2) can mean to punctuate a text (with marks or voiced pauses), to draw a decisive conclusion, or to direct one’s discourse towards a specific end. The gerund “pointinge” (MED, l.a) stands for a piercing or pricking—which by metaphorical extension may be associated with injury or the healing “prick of conscience.” As for “pointe”: besides denoting punctuation (MED, 1.a), the noun can mean an action or consequence (5.a & d), a central theme, principle, decision, conclusion, or plan of action (6.a-g), or a good quality or moral virtue (10.c). It is the sense of determinacy in these definitions that is relevant to my discussion of reading for the moral. For another technical sense of “point,” meaning rhetorical description, see Burrow’s Ricardian Poetry, pp. 69-78.
The exemplum is a form of expansion and reduction all in one—expansion as regards its underlying maxim, reduction as regards a story from which is extracted and isolated that which the speech action of the exemplum needs in order to take on concrete form. As far as the direction of the text composition is concerned, there is no doubt. The basic rule underlying the unity of the whole is the 'purpose' of the exemplum—the moral precept. ("Story as Exemplum" 23)

The moral point, which in my view may or may not unify the whole in a stated precept, is that at which the reader arrives in any text, no matter how indeterminate, so as to discover its utility. I suggest that the use may be highly personalized. John Dagenais puts it right when, in describing an ethics of reading in medieval culture, he argues that the play of the letter is "close[d] off at the point at which the letter meets the life experience of the individual reader" (15).

The constitutive presence of the reader in determining the point of a narrative is worth insisting upon in view of the life of Cecile. The difficulties involved in determining exemplary meaning for a specific individual may be pointed up by the following considerations: Is it important to one's reading of Cecile's piety whether she fasts frequently, that she fasts in the right spirit, or that she fasts at all? Is our heroine's response to the imperious Roman prefect to be taken as sanctioning rebellion against the state, or against pagan states specifically, or against tyrannical heads of state only? What aspects of her evidently exemplary practice are specifically salient? A full catalogue of alternative readings or applications need not detain us; what is important is that such questions can shade inevitably and progressively further into the particulars of the case, and that this may in fact be just what is involved in reading for the moral after all. Ultimately, getting at the pith of the matter means deciding—and someone must decide upon something—what is salient in a given example. As Stierle says, "In accordance
with what is in fact its rhetorical aim, the exemplum is set in a pragmatic situation that is inconclusive and demands a decision” (“Story as Exemplum” 23)—a decision which as he specifies “is implied by the moral category of responsibility” (36), a point I will return to later. The punctuality of reading for the moral is the way it comes to reach a destination in a personal decision.

Put under different rubrics, a single exemplum can be made to point different, even contradictory things, though in a specific context the same exemplum need not (and finally must not) point up more than a single persuasive alternative.48 The nature of the exemplum, again, is to be open-ended or expansive with respect to the meaning of moral terms and closed or reductive when it comes to determining action. The nature of the problem inspires Peter Moos to ask, “which binding rule, which standard of control can eliminate arbitrary treatment of interpretable texts” (245). Yet if we seek only an intellectual grasp of some rule within the context of the textuality of the example, I think we would miss something crucial; the text does not necessarily yield that kind of “control.” As I have been arguing, the question of salience, of what counts as an admissible interpretation, will be a matter that is resolved in the event and for somebody in particular. Relevance is a matter of context: i.e., contexts specified within the work, and without it too. We may note here that the interpretive task of reducing a story to a moral in light of individual circumstance might in fact be extraordinarily onerous, if it were not sometimes already annexed to an automatic or intuitive response on the part of a moral agent. Tropological reduction need not be a purely cognitive or even fully conscious exercise. We must allow that a recognition of particular moral relevance will

48 Moos, pp. 233-34. D. W. Robertson’s comment, “there is also no single definitive interpretation of something said per integumentum” (316), is still very instructive.
now and then force itself upon the conscience of an individual reader. "Discovery often amounts, as when I place a piece in a jigsaw puzzle, not to arrival at a proposition for declaration and defense, but to finding a fit" (Ways of Worldmaking 21). The fitting point may reveal itself in an intuitive and serendipitous, not to say inevitable, way. Reading for the moral need not be conceived as purely intellectual. 49

Etymologically, exemplum derives its meaning from the Latin word eximere, "to take out, to cut," and so as we can see signifies a selection or sampling of some larger whole; the ethics of exemplarity I am describing encourages the further process of taking out or cutting meaning from exempla themselves—a further reduction. Just so, many medieval texts, Chaucer's exemplary Second Nun's included (VIII 78-84), encourage readers to "amende" the story and adapt it to the contingencies of their lives. "This adaptation process," explains Carruthers, "allows for a tampering with the original text

49 My underlying assumption here is that a process of recognition is normally not accompanied by a corresponding consciousness of the recognition process. As Wittgenstein insists in one of his more uninhibited remarks, "nothing is more wrong-headed than calling meaning a mental activity!" (172). Meaning here is a matter of use, skill, or custom: so, for example, a player can be master of a game without having learnt to formulate the rules (§ 31 et passim); and knowing how "to go on" with a mathematical equation entails mastering a technique rather than describing formulas merely (§§ 143-55); and reading lines of print consists in "reacting" to written signs in a manner that is ordinarily independent of the specialized impressions received when deriving sounds from letters, meaning from grammatical rules, etc. (cf. §§ 156-71). Going further, perception or meaning is not so to speak optional, or at least it is not ordinarily experienced that way. Like eyesight, moral insight will frequently be the sense of having an independent impression impose itself upon us. It is a sense of inevitability that attends the experience of enlightenment. Not that one is imprisoned by an inexorable objectivity; morals need not be thought of as brick walls. Perception and meaning can change on reflection. The point is rather, as Wittgenstein's famous remarks on the figures of the cube, the duck-rabbit, and the triangle indicate, that seeing and seeing as are two very different experiences (see PI Part II). I take it that moral motivation will usually be of the order of seeing and not seeing as, for to be moved one will need to be convinced of the rightness or inevitability of an example, or rather of its moral application, rather than finding oneself bemused by the way it merely seems right.
that a modern scholar would (and does) find quite intolerable, for it violates most of our notions concerning ‘accuracy,’ ‘objective scholarship,’ and ‘the integrity of the text’ (Book of Memory 164). Thus the invention activity of “making one’s own” of what one reads entails what may seem an egregiously subjective approach to textual objects to some, a scandalously irresponsible tampering with textual integrity, a selective and erratic kind of interpretation that lacks consistency or rigour. This effectively means that reading for the moral will not constitute a wholly predictable or documentable phenomenon, because the ethical response is an ongoing collaborative and makeshift enterprise, and because the results exist in the futurity of moral action. What reading selectively “into” the text allows, however, is an opening of exemplary narrative to a moral life beyond the dead letter.

To conclude: If morality is the theory, examples are the practice. What I have called the ethopoietic aspect of exemplarity—namely, the way morals are constituted in and through their rhetorical elaborations—will make it clear that circumstantial narrative

---

50 John of Salisbury once admitted of his scholarship, “I take whatever has been well said elsewhere and make it mine” (quoted in Moos, p. 245). Cf. D. W. Robertson, pp. 287-88, for instructive remarks regarding the way medieval allegory never confined itself “to what the text ‘actually says.’” In her latest book, The Craft of Thought, Carruthers discusses the way that medieval etymology similarly violates the “objective” philological integrity of words, as noted.

51 Exegesis becomes eisegesis. See Dagenais, pp. 24-25, on the significance of the “modesty topos” in regard to the invitation to modify what we read. The notion that the “letter kills” (2 Corinthians 3:6), though handy for figuring the praxis of reading for the moral, admittedly represents contested terrain; Besserman, pp. 140-44, discusses the Wycliffite reaction against the orthodoxy of biblical glossing. Other relevant late medieval attitudes towards reading may be briefly noted: The Pseudo-Augustinian Soliloquies invites the reader to begin reading “where it plesith hym best” (Prol. in The Idea of the Vernacular, ed. Wogan-Browne, p. 225), as does the Prologue to the devotional The Orchard of Syon [ed. Hodgson and Liegey]; The Nightingale [Lydgate’s Minor Poems, ed. Otto Glauning] hoped the reader would actively “deface” salacious content (Proem 20); but Julian of Norwich, A Book of Showings, Long Text explicit, expressed the view that selective reading of her book is tantamount to heresy.
details are indispensable to practice. One sees in this light that it is Cecile’s unique response to her specific tribulations as a virgin, married, aristocratic, Roman woman which confer the very possibility of her saintliness; it is in fact Cecile’s idiosyncrasy that renders her exemplary.\textsuperscript{52} It is not quite the case, as one critic puts it, that “Cecilia is firstly a saint, and only incidentally a woman” (Burnley 84). Nor am I persuaded by D. W. Robertson that Chaucer’s exemplary characters generally are “frequently reflections of a conceptual reality, and the actions of these characters are often more significant as developments of the conceptual realm than as imitations of external life in space and time” (Preface 272). Exemplarity is, quite the opposite, established upon Cecile’s immanence within the not-yet-fully-conceptual space and time of narrative context and particular audience reception. Some practitioners might well have responded enthusiastically to the atypical facts of the case, facts which include that Cecile was a female virgin, married but celibate, and preaching as a female layperson to the masses no less. How else is one to understand the ethos of a case, I contend, if not with the help of such rhetorical embodiments, copious figures, mimetic actions, and the contingencies of the unfolding plot itself?\textsuperscript{53} How else does one come to a moral decision without fixing on

\textsuperscript{52} Such features pose other curious paradoxes, as we shall see. “Since examples often are chosen from among the exceptions rather than from among the most common, banal occurrences, then example finds itself in the paradoxical position of arguing in favour of a norm while displaying the fascinating exceptions to the norm” (Lyons 33-34). One readily thinks of such rare examples as those of Griselda, Abraham, and Job—to name only a few.

\textsuperscript{53} One only has to imagine how much those kinds of “incidental” qualities might have meant to a Margery Kempe or, then again, a Wife of Bath to see that salience is variable and unpredictable. Felicity Riddy, in “Women talking about the things of God,” gives an account of the narrative’s actual employments. For example, in the twelfth century Christina of Markyate related the story of Cecile on her wedding night to fend off her husband’s advances; in Chaucer’s day Julian of Norwich “used the story differently: it was the three wounds in Cecilia’s neck that she remembered, and which led her to pray,
figures and actions in the punctual moment of reading for the moral? What would be the point? Ultimately, the relations which obtain between circumstantial and essential, particular and abstract, instance and rule are not stable ones which apply across all examples. Nor do all exempla exemplify the said relations at their most interesting or revealing. I hope, therefore, that my propaedeutic will be taken for what it is, a necessarily provisional look ahead at the possibilities of exemplary rhetoric where a reader’s practical response is in question.

similarly, for the three wounds of contrition, compassion and ‘wyfulle langgynge to god’ that are the starting-point of her revelations”; and Osbern Bokenham in the fifteenth century “offers Cecilia as a pattern of the mixed life of action and contemplation adumbrated by Walter Hilton and put into practice by devout women” (105). Carol Meale comments apropos my general sense of the agency of the reader, “it was possible for women to extract meaning relevant to their own lives and experiences from male-authored texts, as well as from those which they wrote themselves” (“Introduction” 2).
2. Cases, Conscience, and Circumstances

We have by now had a fair sampling of the kinds of questions exemplary rhetoric, situated in the context of practical ethics, can give rise to. Postulating a phenomenology of late medieval morals, I have suggested that moral cognition is closely bound up with narrative descriptions of particular figures and events and the perception of their salience; that ethical practice has its base not in transcendent and universalizing axioms, but in the immanent and inventional “poetic” domain of storytelling; and that exemplary narrative urges pragmatic elaborations beyond the constraints of the letter as we have come to conceive it in modern criticism, at the same time that it constrains meaning in a reduction of the complexities of perception in a singular resolution. These are the fundamental points I will develop before long in the context of my chosen exemplars, but in the immediate context I want to turn to a sketch of the historical background of late medieval exemplarity with a view towards establishing the philosophical and rhetorical ancestry of the pragmatism I have been describing.

A rhetoric of exemplarity in one form or another has occupied a most important place in the intellectual traditions of the West. A rhetorical tradition of case-based ethics in particular, which in the early modern period was to become known as “casuistry” (a word subsequently to become pejorized only in the mid-seventeenth century thanks to Pascal), had focused attention upon the benefits of deliberating from particular cases and general categories towards new moral applications. It is this kind of moral thinking—a

54 The only literary critic whom I have found suggesting a link between exemplarity and casuistry is J. A. Burrow, who in reference to works of the Gawain-poet remarks that the moral application of general ideas was in the period “a delicate and difficult art,
nascent "contextualism" in ethics which began with Aristotle, forebear of the full-grown system of casuistry, and was transmitted in the rhetorical treatises and then passed down through medieval Catholic pastoral practice—that might fruitfully be explored in connection with the ethics of exemplarity I undertake to describe. The period of "high casuistry" is usually determined to have fallen between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, during which time a model of case-analysis thrived particularly among the Jesuits whose casuistic ways of thinking are evident in their pedagogical and political ideals. Others argue, however, that casuistry flourished much earlier, manifesting itself in particular in the penitential theology and speculative philosophy of the later Middle Ages, and indeed as we will go on to discover there is good reason to regard such phenomena as important sources of a negotiated, improvisatory, case-based approach to practical reasoning. All writers on the subject agree, at any rate, that various antique and medieval moral discourses were at least precocious of casuistry at its height.\textsuperscript{55} Given the

\footnotesize


\textsuperscript{55} Jonsen and Toulmin designate the early modern period as the period of "high casuistry" but provide an account of its origins in Greek philosophy, Roman law, Rabbinic Judaism, antique rhetoric, scholastic philosophy, and medieval theology and canon law. Kirk traces casuistry back to Judaism and to the pedagogy of Christ ("... the greatest of casuists," p. 150), among other antecedents. Keenan and Shannon follow others in associating full-grown casuistry with the Reformation period, but they extend its high watermark to the eighteenth century, and among its precursors they mention medieval mendicant preaching and philosophical nominalism. Hugo Adam Bedau (\textit{Encyclopedia of Ethics}, ed. Becker and Becker) cites the \textit{Summa de sacramentis et animae} (ca. 1191) of Peter Cantor as "perhaps the first true casuistic treatise," maintaining that casuistry flourished in Europe from 1200 to 1650. Casuistry fell into disrepute with the publication of Blaise Pascal's \textit{Provincial Letters} (dated 1623-62), a satirical polemic in which the author criticizes Jesuits for their alleged moral laxity, exemplified in their
scope of this study and the timeline of casuistry, I confine myself to a discussion of
historical development where it touches what I see as characteristic of the ethics of
exemplarity. Consequently, I am interested in casuistry here less as a discrete and mature
phenomenon, associated with a delimited school of thought, named personages, or a
historical period than as an account of a pragmatic orientation to problem-solving that
cuts across time and is thus irreducible to any single epoch. Casuistry so-conceived gives
us a useful description of the kind of practical, case-based analysis persons of any period
may draw upon. We might, however, safely regard earlier forms of such practical
reasoning as “proto-casuist” or simply case-based in order to distinguish them from later
developments. Ultimately, the purpose of the following is to consider the various
positions available to writers and readers in the Aristotelian rhetorical and philosophical
tradition extending up to the efflorescence of literary exemplarity in the late medieval
period.

I. Defining Cases

Before detailing the genealogy of a case-based moral rationality, I should define
its style or characteristic methodology. Casuistry as it came to be known in the late
medieval and early modern periods—and as it is practiced by some today—is a
diagnostic technique that enables a practitioner to make sense of unfamiliar cases and

penchant for casuistry by means of which their putatively permissive doctrine of
probability devoid of moral principle was spread (Pascal: “I gather that a single casuist
can make new moral rules as he pleases, and dispose at his whim whatever concerns the
conduct of the Church,” Letter VI [p. 92]). Ever since, the term has been synonymous
with all manner of so-called “medieval” hair-splitting, obfuscation, and unprincipled
expediency.
circumstances by drawing on analogies with the familiar. The best approach to moral dilemmas, thinks the casuist, is to "solve our puzzles by modeling them on previous puzzle solutions" (Casuistry and Modern Ethics 21). So she will proceed in an incremental and syncretistic fashion, by comparison and contrast, moving in and among known cases or groups of cases (paradigms, genera, taxonomies) to the outer limits of current understanding. There, in the face of the unfamiliar, the casuist attempts to accommodate new cases by placing novel circumstances under an existing genus, or modifying known genera so as to take account of the circumstances, or a combination thereof. The essence of the approach therefore lies in our capacity to draw probable conclusions based on past experience and independent inference—quite the opposite of the epistemological orientation, such as that which characterizes post-Enlightenment philosophical ethics generally, which relies on a logical deduction of principles from a priori axioms. In view of its experimental or inventionnal aspect, moral casuistry is regarded as an especially useful method of resolving "cases of conscience" (casus conscientiae), as the scholastic theologians called them. Casuistry is at its best, that is, when negotiating the ambiguous or marginal cases for which objective moral determinations are not clear-cut. In such instances practitioners avail themselves of a certain latitude of conscience, a cultivated discernment or prudence, in the treatment of moral problems.

Lately there has been a resurgence of interest in casuistry among those participating in the field of bioethics, many of whom favour "case-driven" analysis and
concomitantly reject a “top-down” approach to ethical dilemmas. As John D. Arras observes, “the new casuists insist that good ethics is always immersed in the messy reality of cases, and that the philosophers’ penchant for abstract and rigorous theory is a misleading fetish” (“Getting Down to Cases” 32). Given the fact that the dilemmas medical ethicists confront often are unprecedented (as they are for the judiciary too), it makes sense that they should prefer a kind of deliberation that works from the bottom up, deriving practical precepts from concrete case-analysis rather than reading off principles from some pre-established moral code. It is probable, moreover, that the rehabilitation of case-morality among ethicists grappling with new medical developments is a natural outgrowth of the case-method employed in professional programs; as is frequently recognized, there are instructive parallels to be drawn between the old techniques of casuistry and the customary pedagogies of medical, legal, and business training. Jonsen and Toulmin provide an especially lucid account of practical reasoning within the field of medicine, and I take the liberty of quoting the passage at length for the benefit of what it reveals by comparison:

In clinical diagnosis the starting point is the current repertory of diseases, injuries, and disabilities for which descriptions exist in the medical literature. When instances of these conditions are encountered, they are the teaching material required to help students or interns recognize the ‘presentation’ of these conditions. . . . Given the taxonomy of known conditions and the paradigmatic cases that exemplify the various types, diagnosis then becomes a kind of perception, and the reasons justifying a

diagnosis rest on appeals to analogy. As new cases present themselves for examination the physician collects details from each patient's history, his own immediate observations, and the result of laboratory tests and uses these facts to 'place' a particular patient's condition in one or more of the recognized 'types.' Forced to choose among alternative diagnoses, he must decide how close (or analogous) the present case is to each of the possibilities. (40)

Medical education, in theory at least, entails a comparative orientation and so represents an adaptive casuistic approach to problem-solving par excellence. Reasoning by cases, with the aid of cumulative taxonomies and continuing empirical observation, is fundamental to the approach. An additional reason to focus on parallels is that the analogy between medicine and morality is an ancient one. Later we will see how late medieval theologians exploited the same set of parallels in its description of the pastor as physician variously applying the 'cure' of penance.

If analogical reasoning in other fields helps model the case-method of moral casuistry, it is not least because such 'taxonomic' disciplines allow for a constant evolution or adjustment of classes even as they depend on the relative stability of a classification system for identifying new cases, as is clear from my definition above. Nothing is immune from contextualization: the casuist makes rough-hewn analogies between cases so as to class new ones among recognizable varieties and to create or correct known classes accordingly. In this way case-analysis is what we can call provisional and bilateral, allowing an open-ended dialectic to continue to run on between general typologies, paradigms, and principles and the specific practices yielded up by the former. Arras describes the matter well when he remarks that casuistry has an 'open texture': "Both the examples and the principles derived from them are always subject to reinterpretation and gradual modification in light of subsequent examples" ("Getting
Down to Cases’ 35-36). Put differently, “This hermeneutics is developmental; its contours are spiral, not circular” (Keenan and Shannon xxi). This adaptive process of reasoning is, moreover, comparable to what Lévi-Strauss called the “science of the concrete” (16) that he attributed to the mythical thought of the savage mind which expresses itself by means of a heterogeneous repertoire” (17), a kind of primitive taxonomy or treasury, held together by bricolage, that makeshift intellectual activity which creates provisional rather than permanent significant relations among diverse things. Now Kenneth E. Kirk in his study of casuistry spells out the practical consequences of case-reasoning for the fate of moral law: “each extension of a law must involve some modification of it, and each new example of its application must be allowed, though perhaps in no more than the slightest degree, to throw new light upon its essential character . . .” (125). The reference to law brings to mind the evolution of case-law, or what Gadamer calls the “creative supplementing of the law” (Truth and Method 294) occurring in the courts whenever a body of legal code is interpreted: “The judge does not merely apply the law in concreto, but contributes through his very judgement to the development of the law (‘judges’ law). Like law, morality is constantly developed through the fecundity of the individual case” (37).57 In practice morality has always this same contingent and creative dimension about it.

57 On “judges judging law” there are two other relevant discussions to note. Aristotle in the Nicomachean Ethics observes that “equity,” expressed in a judge’s discretion, sometimes must temper “law”: “The reason is that all law is universal, but in some areas no universal rule can be correct” (5.10, 1137b10-30); hence the judge will prudently “correct” the law ad hoc, as the case requires. Drucilla Cornell has an illuminating discussion in her chapter entitled, “The Call to Judicial Responsibility,” in The Philosophy of the Limit, where she argues that law is put on trial by justice. She cites Derrida to the same effect: “Each case is other, each decision is different and requires an absolutely unique interpretation, which no existing, coded rule can or ought to guarantee
Despite its newfangled appearance, associated as case-reasoning is with recent developments in bioethics and with the "narrative turn" in general affecting avant-garde philosophical ethics and legal studies, casuistry as a characteristic mode of reasoning has a pedigree. I outline the lineage of this kind of analogical reasoning below, taking into account a variety of evidence that touches on the place of the rhetoric of example within it, in an effort better to understand the historical possibilities of late medieval exemplarity. As I hope to demonstrate, a proto-casuistic or case-based emphasis in the literature of late medieval England represents a manifest extension and appropriation of a longstanding rhetorical tradition.

II. Ancient Greek Hypotheses: Plato and Aristotle

As Wittgenstein says, "to have understood the definition means to have in one's mind an idea of the thing defined, and that is a sample or picture" (PL 34). Plato and Aristotle were of the same mind with respect to the basic epistemological function of samples, particularly with regard to those cases they called "hypotheses," but each philosopher goes on to offer divergent appraisals of the same fact. In the Republic, where mention is made of the relative convenience of particular figures in the abstract field of geometry, Plato asserts that a truly philosophical mind hastens to dispense with absolutely. At least, if the rule guarantees it in no uncertain terms, so that the judge is a calculating machine—which happens—we will not say he is just, free and responsible" ("Force of Law" 133). For Cornell, in virtue of its iterability, law requires judgement. I have profited greatly from the exhaustive and learned discussion of the classical philosophical positions in Wesley Trimpi, Chapter 2, "The Hypothesis of Literary Discourse," Muses of One Mind. On the immediate topic see also Owen Barfield's remarks in Chapter VII, "Appearance and Hypothesis," of Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry.
“hypothetical” cases once and for all so as to apprehend eternally existent archetypes or exemplars by means of dialectical reasoning (Republic 533CD). Examples are in this view illusory, unless they are transcendentally given that for Plato “the primary philosophical sense of paradeigma (Lat. exemplar) is that of a model, a standard” (Gelley 3). In this usage a philosopher advances past the shadowy images of this world to the things in themselves—those disembodied archetypes or ideal forms—progressing, in other words, beyond examples (as in “one among others”) to the pure exemplars (“the only one”). Pure intelligence thus transcends all particularity in the Platonic version of exemplarity. For Plato’s ethics this entails that the archetypal Idea of the Good has utter primacy over all particular goods because it exists outside appearance and hypothesis—beyond the ontology of the particular instance.

In a very different spirit Aristotle affirmed that the things in themselves are indivisible from their manifold and concrete instantiations (paradigmata). In regard to morality, therefore, Aristotle held that “the good is not something common which corresponds to a single Idea” (Nicomachean Ethics 1.7, 1096b25). His expressly anti-Platonic thought laid the foundation for a tradition of moral particularism and contextualism that was to inform the ethics of exemplarity of a much later date.

---

59 The way of putting the distinction is that of Michael B. Naas, “Introduction: For Example.”

60 Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics was known and closely studied in the later Middle Ages, though not always in the same form as we know and study it today. The complete text was finally made available in the popular thirteenth-century Latin translation of Robert Grosseteste, Chancellor of Oxford University and Bishop of Lincoln. In the century before Grosseteste there already circulated books two and three of Aristotle’s work, which would be known as the “old Ethics,” ethica vetus; sometime in the thirteenth century, an anonymous translator supplied the missing first book in what became the “new Ethics,” ethica nova. By the fourteenth-century various other partial translations and adaptations of Aristotle’s Ethics (by Nicholas Oresme, Brunetto Latini, Giles of
Unsurprisingly, Aristotelian moral reason figures prominently in my account throughout, particularly where he touches on the value of poetry and paradigm cases.

Aristotle’s tendency towards empiricism in mathematics, ethics, and aesthetics should indicate the philosopher’s relevance in this context. Aristotle follows Plato inasmuch as both suppose that geometrical hypotheses or diagrams have a certain utility in mathematical thinking. But for Aristotle, hypotheses are in their way constitutive samples: geometry proceeds impressionistically by bringing forward to the mind’s eye specific figures, from which concrete shapes abstract definitions can be apprehended. He explains,

> It is impossible to think without an image. The same process occurs in thinking as in drawing a diagram; for in this case although we make no use of the fact that the magnitude of the triangle is a finite quantity, yet we draw it as having a finite magnitude. In the same way the man who is thinking, though he may not be thinking of a finite magnitude, still puts a finite magnitude before his eyes, though he does not think of it as such. (De memoria 1; translated in Randall 96)⁶¹

Abandoning the austerity of Platonic idealism while still respecting abstract ideas,

Aristotle thus annexes thought to the realm of concrete particulars and cases (instead of to an extra-sensory sphere of transcendentals) by way of sense perception and the creative faculty of imagination. “For Aristotle,” interprets John Randall, “knowledge comes from observing the world and reflecting upon what can be observed, not, as the Platonists

---

⁶¹ Cited by Trimpi, pp. 39-40.
held, from an immediate inner ‘intuition’ or intellectual vision of a supposed intelligible realm” (95). Aristotle therefore does not abide his predecessor’s ascetic approach to knowledge with its bias towards inspired understanding independent of empirical observation. He holds instead that the contingent world of “appearance and probability” (Trimpi 40) is integral to higher forms of thought.

Like his mathematics, Aristotle’s aesthetic and rhetorical systems also depend upon the diverse approximations one is able to derive from the sensible realm. In respect of the theatrical arts Aristotle is preoccupied with individual figures and hypothetical action, or as he says ever noble men of outstanding virtue involved in “the sort of things that can happen” (Poetics § 31). Tragic moral dilemmas and qualities of character are adumbrated mimetically on the ancient Greek stage, in aid of which a dramatist employs rhetorical speeches, action, and character—in short, all the resources of the aesthetic imagination—to delineate human possibilities. The focus on human possibility is vital; it is in Aristotle’s view what makes poetry more philosophical than history. Because tragedy sets down cases of what can happen rather than what did happen, it has an exemplary application outside the text in the life of an audience.

When in his Rhetoric Aristotle turns from tragedy to an explicit discussion of example, he gives a clear indication as to the practical value of a case-based rhetoric. The example (paradeigma) is in Aristotle’s account proposed as a form of argument, that is, a mode of persuasion, using either real or invented facts, useful in situations where

---

62 Though the analogy between mathematics and other arts and sciences only goes so far. As Aristotle says in the Ethics, “The same exactitude is not to be looked for in all fields of knowledge, any more than in all kinds of crafts. It is the mark of an educated mind to expect just that exactitude in any subject that the nature of the matter permits. For it is unreasonable to accept merely plausible arguments from a mathematician, and to demand formal demonstrations from an orator (1.3.1-4, 1094b).
matters cannot be demonstrated with logical certainty. As such, a paradigmatic instance does not express a specific case so much as a particular kind of probable reasoning from specific cases, as befits the general definition of rhetoric.\(^6\) The example, from this vantage conceived as a figure of thought rather than a figure of speech (to use a distinction common among medieval treatises: e.g., Geoffrey of Vinsauf 60-62), constitutes a second-order proof, what Aristotle calls “a rhetorical induction” (1.2.8, 1356b). It is we might say a “poor man’s” proof, inferior to the dialectical syllogism, and thus most suitable for an uneducated audience for whom inductive logic is more agreeable than the rigour of dialectic (Topica I.XII, 105a16-19; VIII.II,157a19-21).

Indeed, part of the reason for the appeal of example is that it factors in the capabilities and contexts of specific audiences, offering support to arguments by drawing on a shared reality, familiar patterns of thought, commonplace beliefs.\(^6\) But the qualification—rhetorical induction—is important to notice for another reason. Unlike the analytic induction, reasoning from example so to speak goes up and comes down,

---

\(^6\) Rhetoric is “an ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion” (1.2.1, 1355a). Cicero’s definition of rhetorical invention is similar: “Invention is the discovery of valid or seemingly valid arguments to render one’s cause plausible” (De Inventione 1.9). Function predominates over form in such definitions. I already mentioned that exemplarity as I discuss it also does not designate a fixed genre or form, but a conception of morality itself, a manner of ethical reflection, a way of seeing and indeed of being a moral agent in the world.

\(^6\) Lyons, Exemplum, 6. In the twelfth century Alan of Lille had fun with some wordplay in describing the commonplaceness of example, observing “how this art of the commonplace is fortified by commonplaces but yet is restricted to no common place since it does not seek common places but a commonplace and accommodates commonplaces, though unacquainted with common places” (Anticlaudianus III. 45-62). He is drawing a distinction between proof by example, which proceeds inductively from a consideration of cases, topics, or enthymemes (hence from loci communes—one among other places), and proof by dialectic, which proceeds from a logical consideration of the known parts (from loca communia—all of the places); see translator’s notes 15-16 in Anticlaudianus, p. 93. Examples remain a species inferior to serious dialectic, or as Alan puts it they are the “little children” of logical induction.
which tells us something about the ethical potential of the rhetoric. William Benoit, from whom I take much of my direction in this regard, clarifies the point when he comments that in dialectic “induction stops after the generalization is formed, whereas example continues on to apply this generalization to another particular instance” (188). As Aristotle describes it, example proceeds by “reasoning neither from part to whole nor from whole to part but from part to part, like to like, when two things fall under the same genus but one is better known than the other” (Rhetoric 1.2.19, 1357b). This is as fine a description of case-reasoning as can be found. Aristotelian example thus designates a mode of applying knowledge by moving crab-wise or laterally across known cases, “part to whole to part” (Benoit 184), and as such it stands at the foundation of a tradition of problem-solving rationality that would eventually go by the name of moral casuistry.

Aristotle’s rhetoric of example, given its connections with the world of appearance and hypothesis and with probable logic and applied reason, dovetails with his ethics. We can already appreciate the practical potentialities of the example in the Rhetoric. Aristotle states that deliberative oratory, the kind that seeks to persuade an audience to take a certain course of future action, puts such rhetorical induction to good use: paradigms are ideal in speeches that “judge future things by predicting them from past ones” (Rhetoric 1.9.40, 1368a; also 3.17.5, 1418a), given the fact that future events are ordinarily similar to past ones (2.20.7-8, 1394a). In this conception, examples supply the practical wisdom of experience required for decisions, involving a fundamentally rhetorical approach to decision-making, well-matched to the sort of pragmatic and inductive deliberations that are characteristic of ethics, itself an inexact science restricted

---

65 Jonsen and Toulmin note that the two disciplines converge in Aristotle, for inserted into the Rhetoric is “a digest of books I-IV of the Nicomachean Ethics” (73).
to the contingent realm of particulars (Nicomachean Ethics 1.3, 1094b21 and 2.2, 1104a3-7). Example furnishes a conditional knowledge based on circumstances and known cases, giving us the very pre-conditions of intelligibility and utility that go to form the backbone of the intellectual virtue of prudence in Aristotle’s Ethics.

Prudence (phronesis), unlike theoretical knowledge (episteme), is practical intelligence that “come[s] to know particulars, since it is concerned with action and action is about particulars” (Nicomachean Ethics 6.7, 1141b15). Aristotle’s insistence on the singular ends of prudence is a notion to which I will repeatedly recur, for it locates the center of ethics in human practice. In determining practice, prudence concerns itself with what is specific and variable, with an “object of perception” (translating aesthesis), rather than, as is the case with theoretical knowledge, the universal and invariable definitions of things (6.8, 1142a25-30; cf. 2.9, 1109b20-25 and 4.8, 1126b1-5). Like example, then, the intellectual virtue of prudence entails an inductive rather than deductive mode of knowing, basing itself in perceptions of particular cases. It is a highly rhetorical art because ethical perception applies itself to fine-tuned discernment and discovery in the sensible realm—being, in short, an essentially aesthetic mode of apprehending the good and the right. On this last point we read that the acquisition of prudence is secured by the perception of “circumstances” in the assessment of cases, an idea which recurs in the later literature.66 As always in Aristotle the possession of circumspection is not to be had

66 In Aristotle the circumstances are, “(1) who is doing it; (2) what he is doing; (3) about what or to what he is doing it; (4) sometimes also what he is doing it with, e.g., the instrument; (5) for what results, e.g., safety; (6) in what way, e.g., gently or hard” (3.1, 1111a5). For much more on the tradition of the circumstantiae than I am able to provide in this brief discussion see Jonsen and Toulmin, p. 71 et passim, and especially D. W. Robertson, “A Note on the Classical Origin of ‘Circumstances’ in the Medieval
for its own sake, but for the sake of practice: “for its end is action, not knowledge” (1.3, 1095a5; cf. 2.2, 1103b30 and 10.9, 1179b). The prudent person who deliberates wisely upon cases, owing to reasonably sound perceptions of particulars, discovers how to make prudent choices and to act accordingly, e.g., “doing it to the right person, in the right amount, at the right time, for the right end, and in the right way” (2.9, 1109a25-30).

Finally, for Aristotle virtue is cultivated by practicing it, not by defining it: “Virtues . . . we acquire, just as we acquire crafts, by having previously activated them. . . . [W]e become just by doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions” (2.2, 1103b).

III. Antique Rhetorical Cause

Subsequent thinking proceeded apace in the train of Aristotle’s analysis of rhetoric and ethics, and of their interrelation. The antique treatises on rhetoric open up further perspectives on the functions of examples in the context of moral deliberation. What follows is an overview of the main ideas informing practices of later periods. In the second century B.C.E. Hermagorus of Temnos is known to have formulated an influential distinction pertaining to types of case: these are theses or general questions (“Is it right to kill a tyrant?”) and hypotheses or specific cases (“Did Harmodius and Aristogeiton justifiably kill the tyrant Hipparchus?”).67 The distinction was felt to be significant in that it enables one to discover the nature of the question on which a given

Confessional.” In my account we only glimpse the vitality of the circumstances in deciding cases—ethical, legal, and spiritual.

67 The examples concerning tyrannicide are taken from George A. Kennedy’s discussion of Hermagorus in Classical Rhetoric and its Christian and Secular Tradition, p. 88.
dispute turns, that is, whether the issue is an unlimited proposition (infinite question, thesis) or a limited case (finite question, hypothesis). The crux of the disputed question then yields its controversy, or its \textit{stasis}, a basic definition of the issue at stake which is an obvious starting-point for anyone faced with determining the justice or injustice of a case.

In treating the hypothetical case one goes on, as Robertson has shown, to consider the “seven circumstances, which St. Augustine, who is our authority for this feature of Hermagoras’ rhetoric, quoted as follows: \textit{quis, quid, quando, ubi, cur, quem ad modum, quibus adminiculus}” (“A Note” 9). In Greco-Roman rhetoric, in sum, a deep contextualization of the particulars of a case was thought to remain crucial to the success of its defense, and this attitude carried over into other areas where rhetoric was to be used by practitioners in the tradition.\(^6\)

A sensitive regard for the way exemplary cases express the substance of moral dilemmas is evident throughout Cicero’s corpus. Cicero’s \textit{De Officiis}, it has been said, is the first “case book” of moral dilemmas.\(^6\) A Stoic following in the footsteps of Aristotle, Cicero is ever preoccupied with \textit{probabilia} (2.2.7). His treatise is accordingly set forth to address not necessary truths, the supreme good, but rather the probable truths of

\(^6\) It was clear to later writers in the tradition that rhetoricians were particularly well equipped to deal with hypotheses. The hypothesis was thought to be the province of rhetoric because it concerns the relations of particular cases to controversial questions, whereas dialectic is more at home in the propositional mode. See Cicero, \textit{De Inventione}, 1.6; James J. Murphy, p. 9. As John of Salisbury put it in the twelfth century, “The dialectician leaves what is known as the ‘hypothesis,’ namely, that which is involved in circumstances, to the orator” (\textit{Metalogicon} 2.12). When in the third book of \textit{De Officiis} Cicero discusses Plato’s myth of Gyges’s Ring he further defends the deployment of the moral example against “certain philosophers” who have no use for such hypothetical cases because they are fictional, indicating that fiction and not just hypotheses in the ancient sense is or should be a specialty of rhetoricians. The philosophers have little appreciation for what Cicero calls the concept of the “if possible” \textit{(id si posset)} (3.9.39). See Trimpi, p. 279.

\(^6\) Jonsen and Toulmin, p. 74.
quotidian affairs and immediate ends, precepts for practical living. Of such precepts, says Cicero, there are two main varieties, that of expediency (utilitas) and that of right (honestas). Moral deliberation must judge between these and other competing imperatives, not an easy task for anyone, but one that proceeds all the same by interrogating the circumstances (1.18.59). Through habitual deliberation upon difficult cases and circumstances one acquires “circumspection” and thus cultivates prudentia, “which the Greek call phronesis... namely, the practical knowledge of things to be sought for and of things to be avoided” (1.53.153). Like Aristotle, too, Cicero states that the end of ethics resides in action, not mere speculation: “For the whole glory of virtue is in activity” (1.6.19). In De Inventione we can find further evidence of Cicero’s pragmatic approach to ethics, with emphasis on the role exemplarity in particular plays within it. From the perspective of litigation, Cicero speaks about the kinds of exposition of events (narratio) that are most persuasive in the prosecution and defense of a case. In pleading cases, says Cicero, the narrative should in any case be brief, clear, and plausible (1.20.28)—a triad that recurs in the medieval homiletic literature whenever reference is made to exemplification. When Cicero comes around to defining the exemplum proper he categorizes it under the rules of proof (confirmatio), and this too becomes a conventional gesture. Exemplum, in Cicero’s words, is as we already have seen an inductive mode constituting a principle of “probability which depends on comparison” (1.30.49). Consistent with what we saw in Aristotle, Cicero postulates example as a form

---

70 Three kinds of narratio are laid out: fabula or “narrative in which the events are not true and have no verisimilitude,” argumentum or “fictitious narrative which nevertheless could have occurred,” and historia or “an account of actual occurrences remote from the recollection of our own age” (1.19.27). A similar subset is found in Aristotle’s division of the example, indicating the place of fabular narratives in serious argumentation.
of thinking laterally across cases. Comparison and contrast—reasoning “from part to part, like to like”—lies at the heart of exemplification in the tradition, as does the notion that situating “likenesses” by example represents an efficient way of clinching an argument.

The pseudo-Ciceronian Rhetorica ad Herennium is another influential source of rhetorical theory, though the ideas set forth there are not as sophisticated as those found elsewhere. The fullest consideration of example is found in the part of the treatise dealing with style, where it is said that exemplification is a kind of comparison (similitudo) “used to embellish or prove or clarify or vivify” (4.45.59). As a broad definition the author gives the following:

Exemplification is the citing of something done or said in the past, along with the definite naming of the doer or author. [Exemplum est alicuius facti aut dicti praeteriti cum certi auctoris nomine propositio.] It is used with the same motives as a Comparison. It renders a thought more brilliant when used for no other purpose than beauty; clearer, when throwing more light upon what was somewhat obscure; more plausible, when giving the thought greater verisimilitude; more vivid, when expressing everything so lucidly that the matter can, I may almost say, be touched by the hand. (4.49.62)

In this definition we might be tempted to suppose that exemplum is little more than ornamental, a way of rendering thought more transparent or attractive perhaps, but in any case remaining an extrinsic stylistic feature subordinate to thought. In some instances the example is doubtless limited to this role, but that facta et dicta can also substantiate thought—give it body, recalling pseudo-Cicero’s comparison of being “touched by the hand”—remains true too.

There are other handbooks one could consult, but let me end this section by noting one other practical consideration, and that is Quintilian’s point in his Institutio
Oratoria that the good orator is prepared for every sort of contingency by having stocked his memory full of exemplorum copia (12.4). The example provides a rhetoric for various kinds of occasions (11.1.43), and hence the more examples one knows the better.

IV. Cases of Conscience

Turning to Christian discussions of cases takes us into the territory of conscience, as well as into further explanations of the role of examples in public oratory. Historians point out that the Christian origins of a casuistic ethics are located in the Penitential manuals of the later Middle Ages. The early handbooks of penance are interesting from the point of view of their preoccupation with, as one preface writer put it, the "distinctions of all cases": "For not all are to be weighed in one and the same balance, although they be associated in one fault" (Penitential of Bede; trans. in McNeil and Gamer 223). As Jonsen and Toulmin explain,

The penitential literature... was a seedbed for later casuistry. It emphasized acts and decisions as central elements in the moral life. It defined the basic structure of any moral situation: an individual, characterized in a certain way, performs an act of a certain kind, with a specific intention, and in a particular state of mind. It stressed discrimination between acts and their evaluation in the light of the stated circumstances. (100)

71 Admittedly, early penitential literature "deals scarcely at all with problems of conscience" (Kirk 195). A glance at such manuals quickly reveals how unfriendly they would have been to the deep introspection and self-discovery that was stimulated by later Lateran reforms. Neither are they interesting as specimens of rhetoric, with their bald and downright tedious catalogues of sins and punishments; obviously, they were meant to be consulted, not read through.
The minute specifications of cases makes the older Penitentials remarkable because norms are subject to increasing qualification and examination in light of real-life circumstance.

But it was the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 that gave added impetus to a pastoral movement, already under way in the twelfth century according to the most recent accounts, which was to subtilize considerably the penitential theology and confessional practice of the late medieval period. The development is well documented by others.⁷² Conciliar decrees formulated in Rome stimulated broad Church reform, opening the way for new orders of preaching friars to be established and inaugurating a far-reaching catechetical program to redress alleged widespread ignorance among priests (the proverbial ignorantia sacerdotum; see Archbishop Pecham's tract excerpted in Shinners and Dohar 127-32). Amounting to a kind of “charter of the new casuistry” (Jonsen and Toulmin 121), the constitutions developed out of Lateran IV set forth a progressive mandate for educating all believers in the basic articles of the faith. Two initiatives in particular, one concerning preaching and the other the sacrament of penance, demonstrably transformed pastoral care in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.⁷³

---

⁷³ In England a flurry of diocesan decrees advanced the cause of the Lateran reforms. “In giving penance,” states a Winchester statute for example, “the priests shall diligently instruct parishioners concerning faith in the Trinity, the Passion and Incarnation; and wisely provide that their people are not ignorant of the Lord’s prayer and the Apostles' Creed in their mother tongue”; and the parishioner, declares the same document, must
Canon 21, *Omnis utriusque sexus*, made yearly confession compulsory for all over the age of about fourteen, and it also outlined the priest’s role in the cure of souls:

The priest shall be discerning and prudent, so that like a skilled doctor he may pour wine and oil over the wounds of the injured one. Let him carefully inquire about the circumstances of both the sinner and the sin, so that he may prudently discern what sort of advice he ought to give and what remedy to apply, using various means to heal the sick person.

(Tanner 245)

The priest is envisaged cautiously applying spiritual salves to sick patients, positioned thus in a quasi-clinical role as *medicus animarum*, physician of the soul, a truly ancient metaphor that goes back to Gregory the Great (Shinners and Dohar 122). The analogy between medicine and ethics is also one Aristotle frequently drew upon. But the image is given a fresh turn here with the identification of the priest as one who examines and diagnoses cases, *discretus et cautus*, on an individual basis. Shinners and Dohar unpack the significance of the conceptual innovation:

In the earlier penitential tradition, a confessor simply matched the penance to the sin; on the face of it, it called for no real psychological discernment. The twelfth-century reestimation of the sacrament made far greater demands on a priest, obliging him to weigh the personality of each penitent carefully. Now he had to be a discerning reader of souls, someone who could judge intentions, consider temperament, listen for subtleties and extenuating circumstances, and impose penances that would reform sinners . . . . (122)

This “new theory of discretionary penances” (124) as it is described is conspicuously similar to that case-based orientation of mature casuistry, itself routinely compared to medical diagnosis (which is in turn compared, though to less advantage, to medieval penitentialism). To confess properly the penitent has to bare the soul completely. As one popular thirteenth-century confessional manual teaches,

“confess the circumstances of the sin, pouring out his heart before the Lord like water” (cited in O’Carroll 11-14).
Just as it is proper for a person to undress completely to show his bodily wounds to a doctor or a surgeon, since confession is the healing of injuries done to the soul it is proper for someone to reveal all his inner wounds to his spiritual doctor—in other words, all those circumstances and everything which could aggravate the sin in any way. The circumstances of sin can be noted in this mnemonic [versum]: Who, what, where, by whose aid, why, how, and when. (Summula of Exeter; excerpted in Shinners and Dohar 178)

A penitent is to confess “not in general terms but as specifically as he can” (Summula 178), and thus he or she must be aware of the circumstances of sin no less than is the priest. 74 All of this goes to show that the “practice of the confessional was being quietly transformed by a nascent science of casuistry or applied moral theology” (Lawrence 126). The technique was taught in the schools of Paris and practiced with especial facility by the mendicant orders, but it should be emphasized that the laity themselves would have been the real beneficiaries of such minute attention to the details of conscience and moral context. Post-Lateran reforms broadened the scope of ethical deliberation for medieval Christians, turning individuals outward upon the world with a sensibility attuned to the circumstances and encouraging inwardness, thus objectifying the self in ways that could be said to have produced an interiorized, casuistic ethics. 75

One historian of the casuistry in the confessional nearly puts matters in their proper light when he says (though unduly lamenting the fact), “Subjective morality had superseded objective” (Lea 410).

74 The circumstantiae used by priests in the interrogation of cases are those same ones epitomized in the distich used by pagan rhetors. See Lea, volume 1, p. 368, and Kemmler, Chapter 1. But now rhetorical analysis is not directed at cases of law, but at cases of conscience.

75 My discussion of Gower will attempt to establish the point. For another point of view see Scanlon’s rather more suspicious remarks about the construction of a “confessional subject” by the new penitentialism (Narrative, Authority, and Power 12-14).
The other Lateran reform that was to have important implications for ethics and ecclesial reform in the later medieval period was articulated in Canon 10, *De praedicatoribus instituendis*. According to this initiative the responsibility for preaching was to be devolved upon priests for the first time so that the tenets of the faith would be taught more widely:

... bishops are to appoint suitable men to carry out with profit this duty of sacred preaching, men who are powerful in word and deed and who will visit with care the peoples entrusted to them in place of the bishops, since these by themselves are unable to do it, and will build them up by word and example. (Tanner 239)

Now that preaching was no longer the province only of bishops, the grass roots of the Church could make a stronger pastoral commitment; and the preaching campaigns of the period attest to such a commitment. It would not take long before the great mendicant orders, the Dominicans and Franciscans, would be hard at work catechizing and confessing the laity in all corners of Christendom. The friars’ achievements in the confessional are well attested, but mendicant orders are also credited with revolutionizing preaching. “In the friars’ hands,” notes Lawrence, “sermon-making became a new art” (120). By addressing “the particular spiritual needs of different classes and occupations” (123) and engaging the audiences with diverting exempla, the friars set a new standard for the way preaching was to be carried out among the people.76

---

76 Notwithstanding their controversial “concessions” to popular taste, the friars did much more (besides imparting gospel lessons) than entertain the masses with stories. Some of the other consequences are relevant to note. Lawrence argues that the friars “offered new possibilities of active participation” in the Church by their example: “What the friars offered was a new theology of the secular life” (121-22). Similarly, according to Oust, the mendicant preaching instantiated a “philosophy of everyday existence” (*Literature and Pulpit* 23-40) and disseminated a “social gospel” (Chapter IX) that defended the poor and underprivileged. Oust argues that pulpif oratory became “the parent of popular adult education” (*Literature and the Pulpit* 186), contributing to the intellectual development of
Due to the increased preaching and penitential activity in the thirteenth and
fourteenth centuries there was a demand for all sorts of texts that help preachers and
confessors fulfill their responsibilities. Thus the Lateran decrees of 1215 are reflected in
an efflorescence of new genres of so-called pastoralia (the term is Leonard Boyle’s),
including arts of preaching, model sermon collections, confessional manuals, and
compilations of exempla. Homiletic treatises in particular flourished early and were used
throughout the late medieval period. Fritz Kemmler details a handful of early thirteenth-
century arts of preaching from England that recommend familiar rhetorical strategies for
entertaining and edifying the congregation, and it is in such works that the exemplum
comes under explicit discussion. In De modo artificioso predicandi, for example,
composed at the turn of the century, Alexander of Ashby promotes exempla for three
main purposes, as Kemmler explains: “to confirm the single parts of a theme, to edify the
audience, and to have hearers leave the sermon thinking about what was said” (71). As
part of the confirmatio or proof of the oratorical speech—a long-established designation,
as we have seen in Cicero—it is good, in the words of Alexander, “to develop a pleasing
allegory and to narrate a nice exemplum, so that the profundity of the allegory pleases the
learned and the levity of the exemplum edifies the unlearned—and that both have
something to memorize” (trans. Kemmler 218). Thomas of Chobham, who wrote an art
of preaching in the first half of the thirteenth-century and situates himself squarely within
the rhetorical tradition, says that to generate the greatest appeal the preacher’s “narration

the unlettered masses by spreading knowledge of the bible and classical lore,
communicating recent discoveries in science, passing on social ideals, and delving into
theological controversies. Sermons also proved to be a vital source of inspiration for the
literature and drama of the late medieval and early modern periods. On this last topic see
further Wenzel, “The Joyous Art of Preaching” and “Chaucer and the Language of
Contemporary Preaching”; and R. A. Pratt, “Chaucer and the Hand that Fed Him.”
should be ‘short and lucid and plausible’ [citing the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*]. If it is too long or too obscure or hardly probable, it will not please his audience” (trans. Kemmler 223-24). Richard of Thetford in his early thirteenth-century *Ars predicandi* elucidates three “modes of reasoning in preaching”: reasoning from contraries, from enthymemes, and “through example, which is very effective with the laity, since, as is held by Aristotle as well as by Boethius and Gregory, they delight in sensible examples” (trans. Kemmler 224-25). On the other hand, exempla are not merely of use in addressing the unlettered. Recalls the famous preacher Odo of Cheriton: “since, according to Gregory, exempla are often more efficient than words I shall open my mouth in parables; and I shall give you similitudes and exempla which are more gladly heard and can better be retained than words—which heard the wise will be wiser” (trans. Kemmler 226). As *aides-mémoire*, exempla are beneficial for all and were thought to have had universal appeal.

Other sermon aids include collections of model exempla, or exemplaria. These usually anonymous works were variously alphabetized, indexed, cross-referenced, and rubricated in an effort to facilitate ease of use as a reference tool. Some contained moralized stories, others were left unmoralized. The *Alphabetum narrationum* consists wholly of exempla arranged by topics in alphabetical order so that the preacher may easily find a suitable narration, while the *Speculum Exemplorum* offers moralized stories but is not arranged alphabetically (see Crane lxxi-lxxx). But the relationship between such exempla collections and actual practice, or sermons declaimed from the pulpits, is left to conjecture. Inferences can nevertheless be made, and certain views about the matter are widely held. Contends one historian, “It was left to the preacher, speaking in

---

77 For more on the *Summa de arte predicandi* of Thomas see James Murphy, pp. 317-325.
the vernacular, to flesh out the skeletal argument of the model with the ideas and
anecdotes drawn from his own experience or culled from the anthologies of *Exempla*”
(Lawrence 121). The discretion of a preacher would thus have a role to play in the choice
of which story suits a given topic and a given audience. Once an exemplum had been
selected, says another historian, “The moral lesson to be drawn . . . was left entirely to the
judgement of the preacher” (Crane lxxx), even if the story had already been moralized
elsewhere. Siegfried Wenzel argues accordingly there was much room for originality
and variety in the sermons of the post-Lateran period. The improvisatory aspect of
preaching in the period would be the expected result of the homiletic art of *modi
amplificandi* (76), a principle of variation and ornamentation in pulpit oratory widely
taught in the arts of preaching. According to this principle, dilation by means of
exemplification was an accepted way of enhancing a sermon.79

---

78 The same applied to written sermons and other preachers’ aids: “The discourses . . . are
clearly meant to be expanded by the preacher, as he stands, book in hand, to deliver his
address” (Owst, *Preaching* 235). And Ralph Hanna says about the handbooks of vices
and virtues, “the very lack of focus within the presentation, its tendency to fall into
separable items, insures its usefulness: in the dissipation of announced context, the
individual priest is left free to construct his sermon, to provide connections . . . to insert
additional *figurae* or *exempla* which the allusiveness of the cited materials calls to mind”
(“Some Commonplaces” 67).

79 See further Spencer, *English Preaching*, p. 9 et passim, who for instance cites a
Wycliffite sermon collection in which the preacher is expressly permitted to “dilate his
matere” (p. 75). On the other hand, too much of a good thing should be avoided. There
was (frequently Lollard) opposition to those who would “saffron” their “predicacioun”
with rhetorical embellishment (see Wenzel 64), pandering to audiences and indulging in
verbal display. Further complaints were leveled against undue prolixity. Detractors were
concerned that the marvelous tales that went by the name of exempla were an excuse to
indulge in frivolous and carnal fantasy. Dante in Italy (see *Paradiso* XXIX, 99), Chateau-
Thierry in France, Wycliffe in England and later Erasmus all criticized preachers’ fables;
and preachers themselves regularly denounced story-telling (see Mosher 16-18; Owst,
*Literature and Pulpit*, 10ff.; Hudson 269-70; Spencer, 78ff.).
For the history of casuistry there are a couple of things to observe about such texts and their teaching. First, there is the inclination to use particular figures to communicate general truths, which has epistemological implications. I agree with Owst that exempla indicate a “desire to escape as far as possible from the abstract and universal, in religion, and to ‘be at home with particulars’” (Literature and Pulpit 110), and it is the burden of my thesis to flesh out the claim with respect to what it might mean for practical ethics specifically. Second, there is the emphasis on the preacher’s art of adjudicating among and adjusting illustrative materials to specific topics and audiences, and this seems to have ethical implications because it requires a kind of discernment that is kindred to habits of thought required for determining cases in morality. The preacher’s task is one more example of prudential reasoning.

One has to look to other, academic developments within medieval Christian theology for more subtle analyses of the way cases and circumstances impinge on morals. Elements in Aquinas’s ethical theory show the continuity of Aristotelian ethics throughout the Middle Ages:80

materially, . . . just and good acts are not the same everywhere and among all men but must be determined by law. And this happens because of the changeability of human nature and the diverse conditions of men and things according to the difference of places and times. (On Evil 2.4.13; p. 64).

80 The Ethics is by far the most frequently cited of all Aristotle’s works in Aquinas’s Summa Theologiae, and it forms the basis of his commentary on ethics (both in the moral part of the Summa and in a separate exposition called Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics); see further Mark D. Jordan, “Aquinas Reading Aristotle’s Ethics.” On Thomistic ethics generally I have found the following work helpful: Ralph McInerny, Aquinas on Human Action; Denis J. M. Bradley, Aquinas on the Twofold Human Good; and Etienne Gilson, The Christian Philosophy of St Thomas Aquinas. The histories of casuistry—in Kirk, Jonsen and Toulmin, and Miller—also give sketches of relevant aspects of Aquinas’s system.
We can discern Aristotle’s influence in the emphasis on the variable nature of circumstances. Cases of morality are indeed variable—“infinitely diversified” (2.2.259), as Aquinas says in his exposition of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*—and so we must exercise caution whenever we judge them. Judgement, moreover, is a personal matter (Commentary 2.2.259). Prudence, which Aquinas defines in the second part of his *Summa Theologiae* as “right reason about things to be done” (*recta ratio agibilium*, *IaIae*, q.57, a.4), lies in the derivation of secondary precepts for living from the primary precepts of natural reason in consultation with experience and counsel and memory. It is thus as much an intellectual activity of autonomous self-governance as it is one of obedience to law or divine command.\(^8\) The distinction between primary and secondary precepts brings us to the intimately related theory of conscience. Aquinas divides up the mental labour between *synderesis* and *conscientia*: the former is infallible and contains the indemonstrable first principles of morality, but in itself it remains ineffectual; the latter (resembling Aristotelian practical intelligence) is fallible, applies first principles to diverse circumstances, and guides human choices accordingly. If natural law says “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” then conscience figures out how to act in accordance with the general rule (i.e., doing unto *this* person *here* as I would have *him*.

---

\(^8\) On the “autonomous” character of practical reason in Aquinas see Gilson, pp. 264ff., and Bradley, pp. 135ff. Autonomy lies first of all in the freedom of the will, or more precisely in the indeterminacy of the will with respect to moral action; general principles may be given, but precepts for action must be discovered by individuals. Moreover, the will is autonomous in the sense that external sanctions (rewards and punishments) are not the sole factors guiding moral choice; internal and independent motivation is instead integral, contends Gilson. Finally, in Aquinas’s system one does not obey rules “solely for the formality of being in conformity with what God or practical reason dictates. Moral precepts are given so that men may become virtuous” (Bradley 58). Similarly, Aquinas does not maintain that right reason must conform to God’s will (a “volunteerist” stance), but rather that God’s will accords with right reason.
do unto me). Ralph McInerney interprets: "The ultimate desideratum in the practical order is not to come up with precepts of however low a generality, but to apply them to singular circumstances" (151). Moral applications are those which are guided by reason, but it is as we can see a practical type of reason that is meant (ST IaIIae, q.19, a.1). Right reason fulfills its role by considering the circumstances affecting a situation and then realizing moral deliberation in a singular action.  

The last two writers I want to consider speak about how best to communicate moral knowledge, important because they give us some understanding of the value of certain modes of literary expression in the Aristotelian tradition of practical reason. The first, Giles of Rome, defined the pertinence of moral rhetoric by observing in his De Regimine Principum that "in the whole field of moral teaching the mode of procedure, according to the Philosopher, is figurative and broad. For in such matters one should make one's way by use of types and figures, for moral actions do not fall completely within the scope of narrative" (MLTC 248). Giles goes on to explain that this approach must be taken first of all because of the nature of the materia, which "does not admit of detailed and thorough scrutiny, but concerns individual matters, matters which, as is shown in the Ethics, book ii, are very uncertain [in scientific terms] because of the

---

82 Unlike Abelard who maintains that moral valuation of action depends solely on intentions, Aquinas holds that "every bent and motion is completed by reaching its term and attaining its goal" (ST IaIIae, q.20, a.4). Circumstances have bearing insofar as a moral agent moves the will in view of them, and to this extent the goodness or badness of an act is analyzed teleologically (in Aristotle's language eudemonistically, "for the sake of a good or happy end").

83 Or, in John Trevisa's fourteenth-century translation (Governance of Kings, ed. Fowler): "Panne it is to wetyn àat in al moral mater, àat is to saye mater touchyng mannys maner, the maner of processe, as þe philosofer seith, is figural, àat is to say by liknes, rude and boystous. For in suche mater it nedeþ to passe by fygures and liknes. For moral dede fahlleþ nouþt complet, àat is to saye fullich, vnder tales" (6).
variability of their nature” (MLTC 248). The second reason for using “types and figures” has to do with the finis, the purpose:

For, as [Aristotle] writes in the second book of the Ethics, we undertake moral study not for the sake of abstract contemplation, nor to gain knowledge, but in order that we may become good. Therefore, the end in this science is not to gain knowledge concerning its own matter, but [moral] activity; it is not truth, but goodness. (MLTC 249)

The third reason such rhetoric is appropriate to the matter concerns the auditor: “Since, therefore, the populace as a whole cannot understand subtleties, one must proceed in the sphere of morals in a figurative and broad way” (MLTC 249-50). What Giles implies here about the nature of moral rhetoric is crucial to our understanding of the context of exemplarity. From his standpoint, an individual life is not going to resemble any exemplary narrative completely, since actual moral situations are variable and audiences are diverse—that’s why “moral actions do not fall completely within the scope of narrative.” This means moral rhetoric must be broad enough, which it can be by means of types and figures, to comprehend a range of cases: only if it has a sufficiently wide angle, so as to be able to anticipate unprecedented alternatives, can the rhetoric serve as a useful point of reference for moral actions outside “the scope of narrative.”

The final writer I will consider is Averroes whose Middle Commentary on the Poetics, translated out of Arabic into Latin by Hermann the German, shows us another

---

84 “... it is iseid moral mater (påt is to say þis derke mater) suffreth nouȝt solit serchyng, but it is [of] synynglers doynys þat ben ful vncerteyne, for þei ben ful changeable and varyant, a[s] it is declared, secundo Ethicorum ...” (Governance of Kings 6).
85 “Foro it is iwrete, ii Ethicorum, we taketh moral work, that is to say highe and derke work, nouȝt by cause of contemplacioun nother for to be konnyng, bote for to be good. þanne the ende and the entent in this sciens is nouȝt knowleche bote work and doyng; nother sothnes, but profit of godenesse” (Governance of Kings 7).
86 “þanne for nouȝt al the people may comprehende solit thinges, the processe in moral mater mote be boistous and by liknes of figuris” (Governance of Kings 7).
dimension of Aristotle's legacy in the later Middle Ages. Hermann's Averroistic commentary divides all poetry into laudatio and vituperatio, praise and blame, essentially designating poetry as an epideictic rhetoric that inspires readers by figuring praise- and blame-worthy characters and customs. "This is why we use examples in teaching, so that what is said may more easily be understood, because of the moving power of the images. For the mind will more perfectly assimilate teachings as a result of the pleasure which it takes in examples" (MLTC 293). The word "assimilation" has been the cause of some misunderstanding regarding the nature of examples. In Judson Allen's view of the ethical poetic in the later Middle Ages, Averroes can be taken to represent the view that poetry has as its purpose the exposition of universals (Ethical Poetic 123). On this reading medieval poems partake of what Allen calls a "principle of parallel systems" (see 146), whereby texts presuppose an integrative and external relationship to fixed metaphysical structures, or a "normative array." Allen defends an allegedly "medieval presumption that metaphoric structures are more than arbitrary, linguistic, or personal creations, but rather reflect, or enact, something materially true of the universe" (182). I demur—the Aristotelian ethical poetic envisaged here is more than arbitrary and solipsistic to be sure, but something less than fixed and materially true of the universe. The theologians and commentators had dialectic at their disposal if they wanted to discover what was universal and apodeictic. Examples assimilate an audience because, as we will see, rhetoric accommodates itself to them.

87 As Allen rather ominously puts it, particulars exist for the sake of "the great working of the system" (213). Accordingly, poets are "persons in submission to the world of possible words" who work for "a metaphysical Establishment" (106). See Dagenais, pp. 59-60, for a critique.
If we adopt a Kantian attitude towards examples—saying “worse service cannot be rendered morality than that an attempt be made to derive it from examples” (Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals 2.408)—there is little reason to think the example or rhetoric serves a good purpose in the domain of morals. Kant, like others in the Reformation and Enlightenment contexts, did not readily accept the claim that ethics could legitimately be based upon anything like the procedures of “casuistry.”88 When it came to morals he famously rejected all things “hypothetical” in favour of “categorical imperatives.” Thus he epitomizes “the philosophers’ contempt for the particular case,” in Wittgenstein’s phrase (cited in Johnston 14). It is now widely acknowledged that Kant’s ethics foundered on an unwillingness to give the example, ubiquitous in his own rhetoric, a rightful place. Thinkers in prior centuries were demonstrably more candid about the rhetorical dimensions of the ethical claims they sought to advance. There is no total homogeneity among the many writers who deal with case-analysis, yet it is fair to say that in the rhetorical tradition there is at least a shared conception of morality attaching itself to the appearances of the sensible world, working itself out in accord with circumstances rather than over against them, and striving to serve the diverse needs of conscientious individuals. What I describe is by no means the whole Christian tradition, nor is it uncomplicated by any number of ideological variables, but it does represent a set of practices with which it is worth more fully reckoning. An appreciation of the possible influence of this enduring mode of perception and deliberation should give us a good

88 See H.-D. Kittsteiner, “Kant and casuistry,” pp. 185-213. Kant’s theory of aesthetic judgement nevertheless anticipates some of the developments of ethical criticism of the last two decades; see further Parker, Ethics, Theory, and the Novel, Chapter 1, note 3, and Gelley, “Introduction,” pp. 7ff., as well as the particular moral applications of Kantian “taste” in Gadamer’s Truth and Method and Stierle’s “Story as Exemplum—Exemplum as Story,” p. 29.
basis for reconsidering the pragmatic and case-based dimensions of exemplarity in the fourteenth century.
3. Trajectories and Controversies

The learned judge correctly that people of all ages have believed they know what is good and evil, praise- and blameworthy. But it is a prejudice of the learned that we now know better than any other age. (Friedrich Nietzsche, Daybreak 9)

The last few politicized and highly politicizing decades of criticism have habituated us to demystifying and deposing the ulterior, unconscious, and unprepossessing motivations and power differentials which distort literary expression and underwrite canon formation. A by now establishment “hermeneutics of suspicion” has gained widespread acceptance for its scrupulous concentration on the text’s evidential status as bearer of false presence, patriarchal ideology, or some other dubious concealment. Having become accustomed to a kind of aggressive (and dare I say, moralistic and censorious) approach to our books, admittedly one is tempted to bring to bear au courant suspicion to the phenomenon of exemplarity too, even in view of a medieval didacticism that left many of its own interests and biases unconcealed and allowed for latitude of judgement. An almost instinctive reaction would be to demystify moral stories as mere functions of the ideological powers-that-be, evidencing a desire to close down meaning and impose codified values upon otherwise open narratives. Isn’t this the sort of literary mendacity Chaucer exposes so well? Indeed it is so; yet those who confine themselves to such skeptical criticism are liable to miss something important if they persist in holding the view that exempla are just everywhere and always

---

89 Krieger, p. 134, does not hesitate to say so.

73
manipulative or monolithic. The following brief remarks are offered in defense of the coherence and conceptual complexity of the ethical criticism I undertake.

Given the widespread distrust of exemplary narratives, and the skepticism of morality in general that informs that distrust, it is necessary to pause and consider the basic assumptions underpinning the hermeneutics of suspicion before going further. A long and venerable tradition of moral skepticism, which has perhaps become concentrated in the present era, has I fear threatened to close off avenues to reflection about the past and the moral commitments in particular that people in the past could have. Nowadays moral skeptics—those descending from Callicles and Thrasymachus, Marx, Nietzsche or Freud—will argue that exemplarity is nothing if not subject to a reductive and totalizing system of values which effaces narrative complexity and serves the interests of a privileged few. For to the skeptics and to many literary critics alike, “everything that passes for morality is the dress-up for private position or the imposition of positions which do not meet, or even consider, our real need” (Cavell 290). Medieval exemplary narrative, under the glare of such a devastating cynicism, will only appear the

---

90 Critiques of exemplification along such lines can be found in Suleiman’s Authoritarian Fictions, Newton’s Narrative Ethics, and Wyschogrod’s Saints and Postmodernism. Bruno Gélas echoes the general sentiment when he describes the example as “manipulative fiction” (cited in Lyons, p. 21). But John Lyons correctly observes, “when viewed in the context of fictions generally, the example seems less manipulative than many non-exemplary fictions” (23). The Anglo-American philosopher who most ardently criticizes the use of fabulous examples (i.e., “the improbable or unusual cases that novelists, or philosophers with axes to grind, can dream up,” p. 47) is R. M. Hare in his Moral Thinking, especially Chapter 8. Coming at the issue from the other direction entirely is Nussbaum, “Introduction,” pp. 46-47, who criticizes the philosophers’ penchant for “schematic” and pre-“cooked” examples, that is for failing to reach the artistic heights of the novelists. Not without reason, similar criticism is often leveled against medieval sermon exempla. In Nussbaum’s view, such pseudo-literary creations as sermon exempla would not have “the particularity, the emotive appeal, the absorbing plottedness, the variety and indeterminacy, of good fiction.” Cf. Adamson, “Against tidiness.”
more authoritarian and dogmatic for its manifest moral purposiveness; those who
advocate or assent to exemplary morality will seem suspiciously complicit with it.\textsuperscript{91} Yet
this kind of negative critique, because it tends to construe moral discourse as more or less
despotic, and renders readers passive and pathological, is of extremely limited value for
understanding exemplarity. Part of the reason for the inadequacy of suspicion is that the
claims against morality and literary didacticism are untenable on historical grounds.

Another part has to do with the way modern literary criticism is exclusively “fixated on
the power dimension of social action” (Coady and Miller 205), prohibiting prolonged
consideration of individual autonomy, responsibility, and choice. On this last score,
criticism ends up risking a pragmatic contradiction.\textsuperscript{92}

A point of historical difference first. Medieval readers and writers—as the near
ubiquity of concluding moralities at least suggests—were manifestly more comfortable
with value judgements than many of us are who read the same literature today. Poetry, as

\textsuperscript{91} There is of course an equally venerable tradition of moral criticism, epitomized
negatively in Plato’s attack on the poets and then affirmed subsequently by a line of
criticism which reaches from Dante to Sidney to Arnold to Leavis. Much of the recent
“ethical turn” is not as novel as some of its adherents make it out to be. See Cordner, “F.
R. Leavis and the Moral in Literature.”

\textsuperscript{92} I favour Charles Altieri’s critical view towards those “various hermeneutics of
suspicion” that have “trap[e]d us in impoverished languages for talking about values”
(2). Andrew Gibson similarly takes the “politics of English” to task for having claimed
the “moral as well as the epistemological high ground” while yet failing to dispense a
coherent ethical criticism. Freadman and Miller, in Re-thinking theory, give the most
persuasive account of the deficiencies of contemporary schools of criticism (brands of
“constructivist anti-humanism”) with respect to their inability to address questions of
value, agency, intention, and choice. Comparable points are made in the field of
philosophy by Pincoffs, in “Quandary Ethics,” where it is observed that modern moral
theory “is addressed to the conscientious man. He is the ultimate customer” (105). The
question which has gone unasked is, What is the value of scrupulosity per se? See
Newton, Narrative Ethics, pp. 27-28, on the importance of this question. Usually literary
and moral theory fails to engage questions of the kind of personal character (i.e., ethos)
they presuppose as being ideal for reading or philosophizing.
more than one scholar has reminded us, was then considered a species of ethics: *ethice subponitur*, pertaining to moral judgement, as medieval commentators were fond of saying. Medieval moralization, in effect, represents what Judson Allen has called an “orthodoxy of paraphrase” (*The Ethical Poetic* 211), the true sense of which is perhaps difficult for us to recover in our age of the verbal icon or, more recently, the *mise en abyme*. I think we should take the point that morals and stories are not antithetical, or not merely so, and that the “heresy of paraphrase” is largely a modern prejudice, though I hesitate to join with Allen in the assumption that paraphrase was acceptable across the board. The repudiation of *glosing* was not an exclusively Wycliffite reaction. And Chaucer himself satirizes the abuses of the same activity, we will see. Nor would I concede that moral paraphrase, as a literary activity, necessarily locates the center of moral concern in the activity of reading for the moral. Medieval didacticism had a complexity and flexibility that is not captured by the notion of morals as univocal, non-contradictory, and all-constraining expository statements. Didacticism is in fact typically characterized by what one critic has called the “teaching of contrary things” (Brown 2). The moral rhetoric was frequently incongruous and confusing, which shows that moral

---

93 Thus Ovid’s amatory poetry was commonly thought to pertain to ethics (*ethice supponitur*) because it illustrates “behaviour” (*MLTC* 365), the requirement for inclusion in this part of philosophy being only that poetry treats of human character and conduct. Poets were moral, on this account, because they have a role in *showing* the good, embodying virtue inexplicitly in *personae*, rather than merely defining it in categorical and conceptual terms. For example, Arnulf of Orléans’s decided that Lucan pertained to ethics not because “he gives moral instruction (*precepta morum*) but because in a certain way he encourages us to practice the four virtues, courage, wisdom, self-control, and justice, by means of appropriate characters (*per convenientes personae*), showing us good morality . . .” (*MLTC* 155-6).

94 It was commonplace since Augustine to talk about a “principle of contraries” as constituting “Christian medicine” (*On Christian Doctrine* I.XIV [pp. 14-15]); note in this connection the way the same thing may instruct variously (III.XXXV [pp. 99-100]).
exposition in this context could hardly have been utterly fixed, obvious, or conclusive.95
As I have been saying all along, too, morals exist in a reciprocal relation to the exemplary
narratives accompanying them. Larry Scanlon’s point is a good one: “The exemplum’s
didactic claims are not tacked onto the narrative; they are driven by it” (62).

Yet these claims in defense of moral rhetoric amount to little in the face of the
detractors’ main objection: namely, that however complex moral stories are, there is no
morality that will not have a corrupting influence because it is inherently conservative,
coercive, concealing—a mask for self-interest or expediency, for example. Inclined to
treat morality as a purely social phenomenon, the skeptics have little time for moral
rhetoric. Now this subversion of morality has happened so subtly, and often indirectly as
a result of the rise of social constructivism and anti-humanism in many quarters of the
academy, that it is not always clear what the cost has been. The main feature of the
current skepticism is that it takes a causal or symptomatological approach to the subject,
treating individuals as though they were inescapably subject to ideology and seeing moral
phenomena as evidence of social or political contests. It is an approach that is
problematic for several reasons, not least of which that it elides the subject I undertake to
study.

Causal explanations are inadequate as descriptions of ethical practice most of all
because moral agents—human subjects—do not usually think they are being expedient or
fulfilling some dubious social function when they take up a moral position. To employ

95 In my view, Suleiman’s question about how one gets an exemplary story to convey just
one unambiguous meaning begs the question; Chapter 1, ‘Exemplary’ Narratives,” pp.
25-61. But see Gregg, Devils Women, and Jews, pp. 13-14, and Tubach, “Exempla in the
Decline,” pp. 410-11, who emphasize the dogmatism of certain kinds of sermon exempla.
an old distinction, the *moral* thing to do is typically distinguished from the *prudential*.\(^\text{96}\)

Expedience therefore does not exhaust our description of the nature of the language game called ethics, and so it cannot tell the whole story of the ethics of exemplarity. As Paul Johnston notes, "if one considers our actual moral practices what is striking is that they are *not* a social institution" (54). For instance,

> although the notion of self-interest may be more readily comprehensible than the notion of justice, this is not reason for rejecting justice in favour of self-interest or, indeed, for seeking to base one on the other. In fact, what the comparison brings out are the differences between the two notions, and it is these which require philosophical investigation. (68-69)

A related point has been made by others that "contrary to much contemporary literary theorizing, human action is not necessarily social action," or, at least, not "*constitutively social"* (Coady and Miller 203), in which case the sociality of a human subject's action is no root-and-branch refutation of it.\(^\text{97}\) Importantly, the reasons one actually gives for moral behaviour are not the ones put forth by the demystifying critics who cite self-interest or social convenience—or anything else along the lines of *cui bono*—as the sources of moral motivation; if they were our only reasons, moreover, there is the danger that we would *lose* all motivation. From my perspective, at any rate, there lies a chasm between the accounts of subjects *within* society and the accounts of modern social theorists who attempt from the *outside* to give substantive re-construals of the former in terms of social causes. Only from the point of view of a subject, from *inside* the practice

---

\(^{96}\) Williams, *Morality*, pp. 68ff.

\(^{97}\) They argue that while most action is "permeated by the social" not all action is "constituted by its social dimension" (204), which is to say human agency is not everywhere predetermined by manipulative ideology, power, discourse, etc. Parker's astute comment, "radical political consciousness is as much culturally and historically constituted as conservatism" (51), brings out the necessity of making distinctions on grounds other than that human existence is socially constructed. Shared sociality is in fact the prior enabling condition of all action, good *and* bad.
in question, can an adequate explanation of ethics emerge. A coherent ethical criticism of
the subject (rather than, say, a political criticism of the same)\textsuperscript{98} begins with descriptions
from within, or what amounts to a phenomenology of, reading for the moral.

The skeptical analysis I have characterized as causal simply does not allow for the
fact that readers can and do have the option of taking morals or leaving them, and of
adapting and applying the explicit morals they do take. It is proposed in this study that
readers, who have autonomy, can amend and reconstitute moral significations even when
they are given explicitly in the exemplary text. Reading is creative, constructive, and
performative. As Dagenais and Copeland argue in their respective discussions of
medieval reception, the processes of adaptation and application depended intimately upon
the participation of individual readers. Time and again the evidence of exegesis and
commentary and translation attests that what was important was “the structure that
derived from the reader himself, from the things that struck him, made sense to him at a
given moment” (Dagenais 58). I concur that the presence of glossatory morality does not
“close off the power of the exemplum to signify in other ways or to be applied to other
situations” (76). Individuals can—and I believe did—make the difference.

An additional problem with radical skepticism, however, is that it founders on the
same difficulties that other modern moral philosophies cope poorly with, namely, the

\textsuperscript{98} See Scanlon, \textit{Narrative, Authority, and Power}, for a superb sociopolitical reading of the
late medieval vernacular exemplarity. I do not want to make too great an issue of the
difference between politics and ethics, since in reality (as in medieval social theory) they
presuppose one another. But the tendency of literary criticism today (as I say,
predominantly constructivist and anti-humanist) is to do political criticism to the
exclusion of morality, and to treat politics and morality as distinct; individual ethics has
been replaced by some system or other (discourse, ideology, etc.). The humanist
tradition in which Gower and Chaucer wrote, however, preserves important moral
distinctions which postmodern social theory has until recently had little time for.
problem of articulating their own positive commitments beyond bare theoretical
pronouncements. This is an ethical point worth raising given the focus of my study on
moral stories. Demystification is one of those modern positions that speak from a
concealed moral orientation, even as it insists on taking the moral high ground—and so it
fails to tell its own story. As Charles Taylor has argued, the modern hermeneutical
suspicion, like much “mainstream moral philosophy,” has the dubious distinction of “not
coming quite clean about its own moral motivations” (100). In fact, philosophical
inquiries which invoke social conditioning, ideology, or some ubiquity of power relations
to explain morality must inevitably and inconsistently claim sanctuary for their own
positions while proceeding to debunk other more conventional positions.99 As a result,
their putatively value-neutral claims are “kept aloft by a certain lack of self-lucidity”
(Taylor 100). This is crucial, for it points to the fact that radical philosophies are not just
conceptually provocative or progressive; they are instead tangled up in pragmatic
contradictions, ethical perplexities the sort no theorist will actually fail to resolve in
ordinary practice (if despite theory). For one cannot be totally suspicious and live to tell
about it, since the affirmation of some set of priorities is necessary for anyone to lead a
recognizably human life.100 Practice invariably corrects for exaggerations of theory. The
fact is, radical skeptics often depend upon a set of values the nature of which skepticism
should otherwise show does not stand up to scrutiny. Johnston observes, “Here part of
the failure is a failure in imaginative understanding” (130). Again, I think the problem

99 It is the nature of such stances, as Williams notes, that they must seek an impossible
“midair position” (Morality 14) from which to carry out their radical critiques.
100 Taylor, pp. 27-28.
lies in failing to tell the whole story where it touches certain basic moral commitments that seem to animate this species of negative criticism.

The fact is that the practitioners of demystification are themselves—to use Taylor's terms—"unavowedly inspired by visions of the good" (504), but they remain inarticulate with regard to the sources of inspiration that animate their critical practices.\textsuperscript{101}

In a certain sense, these practitioners have no moral examples. Blanket suspicion therefore not only distorts the nature of morality and the potentialities of moral rhetoric,\textsuperscript{102} but it also deprives the skeptics themselves of the means needed to explain let alone recommend their own (usually quite fierce and well-intentioned) ethical commitments. The cost of modern suspicion, at last, has been an attenuated response to questions arising in the domain of ethics (as well as politics), where attention turns to practical concerns, no less pressing for medievals than for moderns, having to do with questions of exemplary conduct, character, and choice. In sum, contemporary theory has been slow in generating or recovering a language with which to talk about values, personal responsibility, and other ethical aspects of human life. The ethics of exemplarity positively addresses and accounts for these sorts of individual and collective concerns because it consistently exemplifies them.

\textsuperscript{101} Cf. Krieger, p. 128, and Freadman and Miller, pp. 69-70. It is in fact not too much to say that radical skepticism, in philosophy as in literary theory, ultimately tends to out-moralize the moralists. This was Nietzsche's distinctive trait. The last decade has seen the emergence of reconstructed poststructuralist theories which, under the influence of the feminist ethics, do a much better job at acknowledging their moral and political commitments.

\textsuperscript{102} Because it is thought that all human activity is animated by (selfish) desire. Cf. Booth, p. 270.
PART II -- TEXTS
CHAPTER 1:

All That Is Written: The Evidence of John Gower’s Confessio Amantis

Gower’s Confessio Amantis achieves an extensive range of rhetorical effects through exemplification and so poses the question, “What is the function of literary exemplarity?” in a particularly strong form. As any who have attempted to classify it know, the poem is a veritable anthology of literary kinds, a miscellany of discourse both pragmatic and speculative, entertaining and edifying, as though it were aspiring to join together all of the genres current in the later Middle Ages. To be sure, in this it hardly differs from many other voluminous medieval works that combine “lust” and “lore.” But Gower’s massive poem of more than 30,000 lines and over 110 exempla, eight books and a prologue, with accompanying Latin apparatus, appears to spare nothing, incorporating elements of amatory lyric, allegory, satire and complaint, fabliau, penitential dialogue, homily, mirror for princes, conduct book, debate poem, academic disputation, dream vision, Boethian consolation, Augustinian confession, and moralized Ovid. Moreover, the individual tales Gower recounts within the fictional penitential frame have their provenance in various classical, scriptural, and historical source texts. Doubtless further sources of inspiration could be catalogued, but at last what is important to remark about the poem’s inclusiveness is how its very extravagance might signify something in its own right, as indeed I want to show it does. Size matters in the context of exemplarity, as does variety, if only because it provokes us to investigate the purposes of such ambitious and assiduous bookish activity.

For one thing, the large scale of Gower’s encyclopedic enterprise, which many readers have found difficult if not impossible to harmonize or consolidate into a coherent
signification, despite the obvious penitential structure, remains a curious textual fact in light of Gower’s reputation for moral conservatism and restraint. There seems to be little moderation in evidence here, at least not on the compositional side of things where a sheer plenitude of narrative materials overlaps and collides with one another. Why, we may then be provoked to ask, has a self-avowed moralist of “good mesure” resorted to such a potentially confounding diversity of the rhetoric? Especially perplexing, if also frequently delightful, is Gower’s habit of blending and juxtaposing subject-matter, creating what amounts to sexual and spiritual montage, and his equally vexing proclivity for the protracted excursus as well as incongruity—in the tales and among them—to the evident detriment of a consistent moral argument. Has Gower failed to realize a premeditated intention to imitate a tidy “point to point” shift, as he occasionally describes it? Is the total effect of his work therefore another unintended casualty of the world’s miserable “divisioun” (Prol. 852), a post-Babelian instance of “Ther wiste non what other mente, / So that thei myghten noght procede” (Prol. 1024-25)?

Then again, perhaps Gower proceeded with ends in view other than the communication of a programmatic moral message, that is to say, besides wanting to “illustrate slavishly idées reçues” (83), in Burrow’s somewhat derisive phrase describing the inadequacies of late medieval exemplarity. One feels, indeed, that if Gower had had something straightforward or categorical to say, he surely could have said it with greater economy and directness. Why resort to riddles and games if so much morality is at stake?

Granted, he proves his facility with no-nonsense Jeremiad in the Prologue, as to a much

---

103 For a sense of how the “design of the poem” reflects “Gower’s concern with division” (600), see Hugh White’s “Division and Failure in Gower’s Confessio Amantis”; see further his Nature, Sex, and Goodness, pp. 174-219.
greater extent he does in his apocalyptic Vox Clamantis, but the poet seems to have given himself special license in the Confessio Amantis. Notwithstanding the confessional framework, we are faced with what seems to be a profoundly shapeless poem. The voice of one crying in the wilderness has it seems come home to play with fables in amoris causa, all alongside the earnest business of social protest and examination of conscience. The results of the lover’s confession are anything but unambiguous given that Gower combines such seemingly mismatched material.

A loose, baggy monster, the Confessio Amantis eludes easy categorization and compass, as much because in its vast prolificity the poem contains all categories as that it resists any single one.® And this fact, I wager, gives us a clue as to the nature of the peculiar properties and purpose of the poem—its method of proceeding (forma tractandi) and its final cause (utilitas), to adopt the scholastic idiom appropriate to Gower’s poetical practice.® It is not that the poem fails to communicate anything determinate, for it does make strong claims upon its audience, and the structural arrangement of the work (its forma tractatus) is unmistakable, if not always strictly adhered to by Gower. It is evident, too, that the Confessio as a whole pertains to ethical wisdom (ethicae subponitur: “it to wisdom al belongeth,” Prol. 67) in view of the conventional divisions of the sciences. That is, Gower is predominantly concerned with virtue over verity.

® Hence like the handbooks of vices and virtues to which Gower’s poem is routinely compared, the Confessio evokes order even as it exhausts it. Ralph Hanna III describes the handbooks and example-books thus: “although the external organization of the works is often meticulous, within the individual articles or entries they frequently achieve a fine—and I think deliberately provocative—disorder, which allows ample room for the initiative and imagination of the individual cleric.” Generally, the “discussions of the various virtues [are] copiously yet irrationally divided into topics” (“Some Commonplaces” 66).

® The scholastic terminology is detailed in A. J. Minnis, Medieval Theories of Authorship.
Practique rather than Theorique to allude to the Aristotelian parts of philosophy as laid out in Book 7, inasmuch as his work is preoccupied with human character and conduct in the everyday domain of the saeculum. It is in other words, to recall Giles of Rome’s remarks concerning the purpose of ethical discussions, concerned not with truth so much as goodness: “the ende and the entent in this sciens is nouȝt knowleche bote work and doyng; nother sothnes, but profit of godenesse” (Governance of Kings, ed. Fowler 7). But over and above attaching convenient labels and making conventional generic distinctions, there are profound methodological considerations that must be broached before we can begin to appreciate the exemplary means by which Gower could be said to realize his ethical object—the “profit of goodness”—and these considerations have as much to do with the various potentialities of tropological reader response as with properties intrinsic to the text of the massive example-book (or exemplaria). My inquiry will therefore be directed principally towards answering the how rather than the what of exemplarity, as I attempt to delineate the specific ethos of the Confessio Amantis and revisit the matter of what has been called, whatever the exact merits of the anachronism, “Gower’s metaethics.”

106 On Gower’s conventional division of philosophye into practical and theoretical domains see J. D. Burnley, Chaucer’s Language and the Philosophers’ Tradition, pp. 54-55, and the analysis in James Simpson, Sciences of the Self. Also compare Dante, Letter to Can Grande della Scala §16: “The branch of philosophy which determines the procedure of the work [i.e., the Comedy] as a whole and in this part is moral philosophy, or ethics, inasmuch as the whole and this part have been conceived for the sake of practical results, not for the sake of speculation. So even if some parts or passages are treated in the manner of speculative philosophy, this is not for the sake of the theory, but for a practical purpose . . .” (Trans. Robert S. Haller, Literary Criticism of Dante Alighieri, p. 102).

As they must, however, questions of method shade inevitably into those of substantive meaning, the *what* of exemplarity as Gower practices it. Anticipating my conclusion, it should therefore be said that the manifest surfeit of the *Confessio Amantis* works towards giving us a glimpse of late medieval moral subjectivity, reducible neither to the figure of Amans nor Genius, nor to any single story or division of the poem, but rather evolving out of a dialectic among narrative personae and exemplary evidence. From this admittedly uncontroversial point of view of Gower's psychological allegory, I will lay out the ways in which the poem presents its readers, rhetorically and structurally, with a cross-section of the psychical microcosm (a "litel world") that constitutes a personal ethical universe. Here I will ally myself with James Simpson (among others) when he very cogently argues that the poem is "a fable of the soul" (*Sciences and the Self* 185), in virtue of which Genius and Amans represent special faculties of a single human being. However, as William Robins rightly observes in a valuable recent essay, the *Confessio* is ultimately no mere mimetic art object; the text does not exist merely to signify, but to stimulate a concrete reader response: "Gower is not primarily concerned to represent the subjectivity of a character, but rather to provoke the subjectivity of the reader" (180-81). Simpson likewise acknowledges the primacy of reception in his analysis: "The ultimate aim . . . is not so much to represent the formation of the soul, but to enact that formation in the reader" (*Sciences and the Self* 14). Russell Peck, too, draws attention to this important phenomenological aspect of Gower's work when he says, "From beginning to end, the *Confessio* is a cluster of tales (texts and propositions) that require one to respond. It is a poem best understood as a sequence of queries rather to "medieval metaethics—that branch of moral philosophy concerned with the nature of moral language, the meaning of moral terms" (189).
than an anthology of answers” (Introduction, John Gower 18). As is widely recognized, therefore, an adequate criticism will have to come to terms with the way Gower’s Confessio Amantis is destined to reside in ever partial, subjective effects and practices—in other words, the way the poem means to shape a person—external to the textual object itself.\(^\text{108}\) The significance of the poem consequently resides in practice and not mere theory. My primary concern, then, is the way a compilation of exemplary tales like this one becomes amenable to ethical practice—practical for the individual end-user—and so eventually determinable of human character, conduct, and choice beyond the confines of the manuscript page.

1.1. Contrast and Congruence

That a text as an exemplaria lacks organic unity or immediate cogency is not a sufficient argument against its utility. Broken language can yet convey a certain functional sense. But the inconsistencies, thematic or otherwise, that critics regularly ascribe to the poem will nevertheless seem to pose a strong challenge to any reading that attempts to discover morality in Gower’s work. That univocal or systematic morality is not compulsory to reading for the moral is a point I have insisted on from the beginning of this thesis, and I will abide by that assumption in the present discussion. What Gower

\(^{108}\) All the same, the critics have important things to say about the representational plane of the poem (the “answers” it gives), as will I. For instance, Simpson argues that the Confessio is already a “person-shaped poem” (Sciences of the Self 7), in that it gives coherent expression to the successful education of Amans and regeneration of Genius. I propose instead that the incoherence of the poem goes some way towards shaping a personal response, and would say that, paradoxically, the work is the more person-shaped for its relative shapelessness.
leaves us, instead of a systematic moral argument (notwithstanding the orderly arrangement of sins and remedies), is a compelling testimony of the divided self, inscribed by means of “all that is written” in the eclectic, secular memory constituted by examples. The result is a repertoire of cases valuable for future generations of readers who might by means of rational self-governance apprehend the good and the right for themselves. To unpack the substance of the foregoing claim is my purpose here.

I begin by bringing forward a sample of the incongruities that exist among exemplary tales pertaining to the specific question of erotic love, before going on to consider the “casuistic” or case-based function of incongruity as such in the application of a personal ethics as Gower would have understood it. The basic question to keep in mind in this section is whether “all that is written is written for our doctrine,” a familiar biblical phrase that resonates at various levels in Gower’s voluminous tale collection, is not simply incoherent or unmanageable.109

The “ensample” of Pygmalion and the Statue set forth in Book 4 can be taken as one representative point of potential ambiguity. The Ovidian tale, like all the other stories in the collection, is related to Amans by Gower’s equivocal but not illegitimate moralizer, named Genius, whose practical wisdom proliferates and divagates over the course of the whole work. Pygmalion will represent one aspect of his teaching that diverges from others, as we shall see. Before going on to consider the example in detail,

109 The biblical verse (Romans 15.4) is cited by Gower in a gloss at 4.2348. That there are important incongruences between love and morality in the Confessio has been argued most recently and forcefully by James Simpson in his superb study, Sciences of the Self. I will be insisting here upon some further ambiguities that exist within the teachings on love.
though, let me pause to consider Genius’s role in the poem. As befits his name, Genius is a genial confessor who tells a sequence of tales meant to delight at the same time they instruct his charge in the virtues and vices. In so doing, Genius multiplies categories and engenders practical wisdom, a role that should run counter to any supposition that Genius, as a kind of genus-bearing figure, simply lays out fixed, finite, and pre-existent moral categories. This aspect of Genius needs to be emphasized. In the twelfth century John of Salisbury documented the fact that the noun “genus’ has several meanings”:

In its original sense, “genus” refers to the principle of generation, that is one’s parentage or birthplace. . . . Subsequently the word “genus” was transferred from its primary meaning to signify that which is predicated in answer to the question “What is it?” concerning [a number of] things that differ in species. (Metalogicon 3.1 [pp. 146-47])

The noun therefore had two basic senses available to it, residually at least being capable of signifying something both fluid and fixed, open and closed, variable and invariable.

Its older association with procreative generation suggests a process of change and development, while its later philosophical usage connects the term to fixed conceptual classification. Now in Gower’s rendering of Genius these same contrary etymological currents seem to coalesce into a single personification (a figure of the exemplarist no less), resulting in one who is at once a progenitor of innovative moral applications and a transmitter of the usual generic ones. On the one hand, in his genetic role Genius as tale-teller will appear to spawn novel ideas; on the other, in his generic role he passes on received ideas. Thus if he is categorical in his approach to morals, he can also be

---

110 The standard work to consult on the multifaceted genius is Jane Chance Nitzsche’s The Genius Figure in Antiquity and the Middle Ages (1975). Of particular interest to my discussion is the identification of genius throughout the tradition as a generative force (whether as a tutelary “begetting spirit” in Roman religion or the creative part of the soul or Nature’s deputy in later medieval allegories); others have treated the various literary representations of Genius.
creative. Kurt Olsson too has observed that “Genius represents generatio . . . . On any
given subject he can utter different judgments at different times in the confession; he is
continually reforming and refitting values to new contexts . . .” (John Gower 114). It is
useful to bear this basic tension between categorical moral precepts and contingent
application in mind when reading the Confessio, and I will return to this feature in my
discussion of the poetics of accommodation in another section. But of course Genius has
another, more explicit dual function in his role as both a Christian confessor and priest of
Venus. It is not easy to tell these two functions apart, nor has it always been clear to
modern critics whether we should distinguish between Genius’s allegiances to love and
morality. Whatever the case, such doubts attaching to Genius in respect of the exact
nature of his allegiances (i.e., religious or secular, moral or amoral), deriving from a
vexed literary ancestry chronicled in works by Alan of Lille and Jean de Meun, add to
our sense of Genius as highly equivocal in his pedagogy.\textsuperscript{111}

What Genius does in the Confessio is posit predominantly secular love tales
within the traditional religious schema of the seven deadly sins (though it is sometimes
equally correct to say that he tells political and religious tales within the frame of a
romance plot). Pygmalion and the Statue in Book 4, to return to my example, is placed
under the rubric of Pusillanimity—

\begin{quote}
Which is to seie in this langage,
He that hath litel of corage
And dar no mannnes werk beginne:
So mai he noght be resoun winne;
For who that noght dar undertake,
Be riht he schal no profit take. (4.315-20)
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{111} For a concise overview of Genius’s literary background as it informs his equivocal
moralizing role in the Confessio Amantis see Simpson, Sciences of the Self, pp. 153-54
& 180-84.
—which as we can see is not obviously an exclusively secular or a religious vice. I will return to the mixing of subject matter below, presently noting only that the resulting ambiguity gives Genius’s teaching the flexibility that it needs to address a variety of problems. In the immediate context, in view of the tale of Pygmalion, we will not miss the moral point: “Nothing ventured, nothing gained” is essentially Genius’s general teaching throughout the fourth book in fact, and it is probably Gower’s too if we take the proverbial Qui nichil attemptat, nichil expedit, cited in the Latin verse heading here, as authorial (see IV.ii). But what is to be attempted?

According to Genius, Pygmalion is a salutary adventurer who takes appropriate chances in matters of love. The legendary sculptor places his love upon a beautiful but lifeless stone image he has made with “al the herte of his corage” (391), and “of his pence / He made such continuance” (4.415-16) that Venus finally caused the statue to vivify. In this altogether affirmative version of the old fable, with its celebration of the virtues of corage and continuance, we are decidedly not in the last book of the Roman de la Rose, with its climactic drama of conflamgrant lust, where Pygmalion is recollected as manifestly irrational and unnatural in his desire, attaining his beloved nevertheless, ironically because he has capitulated to Venus. There is rather, according to Gower’s Genius at any rate, a sensible order to the way Pygmalion goes about his amorous

---

112 The Latin would seem to lend authority to the sentiment, though even it is no guarantee of authorial imprimatur, as I will later observe. In the fourth book, whatever the difficulties of determining authorial intention, Amans is shown that “truantz” (4.342) of sloth avoid attempts at adventure, for they “Dar nothing sette in aventure” (4.322), and with that lack of daring they are less likely to win par amour. Amans himself will confess to being “on of tho slowe” who for faintheartedness dares not speak often to his lady (4.355ff.). And so with an insistent sort of seize-the-day rhetoric Genius admonishes Amans against such fearful inactivity, relating the Pygmalion tale as a positive instance of one who risked love and so achieved it.
business. Nor, as in D. W. Robertson’s characteristically grave allegorization in malo, are we presented with a fallen sculptor who has become idolatrous, sensual, and self-deluding.\footnote{Robertson finds some support in Arnulf of Orleans’s commentary on the Metamorphoses: “As a matter of fact, Pigmalion, a wonderful artificer, made an ivory statue, and conceiving a love for it began to abuse it as though it were a true woman,” quoted on p. 102, Preface to Chaucer. We can observe that Genius consequently departs from the model of the moralized Ovid, though the Latin commentary on the fable does not.} Furthermore, Gower’s artist-figure is not that same one alluded to by Chaucer’s Physician, a certain Pygmalion who despite all his superlative artisanal skill is unable successfully to “contrefete” the authentic work of Nature (Physician’s Tale VI. 9-18). Pygmalion in Gower’s version actually triumphs over nature by steadily applying his art and his heart to the task at hand. And here we arrive at the specific moral point of Genius’s rendering. As the confessor reckons, the triumph of Pygmalion signifies in bono the virtue of steadfast speech as against the vice of Sloth (genus of Pusillanimity):

\begin{quote}
Be this ensample thou miht finde
That word mai worche above kinde.
Forthi, my Sone, if that thou spare
To speke, lost is al thi fare,
For Slowthe bringth in alle wo. (4.337-41)
\end{quote}

In this scenario there is a rational cause (Pygmalion’s exemplary corage and continuance) and a predictable or ordered effect (Venus’s boon, gratuitous though it seems). An assured symmetry appears to obtain between the pursuit and the realization of good fortune. This is the point Genius wants his audience to take away from the example:

\begin{quote}
For after that a man poursuieth
To love, so fortune suieth,
Fulofte and yifth hire happi chance
To him which makth continuance
To preie love and to beseche. (4.365-69)
\end{quote}
Ends are commensurate with means, output proportionate to human input, and a corresponding confidence is expressed in individual self-determination in this rendering of the case. With a somewhat buoyant optimism the tale thus bespeaks the ultimate illusion of blind chance and the efficiency of love's labours, proffering thereby a kind of reconstructed Boethian wisdom (for bad fortune doesn't really exist after all) in the service of refined manners, or gentil lore.\textsuperscript{114}

Gower's famous remarks in the Prologue to the \textit{Confessio Amantis}, which, like the bulk of Book 7 that comes much later and celebrates the virtue of individual self-governance, would seem to be borne out by this happy state of affairs. As Gower had stated at the outset of his poem \textit{in propria persona}:

\begin{quote}
\ldots the man is overal
His oghne cause of wel and wo.
That we fortune clepe so
Out of the man himself it groweth. (Prol. 548-9)
\end{quote}

Here is genuine Boethian wisdom, the basic lesson being that one's fate or fortune is determined by one's choices. Doubtless it is not without some gentle satire that Genius is made to express the same opinion in the context of romantic love. But perhaps the irony

\textsuperscript{114} Much of Genius's teaching is of the "scole . . . of gentil lore" (1.2665), rules of courtship. Book 4 indicates that the vices of sloth are tantamount to bad manners and lack of ambition—e.g., procrastination, forgetfulness, negligence, idleness, lack of prowess, failure to work, somnolence. Therefore, the confessor instructs courtly comportment such as manhood and gentilesse. It is true that other parts of the \textit{Confessio}, notably the Prologue, the \textit{speculum principis} that is Book 7, and the end of Book 8 are more overtly political in their instruction, and that a preponderance of tales deals with kings (see Fisher, \textit{John Gower}, pp. 185-203, and the whole of Peck's \textit{Kingship and Common Profit} for this particular emphasis), but the general conception in the poem in any case is of the way courtly love, personal virtue, and public policy overlap. It is also the case that obsessive erotic love often conflicts with the imperatives of kingship and common profit in the \textit{Confessio}. My immediate focus is on contradictions within the lore of love itself.
of the situation works just as well the other way, in favour of love, indicating that Gower thinks erotic matters are not less important than philosophical ones. Perhaps love as a external and vulnerable fortune is something Gower prizes. Whatever the case, Genius draws a moral that apparently hinges on a Boethian assumption about self-determination, put to rather unBoethian purpose. If Pygmalion

... wolde have holde him stille  
And nothing spoke, he scholde have failed:  
Bot for he hath his word travailed  
And dorste speke, his love he spedde,  
And hadde al that he wolde abedde. (4.426-30)

If Amans wants to *spede* his love accordingly, he would do well to go and do likewise.

However, in the context of the whole of Gower's poem, this sanguine piece of unmoralized Ovid represents only one extremity of a vast, multifaceted body of exempla put to divergent purposes. In Book 6, to take my second example, the tale of Jupiter's Two Tuns emblematises the outright caprice of love against all claims of efficient labour, just rewards, commensurability, and predictable ends. In this case the vice under discussion is that of "lovedrunke," evidently a novel species of Gluttony. The exemplum features two kinds of liquor stored in Jupiter's cellar—one draught sour, the other sweet. "Cupid is boteler of both":

    Bot for so moche as he blinde is,  
    Fulofte time he goth amis  
    And takth the badde for the goode,  
    Which hindreth many a mannes fode  
    Withoute cause, and forthreth eke.  
    So be ther some of love seke,  
    Whiche oghte of reson to ben hole,  
    And some comen to the dole  
    In happ and as hemselfe leste  
Drinke undeserved of the beste. (6.345-58)
The identity between love and fortune and the difference between passion and reason are perhaps nowhere more clearly manifest than in this stark exemplum about Cupid’s outright caprice:

\[\begin{align*}
\text{Lo, hou he can the hertes trouble,} \\
\text{And makth men drunke al upon chaunce} \\
\text{Withoute lawe of governance. (6.362-64)}
\end{align*}\]

Now, against erstwhile confidence in self-governance and direct causality, Genius presents us with a distinctly pessimistic analysis (the rhyming words in the last citation accentuate the point). No “lawe of governance” seems to obtain where it matters. From this vantage, Gower’s other introductory remarks (the so-called “second” or intrinsic prologue, the introduction to Book 1) regarding how “love is maister wher he wil” (1.35) are most apposite:

\[\begin{align*}
\text{For wher as ever he lest to sette,} \\
\text{Ther is no myht which him may lette.} \\
\text{But what schal fallen ate laste,} \\
\text{The soothe can no wisdom caste,} \\
\text{Bot as it falleth upon chance. (1.37-41)}
\end{align*}\]

It is a fatalistic sentiment, one that gets picked up by other characters at other junctures in the poem, signifying that fortune and not human will and freedom have the greater ascendancy. So much for the earlier sentiment: “For after that a man poursuieth / To love, so fortune suieth”! Cynical comments that come later in the Confessio—including the following, “That who best doth, lest thonk schal have” (5.2265)—would seem to bespeak a very different ethos.\textsuperscript{115}

\textsuperscript{115} Cf. Vox Clamantis 2.629-30. And yet the exemplum of Jupiter’s Two Tuns is not intended to support a defeated complacence. Notwithstanding the bad news, Genius proceeds to instruct Amans to “bidde and preie” to receive a taste of the “lusi welle” so that he might receive “grace” thereby and be made “sobre” (6.391ff.). In the face of all the evidence that suggests action is ineffectual, Amans is thus instructed to hope
Consider the contrasts. In Pygmalion the lover saw how fortune is linked to human effort and desire, the overt moral point there being that fortune per se does not exist, since the lover realizes his own will.¹¹⁶ To be sure, there are other exempla in Gower’s collection which support that wishful morality: the tales of Ulysses and Penelope, of Iphis and Iante, and of Bacchus in the Desert similarly show that fortune helps those who help themselves. Alongside these cases, though, one finds more problematical portrayals of fortune that support the contrary ethos of Jupiter’s Two Tuns—not least among these instances being the example that the Confessio Amatis taken as a whole must seem to set in the biography of the lover.¹¹⁷ Amans indeed fails to spede his own love after all, a rather unpropitious end to a collection of tales educating its readers in the ways of love!¹¹⁸ Other cases of failure—to choose obvious ones—include

---

¹¹⁶ This, despite the fact that the statue’s miraculous ensoulment was a gift from Venus, as was mentioned in passing. Such internal dissonance—i.e., where moral and story clash within a tale—elicits the contempt of critics who urge that complex narrative examples cannot be contained by a simple morality. I do not so quickly concede that inconsistency or crude simplicity renders moral tales defunct. In this case, the perceived incongruence may supply added dimension to the exemplum, since the very symmetry among effort and desire and outcome which the exemplum instantiates is perhaps not to be held apart from the idea of love as an enigmatical grace. Here we can appreciate something of the both/and quality of the rhetoric of exemplarity, even if ultimately the expansion of meaning is destined for an either/or reduction.

¹¹⁷ Amans will apply the tale of the two tuns to himself at 8.2252ff.

¹¹⁸ The ending of the poem appears quite as unpropitious for the education of the lover where it touches philosophical or political wisdom (regularly seen as contradicting or qualifying the love lore), at least insofar as Amans appears to remain largely unaffected by any and all exemplary instruction. “John Gower’s” eventual chastity is every bit as lucky as would be any sexual union with his beloved. For the association of chastity with supernatural and suprarational “grace” see *5.6395-6403 and 7161-63, 7.4242-44, and
the misplaced love of Dido for Aeneas, and the tragic tales of Canace and Machaire and of Piramus and Thisbe. In such extreme instances, the will is shown to be severely restricted by the caprice of a higher—or lower, cupidinous—amatory power. Love’s fortune is on this score at best an arbitrary or undetermined grace, depending as it does in real life for its success upon the gracious reciprocation of the beloved, on the expectation of mutuality which is never guaranteed. In short, love is something given or withheld rather than strictly achieved.

Now it is part of my larger claim that in Gower’s poetic exemplaria as across a multiplicity of such compilations (existing in books, pulpit oratory, popular drama—i.e., suffusing the ambient culture and, most importantly, constituting the individual memory at large), one would be hard pressed to discover a uniform moral theory governing the surfeit of stories. Nor does any stable generic description—e.g., the mirror for princes or the so-called Ovidian paradigm that has recently been proposed—account for all of the evidence in Gower’s single collection. I am unable to say with Alastair Minnis that the Confessio teaches “a quite consistent morality” (MTA 185), because, as I have barely begun to show, there are profound thematic discrepancies to reckon with in what is effectively a massive stock of moral memorabilia. Granted, Gower’s capacious poem has a defined structure and a narrative progression, the lineaments of a plot, which we can trace, but what it lacks is a still moral center which would orient the reader once and for all around a single ideal or set of ideals. One is tempted to ask, as I have, whether Gower has failed to achieve his intentions to compose a work that exhibits a coherent argument.

8.2330-36 and 2775-79. Gower doubtless indicates in this respect that he shares certain doubts about exemplarity with Chaucer, not so much about the rhetoric itself (which both poets use competently if not confidently) as about people who fail to live exemplarily. I will deal with this particular failing in the chapter on Chaucer.
The better question to start out with is whether the Confessio Amantis is any worse off as an ethical project for lacking the sought-for conceptual uniformity. 119

Basically, my answer will be that if a consistent morality seems to be absent, this is so less because the rhetoric has failed than because we as yet do not know what Amans, or any moral agent for that matter, is going to do with the examples. What is Amans most impressed by? Perseverant Pygmalion, capricious Cupid, or neither? That we may never find out Aman's final inclination in this regard—though for the time being he wavers between them, on the point of despair one minute and hope the next (e.g., 8.2041 and 2178-82)—does not affect the point of my question, since what I am after is the way moral application can happen in the futurity of decision beyond the letter of the text. It should be emphasized that the ethos of neither tale is obviously illegitimate to Aman's situation, even if they remain incompatible with one another. Aman's love story, for all he knows at this point in time, could perchance go either way, and this is the point he must ponder. Aman must make his choices in the present with the aid of the

119 Gower's Confessio is filled with exemplary teachings that demonstrate contrary things. Certain exempla (as we will see) censure foolish haste in respect of erotic love (Piramus and Thisbe; Phoebus and Daphne), and others rebuke procrastination in the same context (Aeneas and Dido; Demephon and Phyllis). Some instruct virginity (Phyryns; Valentinian), while other passages recommend marriage or at least propagation; there are exempla that enjoin military prowess (Aeneas and Lavinia), yet at least one commends peace and domesticity (Achilles and Polixenex) and in other passages war and crusade are censured; romantic love itself is said to be founded on measure or equal exchange in one place, while in another it is discovered to be immeasurable and unmanageable. Some exempla show that revealing the truth is dangerous or undesirable (Jupiter, Juno, and Tiresias; Phoebus and Cornide; Jupiter and Laar), others that concealing it is as hazardous (Vulcan and Venus; Echo); some illustrate the legitimacy of dreams (Constantine; Ceix and Alcione), others their potential for error or deception (Pope Boniface). Many of the contrary tendencies are conjoined in single tales. Individual exemplars, too, embody divergent qualities. Salomon here is made to represent idolatry, carnal lust, or love's dotage; there he is an example of good kingship, wisdom, or godliness. Aeneas, Alexander, Aristotle—to name a few examples besides the two main ambiguous figures, Venus and Genius—are as equivocal.
precedents given; he can only know for certain the wisdom of his choices at the end, when all the consequences have been seen. We will see how important the temporality of ethical decision-making is later.

The audience is similarly bounded by the present tense of the poem, even if we already know remedia amoris the ending. We are inevitably like those legendary lovers who gather around Amans in the eighth book, “To se what ende schal betyde / Upon the cure of my sotie” (8.2758-59), and who perforce can only debate among ourselves—“on that, another this” (8.2762)—as to the outcome. Knowledge of the outcome does not of course prevent our feeling some suspense. Moreover, if we press a certain exemplary wisdom (implicit in many of the examples Genius gives, but inherent in the way examples are always partial) to its logical conclusion, the ending did not have to happen the way it did. The termination of Amans’s love affair does not tell the whole story, is quite literally not the whole of the Confessio. Briefly consider the ending. Amans’s rescue from “loves rage” (8.2863) and final withdrawal from the court of love, dramatized by an intriguingly ambiguous sequence of events in Book 8—beginning with Venus’s exhortation, “Remembre wel hou thou art old” [8.2439], after which Amans swoons [8.2449] and witnesses a procession of famous young and aged lovers, then unexpectedly has the “fyri lancegay” [8.2798] removed from his heart by Cupid, before he is able to see his advanced age and accept a necklace of black beads for his repose [8.2820-2907]—these are events as conspicuous for their grace or good fortune as for any triumph of good will, right reason, or old age over cupidinous desire.120 Indeed it just

seems to happen to be the case that Amans falls out of love, indicating something fundamental about the kind of example he himself sets. For why should Amans's affair have ended the way it did? Finally, Amans's example of the remedias amoris is only one among a set of other possibilities: it is in other words rhetorical in its practical wisdom rather than apodeictic or axiomatic, something that makes for probable rather than necessary truth.

Why indeed should the poem have ended the way it did for the lover? Amans may himself fail to sped his love, in which case he has wasted some time and energy, but other outcomes are imaginable even for the aged and infatuated lover, as his final vision of lovers in Book 8 suggests. In Gower love in old age is not something unnatural at least. More than as Gower himself implies at the end of the poem (echoing Genius), when one can anticipate success the pursuit of love is not wrongheaded:

But he which hath of love his maake  
It sit him wel to singe and daunce,  
And do to love his entendance

For he hath that he wolde have:  
But where a man schal love crave  
And faile, it stant al otherwise. (*8.3078-80, 3083-85)

The circular logic here—it is good to possess what one already possesses, implying the corollary tautology that you should only take a chance on love when there is no chance you will fail (see the later recension for a similarly circular sentiment at 8.2092-97 and reserves a place for reason nonetheless, not despite fortune but in anticipation of the fortuitous.

121 See Hugh White, "The Naturalness of Amans' Love," who establishes that it could not be because of his physical maturity alone that Amans is dismissed from the court of love. Gower is more open-minded than others who would dismiss aged love tout court. Actually, he stages a on the question (generally speaking, but also specifically at 8.2750-82).
the headnote 8.iii)—is the everyday logic of having to make prudent decisions in the
process of time before the outcome is known. Insofar as Amans finds himself suspended
in time—in the meantime of much of the poem—the question of what he is to do in the
case of romantic love is uncertain, a fact Amans himself will struggle with right up until
the end in fact (8.2041 and 2178-82). His love may be blind, but all important choices are
made without the benefit of absolute foresight.122

And so our foreknowing Amans’s end similarly does not preempt our making
important choices. It is here that I want to propose, in respect of individual choice or
agency, that moral coherence be envisaged less as either a formal or a psychological
matter than as a tropological question as-yet-to-be-determined in personal deliberation
and practice. The contrast should become somewhat clearer in the next section, where I
review the other options. Put simply, I am suggesting that the audience stands—like
Amans—in the moral center of the work, which is to say readers can decide on its
significance for them in the “meantime” of everyday practice. The rhetoric of
exemplarity is the consummate art of the mean. Suffice it to say at this point that readers
are invited to moderate and punctuate the rhetoric of the poem at different junctures, to
determine if the examples in the work (including the example Amans sets) are persuasive

122 For an example of a very different view that insists Amans should have seen the error
of his ways from the beginning see Georgiana Donavin, Incest Narratives and Structure
of Gower’s Confessio Amantis, who argues that the “comic” ending of the poem stands
as a condemnation of the court of love because it does not promote Christian charity (pp.
21-25). On her (by no means unique) reading Amans represents sinful infatuation that
has to be abandoned in favour of higher spiritual love. On my account there is room for
Amans to improve his love qua romantic love (cf. Simpson’s Sciences of the Self, p.
159), something Genius allows up to the very end when he delivers the lover’s final plea
to Venus, so that for the duration of the poem it remains in doubt whether romantic love
ought to be abandoned for something else. After all, chaste married love (honeste
love) always remains a viable alternative ending to the story of the infatuated lover: “For
if I hadde such a wif / As ye speke of, what sholde I more?” (6.692-3).
for them. Persuasion and practice constitute the real end of the rhetoric: a main principle of selection lies outside the text, beyond the manuscript page in the individual conscience of the reader where exemplary instances are made meaningful, where cases are turned to purpose, in coming into contact with the singularity of perceptions and present circumstance. Exemplarity here as elsewhere will come to ethical meaning through the negotiated and timely responses of persons reading for the moral, in view of the varied and unpredictable lives they lead. If textual coherence is therefore less important than the coherence readers can make of the examples in relation to their present affairs, it is because the ideal reader of the exemplaria is meant to become its practitioner. What I am describing may seem to be true of reading in almost any case (for one may accept that reception is always more or less selective, partial, and personal), but my basic assumption is that the exemplaria, as texte, is peculiarly destined to such pragmatic accommodation hors texte. Because of its dialogical and taxonomic character (what others call its “centonic” or “paratactic” structure) and its highly reductive aspects, I believe Gower’s Confessio in fact lends itself to a casuistic ethics in the way other literary texts do not.

I have yet to show how these casuistic implications play themselves out in Gower’s work, and just how Gower addresses the possibilities and limitations of case-analysis. Amans’s analysis of his own case is, as I have noted, germane. In light of the question of what Amans is going to do, or what he might make of the text, the tales surveyed so far undoubtedly have their usefulness, given their obvious concern with the place of the will in creating a destiny in matters of love. Recall that Amans himself is will, that motivational part of the soul which, Pygmalion-like, energetically attempts to achieve a desired outcome, yet like those whom Cupid despoils with sour drink is unable
to gain a requital. Amans's situation seems to be articulated in the two contrastive
exempla, and it is up to him to discover a practical answer to his dilemma in light of them
(and the many others). One point for Amans to consider—as a practitioner of
love—might be that if it is sometimes true that fortune helps those who help themselves,
she is also not obliged to help anyone at all; a corresponding insight seems to be that
good fortune, when it comes, is no less miraculous for having been purchased with hard
work. Whatever conclusion one prefers, Gower can be said to keep in tension a dual
perspective, a both/and logic, embracing an inclusiveness towards moral wisdom,
preserving rival answers to the question of whether love is worth risking. Clearly, the
book cannot decide the question for the lover in the absence of concrete circumstances
against which to bring specific judgements to bear. Only Amans can judge—and only
time will really tell—whether he has a chance with his beloved lady, based on the
perspicuous if also amphibolous impressions left by the stories he hears.

1.2. *Compilatio*, Reader Response, and Gower’s Ethical Poetic

Earlier I noted that the poem’s *forma tractandi* is less clear than its *forma
tractatus*, in other words that the structure and partitioning of Gower’s *Confessio
Amantis*, organized as it is around a penitential dialogue on the distinctions of the seven
deadly sins, is more or less patent while the functions and effects of the manifold content
remain to be demonstrated. I will come to insist on the latter point because, as I have
already suggested in the previous section, in the strongest sense the poem remains to be
made through reader response, demonstrated in action. But less audience-centered
solutions have been put forward to account for the text's complex mode of proceeding, some of which are very helpful all the same for formulating alternative claims about the reader-oriented potentialities of Gower's ethical poetic. In this section I consider a range of interesting readings of the Confessio Amantis in an effort better to position my own account of the ethics of exemplarity in view of the contemporary debate.

Explicitly, Gower seems to describe his vernacular work in more than one of his Latin prose commentaries in the academic terms of compilatio, a word which has taken on great weight in recent discussions. In one such gloss in the margins of the Confessio Amantis it is said that the author despite poor health diligently compiled (studiosissime compliauit) his poem, *set tanquam fava um ex floribus recollectum, . . . ex variis cronicis, histories, poetarum philosophorumque dictis* [like a honeycomb gathered from various flowers, . . . from various chronicles, histories, and sayings of the poets and

---

123 On Gower in his role as compilator see Minnis, Medieval Theory of Authorship, pp. 194-200, Copeland, Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation (1991), pp. 202-20, and Olsson, John Gower and the Structures of Conversion (1992), pp. 1-15. In the critical literature the term compilatio has come to designate something like a literary genre or principle of organization. On the putative origins of compilatio in thirteenth-century "academic and legal circles" see Doyle and Parkes's influential essay, "The Production of Copies of the Canterbury Tales and the Confessio Amantis." A rejoinder to Parkes and an excellent corrective to modern usage can be found in Rouse and Rouse, in "Ordinatio and Compilatio Revisited." These critics argue that the late medieval compilations descend generically from late antiquity—"The archetypal compilation no doubt was the florilegium" (120)—and not the thirteenth-century. They also show that the term compilatio is attested very seldom in the thirteenth-century, having very scant support in such medieval literary theory as can be garnered from the accessus ad auctores, so that there is little basis "on which to erect a literary theory for the end of the Middle Ages" (118). Arguing that modern critical applications of the idea of compilatio to poetry of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries—besides being anachronistic—tend to be obscurantist, imprecise, and almost meaningless, the Rouses conclude that compilatio, as a literary term denoting any kind of compilation, should be replaced by the English word.
philosophers] (Prol., at 34*).\textsuperscript{124} The poem is thus an expressly inclusive collection, something akin to a gathering of the best that has been known and thought, and very much like the kind of antique \textit{florilegium} that is arguably the origin of later compilations.\textsuperscript{125} As a collection of narrative exempla, the \textit{Confessio} also seems to be related to the preacher’s example-books, such as the \textit{Alphabetum Narrationum} or \textit{Speculum Laicorum}, as well as to the penitential handbooks, most familiar of which is Robert Mannyng of Brunne’s \textit{Handlyng Synne}. Moralized stories, not just sententious extracts, fill Gower’s pages.

Now in specifically resembling a honeycomb \textit{ex floribus recollectum}, as the gloss has it, Gower’s compilation is indicated to be more than the sum of its parts. But what is the nature of this sum, this \textit{summa} of exemplary instruction? Various answers are available to those who ask. As Rita Copeland, for example, has done well to document and describe, medieval \textit{compilatio} entailed techniques of invention that facilitated processes of displacement and appropriation across an intertextual field, culminating in the refashioning of old material for the present— that very translatory activity Chaucer describes so memorably with the apt comparison, “out of olde felds, as men seyth, / Cometh al this newe corn from yer to yere, / And out of olde bokes, in good feyth, /

\textsuperscript{124} An asterisk indicates first or second recension, i.e., not the third recension (Fairfax 3) used as a base text in the editions of Macaulay and Peck. For Gower’s Latin verses I rely on Siân Echard and Claire Fanger, \textit{The Latin Verses of the “Confessio Amantis”: An Annotated Translation}, Michigan: Colleagues Press, 1991. Gower apparently altered a third recension Prologue at line 22 to redescribe his activity as that of composition instead of compilation, and there is some controversy over what if anything this indicates about authorial self-image; see Peck, \textit{John Gower: Confessio Amantis: Volume 1} (2000), Explanatory Notes, p. 286.

Cometh al this newe science that men lere" (Parliament of Fowls 22-25). Much has been said in this connection about the poetics of Gower, for whom the proliferative wisdom of the past also seems to have renewed itself, and here we undoubtedly learn something of his purpose. He begins with a sort of literary manifesto that reveals his thinking in this regard:

Of hem that written ous tofore
The bokes duelle, and we therefore
Ben tawht of that was write tho:
Forthi good is that we also
In oure tyme among ous hiere
Do wryte of newe som matiere,
Essampled of these olde wyse,
So that it myhte in such a wyse,
When we ben dede and elleswhere,
Believe to the worldes eere
In tyme comende after this. (Prol. 1-7)

Expressing continuity with an exemplary past, Gower anticipates its corresponding translation and transformation into the present through the common inventional procedures of orderly arrangement and division. But the paradoxes of the position he arrogates to himself should not go unnoticed. In preserving and mediating the past, various measures are taken to renovate it. Copeland explains what is involved in the role the poet assumes in this translatio studii:

As a compiler, Gower quite literally makes a new book out of inherited materials: the structure of his text confers new meanings on his sources, which are now organized to pertain to different stages of sin and to exemplify the laws of human and divine love. It is for this reason as well that the classical tales are transformed in the retelling, abbreviated, amplified, and refigured so as to comply with their new textual purpose. . .

---

126 Gower's difference from Chaucer in this regard has also been noted. Judith Shaw, in "Lust and Lore in Gower and Chaucer," has argued that if Gower emphasizes the continuity of the past and its present usefulness, Chaucer is much more skeptical about the morality of old books.
New matter is thus established on the perpetual authority of the old. The consequences of
translatio are curious. It is not to be thought that the activity of translation or invention
necessarily results in a diminution of authority of those who come after, as though new
authors were mere dwarves standing on the shoulders of giants. (That proverbial
medieval expression contains the same paradoxes, to be sure.)127 To the contrary: ancient
auctors, according to Gower, not only furnish moderns with authoritative examples to
reiterate but themselves become examples of authority to imitate—hence, importantly, to
supersede—by way of the production of new books, which books (and writers) in their
turn will eventually become “olde wyse” to unborn generations in “tyme comende after
this.” Gower can therefore be seen as setting himself up, proleptically, as a potential
auctor for future epochs, which is exactly Copeland’s point. Therefore, both conservative
and progressive impulses apparently commingle in this rhetoric, and it is unclear what the
pretensions of the final product will be, that is, whether the new book is more innovative
than derivative, and what if anything this means for readers.

Copeland goes on to argue that the new shape of Gower’s material adds up to a
new and systematic assertion of “canonical authority” (202), representing an ostensible

127 Cf. Thomas Usk who takes the same humanistic position on the question of scientific
progress: “knowing of trouth in causes of thinges was more hardyer in the first sechers
(and so sayth Aristotle), and lighter in us that han folowed after. For their passing studies
han fresshed our wittes, and our understandinge han excited, in consideracion of trouth,
by sharpnesse of theyr resons” (Testament of Love, Prol.; in Chaucerian and Other
Pieces, ed. Skeat, p. 4). Though more difficult for the first searchers, it is easier for us:
what this implies is a progress of enlightenment which while it pays homage to the past
actually exalts present understanding above that of the past. Dwarves may be undersized
but they are nevertheless more subtle.

For a discussion of how translatio can be variously subversive, revelatory,
creative, and so on see Caroline Dinshaw, Chaucer’s Sexual Politics, pp. 137-41.
appropriation of learned discourses to the world of vernacular cultural politics in particular. It remains only an apparent triumph of the vernacular, she argues, because Gower's own Latinity very much dominates if it does not outright belie the vulgar language he employs, reining in the English poem with its comprehensive academic apparatus (verse prologues, prose glosses, speaker markers) of what she aptly calls "auto-exegesis" (205). This rather dubious scholarly machinery, together with "the interpretive ministrations of Genius" (203), associated as they are with institutional priestcraft, enables the putatively modest author to mask even as he mimics his own auctoritas. A familiar argument by now perhaps, though it has not gone uncontested. Larry Scanlon has recently put forward a diametrically opposed reading, arguing that "Gower combines anti-clerical critique with a more explicit celebration of lay political authority" (247). On this account, Gower, through a vernacularization of Latin tradition, displaces clerical authority by simulating it and shows that the old institutions need to be reformed.

For Copeland and Scanlon, whatever their differences, the inventional moment of textual transmission represents a solemn sociopolitical drama of control, co-optation, and containment. This is the predictable result of a hermeneutics of suspicion that sees literary activity primarily in terms of broader social contests rather than of the potential for individual practice (an alternative perspective which need not rule out others). That the Confessio Amantis ultimately realizes its author's intentions is a further presumption of these critics' readings, a presumption that I should not so much like to discredit as to round out with a fuller consideration of textual effects.¹²⁸ Kurt Olsson, in John Gower

¹²⁸ Copeland's reading is in some respects a reprise of a sensible and well-established view of the poem as having to do with kingship and common profit (to recall the title of Russell Peck's study of 1978). Getting down to particulars, however, the author's
and the Structures of Conversion, offers a take on the compiler's achievements in light of its effects, claiming that the *Confessio* is a self-conscious mélange of materials juxtaposed to play off one another, generating nuanced ethical wisdom through the careful cross-referencing of tales and interlocking argumentation. The disjunctive surface quality of the work—again, its effect rather than the intention behind it—is therefore more fully reckoned with in Olsson's reading, though he does not go as far as he might. Gower, in the role of "tumultuator" (13), is seen as one who likes to stir up intellectual debate by means of the deliberate provocation of contradiction. A comparable argument is made by Russell Peck in "The Phenomenology of Make Believe," where he states that Genius's story-telling "strategy is to create a comic warfare by means of complication" (263). But in Olsson's view, beyond stirring up trouble, Gower means for his poem to attract the audience towards a specific ethos, namely a certain loving disposition towards one's neighbour. The *Confessio* is thus no mere repository of complacent exegetical norms, nor is it necessarily engrossed in a contest for its own canonicity (Copeland) or, for that matter, laicization (Scanlon). In Olsson's view, the poem is rather a creative expression of *caritas*. Olsson thus sublimes the textual incongruity to a single effect which he describes in terms of religious conversion. As he puts it, Gower's "ambition is not to impose a rule of conduct or clearly defined justice on his readers, but to attract them to charitable love" (28). I find Olsson's reading of the intention should not be taken as the only key to determining the content of its morality; the effects of the work on the intention of the audience locates the real index of the morality of the *Confessio*. There are others (*viz.*, Winthrop Wetherbee, Judith Ferster, Patricia Batchelor) who argue nearly the reverse of Copeland, claiming that interaction between linguistic registers challenges or deconstructs *auctoritas* in Gower. It is worth remarking too that Genius himself occasionally disowns moral authority (*e.g.*, 1.267-71), even though his is an unquestionably authoritative voice.
productive tension between textual disjunctions persuasive, yet his thesis needs to be modified to find a place for particular rules of conduct (they certainly exist and are sometimes desirable), the presence of potentially inassimilable material (such detritus that is not attractive or amenable to an interpreter), and a plurality of practical effects (beyond that of attraction to a rather vague ideal, caritas).

I also remain unconvinced of the possibility of a coherent signification that cuts across the divisions of the whole work. There have been many others who in stronger terms than those employed by Copeland, Scanlon, or Olsson champion a coherentist view of Gower’s work.\textsuperscript{129} It is commonly observed, in fact, that Gower’s exempla are duly combined and collated to achieve what seems to be an impressively unified (formal, philosophical, or psychological) design. In this vein, Judson B. Allen has argued that the Confessio Amantis is joined to a “normative array,” a set of ethical distinctions (in this case the deadly sins) that make up something like the mental furniture of the medieval mind and the metaphysics of the universe, and thus the critic subordinates its disjunctions to an unproblematic system of values external to the text. Winthrop Wetherbee likewise claims that “Gower’s Genius carefully adapts each tale to its place in the exposition of a moral system” (“Genius and Interpretation” 241), though to be fair this critic admits that the achievement is not without some ironic fallout as a result of Genius’s fallibility.

\textsuperscript{129} See David Aers, “Reflections on Gower” (1998), for a concise review of such approaches which include the diverse efforts of A. J. Minnis, R. F. Yeager, Kurt Olsson, James Simpson, and Larry Scanlon. Aers remarks, “Recent scholarship on Gower has been marked not only by its erudition but also by the extremely strong claims made for the subtlety and coherence of Gower’s moral and political thought, especially in the Confessio Amantis” (185). He summons us to return “to a consideration of the ‘contradictory positions’” (188) of the poem and goes on to establish that Gower used a “paratactic” mode of writing which depends on dissymmetry for its effect, a point to which I will return. Parataxis is suspect according to Aers, for whom the juxtaposition of materials represents deliberate mystification on the part of an ideologue.
Charles Runacres similarly argues that the arrangement of exemplary materials is clear and comprehensible, “All is logical, with none of Chaucer’s haphazard ‘aventure, or sort, or cas’” (111), notwithstanding certain tensions that according to this critic arise between stories and their ostensible morals in order to provoke more complex responses. In these last two readings, Olsson’s image of Gower as a mild-mannered controversialist seems to be maintained, and undoubtedly it has its appeal and validity. But it is A. J. Minnis who argues most forcefully that the poem entirely hangs together:

Gower’s Confessio seems to work by assimilation of materials which, although they may appear ill-sorted to us, would have been regarded as quite compatible by the learned medieval reader. Diverse exempla of lovers were brought together: some commended chaste love while others warned of unchaste love, thus teaching a quite consistent morality. (Medieval Theory of Authorship 185)

Gower in the role of ethicus, or moral philosopher, is on this account aspiring to achieve the auctoritas of a medievalized moral Ovid. Furthermore, the English poet is supposed to have realized his object by a deft deployment of Latin commentary and exempla amantium set out in a relatively orderly fashion.¹³⁰ The interaction between text and gloss leaves us evidence, Minnis goes so far as to assert, of the “singleness of the writer’s purpose and the essential unity of his materials” (190)—a strong claim in light of such a vexing long poem. Enabling Minnis is his assumption (which he shares with C. S. Lewis) that the virtues of secular love and religion coincide: that a good lover is for all intents and purposes a good man.¹³¹ Unlike others who admit the prima facie

¹³⁰ Simpson takes issue with the characterization too, insisting that Gower is “essentially a poet . . . rather than an efficient moralizer and compiler of philosophical traditions” (“Ironic Incongruence” 617), though he agrees that the main subject matter is romantic love.
incoherence of the poem in this and other respects, Minnis therefore urges textual or thematic unity upon us, insisting that the poem is moral in an objective sense. In so doing, Minnis not only neglects many “ill-sorted” tales and those large tracts of Gower’s poem that have nothing to do with love or the lover (as Amans will protest) except perhaps derivatively, but he also does not acknowledge that Genius’s teachings sometime amusingly resemble more of an unmoralized Ovid than a moral one. Needless to say, I find the idea of the Confessio providing straightforward moral lessons in romantic love an over-simplification, even if I would wish to join Minnis by asserting the primacy of love matter in much of the poem.

A recent argument which accounts for much more of the evidence is that of James Simpson, in his Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry. Simpson compares Gower’s Confessio to Alan of Lille’s Anticlaudianus and proposes that Gower’s poem is as much a “humanist psychological allegory, in which the soul requires philosophical knowledge to achieve its information, or proper form” (135). Taking issue with the near critical consensus that sees the poem as providing a systematic moralizing structure, or “information,” Simpson emphasizes what he calls the “deeply planted structural incongruities” (138) existing in what is principally a framework of “Ovidian disunity.” There is no easy congruence between teachings on sexual love and ethics and politics in the poem. Genius, as an equivocal praeeptor amoris, fluctuates widely in his instruction. In his Venerian capacity, the confessor tells Amans merely what he wants to hear; as the cognitive faculty of the imagination, Genius is sometimes able to ascend to proper philosophical and political wisdom. Also part of Simpson’s argument is the incompatibility of secular love and rational ethics, as for him the poem represents a failure to harmonize the two sets of values in the biography of Amans/“John Gower.”
assumption that together Genius and Amans represent the volatile psychological
constitution of the soul, namely desire and imagination, “making up the mind” under the
pressure of the manifold incongruities of exemplary material. That Simpson thinks these
two constituent parts of the soul ultimately do make up their mind in the course of the
poem is a measure of his optimism, or of the optimism he ascribes to Gower: the critic
finally joins others in arguing that the poem presents us with the eventual integration of
the soul in the overarching figure of “John Gower” in Book 8. This successful self-
integration, Simpson claims, is the result of a complex mental progression towards
psychical resolution in the teachings of political rationality: “Gower represents the
naturally regenerative powers of the soul inter-acting with each other, bringing the will
back into its proper mediation with, or conformity with, the reason” (197). Political
rationality is seen as effectively unifying the divided soul and consolidating the structural
incongruities of the poem by providing “constitutional” restraints on the pursuit of erotic
desire. As Genius explains late in the poem, human nature indeed must be kept in check
by the law of reason. Genius glosses the example of Sarra and Thobie (7.5307-71),
illustrating “honest” or chaste married love, with the following reflections on the laws
governing human behaviour:

For god the lawes hath assisshed
Als wel to reson as to kinde,
Bot he the bestes wolde binde
Only to lawes of nature,
Bot to the mannes creature
God yaf him reson forth withal,
Wherof that he nature schal
Upon the causes modeifie,
That he schal do no lecherie,
And yit he schal his lustes have. (7.5372-81)
Simpson rightly sees here that some higher arbitrating rule of reason (what Gower elsewhere calls "positive law"), other than that provided by the impulsive law of nature, is necessary for the regulation of desire. Erotic desire still has its place—"yit he schal his lustes have," grants Genius—but only within the limits set down by customary law deciding what is *honeste*. Now the burden of Simpson's argument rests in proving that Genius's position as cited is the one finally sanctioned by Gower in the *Confessio*, and I concede its first importance in the poem (though Genius's subsequent behaviour in Book 8 throws in doubt his own belief in the importance of such "constitutional" principles).

But focusing so intently on the political solution, Simpson perhaps gives less attention than is due to the relevance of reason in the private sphere of irrational desire, before love becomes *honeste*.\(^\text{132}\) All this means is that Simpson could stand to enlarge his perspective where it concerns the valid practical issues of courtship, though he does a fine job of illuminating Gower's larger political concerns. Those concerns should not make us lose sight of the practical ethical question that remains like a kind of residue on the system of political rationality: should Amans pursue his love or not, and if so how? The suspense of the lover's choices remains a practical problem, and the poem I think provides particular ethical resources (i.e., rules of courtship) that are not simply reducible to the political. Simpson's reading, on the other hand, is a teleological account which finds it fit

\(^{132}\) The power of reason is something Gower puts in doubt *in propria persona* in the Prologue (e.g., Prol. 70-76), as he may be said to do consistently in the poem when Genius stresses the irresistible nature of erotic desire—that, as we have seen, it is "Withoute lawe of governance" (6.364).
to kick the ladder of love away when one has mounted the height of integrated
subjectivity under the aegis of politics.\textsuperscript{133}

Simpson's learned discussion is nonetheless one with which I would be very
happy to have my own account associated by way of supplementing his claims for the
primacy of politics with a wider (or, perhaps necessarily narrower) ethical perspective.
His analysis has the further distinction of throwing light on the psychology and agency of
reader response in the process of education in the poem, where others have tended to
insist upon textual or thematic uniformity to the incongruities of the \textit{Confessio Amantis}.
What is lacking from my standpoint, and ultimately from Gower's too I believe, in much
of the criticism I have just surveyed is that none of the aforementioned critics takes
enough account of the potential for variability in audience reception. Because they do
not allow for such variation (or its invitation), the text comes off as more or less
monolithic in its teaching, which is on any account of medieval exemplary narrative

\textsuperscript{133} Hugh White, in \textit{Nature, Sex, and Goodness}, persuasively challenges Simpson's
teleological psychological-unity thesis in favour of the view that Gower is "more
impressed with the tendency of things to fall out of always precarious harmonies and
balances than with their capacities to achieve these" (203). In his words, "rational
reflection can happen only after the passion of love has ended and does not bring about
the end" (207). White's realignment of the poem along such pessimistic lines is
supported by a close reading of the final sequence of events in Book 8, events Simpson
largely ignores. In view of its perplexing ending I concur that division, not integration,
prevails in the poem, though I think rational reflection can have a place within the context
of the passion of love (and \textit{not only} for the purpose of bringing it to an end, for why
should reason have no bearing on passionate love?). Nevertheless, Amans (or the "John
Gower" who emerges at the end) is not obviously exemplary of the fruits of humanistic
education, though for economy I have had to leave the endgame to one side. Suffice it to
say that integration, when it happens, will have to occur outside the poem in the
conscience of the reader. Simpson himself acknowledges that Gower's audience must
become \textit{better} readers than Amans (\textit{Sciences of the Self} 254-68); Amans is not wholly
exemplary even for this critic.
problematic. There are three points to register in light of my insistence on the reception of the text.

First, the idea of transmission and translation needs to be reconceptualized to include audience reception. Certainly, as critics have noted, the ordering of source texts involving the sorting, sifting, and storing of old material goes a long way towards making the *Confessio Amantis* what it is. But *inventio* and *compilatio* need not—and do not—stop there. Against Copeland, therefore, I contend that strategies of invention reading (*after* writing) have an additive role to play in medieval hermeneutics, in constructing and reconstituting the text for a given interpreter, consequently extending the imperatives of *compilatio* to conform to sometimes quite private and idiosyncratic intentions and stock of memories situated outside the material and inside the mind of a particular person. Via the practical processes of ethical “turning” I delineated in Part I of the thesis, we should be able to appreciate the way in which literary activity as a “form of ethical action” (Copeland 218) may reach beyond the dead letter of the text into the present tense of the reader’s experience. Not only compilers do compiling. Every reading, particularly those readings that end up in ethical praxis, is a re-invention.

The second item to reconsider very briefly is the interaction between text and gloss, which in Gower’s case plays itself out in a relationship between vernacular poetry and Latin verses and prose commentary. In the more or less unpredictable and improvisatory readerly context I am invoking one should be able to perceive that normative Latin “exegesis” will not always preempt interpretation in the way Copeland
and others suppose. The point is controversial, I admit. But in Gower’s compilation specifically, where Latin verses are so thoroughly elliptical and the commentary frequently incongruous, there is little reason to conclude the apparatus sustains its putative legislative control throughout. In fact, exegetical privilege is liable to find itself destabilized by a certain limited legibility. A related point is that concerning basic literacy: although the “learned medieval reader” whom Minnis envisages (and Copeland implicitly presupposes) will find his way with greater facility by using the Latin apparatus to orient a reading of the poem, this in itself raises the prospect that there existed at least two disjunct reading experiences—or rather, two versions of the poem we singly call Confessio Amantis—conditional on different linguistic competencies. Simply

134 But those with the expertise indicate that there are many good reasons to argue as I do besides those having to do with the dynamics of reader response. Siân Echard, “With Carmen’s Help” (1998), provides a salutary corrective to the view, represented in the work of Copeland among others, that Latin has some kind of privileged, hegemonic control over the vernacular. She critiques the commonplace assumptions, first, that “the Latin language in Gower’s day is a monolith, secure in its linguistic identification as the language of the fathers and thus the source of final authority,” and, second, that “the gloss is an aggressive instrument for the subjugation of the text, a form of ‘textual harassment’” (5-6). To the contrary, “far from invoking authority, Gower’s Latin problematizes the question of authority in the Confessio by presenting the reader with several competing authoritative voices, Latin and vernacular, none of which seem capable of taming the text” (7). From Echard’s expert point of view there are multiple Latins in the text, and these work together with the vernacular to destabilize any and all linguistic authority. It is further observed that the majority of extant manuscripts have transcribed the Latin “marginal” commentary into the columns of the text proper, which would seem to reposition the Latin ideologically and also, as Echard observes, to disrupt rather than direct one’s reading. See further Echard, “Glossing Gower: In Latin, in English, and in absentia” (1998).

put: If she is a *lewed* reader of the poem, the Latin will remain entirely dumb to her.

Such linguistic distinctions predictably fall along the lines of class and gender in the fourteenth century, as my language is meant to indicate, providing further proof of the need to factor actual readers into the hermeneutical equation. My basic claim here is that, given the complexity of the social realities, glossary "auto-exegesis" has to be proven rather than assumed in relation to medieval texts.

The final point I wish to make is not to underestimate even the superficial appearance of surface irregularities, that disjunctive textual surface which scholars acknowledge but attempt to explain away. Such readers effectively deny their primary experience of Gower's inclusive poem in favour of some theoretical conceptualization of poetical unity in diversity. Olsson's image of Gower as *agent provocateur* is useful in this regard and needs to be extended to include a larger range of reader responses and the potentially generative quality of discordance in exemplarity, rather than settling for objective signification, Latin or otherwise.

Throughout my inquiry, I will presuppose a hermeneutics of reader response (which I call ethopoetical, involving the making of moral meaning) with the intention of addressing problems raised only schematically so far. In a recent article Russell Peck has already gone some way towards correcting previous assumptions by emphasizing that moral meaning depends as much on what readers do as on what the text may mean. Because Gower explores so much that is false, Peck argues, indeed it is vital for readers to intuit the truth of the fiction for themselves. Accordingly, as he goes on to explain, "Gower aligns himself with the complexities of late medieval reception theory" ("Phenomenology of Make Believe" 253). Peck's is basically an intuitionist account of
the “relative interiority of representation” (253) that sees how a text can become the occasion for self-examination and self-improvement, and in what follows I hope to corroborate but also broaden such insights, particularly the idea that, as Peck puts it, “Gower’s ‘middel weie’ is a most gentle mode of psycho-political infiltration by exemplification” (263). By tying textual irregularities and the multiple registers of signification they produce to the realm of ethical practice as much as to intuited experience, we should indeed be able to see how the rhetoric of exemplarity exhibits an incongruity of a sort that betrays not a failure of the moral imagination, but rather a useful mode of proceeding inductively and imaginatively—through that ethical or “psycho-political infiltration” Peck describes—towards the good and the right.

1.3. Via Media, Accommodation, and Gower’s Poetical Ethics

The contingency of the ethical requires that for moral wisdom to be useful, it must adapt to changing circumstance. In a “world which neweth every dai” (Prol. 59), a world cast like dice by the agency of blind chance (Mundus in euentu versatur vt alea casu . . . [Prol. v]), there is truly much need for morals to adjust to the pressures of surprising and sometimes unprecedented situations.\(^{135}\) Real-life ethical dilemmas demanded as much in the past as they do for us today. What makes adaptation and adjustment yet more urgent for Gower is the way the world has declined as of late, as he would see it. A customary way of reaching a kind of homeostasis between life and the moral wisdom contained in the literature, I have been arguing, is through a process of reading for the moral, which

involves an essentially aesthetic mode of apprehending useful information about what it is good to do and then turning or reducing stories to a moral point. There are in this context a number of ways that Gower expressly seeks to accommodate his readers and the times, to make moral wisdom timely. It is in view of these accommodations that we can gain further understanding of the *forma tractandi*, the mode of proceeding, of the *Confessio Amantis* so as to appreciate its exemplary value in the realm of practical ethics.

Gower starts with a consideration of his audience. With the following oft-cited and gracious recognition of the experience of reading so much moral lore,

That who that al of wisdom writ
It dulleth ofte a mannes wit
To him that schall aldaie rede,

the poet promises to write in a style agreeable to a nonspecialist audience:

For thilke cause, if that ye rede,
I wolde go the middle weie
And wryte a bok between the tweie,
Somwhat of lust, somewhat of lore... (Prol. 13-19)

The combination of earnest and game that constitutes the *via media* of exemplary rhetoric of course complicates the reading experience considerably, but it is noteworthy that Gower is the first “reader” of his own text to open up it to complex and opposing responses. He says he writes in such a manner “Which may be wisdom to the wise, / And pley to hem that lust to pleye” (Prol. 84-85*), even if it should seem palpable to us which response “moral” Gower would prefer. Yet if the text is not quite, as Minnis puts it, “all

---

136 See Olsson, “Rhetoric, John Gower, and the Late Medieval Exemplum” (1977), for a relevant explanation of how the trope *homeosis*, or “likeness,” constitutes a basic premise of exemplarity. Defined by Bede the term denotes “a demonstration of what is less familiar by its likeness, which is more familiar” (cited on p. 198). Judson B. Allen’s concept of *assimilatio* is comparable but from a reader-response perspective problematic; see *The Ethical Poetic* (1982), Chapter 4, “Assimilatio and the material of poetry.”
things to all men” (Medieval Theory of Authorship 186), its author nevertheless provides explicit justification for a range of reader responses and so can be seen as trying to leave room for a variety of positions, critical and non-critical alike.\textsuperscript{137} If Gower’s is finally not a full-blown latitudinarian hermeneutic, it nevertheless does involve a high tolerance for different interpretations. His text is ethopoietical. Gower’s first version epilogue elaborates a crucial point about his kind of Horatian approach to “lust” and “lore”:

\begin{verbatim}
In som parte it mai by take
As for to lawhe and for to playe;
And for to looke in other weye,
It mai be wisdom to the wise,
So that somdel for good apprise
And eek somdel for lust and game
I have it mad . . . . (8.3056-62*)
\end{verbatim}

Importantly, the passage suggests that profit and delight are to be “take” by a reader from the text, rather than simply that some parts are more entertaining while others are more edifying, though that is surely the case too. It is as a whole work that the book stands between earnest and game (8.3107-10).\textsuperscript{138} At another place Gower has Genius explain that it is good for the audience to “take that him thenketh good, / And leve that which is not so” (8.260-61). Whether the text was in fact read piecemeal, by different readers seeking to find either the sentence or the solace that suited them, is an interesting historical consideration.\textsuperscript{139} What I think Gower is indicating here, though, is that reading

\textsuperscript{137} Gower justifies his work’s literariness in ways that are familiar to us from the comments of contemporary homilists who aimed to adjust pulpit oratory to a plurality of readers. I cite Gregory the Great in this connection later on. Like the mendicant preachers, Gower’s Genius directs his stories \textit{ad status} (as certain sermons were designated; see for example Crane, \textit{The Exempla of Jaques de Vitry}, xxxviii-ix). As noted earlier, scripture was thought to work on a similar accommodative principle.


\textsuperscript{139} The historical record provides no clear evidence either way according to Pearsall, “The Gower Tradition” (1983). In view of the last quotation and lines 84-85* of the first
is to some degree occasional and thus dependent upon perception, on a way of seeing (a moral optics), something which varies among persons but, doubtless, within them also. Depending on how it is *looked* upon as Gower says ("And for to looke in other weye . . ."), or how it is *taken*, the Confession can evidently have vastly different meanings or effects. Entertainment and edification are as much functions of readers and times as of the texts, if we press this view to its extreme. In this conception, reader response is not linked to some objective properties of the text, nor, for that matter, to quality of persons. To bring out the substance of this claim it is useful to compare the more severe and commonplace stance of the anonymous author of the *Cursor Mundi*, ca. 1300 (ed. Morris). Speaking of the popular taste for secular romances, that author observes in his prologue that "to rede and here Ilkon is prest, / Pe thynges hat þam likes best. / Pe wisman wil o wisdom here, / Pe foul hym draghus to foly nere . . ." (25-28), employing an antithesis which fairly deterministically associates the nature of the reading matter with a variety of character. Fools and foolish matter rush together. Or, as the anonymous poet of the *The Wars of Alexander* (ed. Skeat) says, in a similar context pertaining to reading tastes, "For as þaire wittis ere within so þaire will folowis" (14). It is the same principle of decorum Chaucer appears to invoke when he attributes fabliaux to the
“cherles” on the road to Canterbury, in a move that falsifies the real origins of the comic tales, as is now known, by associating such matter with the lower classes. In Gower’s moderate view, by contrast, the same person can have different and no doubt divided allegiances to books, even to a single book, much as seems to have been the case for the author himself given his own extremely diverse bookish delectations. Granted, the wise and foolish will tend to gravitate to complementary subject matter in any actual social world, but the idea seems to be that what one does with what one reads, how one looks upon texts, is something of an individual rather than a class or category issue.

Another concession to readers occurs in the prologue to Book 1. Here the author, getting ready to assume a narrative persona in the figure of the lover, promises to “speke of thing is noght so strange, / Which every kinde hath upon hond” (1. 4-5, 10-11); that is to say, he gets set to engage the universal subject of Love. The fact that naturatus amor is common to all means that all have some common stake in understanding it. Moreover, amor comprises subject matter which universally delights as much as it instructs. As, according to the Colophon at the end of Book 8, the principalis materia of the work, the topic of romantic love governs the selection of tales and their specific applications: in Genius’s words, “But of conclusion final / Conclude I wol in special / For love . . .” (1.249-51). For instance, in Book 6 when straightaway the sin of Gluttony is broken down into one of its constituent subspecies drunkenness, the vice is transposed “in loves kinde” into the topic of love-drunkenness. The same procedure is followed in numerous other instances throughout the work, e.g., Presumption in Book 1 (thinking oneself worthy of love), Hypocrisy in Book 2 (false seeming in matters of love), Melancholy in Book 3 (despairing over the future of love), Covetousness in Book 5.
(desiring more than one woman’s love), Prodigality in Book 5 (wasting one’s love), and so on. Here we see evidence of typical late medieval penitential adaptation of general precepts to particular circumstances and persons, *ad status et ad populum* as it was known by the preachers. The net result, so Minnis has argued, seems to be that Gower’s particular fiction of the confessional comes to resemble an “Ovidian paradigm” of juxtaposed good and bad exemplary lovers.\(^{140}\) That the *Confessio* does not deal with exemplary lovers exclusively, and that it veers off into things “strange” such as Aristotelian metaphysics and the equally abstruse sciences of astronomy and alchemy, indicates as I have mentioned before that no single paradigm obtains across the whole work. Some argue, too, that the love stories are subservient to more important themes: i.e., the prevailing concern with sex and romantic love merely generates added interest, for a wider range of readers than otherwise might be the case, when it comes to the poem’s profitable moral dimensions.\(^{141}\) Such readers ignore the fact that the teachings concerning *amor* itself consitute one profitable dimension.

Which brings me to a final important cluster of concerns related to the accommodative function of exemplarity as Gower practices it, related once again to the occasionality of ethical understanding. The author, now outfitted *in persona aliorum,*

\(^{140}\) See Minnis, “John Gower, *Sapiens* in Ethics and Politics” (1980), on the poet’s imitation of the *Heroïdes* with respect to the “patterning of *exempla amantum*” (207) in conformity with an “Ovidian paradigm.” The medieval reception of Ovid’s works as *ethicae subponitur* is further documented in Minnis’s “Moral Gower” (1983) and in his *Medieval Theory of Authorship,* pp. xiv, 25, 55ff., 182.

\(^{141}\) When Genius speaks “in detail about love,” claims Gerald Kinneavy, “the specifics are not important in themselves; they serve, rather, to help him fulfill his duty as confessor: to clarify a general, abstract moral principle for the penitent—in this case, a lover” (159). In this austere view, courtly love is only a “rhetorical tool” (158), not a real concrete ethical concern. But there is no reason to think the rhetoric could not have worked the other way around—that is, that the language of confession helps Genius fulfill his role as *praeeperator amoris.*
quos amor alligat, fingens se auctor esse Amantem [in the role of others whom love
binds, the author feigning himself to be a Lover] (1, at 60), at last proceeds in his
narrative “to proven” (1.61) the power of love by recounting his own “wonder hap”
(1.67). Offering to leverage his own personal experience in the service of instructing
others the lover remarks,

Fro point to point I wol declare
And wryten of my woful care,
Mi wofull day, my wofull chance,
That men mowe take remembrance
Of that they schall hierafter rede. (1.73-77)

The sometime lover thereby makes an example of himself, anticipating Genius’s claim
that “every man is othres lore” (8.256) and putting to work the evidentiary resources of
exemplary rhetoric in virtue of which ethics can best be communicated and remembered.
The Latin verses heading the subsequent section of the poetry indicate the nature of the
procedure and the reasons behind it:

Non ego Sampsonis vires, non Herculis arma
Vinco, sum sed vt hi victus amore pari
Vt discant alii, docet experiencia facti.
Rebus in ambiguous que sit habenda via.
Deuis ordo ducis temptata pericla sequentem
Instruit a tergo, ne simul ille cadat.
Me quibus ergo Venus, casus, laqueauit amantem,
Orbis in exemplum scribere tendo palam. (1.ii)

The strength of Samson I do not surpass,
No Hercules in feats of arms am I,
But like those victors, victim am of love.
In things unclear experience shows the way;
By it may others learn; the leader’s track,
A crooked record of the dangers met,
Instructs the follower, lest he should fall.

142 The commonplace, aliena vita nobis magistra est. “The lives of others are our
teachers,” attributed to Cato in John of Salisbury’s Historia Pontificalis [quoted in Moos,
“The Use of Exempla,” p. 208], stands behind Gower’s remark.
So openly I bring myself to write
Of nets I tumbled in, for me outstretched
By Venus; thus a lover warns the world.

This is one of only a few places where the voice of the Latin glossator seems to be one with that of the poet, signifying an identity between the lover and the authorial voice and thus complicating the distinction between authoritative Latin and lesser vernacular. But the important thing to register in the immediate context of my argument is the way in which supposited *experiencia* becomes a touchstone of persuasion and practical ethics (and is thereby assumed to have some authority in this world after all). A written record of an individual’s past experience is employed as the microcosmic means of enticing and sensitizing readers to macrocosmic moral norms, even as it invites personal judgement regarding the applicability of those norms to new situations. Amans’s is a crooked record, and from it we must infer the straight path. That his is a negative example of a lover ensared by Venus is one of the propositions we are invited to test, in order to understand whether and how *naturatus amor* can be safely experienced by ourselves.

---

143 As Gower remarks in the Prologue to the *Vox Clamantis*, “Writings of the past contain fit examples for the future, for a thing which has previously been experienced will produce greater faith” (*Major Latin Works* 49). Appeals to experience were common in sermons of the period; see Wenzel, “Chaucer and the Language of Contemporary Preaching,” 151-52. Another famous example of the deployment of experience for exemplary ends is The *Book of Margery Kempe*. Experience, in Gower as in other literature, is invariably mediated by prior bookish example to be sure, yet medievals might go on to observe that reading a book is equal to “experience”; on this see Carruthers, *Book of Memory*, p. 169. My remark in the text alludes of course to the notorious gambit at the head of the Wife of Bath’s Prologue, III. 1-3; but see the Explanatory Notes of the *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. 865, and consult the Knight’s Tale, I. 3000-01, for comparisons.
1.4. Proof, Remembrance, Conscience

Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* is preoccupied with conveying philosophical, historical, and religious lore alongside the rendition of genteel examples about love matters. The burden of this kind of Horatian rhetoric, with its combination of lust and lore, plainly rests on the capacities of individual judgement, the discretion of the wise. But what is this practical wisdom which can help determine what is morally salient in the discursive mix? And is Gower confident that individual judgement and self-governance will suffice in establishing wise applications of his material? As we will see in this section, the poet goes a long way towards analyzing and diagnosing the kind of moral rationality from which, according to his perspective, ethics must ultimately derive. And it appears that Gower is not always sure that judgment will not fail.

Allow me to set the scene by recounting the lover’s initial experience in the events of the poem, for some of the language Gower employs will be central to my subsequent investigation. The narrator goes on in Book 1, having changed into the fictional persona of the infatuated Amans, to describe how one day he went walking in the month of May, “When every brid hath chose his make / And thenkth his merthes for to make / Of love that he hath achieved” (1.101-3), wherefore he fell to the ground into a great love-melancholy in remembrance of his own unrequited desire. Next, the God of Love mysteriously pierces his heart with a “firy dart” (1.144), after which Venus comes near to Amans and asks, “What art thou, Sone?” (1.154), before contracting him to relate the nature of his “maladie” (1.164). Amans, hurt and apparently confused, begs for success in his love suit, but Venus replies that he must be absolved by her “oghne clerk”
(1.196), one named Genius, lest the lover’s condition prove fatal. Genius takes over from there, applying what amounts to the *cura animarum* of his priestly function. Like any good father confessor, Genius insists that Amans confess in plain terms and completely to cure his soul; and for his part Genius promises to “oppose and hier” the lover’s shrift, which involves listening but more often a sort of catechistical moral instruction. As a good orator, moreover, Genius is equipped with *exemplorum copia* and so instructs by the particular means of storytelling. Genius assures Amans that he will be educated accordingly in things “touchede of love” (1.236) and, as befits the religious office of a Christian priest moreover, of things “That touchen to the cause of vice” (1.241). Here the equivocal priest of Venus admits that “it is noght my comun us / To speke of vices and vertus, / Bot al of love and his lore” (1.268-69), yet nevertheless Genius shall inform the lover more generally “Whereof thou myht take evidence / To reule with thi conscience” (1.247-8). The aforementioned duality of the Genius—as both confessor and what amounts to a sort of medieval dating specialist or, perhaps, Ms. Manners—is made explicit in the speech. The genial priest next proceeds to elucidate the sins, their

---

144 For the idea of the priestly confessor as *medicus animarum* (physician of the soul) see Leonard E. Boyle, O. P., “The Fourth Lateran Council and Manuals of Popular Theology.” John Fisher also discusses the background to the priest’s role in the penitential tradition after the Council in *John Gower*, pp. 137ff.

145 As Yeager explains, “Confession was, therefore, both probative and pedagogic” (“John Gower and the *Exemplum Form*,” p. 310), that is, interrogative inasmuch as it involved questioning a confessant, but informative in the way learning was imparted also. On the “quasi-judicial framework” of the sacrament of penance, wherein “the penitent is both defendant and prosecutor as he rehearses the failures of his life before the tribunal of God and the whole Church represented in the person of the priest,” see John Wall, “Penance as Poetry,” pp. 179ff.

146 The Latin phrase derives from the *Institutio Oratoria* 12.4 where Quintilian says the orator must be acquainted with as many examples as possible.
subspecies, and affiliated remedial virtues with the curative aid of a copious supply of exempla.

Gower’s poetical ethics of *naturatus amor* is based on certain basic assumptions contained in his terminology, his keywords, and they are that the *proof* of an argument lies in the *evidence* of *experience* inscribed in *examples* useful for future *remembrance*, and that the said *evidence* is to be judged according to the *rule* of one’s own *conscience*. Again, the language is all Gower’s. Packed into this brief but meaningful summary, which I have knitted together from the skeins of the poetical idiom, is the substance of the late medieval ethics of exemplarity as I have come to understand it. Unpacking the main concepts—particularly *proof*, *remembrance*, and *conscience*—in light of Gower’s practice will reveal the specific contributions and permutations of the language of exemplarity within the *Confessio Amantis*. Gower’s idiom is for the most part based on common late medieval Aristotelian understandings of conscience (*conscientia/synderesis*) and rational self-governance (*phronesis* or *prudentia*), and the rhetorical and evidentiary function of individual instances (*paradigma*) brought to bear on ethical dilemmas. Both the penitential and poetical contexts of his work serve to enrich and alter such understandings, and they often put them to the test.

To begin with a most fundamental idea in the *Confessio Amantis*, “remembrance” (a word occurring over fifty times in the poem according to Pickles and Dawson, *A Concordance*), which, as is of course self-evident, is closely related to confession. “So schal I moche thing foryte: Bot if thou wolt my schrifte oppose . . .” (1.224-25), worries Amans. But what exactly is the nature of the kinship between memory and confession? Peck has described confessional practice as Gower would have understood it as “a kind
of psychoanalysis,"147 an exercise in soul-searching and stock-taking which attempted to piece together an identity through the personal recollection of the past. Reason in this therapeutic context uses memory to reorder, or re-member, the confused fragments of one's life history. The priest's role, as Gower elsewhere explains, is to apply the six or seven circumstantiae in the interrogation of the confessor (see Mirour de l'Ommes 14833ff.), those same circumstances with which we are familiar from the rhetorical handbooks, and thus ensure that confession has been comprehensive and complete.148 The preacher's and poet's roles are related to that of the confessor in this respect, inasmuch as their exemplary tales (i.e., "remembrances" in Gower) serve as the building-blocks of personal identity formation by providing exemplars for comparison, on which more later. But I should now want to add to Peck's observations that the quasi-psychoanalytical work of the confessional is, in view of the enduring temporality of a penitent's continuing existence, actually never but momentarily or tentatively complete. Shrift depends on a proper analysis of the circumstances, the "when," "where," "why," "how," and so forth of each and every past act as it is remembered, and such a thoroughgoing self-contextualization of the past is always liable to error and evasion. As

147 See Kingship and Common Profit, p. 30, and his Introduction to John Gower, pp. 7-18.
148 Peck, Kingship and Common Profit, p. 31. Also see Robertson, "A Note on the Classical Origin of 'Circumstances' in the Medieval Confessional," for the history of the interrogation.

See sermon 42 in Middle English Sermons: Edited from British Museum MS, Royal 18 B. xxiii, ed. W. O. Ross, for a concise vernacularized account of the rules of confession. For example: "The forthe reule is quod confessio sit plena—prii confession must be full. Tell þe circumstances þat aggregethe þi synnes, tell what place þou didust þat synne, tell in what tyme þou didest itt, tell with what felishipe þou didust itt, and tell where-fore þou did it" (p. 279). The role of memory is explicitly laid out with an exemplum of a woman cleaning house with her broom: "So must þou do alike-wyse. þou must clense þin hous of þi soule, and make it holy in þe siȝt of God. . . . þi besom [i.e., broom] shall be of longe durynge remembrauns of all þi þeres afore, by þe wiche þou shalt gadur all þe synnes of þi soule to þe þur in þi siȝt" (p. 279).
we have just seen, Amans admits that his memory is fading and so asks for the confession which will restore it to him; memory is not infallible. A related point is that the examinations of conscience must be carried out repeatedly, or once a year if we stick to the stipulations of the Fourth Lateran Council, though there is no reason to think that profound self-examination would have coincided exclusively with the institutional requirements—reading Gower, or hearing a sermon, will give a person the same opportunities. At any rate, my point is that the penitential activity of remembrance is based on the ongoing possibility of imminent reconfigurations of the past, retroactive changes in self-image if you will, and thus never can it be said that confession is sufficiently completed in this life.

Let me elaborate further. One submits oneself to continual re-interpretation in Christian penitential theology, and is thereby liable to find fissures and traces in the narrative of the self, only to discover that a prior view of self (a past remembrance) was perhaps false, superficial, unexamined, or incomplete. Re-reading the self brings new self-understanding, and in some accounts this is what we witness Amans undertaking in the Confessio. Envisaged as a kind of slowly advancing hermeneutical circle, we can see confessional testimony as processual and provisional in the way that meaning—the meaning of a life, or "narrative identity" to make use of a useful recent critical term\textsuperscript{149}—is constituted and reconstituted in the act of penitential dialogue, as a person shuttles back and forth between the past and one's present valuation of it. This is the dialectical way

\textsuperscript{149} See Ricoeur, \textit{Oneself as Another}, pp. 113-68, where he refines a term originally given currency by Maclntyre in \textit{After Virtue}. Ricoeur discusses narrative identity in terms of a "twofold movement" between general life plans and particular circumstances, which it is argued is comparable to the way reading proceeds by a continuous exchange between whole and part. This conception of the temporal dimension of ethics and aesthetics informs my remarks.
readers actually read, to draw a comparison as Augustine actually did (Confessions 11.28): that is, the very manner in which one works on the material of texts to achieve a sense of an integrated whole by moving backwards and forwards among constituent parts with the aid of memory and expectation. Our understanding of ourselves is comparable to reading, excepting that, as Augustine also understood, unlike a poem the real history of the world of which individual human beings are a part is incomprehensible as a whole (Confessions 4.11). Life is ongoing and much more complex than any literary text.

Nevertheless, in resembling a beautiful poem, the course of the world has a sense about it that is produced out of the relations of its contrastive parts (City of God 11.18). This description of historical understanding is as good as any for explaining the way that exemplary texts—and thus the self—may be read and reread in time. In the best of circumstances it may therefore be possible to become "hol ynowh" (8.2869), as Amans himself may have become by the end of the poem (though of course whole enough is not the same as being entirely undivided), through continual therapeutic recollection of the self.

Many exempla in the Confessio Amantis tell against the vice of forgetfulness and so engage a number of the foregoing concerns about living with memory in a story-

---


151 For more on wholeness and memory see Katherine Chandler, “Memory and Unity in Gower’s Confessio Amantis.” As I have suggested before, the real nature of Amans’s sufficiency at the end of the poem is debatable because his self-recollection seems conditional on the mysterious swoon and (purely lucky?) removal of the fiery lancegay by Cupid. As noted, this remains a problem for any reading of the lover’s development over the course of the poem—a poem which lends itself to continual retrospective understanding.
shaped world. Some such wisdom is embodied in the Tale of Capaneus, for example, which is related by Genius under the rubric of the vice presumption ("Surquiderie"), subspecies of the principal deadly sin of Pride. The pompous knight Capaneus is one who held such a high opinion of himself that he refused to pray to the gods for support, until one day at the height of his vanity he went out to battle against Thebes and was promptly pulverized by a fire from heaven. Thus may we learn "That ek ful ofte time it grieveth, / Whan that a man himself believeth / . . . / And hath forgete his oghne vice" (1.2011-115). The moral is at once complex and simple. Here the warning concerns excessive self-regard on one hand, and on the other a failure to regard the self closely enough—both of them issues that are couched in terms of the responsibilities of the memory. True self-knowledge occurs, as is usual in Gower, when a balance is struck between two contrary extremes. Presumption, as the tale is supposed to illustrate, does not know itself (Omnia scire putat, set se Presumpcio nescit, according to the Latin verse at 1.viii) and so results in a fatal self-forgetting or misrecognition.

Vainglory poses similar threats to the integrity of the narrative of the self, as the tale of Nebuchadnezzar's Punishment, near the end of Book 1, goes to show. The all-conquering king of Babylon was

so full of veine gloire,
That he ne hadde no memoire
That ther was eny good bot he,
For pride of his prosperite. (1.2799-802)

---

152 I allude to Brian Wicker's The Story-Shaped World: Fiction and Metaphysics (1975).
153 Closely resembling the proverbial Plures plura sciant et seipsos nesciant, "Many know many things yet do not know themselves," attributed to Bernard in a marginal gloss at 6.1567. It also occurs in William Langland's Piers Plowman B XI.3.
God, the king of kings, who peers omnisciently into the “privetes of mannes herte”
(1.2806), duly humiliated king Nebuchadnezzar for his myopic misreading or
misremembering of his own condition. One day when the king arrogantly “drowh into
memoire” (1.2958) how great he had become, he was transformed into a beast of the
field. It was ordained that for seven years Nebuchadnezzar would live in the wilderness,
until he became sufficiently repentant. And so it passed. Set out to pasture, the
conquerer finally recalled his former glory and, comically, on his back with his hooves up
in the air, Nebuchadnezzar prayed ardently for mercy. Suddenly he was

Reformed to the regne
In which that he was wont to regne;
So that the Pride of veine gloire
Evere afterward out of memoire
He let it passe. (1.3035-39)

A complex interplay of forgetting and remembering is evident in this exemplary story, as
in the last. For his improper memories Nebuchadnezzar is damned to suffer, as when for
instance his focus is too much on his own achievements, but for his proper remembrance
the king is redeemed, since it is only after he recognizes his former glory in the light of
its divine provision and laments his “bestial” (1.2913) heart that he is granted his
humanity once again. *Forgetting* has the same range of ambiguity in its application to
right proportion, for it is commended in the context of the last passage where vainglory is
appropriately put behind him, but condemned when it proves an obstacle to self-
governance and self-knowledge. When Nebuchadnezzar finally recollects himself
through the agency of right memory he is restored to himself, given his “reign” back,
which also implies the ability to rule himself again. Having the right memories, at the
right time, in light of the proper evidence is obviously of great moment for the self-governance and self-understanding of persons.154

154 The classical humanist imperative to self-examination—the Delphic maxim gnōthi seauton, Know Yourself—is cited by Gower in the tale of the Roman Triumph ("Bot know thiself," 7.2388) and in the accompanying gloss (nosce te ipsum); Simpson, Sciences and the Self, pp. 203-11, discusses the tale in this light. The Delphic Oracle was by no means unfamiliar to medievals, for many of whom only an examined life (in various special senses) would be worth living. See Eliza G. Wilkins, "Know Thyself" in Greek and Latin Literature, for discussion of early references—e.g., from Heraclitus to Horace to Ambrose to Augustine; see J. A. W. Bennett, "Nosce te ipsum: Some Medieval Interpretations," for a discussion of various uses of the idiom; and see Owst, Literature and Pulpit, p. 185, for another brief discussion. Its relevance to the argument of this chapter and other parts of the thesis does not need to be spelled out. The precept is cited by many later authors (e.g., Bernard of Silvester, Ralph of Longchamps, Hugh of Saint-Victor; see Minnis and Scott, eds., MLTC, p. 153 n. 158; Peter Abelard entitled his work on ethics, Scito Te ipsum) and is attested later in the vernacular in, to take only once instance, The Prick of Conscience, Prol. 13: "To mak himself frust to knowe / And from synne and vanities hem drawe..." (The Idea of the Vernacular, ed. Wogan-Browne, p. 243).

The maxim crops in other interesting contexts of Gower's poem, as in the notorious tale (a "wikke ensample" according to Chaucer's Man of Law, II.78) of Canace and Machaire in Book 3, in which Gower gives yet another perspective on the ethical dimensions of memory. An incestuous love affair between a brother and sister is there described in terms of an innocent lack of "insihte" (3.181), which might at first seem to recall Plato's theory of reminiscence:

Bot as the bridd which wole alihte  
And sethe the mete and noght the net, 
Which in deceipte of him is set,  
This yonge folk no peril sihe,  
But that was likinge in here yhe,  
So that hei felle upon the chance  
Where witt hath lore his remembrance. (3.182-88)

In Genius's rendering the pair is finally acquitted for having been too young to know better, and critics have been exercised ever since over the (for them at least) troubling moral implications of the tale. Restricting ourselves to the idea of self-examination and memory, we might wonder what it means that reason was deprived of "remembrance"? Should the children have had some insight or shame, some sort of primordial reminiscence after all? Not according to the history of marriage and sexuality given in Book 8, where we learn—in what might be taken as an index of Gower's characteristic candour and apparent tolerance for sexual deviance (Rosemary Woolf, "Moral Chaucer and Kindly Gower")—that the inflammation of love is indifferent to degrees of kinship.
Which brings me to the next question of evidentiary proof. Memory is, as we see in the foregoing three exempla and in the confessional dialogue of which Amans is a part, linked to therapeutic self-evaluation, life history, and identity formation—a constellation of ethical concerns whose reach is broad and deep. But memory has more specific, pragmatic ends too; it has a role in guiding action and conforming the human intellect or will to the “evidence” (the word occurs thirty-nine times in the Confessio and can be defined variously as factual proof, proverbial sayings or authority, sign or symbol, instructive example or model; MED, “evidence,” q. v. 1-5). In medieval practical ethics, as Mary Carruthers has shown, the trained memory, which is what she rightly calls “a condition of prudence,” cultivates concrete “moral habit” through repeated exposure to the evidence of examples—“ethical memories”—from the past. Such a cultivation of prudential memory is thus linked to “the formation of moral virtues” (Book of Memory 71, 182, 156). Amans is likewise told by his confessor to hold tales close in remembrance (e.g., 1.2364-65; 3.612; 3.2196-97; 3.2773), and “to be war therby,” indicating the importance of mnemotechnics in Gower’s thought about prudence and the centrality of exempla to its exercise. Representative cases were thought to be measuring sticks against which to set one’s own past and future actions: as prototypes, parallel cases, or tokens of inherited wisdom exempla serve in evaluative and prescriptive

Still, that “remembrance” is absent in this instance remains an important moral consideration, suggesting that some memories are constitutively social (rather than Platonic) and need to be inculcated over time—time being precisely what the children have not had enough of.

Memory is also central to the tale of Appolonius of Tyre, Book 8. See Chandler, “Memory and Unity,” 23-25, for a discussion.

To Aristotle was attributed the notion that “examples and fables resemble evidence” (Pseudo-Aristotle, Problems 916b, 25-34). For fifteenth-century references to the utility of the past as a source of exemplary evidence see John Lydgate, Troy Book, Prol. 80-83 and George Ashby, Active Policy of a Prince, Prol. incipit.
functions, providing concrete patterns or models to emulate or avoid. In order to function prudently the memorial part of the self thus requires evidence in the form of what we can call a taxonomy of cases from the past experience (e.g., “I finde a gret experience,"
Genius notes in a preface to the tale of the Trojan Horse, “Wherof to take an evidence,”
1.1073-74), or more broadly defined proverbial or philosophical *lore* taken from books, but at any rate the stuff of the cultural imagination—let us say, the mental furniture that forms a *sensus communis*—constituting an individual’s moral horizons, rules of conduct, or simple self-assurance.157 Much of this is to describe the so-called “precedential mode” (Olsson 1977) of the exemplum. However, in Gower the questions of proof and the perception of proof are in practice never simple and straightforward. Evidence, experience, and imagination are terms fraught with multivalent significance in the *Confessio*, and they are worth investigating in some detail because they pull together a number of key practical problems.

The first few books of the poem especially seem to insist on the dangers of perception of proof and the possible fraudulence of so much evidence. The first string of exempla in Book 1 concerns vision and hearing, the portals of the soul which as the gnomic verse heading suggests are extremely fallible: *Visus et auditus fragilis sunt ostia mentis, / Que viciosa manus claudere nulla potest* [The doors of fragile mind, the eye and ear, / So faulty are, no hand may shut them up] (1.iv). Here we are shown how delicate

157 In Book 6 Amans tells his confessor that he sometimes recalls the romance of Amadas and Ydoine, among others, in order to remind himself that sorrow never lasts (6.875-89), though the solace he receives lasts only as long as a “cherie feste” (6.891). At another place (in the rhyme royal complaint) Amans seems to have envisaged himself as existing inside such a romance (8.2238). Stories have utility in providing solace and power in orienting the self in moral space, but as Gower seems to suggest they can also lead to solipsism; see Simpson, *Sciences of the Self*, pp. 254-58, for a discussion of a “self-deluding practice of reading” as modelled by Amans.
indeed is human perception, when for instance in the subsequent Tale of Acteon, “touchende of mislok” (1.334), we learn how “an yhe is as a thief / To love, and doth ful gret mischief” (1.319-20). The illustration is of a worthy knight named Acteon who is changed into a hart, having stolen a look at Diana bathing, and then devoured by his own hounds. Further “to proven it is so” (1. 385) Genius next relates the Tale of Medusa, which like the last exemplum indicates how perilous a misdirected glance, mislok, can be. The evidence of things seen can be terribly destructive,158 even given what would seem to be a nearly accidental glance. Moving on to hearing, the confessor provides the following segue:

Of mislokyng how it hath ferd,
As I have told, now hast thou herd,
My goode sone, and tak good hiede.
And over this yet I thee rede
That thou be war of thin heringe,
Which to the herte the tidinge
Of many a vanite hath broght,
To tarie with a mannes thought.
And natheles good is to hiere
Such thing wherof a man may lere
That to vertu is accordant . . . . (1.445-55)

A paradoxical dual register of significance is manifest here, since the initial lines foreground the fact that the confessional practice is itself an exercise in listening aright. Hearing tales is constitutive of Amans’s moral education, and so it is not without some considerable irony (and obvious application to the situation of readers of the Confessio) that the first course of instruction has to do with cultivating circumspection towards

---

158 Keeping in mind the etymological sense of L. evidentia, “things seen.” That these and the other exemplary narratives I cite are perhaps more complex than they at first appear is not something we need always pursue, though see Wetherbee, “Genius and Interpretation” for fine examples of the alternative approach. My assumption throughout is that reading for the moral stops somewhere, if only at some more or less arbitrary level of signification.
things heard. Thus Aspidis the Serpent shows him a resourceful snake stopping up its own ears to fend off the seductive sounds of the charmer’s “enchantement” (1.477; therefore contradicting the headnote at 1.iv?); next the story of Ulysses and the Sirens provides similar instruction, counseling Amans to “yif no credence” to what he hears without sufficient “evidence” (1.533-34), resulting in a kind of catch-22.

Genius’s discourse on the perils of proof therefore has obvious application at the head of the collection of exemplary narratives. Genius is explicit when he says that Amans is instructed

    Wherof, my sone, in remembrance
    Thou myth ensample taken hiere,
    As I have told, and what thou hiere
    Be wel war, and yif no credence,
    Bot if thou se more evidence. (1.530-35)

Gower’s full range of preoccupations with perceiving, remembering, and proving is brought together in this early passage, betraying as it does the intimate links existing between exemplary rhetoric and the practice of confession. We are made to understand that the wisdom of Genius’s speech is inherently problematic, at least to the extent that it is just another quantity of exemplary “evidence.” The difficulty of the situation in fact intensifies as the poem proceeds, when for instance we see Genius offering inconsistent or questionable advice to Amans. How much “credence” one is to give the confessor at any point in the confession is a crucial question for Amans as it is for any reader of Gower’s poem. To what extent the audience is impressed by Amans’s own idiosyncratic example, only one more piece of evidence, is also in question. The interpretive problem points up a critical but insufficiently acknowledged aspect of medieval exemplarity: a
moral example is never its own justification but rather must be passed through the individual judgment of conscience and given proper "credence" by its interpreters.

But before moving on to consider the arbitrating role of conscience, we would do well to observe other ways in which Gower's exempla sometimes implicitly challenge their credentials by calling in question the conditions of exemplary evidence. Examples of misplaced credence indeed fill the pages of the poem beyond Book 1 and raise the problem of proof in a variety of ways, again showing just how dependent human knowledge is on the vagaries of perception and experience. For instance, there are plenty of liars and imposters in the Confessio to reckon with. Mundus misleads Paulina with "blinde tales" (1.927) in an effort to convince her to sleep with him under the pretence that he is the god Anubus come to bear a child on her. Only too late does Paulina lament the offending knight's "ypocrisie" and her own "fals yimaginacion" (1.956, 958) that made her credulity possible. Deceptive or counterfeit "ymaginacioun" is singled out by Gower as a particularly heinous offense against reason in other parts of the work as well.¹⁵⁹ A similar story is the one about Nectanabus, coming much later in Book 6, concerning the villainous sorcerer who uses a nearly identical god-trick in order to deceive Olimpias of Macedoine. It is also noteworthy that the two hypocrites just mentioned take advantage of religious belief, another sort of credence, by fabricating

¹⁵⁹ Fantastical imagination causes one to fall into love melancholy (3.125-27); to fear the worst or have false expectations (5.321ff.); to become jealous (5.511-12) and idolatrous (5.1323ff.). The "ymaginacion" is nevertheless integral to love: Rosiphelee is rebuked for her idleness that results from a lack of such amorous imagining (4.1245ff.). Amans describes himself as being under the sway, for better and worse, of "thilke unwise fantasie" (8.2866). And insofar as Genius himself represents ingenium, imagination, Gower confers some significant degree of credibility upon it in the realm of love and politics; see Simpson, Sciences of the Self, pp. 264-67, on the different potentialities of the imagination, a faculty that can lead to tyranny or mercy.
bogus prophetic revelations to achieve their ends. Similar artifice is employed by characters in the tales of Pope Boniface (Book 2) and Virgil’s Mirror (Book 5), suggesting yet other ways in which revealed religion may be exploited. As the story of the Trojan Horse shows, false “evidence” (1.1160) may similarly come in the form of a conciliatory sacred offering (as in this case a peace offering to Minerva). The wise are therefore counseled to judge the truth based on what they can know and discover (“the wise men ne demen / The thinges after that thei semen, / Bot after that thei knowe and finde,” 3.1073-74), though it is also true, as Genius teaches later, in Book 7, qualifying somewhat his cautious remarks in other parts of the confession, that genuine faith must place trust where no substantive evidence exists at all. Perceptual or empirical knowledge is therefore in tension with a genuine Christian faith that emphatically believes in the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen.

Further instances of the misappropriation or misapplication of evidence in Gower pile up. In Book 2 we learn all about False Semblant, though his notorious ubiquity is already well-known since (if we have not already read the Roman de la Rose) “al dai in experience / A man mai se thilke evidence / Of faire wordes whiche he hiereth” (2.1899-1901). And next we meet “Fa crere,” or False Credence, extorter of goods who “makth believe, / So that fuloste he hath deceived, / Er that he mai ben aperceived” (2.2136-38).

---

161 Hebrews 11.1. Genius provides an allusive rendering of the celebrated definition of faith when he discusses the relevant part of philosophy: “Theologie is that science / Which unto man yifth evidence / Of thing which is noght bodely . . .” (7.73-75). Evidence in this case is not knowable, for in the resonant words of Hugh of St Victor, “Faith is a voluntary servitude” (cited in John of Salisbury’s Metalogicon, IV.13 [p. 223]). Whence the vulnerability of those taken in by false prophecy in the abovementioned tales. Again, we see Genius teaching according to a tacit principle of contraries whereby contrastive wisdom gets juxtaposed with one another.
In the tale of the False Bachelor (Book 2) it is shown how a token ring in proof of inheritance can be embezzled. More suggestively, Genius explains the way mirrors are intrinsically deceptive ("The Mirour scheweth in his kinde / As he hadde al the world withinne, / And is in sooth nothing therinne," 3.1076-78; cf. 2.1921-22), which, recalling of course that the mirror is everywhere a metaphor for didactic literary discourse in the late medieval period, implicates the specular supposition of exemplary rhetoric itself.162 A skepticism towards the evidence of rhetoric in particular is borne out in still other places. Bad fame, or "worst speche" (3.2121), is said to prevail in the world. A false lover's words can prove a false "enchantment" (4.765), as the tale of Demephon and Phillis among others indicates. In this vein the middle portion of Book 5 presents itself as a virtual Legend of Good Women, consisting of many bad men of course, treating the problem of false witness and perjury. Sins of the tongue, we learn, include argumentativeness and a lack of restraint (illustrated in Book 3 by the tales of Jupiter, Juno, and Tiresias; Phebus and Cornide; and Jupiter and Laar). "Mi Sone," instructs Genius at one place, where his words resonate with those of the Maniciple's practical

162 See Grabe, The Mutable Glass: Mirror-Imagery in the Titles and Texts of the Middle Ages and English Renaissance. For an early example, Gregory the Great, Moralia in Job 2.1. I've noted occurrences at the outset of the thesis (see note 4), but among the many other references to be found in the vernacular is John Lydgate's confident statement regarding the veracity and effectiveness of recorded examples in history: "To make a merour only to oure mynde, / To seen eche thing trewly as it was, / More bright and clere than in any glas" (Troy Book, Prol. 120-22); and John Capgrave's hope that female religious will "loke as in a glasse" into his Life of St Gilbert, Prol. Gower's first work was entitled Speculum Meditantis (better known as Mirour de l'Ommne). And in the Confessio Gower employs the terminology, for example, to speak of exemplary clerics as "The Mirour of ensamplerie" (Prol. 496) and Amans's beloved lady is described in the traditional manner of a "Mirour and ensample of goode" (5.2605). In Gower's retelling of the story of Virgil's Mirror a mantic looking glass produces true predictions of the future. A mirror also appears at the end of the poem when Venus has Amans look at his own reflection, by means of which he is supposed to recognize his decrepitude.
dame in the *Canterbury Tales*, “be thou non of tho, / To jangle and telle tales so, / And
namely that thou ne chyde” (3.831-33). Genius’s teachings about rhetoric are sometimes
rather more pessimistic than any of these negative examples in themselves may have so
far indicated. As the confessor puts it in one place, “word is wynd” (3.2768).

Implicitly, deeds are what count as the measure of moral integrity. But rhetoric or
linguistic proof is nevertheless an efficient instrument in the confessor’s hands, and so
Genius can be seen defending creative speech in terms elsewhere that, not surprisingly,
qualify if they do not contradict the cautionary advice given so far. In Book 2 the tale of
the Travellers and the Angel exemplifies the probative power of tale-telling and gives us
a unique perspective on Gower’s rhetorical art. The tale is worth lingering over.\(^{163}\)
According to this tale Jupiter once sent down an angel to earth to discover the condition
of humankind, and when the angel happened upon a pair of unsuspecting travellers he set
about to test them:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{This Angel with his words wise} \\
\text{Opposeth hem in sondri wise,} \\
\text{Now lowed wordes and now softe,} \\
\text{That mad hem to desputen ofte,} \\
\text{And ech of hem his reson hadde.} \\
\text{And thus with tales he hem ladde} \\
\text{With good examinacioun,} \\
\text{Til he knew the condicioun,} \\
\text{What men thei were bothe tuo.} \quad (2.307-15)
\end{align*}
\]

The angel finds the one man covetous and the other envious and next proceeds to teach
them a very memorable lesson on the self-destructive effects of their respective vices.

Now whatever else it indicates, the passage I’ve cited appears to give a conspicuous and

\(^{163}\) Another rendering of the exemplum (“Avarice and Envy”) can be found in Jacques de
Vitry; see T. F. Crane, p. 196. Mary Schenck, pp. 370-71, presents a brief comparison of
de Vitry’s version with its fabliau analogue, “Del Couvoiteus et de l’envieus.”
concise description of a confessor’s rhetorical handling of penitential interrogation,
“opposing” his parishioner as is his responsibility, and “examining” the condition of an
interlocutor through the agency of “tales,”\textsuperscript{164} recalling the manner in fact in which Genius
as priest proves Amans (note that the speaker markers \textit{Opponit Confessor} and \textit{Respondet
Amans} are loitering in the margins of the manuscript reminding readers of the pastoral
situation of the dialogue). Another suggestive detail concerns the angel’s methods
(“Now lowed wordes and now softe, / That mad hem to desputen ofte”), his way of
speaking that seems to parallel Gower’s method of provoking debate and reflection by
means of the controversial juxtapositions of contrastive evidence.\textsuperscript{165}

Rhetoric, as Gower clearly recognizes, is therefore a powerful verbal science. We
learn elsewhere in the \textit{Confessio Amantis} that creative or eloquent speech is necessary to
human affairs, “For specheles may no man spede” (1.1293). Jests, riddles, and
“demandes” in particular represent efficient ways of testing one’s mettle (Three
Questions; Tale of Florent: Book 1), teaching moral lessons (Trump of Death: Book 1),
and consoling the brokenhearted (Apollonius of Tyre: Book 8). In the multiplication of

\textsuperscript{164} A word with a vast semantic range in the language designating anything from factual
information to fable; proverb to prophecy; general utterance to a specific complaint,
argument, or exposition; a narrative account to number counting; and from having regard
for value to a reproach or blame: MED, “tale,” q. v. 1-12.
\textsuperscript{165} Does the angel’s approach refer to a manner of speaking (loud = harshly; soft =
imimately, gently) or the matter of which he speaks (loud = obviousness, directness,
plainness; soft = indirection, secrecy)? Might the angel’s modulated way of speaking
resemble that of Chaucer’s good Parson, who when he speaks to sinful men is generally
“discreet and benynge” but who upon encountering an obstinate man will “snybben
sharply” (\textit{General Prologue} I. 518, 523)? See further Jill Mann, \textit{Chaucer and Medieval
Estates Satire}, pp. 60-61, on the ideal combination of “gentleness and severity” in
pastoral practice. Gower’s meaning is uncertain, though the collocation (loud/soft) is
attested elsewhere in Middle English; see MED, “loud” q. v. 1. (a). To draw a parallel
between the angelic speech and Gower’s ethical poetic in any case seems warranted by
the language used in the description of “opposing” and “examining.”
such instances we come to appreciate the full force of the proverbial “wordes ben of vertugrete” (6.449) and “word above alle ethli thinges / Is virtuous in his doings. / Wher so it be to evele or goode” (7.1557-58). Words have power. In a Latin verse Gower cites another common proverb: *Herba, lapis, sermo, tria sunt virtute replete, / Vis tamen ex verbi pondere plura facit* [These three are efficacious: herb, stone, speech; / And yet by force of word’s weight more is moved] (7.v). The potency of language is so great that “word mai worche above kinde” (4.438) in transforming lifeless matter to conform to our desires, as has already been shown in the flagrantly optimistic tale of Pygmalion (Book 4). It should come as no surprise, then, that the art of eloquence, consisting in the correct placement of words in proportion to one another and according to canons of decorum, “is, men sein, gret prudence” (4.2652), according to Genius. The handling of language is integral to the ethical perception and deliberation from which *prudent* action is derived. Hence, “go ther vertu moral duelleth,” instructs Venus in her final speech to Amans, “Wher ben thi bokes . . .” (8.2925-26). On the other hand, a person who ignores wise *lore* or puts it out of memory and “wol noght loke his evidence” is called Negligent (as the tales of Phaeton and Icarus exemplify, Book 4).

Evidence, remembrance, exemplum: with these fairly homologous terms we are right back where we started, at Gower’s implied blueprint for a practical ethics of exemplarity, properly forewarned but perhaps also given courage by the various and paradoxical instances. Now there is one last piece of the puzzle to fit together with the rest, and that is the place of conscience in the medieval ethical imagination as Gower envisages it. As was remarked before, exempla are only as useful as their readers or hearers make them; good examples are, in other words, as good as the persons who
practice them. Exemplary evidence must be *judged* appropriately. In the language
Genius uses, "As thou shalt hier me devise, / Thow miht thiself the betre avise"
(2.3529-30), invoking a commonplace association between rhetoric and rational self-
governance in the Aristotelian tradition. Genius, as we have seen, undertakes to provide
Amans with the rhetorical material he will need for proper judgement, "Wherof thou
myht take evidence / To reule with thi conscience" (1.247-48; recurring at 3.2249-50 and
5.2919-20).¹⁶⁶ Amans is thus made "war" (e.g., 5.7838) through the agency of Genius by
having been given an extensive taxonomy of cases, an array of moral stories and
proverbs, which among other things is good to retain and bear against future
contingencies and cases of conscience. Basically, conscience has its role in the activity
of applying examples to the diverse conditions that arise in the ethical life, employing
comparisons with the aid of memory to reach specific determinations about what it is
good to do or become. Amans is invited thereby to "ley thi conscience in weyhte, / Mi
goode Sone, and schrif the hier" (2.1926-27), to reflect on his character and testify to his
condition in an effort to restore order and serenity to the soul through self-assessment.
Advising oneself is central to the moral life, but as Chaucer’s *Tale of Melibee* also
teaches, one does not attain good judgement without the aid of the counsel of others.
Conscience is a function of communal evaluation as much as of individual right rule, and
so it preserves personal agency even as it works within the restrictions set down by the
*sensus communis*. Genius describes the moral self-in-community in terms of medieval
political economy:

> every man for his partie

¹⁶⁶ The pair of rhyming words (*conscience : evidence*) occur in no less than eight places
in the poem; see Pickles and Dawson, *A Concordance*, Appendix III.
A kingdom hath to justifie,
That is to sein his oghne dom. (8.2111-13)

Microcosmic instances of a larger political macrocosm, human reason and conscience
("dom") is envisaged as the ethical cornerstone of self and society. To be a moral being
is therefore to recognize that one has a certain authority over the jurisdiction of the self,
always in relation to others. Conscience thus enlarges the scope of one's ethical
responsibilities.

Conscience, like the other ethical concepts we have had occasion to examine, is
not without its problems and paradoxes in Gower, for whom the ethics of exemplarity is
not immune to criticism. Conscience is described as providing a "reule" (1.1236), yet as
a prior citation seems to indicate ("Wherof thou myth take evidence / To reule with thi
conscience," 1.248) the conscience must also in a sense be ruled, or at least moderated by
forces outside itself, namely, established upon the proof at hand. The ambiguity over the
sources of conscience perhaps alludes to the dual or split nature of the conscience
(consciential/synderesis) that had wide currency in scholastic philosophy. Basically,
conscientia is a fallible human moral faculty whose role is to apply the natural precepts
or dispositions of synderesis.\(^67\) Conscientia, not being perfect like the innate synderesis,
is therefore susceptible to "fantasies" (2.2898) brought on by the misperception of
evidence, as we readily see in the case of a certain Pope who "ful of innocence /
Conceiveth in his conscience" (2.2901-2) a mistaken notion that it is God's will he resign
his post, when in fact what had happened was a usurping Cardinal planted the suggestion
subliminally by means of an ear-trumpet employed during the Pope's slumber! We may

\(^{67}\) On the important distinction see T. C. Potts, Conscience in Medieval Philosophy, and
Denis Bradley, Aquinas and the Twofold Human Good.
recall in this context the misleading and sometimes tragic effects of the evidence of false prophesy, hypocrisy, and lies—the stuff that conscience must nevertheless employ to inform itself in dire circumstances. Genius explains with the tale of Ceix and Alceone that dreams are as equivocal as anything else in this respect: “Of swevenes stant al thapparence, / Which otherwhile is evidence / And otherwhile bot a jap” (4.3053-56). It is in fact always possible to misrule or, as Gower says in another place, “misuse” conscience and thereby be misruled by it when not properly “avised” (Prol. 520-21). As Aquinas explains, “Conscientia . . . is like a rule which is itself rule-governed, so there is nothing surprising if error can occur in it” (Debated Questions on Truth 17.2.7; translated in Potts 133). Practical rationality, the last arbiter of personal ethical judgement, is not infallible. It must nevertheless do its best in the moral universe imagined by Gower, with his recognition that practical reason depends on the continual apprehension of cases as much as upon accepted, stable categories. “The teaching on matters of morals,” Aquinas also said, “even in their general aspects is uncertain and variable. But still more uncertainty is found when we come down to the solution of particular cases” (Aquinas, Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics 2.2.259).

---

168 On the tragic potential of Thomistic conscientia vis-à-vis synderesis particularly see MacIntyre, Whose Justice? Whose Rationality, pp. 183-208. Mention of tragedy in ethics calls to mind recent thinking (represented, for example, in the work of Nussbaum, MacIntyre, Williams, and Ricoeur) about conflicts arising in a moral system as a result of its contact with a contingent world. Ruth Barcan Marcus, in “Moral Dilemmas and Consistency,” explains the problem succinctly. Many such thinkers turn to Greek tragedy to illustrate their point, but as I hope is clear medieval literature explored the same difficulties.
1.5. Practical Reason: Meaning and the Mean

Ethics is therefore not an exact science.\textsuperscript{169} But again in a manifestly mutable world that is as Augustine famously described it \textit{nihil solidum, nihil stabile} (\textit{De Civitate Dei} 20.3, p. 702), the inexactitude of the ethics of exemplarity has a useful place insofar as it furnishes individuals with a flexible and adaptable means for deliberating upon and responding to contingencies of circumstance. This fact goes a long way towards explaining the incongruities in and among Gower's examples: he is providing a casuistic taxonomy, hypothetical rather than categorical imperatives, to deal with questions of love, human if also divine, because the instances in which love arises are so very diverse. My point is that the exercise of prudence is given freedom and power precisely in virtue of the diversity and interpretability of the rhetorical mode of exemplarity. That is, judgement exists \textit{because of} the uncertainty of moral application. That the ethics of exemplarity ensures the very possibility of responsibility in individual choice, within the contingent realm of practice, I want to establish with one last set of contrastive examples.

Consider the "olde ensample" (3.1683) of Phebus and Daphne, told against the vice of "Folhaste." Genius tells how Phebus once became infatuated with Daphne, but she rejected his suit. The God of Love, seeing the foolish haste of Phebus in this matter,

\textsuperscript{169} Ethics in the Aristotelian tradition is concerned with what is usual and approximate (\textit{hos epi tou polu} for Aristotle, \textit{NE} 1.3, 1094b21 and 2.2, 1104a1-10; \textit{probabilia} throughout Cicero), rather than what is exceptionless and necessary, or apodeictic. What one relies upon are commonplace and probable truths as guides to practical action. Giles of Rome, from whom Gower received much of his Aristotelian lore, points to this feature of ethics—as translated by Gower's contemporary, John Trevisa: "moral mater (\textit{bat} is to say \textit{his} derke mater) suffreth noust solit serchyg, but it is [of] syngulers doyngs \textit{bat} ben ful vncerteyne, for \textit{hei} ben ful changeable and varyant, a[s] it is declared, secundo Ethicorum . . ." (\textit{Governance of Kings}, ed. Fowler 6).
cruelly determined that "he scholde haste more, / And yit noght speden ate laste"

(3.1698-99). Cupid forthwith lodged a flaming dart of gold into Phebus's already blazing heart, shooting into that of Daphne a contrary dart of cold lead. Thus with greater haste the misdirected lover pursued dear Daphne, but with even greater repulse she fled him.

Finally,

This Daphne into a lorer tre
Was torned, which is evere grene,
In tokne, as yit it mai be sene,
That sche schal duelle a maiden stille,
And Phebus failen of his wille. (3.1716-20)

Genius draws the moral from this sad misadventure:

Be suche ensamples, as thei stonde,
Mi Sone, thou miht understonde,
To hasten love is thing in vein,
Whan that fortune is therayein.
To take where a man hath leve
Good is, and elles he mot leve;
For whan a mannes happes failen,
Ther is non haste mai availen. (3.1721-28)

The expository moral given here would seem to disambiguate and circumscribe the story's field of value, making its purpose self-evident. Looked at on its own, at least, one might more readily accept its conclusion, but as always in light of the sheer copia of examples Genius gives Amans, matters are not nearly so straightforward.

It is by now understood that practice is the end of the rhetoric of example, just as action and not interminable speculation is the end of practical reasoning in the Aristotelian scheme of things, yet how one actually practices a narrative text remains

\[\text{\footnotesize 170 Cf. Aristotle, NE 1.3, 1095a5 (also 2.2, 1103b30 and 10.9, 1179b) where he says action rather than knowledge is the end of the study of ethics. The rhetoricians used the formula to describe the ends of oratory, and later still Sidney would say of poetry that its purpose is "well-doing and not . . . well-knowing only" (Defense of Poetry). Throughout,}\]
to be seen. I mean the last comment quite literally: the moral application has to be perceived by someone in particular in the particulars of the exemplary narrative, and then put into practice in some specific situation. The tale of Phebus and Daphne is put to Amans against a single explicit vice, as the Latin marginal commentary has it, *contra illos qui in amoris causa nimia festinacione concupiscentes tardius expediunt* [against those who for the cause of love too greatly hurrying hinder the success they strive for] (3, at 1688). So it has an overt morality, a practical maxim, as is common with exempla. But how useful or decisive that moral maxim is to any given practice is as yet unclear, for how the exemplum is looked at in its particulars can make all the difference—for we will recall Gower saying, "And for to looke in other weye, / It mai be wisdom to the wise" (8.3058-59*). It is through the perceptual agency of the reader that a decision is made about what is salient in or impressive about the example vis-à-vis the moral. My premise, again, is that to be useful a moral must be brought to bear on a life outside the text through the ethical judgement of particular readers. What I earlier mentioned as a kind of moral optics describes the perceptual, or recalling the Greeks *aesthetic*, mode of judgement in this regard: seeing in the example something meaningful, the reader invents an application that is at once ethical and poetical. Of course it is not always easy to determine the exact proportion of invention that is required to make any given case applicable to life circumstances. How one makes the cross-over from the particular tale of Phebus, with all its fabulous and remote peculiarities (e.g., sun-gods chasing women, Cupids shooting arrows, people turning into trees), and likewise how one achieves the transition from the *sentence*, with its lean abstract generality, to the singularity of one's...
ordinary existence—these are extremely vexed, but eminently practical, questions. To what kind of precept for practical action will reading for the moral reduce the tale of Phebus?

We can understand something of the unpredictability of moral application in this regard by considering the potential disjunction between different modes of time that come into play in reading such an exemplum. For, besides having to account for metaphor and moral generality, the audience who reads for the moral will need to negotiate the contrasting temporalities of the unfolding story and its stated moral point. Genius’s exempla on haste (a temporal concept) are prefaced by a string of pearls of prudential wisdom—e.g., “Men sen alday that rape reweth,” “To caste water in the fyre / Betre is than brenne up al the hous,” “Suffrance hath evere be the beste / To wissen him that secheth reste,” and so on (3.1625, 1632-33, 1639-40)—yet it is noteworthy that by virtue of their apothegmatic form such simple moral maxims are liable to be at odds with the detailed causality and temporality of the subsequent narration. Of course, due to the relative featureless abstraction of maxims—as is the case with all proverbial wisdom—such statements are perhaps all the more amenable to diverse narrative situations, but they lack the ingredient of temporality human existence and narrative both enjoy. The temptation for some modern readers, influenced by the trend of the hermeneutics of suspicion that is still upon us, would probably be to insist that the complex changes of narrative subvert the simple norms they subserve: for story essentially must seem to remain unfriendly to fixed meaning and will not finally be contained. In the present example it is not difficult to pinpoint a conflict between narrative and normative moral meanings, making the suspicious reading more or less
plausible. At first, though, it seems to support rather than subvert the moral generality of maxims. Cupid is depicted as a god who "hath every chance / Of love under his governance" (3.1695) and, just as unlikely, one who is capable of predetermining the outcome of events. His cruel and contrary arrows guarantee that Phebus "scholde him haste more, / And yit noght speden ate lasse" (3.1698-9), thus instantiating the main point about the futility of haste. Life may not actually be so plainly predetermined by Cupid, except of course in fantasy, but the narrator assures us that the fate of Phebus is indeed representative. To this extent the events in the story are complicit with simplistic moral declarations or maxims, since only at the expense of realism is the reader going to be persuaded that haste in love is bad. The moral of the story at last returns us to the timeless proverbial level, which, given the fantastical events in the story, the skeptic will say we actually never left.

For the duration of this particular narrative we adopt a viewpoint on events that we are not normally privy to and this fact poses a problem for the skeptic. Amans himself notices that the implications of the story are problematic (which is not to say irrelevant to him), as we will see. The confessor, for his part, puts all the emphasis on the inviolability of fortune in this tale—fortune being the residual pagan principle of unpredictability and mutability in the world, as viewed from the sublunar perspective to which humans are ordinarily restricted—even as he indicates in the figure of Cupid that fortunes can be explained and should be eschewed. And here we come up against a clash of temporalities. Fortune being what it is, of course, it cannot be perceived in advance quite in the way the moral of this story suggests. As Gower says in the Prologue, "The fortune of this worldes chance" is such that "no man in his persone / Mai knowe, but the
god al one” (Prol. 548-9). It is a truth that, much later in the Confessio, the tales of Ulysses and Telegonus and of Nectanabus will serve to propound (see for example 7.1567-74). Only God and storytellers can by means of the omniscience they assume know the end of a story, the fortunes of a life, the “happes” that finally fall (and if an audience also knows the end of a story, they are perhaps invited to suspend that cognition for the duration of the telling to experience its full, apparently fortuitous effect). There is consequently a paradox built in to any exemplary teaching presuming to show the effects of ill-fortune, since in real life we rarely see our fortunes rising and falling in an equivalently synoptic way; the exemplary tale that would caution us against such ill-fortune seems to suggest that we should. Is there not therefore a major obstacle in making such a moral imperative relevant to readers, themselves caught up in their own narrative moment as it were, or even, like Amans, striving to realize their own amorous fortunes without the benefit of an omniscient vantage? What good is the timeless wisdom of the ages to the events of life lived in the midst of time and change?

Amans’s comic response is a revealing one with respect to the issue of assimilating untempered moral precepts and proverbs to the singularity and temporality of an individual life. After the morality is put to him by Genius, Amans retorts:

Mi fader, grant merci of this:
But while I se mi ladi is
No tre, but halt hire oghne forme,
Ther mai me noman so enforce,
To whether part fortune wende,
That I unto mi lyves ende
Ne wol hire serven everemo. (3.1729-35)

He has no reason to end his love affair, since his love story has not come to an end;
whether he is lucky in love, or whether his love is indeed turned into an wooden emblem
of his failure, Amans has yet to discover without the benefit of godly omniscience. To be sure, the case of Phebus is not unimpressive despite all that Amans or we cannot actually know in advance, and insofar as it seems credible the tale may supply the omniscience that humans ordinarily lack (an important point). But in the meantime his lady is no tree! The amusing rebuttal points up the inherent difficulty of adapting literary lore to the idiom of life and of knowing what a precedent case might mean to the present. Metaphors aside, how and when would one know when a real beloved had become unattainable? And how can Amans entrust his future to a timeless truth?

Further complicating things is the fact that later exemplary instances contradict the Phebus morality, as they did opposite the tale of Pygmalion. This is where the copious, intratextual context of exemplarity comes into play. As we have seen, Genius tells a series of tales on the topic of Sloth in Book 4, which translates into such inactivity as procrastination and lack of steadfastness in love, vices that represent the reverse of that “Folhaste” Phebus was guilty of in fact. As the Latin verses heading the book put it, *Poscenti tardo negat emolumenta Cupido, / Set Venus in celeri ludit amore vir* (Late suppliants get no rewards from Cupid, / But he who’s quick to love makes Venus sportive) (4.i). To illustrate, Genius presents the negative exemplum of Aeneas, the biblical parable of the Foolish Virgins, and the confident story of Pygmalion, among others. But one other tale stands out as an interesting counterpoint to the Phebus story. It is the story of Demophon and Phillis, better known for its place in Chaucer’s *Legend of Good Women*. Briefly, in this narrative it transpires that Phillis is turned into a nut tree (recalling Daphne’s metamorphosis into a laurel) after her male suitor, Demophon, failing to return from a voyage, “slothfully” forgets her. The audience is told that the tree
betokens the “wofull chance” (873) of Demephon’s tarrying, which sin he laments only after it is too late: “He gan his Slowthe forto banne, / Bot it was al to late thanne” (4. 877-8). Now the question about how you know when your beloved has been petrified into a plant—arborialized, if you will—is doubly compounded by the difficulty of knowing what kind of tree she has become. Say, for instance, whether your beloved’s wooden reticence signifies your haste or your lateness.

Other substantive differences come out in the comparison between tales, and they are differences which we have witnessed before. For example, the emphasis on human failure is evident in the latter exemplum on forgetfulness. Its insistence on tragic mistiming achieves great pathos. As Genius says, Demephon “foryat / His time eftsone and oversat” (4.805-6); he is a “slowe wiht” (4.843). The Latin verses describe the consequences in terms of personal responsibility: *Sic amor incautus, qui non memoratur ad horas, / Perdit et offendid, quod superare nequit* [Thus slipshod love, which does not mind the hour, / Offends and loses what it can’t recover] (4.iii). We are, then, more solidly rooted in the realm of human choice and causality in this example, if also in the contingencies of time and circumstance (since no Cupid figure dominates), than we were in the Phebus exemplum in which blind Cupid ruled. Therefore, a similar contrast to that which complicated our reading of Pygmaeleon vis-à-vis Jupiter’s Two Tuns occurs here. Fatalism in the one tale has given way to something close to free will and autonomous destiny in the other, where *memoratur ad horas*, minding the time, becomes crucial to love’s success. Granted, chance is still a factor in Demephon. Yet fortunes are now tied more closely to persistence and the timeliness of human action, to self-determination rather than to inexplicable fortune. Genius instructs Amans accordingly: Don’t give up
on love, because love does not respond to those who are idle, and besides you never
know what might happen (4.712-13, 723-35; and 5.781ff.).

So good fortune, if it is not quite fully to be relied upon, is now seen as something
one can at least place one’s hopes before. The two contrastive exempla sit at opposite
extremes, showing what happens when love is pursued either too eagerly or too
slowly—the one tale clearly discouraging Amans’s suit, the other promoting it. The total
effect could be confusing, and the inexactitude the moral stance the Confessio as a whole
takes on these matters might thus seem more liable to perplex than profit moral wisdom.
In fact, though, there may be a legitimate way in which both the tale of Phebus and the
tale of Demophon can go to form a comprehensive (rather than totally coherent) moral
wisdom. Perhaps it is because they are offered at different junctures just when they are
needed the most, in order to qualify or challenge their opposites, that they are legitimate.
Examples can have their own timeliness. Perhaps the truth is that haste and lateness,
though opposing vices, can both be valid in different situations.

As befits proper pastoral practice, Genius teaches contrary things in the
confessional because life demands more than a system of neat and tidy distinctions from
morality to deal with particular cases. Gregory the Great, the major early influence on
later medieval conceptions of pastoral care, recommended that when exhorting
parishioners it was necessary to modify one’s message according to the person, a
homiletic commonplace I have remarked upon before in the context of the pedagogy of

171 Genius elsewhere admits, “Fortune, thogh sche be noght stable, / Yit at som time is
favorable / To hem that ben of love trewe” (8.2013-15). Almost Pandarus-like indeed,
Genius encourages the lover later in the poem to try his luck—as we have seen with the
Pygmalion tale of Book 4.
accommodation. In *Pastoral Care*,\(^{172}\) where Gregory lays out the responsibilities of the spiritual ruler and the art of preaching, it is said that “one and the same exhortation is not suited for all, because they are not compassed by the same quality of character. Often, e.g., what is profitable to some, harms others . . . [T]he discourse of the teacher should be adapted to the character of the hearers” (89). Gregory goes on to say that the audience, like a many-stringed harp, must be diversely plucked by the spiritual ruler to produce harmony (an image that might recall those exemplary harpers and earthly rulers in the *Confessio Amantis*, Arion and Apollonius, whose impeccable sense of “measure” stands for a capacity to promote communal harmony\(^{173}\)). A catalogue of the many possible characters or dispositions of which the preacher must be mindful follows: men and women, young and old, poor and rich, humble and haughty, and so on down the line including such psychological refinements as, for example “those who grieve for their sins yet do not abandon them, and those who abandon their sins yet do not grieve for them” and “those who commit only small sins but commit them for idle words” (90-91).\(^{174}\)

What is of keen interest in the immediate context are Gregory’s comments in Part 3, Chapter 15, of the same work, entitled “How to admonish the slothful and the hasty,” a topic that pertains directly to the contrasts among exempla in books 3 and 4 (concerning haste and sloth, respectively) of the *Confessio Amantis*. Each vice requires a different

---

\(^{172}\) A text Gower alludes to in the Prologue, lines 284ff.

\(^{173}\) See Peck, *Kingship and Common Profit*, pp. 22-23 and 170-171, on the important link between harping and the commonwealth. Robert Yeager’s *John Gower’s Poetic: The Search for a New Arion* develops the idea at length in view of the poet’s vocation.

\(^{174}\) James J. Murphy remarks that Gregory’s list is intended “as a sample drawn from a potentially infinite set of human characters” (295). A similar concern for the diversity of audience is shown in the *ad status* sermon collections directed at specific occupations.
approach, a truth that is also borne out also in later sermon collections and arts of
preaching. Says Gregory,

The slothful are to be admonished in one way, the hasty in another. The
former are to be persuaded not to lose the good they ought to do by
deferring it. The latter are to be admonished not to spoil the merit of their
good deeds by imprudent haste in anticipating the times of doing them.
(134)

A long disquisition follows in which the respective sins of each type are treated. For
Gregory, two types of character correspond to each type of vice. In Gower, by contrast,
the contrary exhortations are combined and targeted at a single person (and, secondarily,
at a mixed audience) over the course of a single poem. This perhaps indicates a later
development in homiletics, one that might be post-Gregorian insofar as Gower envisages
one character divided within himself, as needing sometimes one exhortation and
sometimes another. Whatever the case, Amans seems by implication to be constituted by
opposing impulses or tendencies (e.g., sloth and haste). It is thus a more complex view of
human subjectivity than that offered in Gregory’s simple typology of character, I suggest,
even if Gower’s nuance comes with the price of greater uncertainty and inexactitude. For
how is one to know which teachings are salient at any given moment in one’s life? If
there are competing precepts in the same canon of tales, addressing a single person, how
is a moral agent to negotiate the differences? What is Amans to do?

The answer can be found in Book 5 where Genius describes virtue as a
proportional value, namely, the intermediate point between behavioral extremes
(5.7641ff.). It is an especially evocative idea because it elicits a comparison between the
style and substance of Gower’s ethical poetic, recalling of course that in the Prologue the
poet promised to steer a course the “middle weie” between earnest and game. Rhetorical
style and substance are indeed reciprocal qualities in the ethics of exemplarity I have been describing, not only because as rhetoric exemplary tales delight while they instruct, but also because one takes the full measure of a moral dilemma against the backdrop of narrative cases. As for the substance of virtue, we must look more closely at the principle of practical reason Gower elucidates in the fifth book of the Confessio Amantis. There Gower has the confessor Genius rehearse the gist of Book 2 of the Nicomachean Ethics, where Aristotle spells out his famous doctrine of the mean. In so doing Gower anticipates his later elaboration of the parts of philosophy in Book 7 ("the Scole... / Of Aristotle" [3-4]), where alongside the speculative and verbal sciences (Theorique and Rethorique), the practical sciences (Practique) of ethics, economy, and especially policy will be delineated in the context of the education of a king.175 In the context of Book 5, however, Genius is most concerned with a doctrine of ethical practique that concerns individuals—individual lovers. Classically, the Aristotelian doctrine of the mean had it that virtue is the intermediate position, relative to a person's situation, abilities, resources, etc., between the vices of excess and deficiency, an eminently practical teaching having to do with rational self-governance.176 One example from Aristotle's own Ethics is that generosity is the medial point between the excess of prodigality and the deficiency of avarice (2.7, 1107b; 3.12, 1119b20; 4.3, 1123b). Actually, Gower's Genius puts the very same example to Amans in the fifth book of the Confessio: "And thus between tomoche and lyte / Largesce... / Halt evere forth the middel weie" (5.7689-91; see

175 In Simpson's analysis the speculum principis of Book 7 constitutes the "frame" of the poem and the practical matters of policy discussed therein are what the poem is all about (220ff.).

176 The same doctrine alluded to by Boethius. See Chaucer's Boece: "Occupy the mene by stidefast strengthes; for al that evere is undir the mene, or elles al that overpasseth the mene, despyseth welefulnesse (as who seith, it is vycious)..." (IV. pr. 7, 100).
further 7.2014-18). The *via media* that constitutes this virtue is therefore a matter of “mesure” (5.7703), of finding the mean and moderating behaviour accordingly with the aid of reason and conscience in view of the circumstances in which excess and deficiency obtain.

How exactly does the doctrine of the mean relate to the case-based rationality of exemplarity? Russell Peck suggests that Genius’s inconsistent moral teachings represent “an attempt to mediate extreme positions through debate and juxtaposition of examples.” In this conception Genius is the one who locates the mean and adapts his instruction accordingly: “If the lover swings off balance in one way, Genius will swing the other” (Kingship and Common Profit 105). We can further surmise, however, from the point of view of ethical practice that the responsibility for determining the mean lies not entirely with the confessor (who we must admit does not always correct so much as confirm Amans’s off-balance perspective). Amans himself must reach his own judgement, find the measure, make meaning—by moving in and among contrastive exempla representing cases *in extremis*—if he is to figure out what it is good for him to do with his love.\(^{177}\)

This is essentially the “punctual” moment of reading for the moral that makes, as much as

---

\(^{177}\) And yet Gower does not hesitate to show that love and moderation do not always mix: “. . . ther is noman / In al this world so wys, that can / Of love tempre the mesure, / Bot as it faith in aventure” (1.20ff.). Something like luck again holds sway. See also the verse at 8.ii: *Sors tamen vnnde Venus attractat corda, videre / Que racionis erunt, non racione sinit* [Venus lures the heart by random lot / Which does not let the lover reckon reasonably]. Contrary teaching affects even this basic assumption about the powers of reason in the poem—hence I cannot claim sanctuary for my reading and say that prudential reason forms a unitary “theme” or “morality” that escapes the latitude of exemplarity. The power of reason is just what is in question. The resulting aporia is well articulated by Simpson when he observes that in such pessimistic passages, telling of the unruliness of blind love (e.g., 6.1262-84), “Genius effectively tells us that the whole project of the poem (which has been, ostensibly, to teach the lover) is futile” (*Sciences of the Self* 164-65).
it makes manifest, what one is supposed to accomplish. To recall the words of Genius, he must “avise” and “mesure” himself based on the “evidence” at hand. This kind of invention on the part of the confessant may seem like a crude operation, but it should be clear by now that it has its own sophistication. For the middle way is not predictable in advance of any individual reception and reduction of the exemplary evidence, an important point that returns us to the idea of the interpretability of the exemplaria, as well as to the difficulty of documenting a phenomenon that relates to how people actually perform. To be sure, it would be disingenuous to say that *anything goes* in view of what I shall later call, in a discussion of Chaucer’s *Clerk’s Tale*, the undecidability of exempla. It would be foolish to claim that late medieval ethics could tolerate moral relativism, and worse still to ignore Gower’s commitment to the rule of reason instantiated in “positive law.” And yet, notwithstanding the fact that certain ideals in the *Confessio Amantis* are not negotiable, a limited relativism is implied in the ethical poetic. Let me be clear about this: I am finally claiming that ethical reception, reading for the moral point, requires an improvisatory decision about the applicability of one or more cases. As Ricoeur observes, “the most serious moral decisions consist in drawing the dividing line between what is permitted and what is forbidden in zones which themselves are ‘median’ and resistant to familiar dichotomies” (*Oneself as Another* 273). In practice improvisation could mean one of two things: either *affirming* a predetermined moral case or precept, and then figuring out how to apply it in the event (which itself introduces an element of the aleatory into decision-making), or the more creative intervention of *inferring* a moral stance from among a number of possible cases or precepts (implying greater inexactitude,
but only by way of ensuring a more exact fit between precedent cases and circumstances). In either case, some latitude is required.

The latitude I am attempting to describe will be clearer once we recognize that what is moral in this circumstance could not have been anticipated by any moral theory alone, without the aid of human reason, conscience, and communal wisdom. The exemplaria as a cultural phenomenon is perhaps more candid about this fact than other post-medieval normative theories of morality have tended to be. Whatever the case, the rhetoric of exemplarity as I understand it implies the flexibility, openness, and accommodation of the practical ethics within the domain of morality. In this view, the manifold “cas” or “chaunce” or “aventure” of the rhetoric (all synonyms for exemplum in Gower’s Confessio as well as in Robert Mannyng of Brunne’s HANDYNG SYNNE) constitutes a horizon of possible outcomes, a taxonomy of cases, a telling of fortunes, a repertoire useful for orienting the subject in moral space, without predetermining final ethical positions in practice. Just so, the cas will introduce an aspect of the aleatory into our analysis, because reading for the moral is, as I put it, inventional or improvisatory. Not that invention is infinite or, again, utterly relativistic or antinomian. Rather, we may go so far as to say that, paradoxically, the invented possibilities are only as relative or open-ended as they are normative. As de Certeau explains in a related context, “invention is not unlimited and, like improvisation on the piano or on the guitar, it presupposes the knowledge and application of codes” (21). The comparison clarifies what is at stake. Like finite codes or rules of grammar, too, which regulate the intelligibility of speech acts without determining the precise content of what is enunciated in a given situation, the exemplaria serves to direct the formation of ethical responses
without predetermining its forms in advance.\textsuperscript{78} In this respect it can be said that the
rhetoric of exemplarity initiates a new decision rather than imposing a preformulated one,
inspires choice rather than impedes it. As Genius acknowledges, the choice is Amans's
whether he "wolt live or deie" (8.2148). What evidence Amans finds useful and
appropriate to his own case of unrequited love is for him to discover or invent—in the old
rhetorical sense, not \textit{ex nihilo}.

The question of how an array of cases might possibly serve to orient a subject
without predetermining actual positions repays still closer analysis. Exemplification, in
Aristotle’s view we may recall, entails "reasoning neither from part to whole nor from
whole to part but from part to part, like to like, when two things fall under the same genus
but one is better known than the other" (\textit{Rhetoric} 1.2.19, 1357b). The same practical
method of lateral reasoning, I suggest, applies in the exemplaria. Associated as it is with
this kind of case-based rationality, familiar to us from moral casuistry, the ethics of
exemplarity can be seen as moving in and among alternatives, between cases, in search of
probable solutions to find what is otherwise termed "mesure." Exempla, as much as
instantiating conventional morality, are therefore also in a sense on a quest for practical
precepts that we have not yet formulated, or at the very least they supply moral guidance

\textsuperscript{78} We can compare the ethics of exemplarity to board games, which permit certain
moves without predetermining them; to street signs, which direct traffic without dictating
itineraries; or to poetic convention (meter, rhyme, stanza forms, etc.), which restrict
invention without ruling out originality. Yet the exemplaria does not give rise to such a
\textit{formal} set of instructions or codes as these analogies might suggest; exempla are more
like a record of possible moves in a game, or the flow of vehicles in traffic, or a
collection of poems. The question arises, How do we discover directions for reading if
the exemplaria does not give them explicitly and formally, besides supplying \textit{moralititates}
which are part of the exemplary game? When de Certeau wants to find what he calls the
"hidden" "rules of these circumstantial ways of making" he looks to games and tales and
legends. The latter "offer their audience a repertory of tactics for future use" or "models
of practices" (22-24); they function because they are exemplary.
which, as mentioned, the audience is able to affirm, refine, or deny. The lover, in this case, is invited to traverse sundry stories (e.g., about fortune and free-will, haste and hesitancy) in order to, as it were, triangulate a present, proportional response that is not necessarily reducible to any single precedent. For there is no universal and invariable abstract form of the good according to which every act can be automatically judged apart from contingent circumstance: “the good is not something common which corresponds to a single Idea,” as Aristotle famously put it in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.7, 1096b25. Following the ancient philosopher, Aquinas articulated a similar view of practical rationality in ethics when he said, “materially” speaking, “just and good acts are not the same everywhere and among all men” (*On Evil* 2.4.13; p. 64). Moral practice is variable. Because cases tend to be, as Aquinas plainly elaborates in his exposition of Aristotle’s *Ethics*, “infinitely diversified” (2.2.259), it is necessary to learn the art of discretion which enables one to discern the salient aspects of a moral case as they present themselves in particular situations: “Hence judgment of particular cases is left to the prudence of each one” (*Commentary* 2.2.259).

The late medieval rhetoric of exemplarity presupposed as much in its crude and concrete *practique*, with its casuistic mode of constituting morality in the specificity of individual cases in relation to one another. Reducing stories to morals rather than merely deducing principles best describes Gower’s vision of how persons are to figure out what it is good to do.

---

179 A similar operation is suggested by Goodwin and Wenzel regarding a related rhetorical figure in “Proverbs and Practical Reasoning,” in their discussion of contradictory proverbs: “Knowing both ‘Look before you leap’ and ‘He who hesitates is lost,’ one is inclined to hesitate just long enough to look! And no doubt many young lovers have found a middle way between ‘Absence makes the heart grow fonder’ and ‘Out of sight, out of mind’” (143).
1.6. Gower's Dialogic Imagination

What we see is that Amans's position as a moral agent—which I hazard to say is a typical position for a medieval subject, notwithstanding the charge of essentialism such a remark is liable to incite—is as one faced with a plenitude of stories, an array of petit récits, a taxonomy of cases that represent a stock of communal wisdom useful for deliberating and applying to new situations. It is for the individual to hit upon a choiceworthy mean in and among the many and contradictory tales he has been given; it is for him to turn texts, through tropological reduction, to good purposes with the aid of reason, conscience, and good counsel. That much should be clear by now. We can go a step further, however, by ascribing a metaphorical dimension to the fictional personae Gower employs and the circumstances in which we find them. In this light, with equally compelling specificity the Confessio Amantis exhibits the dynamic interiority of the subject modeled on the manifold exemplaria itself. Thus, to qualify somewhat my cautionary remarks at the beginning of this chapter, the penitential dialogue that is the Confessio elucidates the nature of the self in its ever-evolving formation as much as it is a provocation to further transformations in an audience, external to the work—which is to say, besides being didactic the poem is perceptibly mimetic. Whatever else it may be, the poem is an objectification of the subject, a microcosm of the medieval mind (if I may be temporarily permitted to recover a much maligned term), something other critics in fact usually straightaway assume rather than put to the side the way I have largely done up until now. What Gower finally creates, to recall James Simpson's useful phrase, is a
fable of the soul. I will conclude here by outlining in the abstract what I see as the matter of this fable in view of the ethics of exemplarity discussed so far.

First, the poem represents a constructive or therapeutic psychodrama. By this I mean to describe a situation that is less a pitched battle between adversarial and rigidly differentiated powers (i.e., psychomachia) than a creative if sometimes tense dialectic among interdependent principals, in this case personified energies at home in the same mental faculty. Notwithstanding their differences, Genius and Amans are for the most part seeking the same ends, i.e., the good and the right, through the agency of exemplary rhetoric. We could say that together they personify an intention to virtue rather than contrary intentions, one to virtue and the other to vice, as is the case in other moralities. Genius, as counselor and custodian of stories, and Amans, as confessant and willful lover, are in this view two interfluent forces of the same psyche—or more accurately, of the ethically engaged part of the psyche—working itself out in time. Genius and Amans are in other words making up the mind. Most of this has already been elucidated by James Simpson who very cogently argues that Genius and Amans are two constituent parts of the same soul in need of regeneration. Genius the psychopomp is the imaginative power—like a librarian to the soul—actively informing the moral subject, bringing to bear diverse lust and lore on a life under some kind of duress. Amans is the receptive ego, internal to the soul, and an active principle of desire resisting and also requesting pastoral direction from the father confessor. Both personae in Gower therefore amount to something like the cooperative powers of imagination and will, but they are powers not resolved into any obvious choices ahead of time.
The emphasis of this thesis has been on how stories themselves are integral to the execution of choice and the formation of character, which brings me to my second point about the representation of the moral subject in Gower. In the protracted interlocutory exchange between Genius and Amans we witness a complex psychogenesis, an invention of the human to adopt Harold Bloom's resonant phrase, brought about by means of the rhetoric of exemplarity. The interior mental space of the subject is envisaged as a kind of repertoire of stories (one might be tempted to say: comprising a vernacular ego in the text and a Latin superego presiding in the apparatus, though thankfully the parallel is not consistent in the work). That is, the very structure of the intelligence of the moral agent takes after the compilation it calls upon for moral guidance, it being the case that conscience is constituted as a series of narratives mirroring the composite example-book. Therefore, the soul is figured as much by the form of the interlocutory exchange as by its content or circumstance. As Simpson too claims, the internal form of the poem resembles something like an ideal reader, becoming a kind of synecdoche of the person whom the poem is meant to instruct. Here we might also return to the notion of Mary Carruthers, that the moral intelligence as medieval writers saw it resembles an inscribed "book of memory," an inventory of cases—for in a sense the psyche does not merely rely on books, it is book-like.

It follows from the fact that a subject is constituted by the plurality of stories it consults, that the moral agent is furthermore, as William Robins has observed, an "intersected subject" (178). In Gower the psychodrama implies a division in the soul, however constructive or therapeutic it is otherwise meant to be (in curing division and

---

180 See *Confessio*, Prol. 974ff., for relevant remarks on the divided complexion of the human.
making the lover "whole enough"), of which we see a fictionalized cross-section in time.

As Gower projects it in the fiction, the mind is with respect to morals made up of the
inscription of a large canon of moral stories which are themselves divided, mutable, and
interpretable. The sheer multiplicity of exempla, constituting a conspectus of available
communal wisdom on love, sexuality, war, kingship, and so on, dispenses the variable
substance of selfhood. It also supplies the very capacity for moral responsibility, because
lacking variance there would be no freedom of will. Without a certain undecidability, no
decision would be meaningful. Subjectivity also essentially becomes intersubjectivity
here, since what one depends on are the examples of others. The subject is thus
intersected by many and contrary possibilities, a condition of the soul enabling dialogue
among available ethical principles, a constant sifting, sorting, and reconstitution of moral
stances in virtue of which the ethics of exemplarity may better respond to a mutable
world.

Finally, all this goes to show that Gower is figuring a condition of the soul
irreducible to any single narrative, principle, or philosophy, even as he seems to indicate
there is no proper soul without some narratives, principles, and philosophical education.
The moral of the story of the Confessio Amantis is that moral agency comes about as
much through the invention of new rules (rhetorically speaking rather than
apodeictically) as through the imposition of familiar ones. There is in Gower therefore
less an imperative to some essentialized subjectivity à la Medieval Mind than something
like a sustained openness to negotiated ethical stances in view of new cases and
circumstance, a process or moral reasoning I have described in terms of ethopoeia, or the
“making” of moral character and conduct. In this basically additive conception of moral wisdom and selfhood, the mind makes itself up in time and narrative.

According to David Aers, Gower’s style in the *Confessio Amantis* is “paratactic” without being dialogical, that is, without there being any honest commerce between divergent exemplary ideals. The diversity effectively represses contradictions inherent in the ideology the tales uphold. By contrast, in Robert Yeager’s parlance the poetry is manifestly “centonic,” indicating a kind of classical patchwork style of composition that is in its own way paratactic while enabling a true dialogical exchange among diverse exempla.\(^1\) Despite their disagreements, both critics point to the very quality in Gower that I have been at pains to suggest is potentially dialogical *and* coherence-building without resolving itself into a fixed and finite moral scheme in advance of the process of reading and remembering. All that is written for our doctrine in the *Confessio Amantis* finally remains to be made instructive, and that, if we so choose, is our job as much as it is Amans’s. Minnis rightly observes, “St Paul did not say that all that is written is true: he said that all that is written is written for our doctrine. The onus is therefore placed on the discriminating reader” (*Medieval Theory of Authorship* 205).\(^2\) Which brings me to my original thesis that Gower’s long poem, however it may be formed or structured on the manuscript page, and whatever it might say about the internal structure of the

---

\(^1\) Aers, “Reflections on Gower,” passim; Yeager, *John Gower’s Poetic*, Chapter II.

\(^2\) Minnis’s remark echoes that of John Trevisa in his late fourteenth-century translation of Ralph Higden’s *Polychronicon*: “For the apostel seith nought, “All that is write to our lore is sooth,” but he seith “All that is i-write to our lore is i-write” (quoted in Delany, *Medieval Literary Politics*, pp. 4 & 26).
medieval mind, ultimately exists in its plural and partial subjective effects, in concrete

pratique, among persons in the world.
CHAPTER 2:

Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and the Problem of Exemplarity

Some may still find it customary or convenient to distinguish Chaucer on the basis of his good humor from the sententiousness of Gower, but the distinction overestimates the difference between their respective artistic accomplishments. As Derek Brewer reminds us, Chaucer's early reception was as a poet who wrote "serious and nourishing subject-matter" (*Chaucer* Vol. I, "Introduction" 6). During Chaucer’s lifetime Eustache Deschamps eulogized him as *Seneque en meurs* [Seneca in morals], and observed that drinking from Chaucer’s font had quenched *ma soif ethique* [my ethic thirst] (40). Thomas Usk extolled Chaucer as "the noble philosophical poete / in English" (43), and Henry Scogan took Chaucer to be a moral philosopher of "vertuous noblesse" (60). In the early fifteenth-century, after Chaucer’s passing, John Lydgate lauded the poet for "keping in substance / The sentence hooel" (50), and Thomas Hoccleve considered him equal to "Tullius" [Cicero] and an "hier in philosophie / To Aristotle" (63). Later still Chaucer was acclaimed "ful of plesaunce / Clere in sentence" (72), and Caxton would also attribute to the poet "hye and quycke sentence" (75), not just as a part of a marketing campaign but because this is what Chaucer was by then regularly celebrated for. To be sure, encomia such as these typically pay tribute to Chaucer for his novelty, his eloquence, and the way "he hath toold of loveris up and doun" (II. 53) as the Man of Law puts it, but such high praise is characteristically premised on the assumption that Chaucer is morally serious. What emerges from a review of the first recorded responses, then, is that early readers would have had some difficulty recognizing the "genial Chaucer" of our modern age, if what is meant by that appellation differs too much
from “moral Gower.” Gower and Chaucer, it could instead be said then, were equally “Superlatiue as poetis laureate / In moralitee and eloquence ornate” (James I 1376-77).

However jejune or partial the early attempts to characterize Chaucer inevitably must seem, they nevertheless do modern readers the service of stimulating important questions about the possible salience of morality in Chaucer’s poetry. Particularly those approving comparisons to the great moral philosophers—Aristotle, Seneca, Cicero—should wake us up to critical reflection about ethical dimensions of Chaucer’s art, specifically those stemming from the tradition of rhetorical thought, now typically overlooked. Of course it was Chaucer himself who first apostrophized his friend as “O moral Gower” in the dedication at the end of Troilus and Criseyde, V. 1856, and the characterization—often taken as a sure sign of a wide gulf separating the two poets—has stuck. Chaucer’s only other reference to Gower is a veiled allusion in the Introduction to the Man of Law’s Tale, where the terms of the comparison are effectively reversed. There the lawyer finds fault with Chaucer’s versification but marvels at his literary output and credits him for having steered clear of filthy incest stories. Praising Chaucer for excluding “abhomynacions” from his “sermons” (II. 87-88), specifically for having

---

183 See John Fisher, John Gower, pp. 1-36, for a survey of the poets’ interlocked critical reputations. “Genial” became a common epithet in the nineteenth century; but even before then Coleridge and Arnold spoke of “kindly” Chaucer. The evidence leads Fisher to comment on the “inadequacy of the stereotypes of the brilliant Chaucer and dull Gower bequeathed us by Taine, Lowell, and the superficial critical tradition of the 19th century.” Rosemary Woolf, in “Moral Chaucer and Kindly Gower,” goes further, as the title of her essay indicates, in suggesting that if anything the usual epithets should be applied in the reverse.

184 It is worth observing (with R. F. Yeager) that at the time the dedication was written Chaucer could only have known Gower’s early work: the Vox Clamantis and Mirour de l’Ommé. These early poems are decidedly “reformist, argumentative, and personal” (Yeager, “‘O Moral Gower’” 96), unlike the bulk of the Confessio Amantis (completed some time after Chaucer’s Troilus).
avoided the cursed stories of Canacee and Apollonius which, perhaps not incidentally, Gower recounts in the *Confessio Amantis* (though it would have been difficult to mention any story Gower had not written, ironically given II. 45-50), the Man of Law makes Chaucer out to be the prude. Certain critics, displacing questions of the implications of morality in Chaucer’s self-characterization as a poet in this passage, have insisted upon the apparent irony of the Man of Law’s own resemblance to Gower.\(^{185}\) What appeals to the critics is the way the prosecutor turns out to be “more moral than moral Gower” (David 125), a mildly comic situation, we are to think, on the assumption that earnest didacticism is sufficient to render anyone ridiculous. A modern prejudice against moral poetry asserts itself in this bit of ironizing, even if it is in other respects based in sound evidence of the lawyer’s poor literary taste. Yet the fact remains that the Man of Law commends Chaucer for morality while censuring Gower, so that Chaucer comes off as the more moral of the two. This according to Chaucer himself, indicating that he at least considered the possibility that others would take him as a moral poet. Even if the passage is a sign of Chaucer’s mortification at the thought of being favorably received by philistines like the Man of Law, it shows that the poet could envisage his own moral authority in ways that have become difficult for modern readers to acknowledge.

Many critics nowadays are indeed in the business of disclaiming the moral authority of Chaucer, by which they usually mean the ideas they are prejudiced against, while appropriating his texts to comfortably near sensibilities. A popular late twentieth-century view (the occurrence of exegetical criticism notwithstanding) has been that

\(^{185}\) Notwithstanding the significant fact that the lawyer expressly condemns the incest stories Gower tells. See Fisher, pp. 286-87, 290; and David, p. 125. David cites their comparable “legal training, the sententious manner, and, most important, the didactic aesthetic” (125).
Chaucer’s poetry evinces a struggle between the artist and the moralist in which the former always prevails. Alfred David, the chief proponent of this aestheticizing view, argues: “In writing the *Canterbury Tales* Chaucer came to master the art of illusion but at the same time to regard with growing skepticism its potential for expressing moral truths” (6). Thus the tales dramatize a generic collision of poetry and morality, story and sermon, all the while with a bias coming out on the side of the poet’s so-called strumpet muse. Derek Pearsall similarly maintains that Chaucer’s purpose is purely literary, hence non-moral: “Chaucer’s endeavor is to release narrative from external pressure, and to allow it a self-validating, non-exemplary significance of its own which grows out of its intrinsic nature as an imitation of human life” (*The Canterbury Tales* 48). A kind of charitable mimesis, embracing God’s plenty without reducing it to a moral schema, is supposed to be Chaucer’s guiding principle. More recently, Michaela Grudin maintains that Chaucer’s employment of Bakhtin’s “dialogic mode” (19) undermines the conventional authority of prescriptive speech and structural closure as evidenced in the routine moralizing of the period, conclusive morals being just so many miserable monologisms waiting to be overthrown.

Whatever the respective merits of these critical approaches—and I regard David and Pearsall as especially brilliant readers of Chaucer—we tend to end up with so many versions of Chaucer’s anti-moralism, cast in such a way as to bring the rhetoric of exemplarity in particular into disrepute. The modern temptation, as Larry Scanlon too has observed, has been to think that exemplarity represents “pure mystification” (29). The distortions of this skeptical take on the didactic rhetoric are manifold. A fundamental problem, so I will contend, is that the critics invariably replace old values
with acceptable new ones at the very moment that they reject determinate value
judgement as being obsolete, sub-literary, or monological. The result of such a
paradoxical state of affairs has to be a critical blindness towards the specifically ethical
valences of the medieval poetry as well as a certain inarticulacy about the imperatives
driving putatively value-neutral (or, for that matter, radical or activist) modern literary
criticism. What needs to be recognized, after all, is that strong and serious
valuations—moralizations as it were—are not optional or superfluous to criticism.\footnote{\textsuperscript{186}}

Granted, modern criticism has gone a long way to show how Chaucer does not
lack a kind of "high seriousness" (of which Matthew Arnold attempted to deprive him),
that he in fact engages all sorts of profound social, philosophical, and psychological
issues and does so with as much acuity as imaginative thinkers ever display.
Notwithstanding such developments, the basic distinction between Chaucer the genial
poet and Gower the drab moralist remains unaffected, or rather the distinction is
reinforced to the extent that Chaucer is now considered far more serious and congenial
because he is distrustful of the occult aspects of moral authority and power. Chaucer
demystifies conventional morality, Gower allegedly perpetuates it. There is some truth in
this characterization, but the measure of untruth is enough to merit closer study of
Chaucer's possible moral commitments or concerns. It is not my intention to prove that
the poets are identical in their aims or effects, which is obviously false; John Fisher

\footnote{\textsuperscript{186} Recent proponents of ethical criticism remind us (as Leavis used to) that ethics and
aesthetics are inseparable. Murray Krieger observes that "to thematize is to moralize,
even if negatively" (135). Tobin Siebers takes up the point and insists that we cannot in
any case "understand a story without engaging in such paraphrasing or moralizing
because most statements require us to summon various contexts, conventions, and norms.
This thematization, if we can use the term, is a moralization insofar as it connects the
story to the places where people live" (34). Thus the question has always been not
\textit{whether} critics or artists moralize, but \textit{how}.}
observed some time ago that, generally speaking, Gower's is the art of complaint while Chaucer practices satire. I do not at any rate want to focus my discussion exclusively on a comparison. What is of interest to me is determining the moral dimensions of Chaucer's poetry, both in the way Chaucer addresses ethical problems and in the way he could conceivably be called (as he used to be) a moral poet. With this double outlook I intend to investigate exemplary moments in the *Canterbury Tales*, looking for evidence of moral phenomena where we have, only lately, become accustomed least to expect it. For alongside his celebrated insouciance and skepticism I think we might discover some practical wisdom.

First, as to the question of Chaucer's form of address, it has been my supposition that to understand the rhetoric of exemplarity we must pay as much attention to its function as to its form. In trying to comprehend what Wittgenstein would call the grammar of the language game we must start not "from certain words, but from certain occasions or activities" (*Lectures* 3; cited in Johnston 99). We had best start from the uses of certain words, endeavoring to describe readers as practitioners. From this point of view the pertinent question to ask of the rhetoric of exemplarity is not just "What is it?" but "When is it?"\footnote{187} Another way of putting the distinction is to say that the question "What does it do?" comes before the question "What does it mean?" In this way, addressing the occasions and activities in virtue of which the exemplum has its existence, the exigencies of situation and audience response are sure to be factored into our analysis. Nowhere else in the early English literature are we given as perceptive an account of the functioning of exempla, addressing the when of the rhetoric, as in the *Canterbury Tales*.

\footnote{187} Here I adapt Nelson Goodman's way of putting a distinction which he originally applies to the question of defining art, "When is art?" (*Ways of Worldmaking* 66-67).
It is a truism by now that "Chaucer was uniquely oriented to imagined situations of
telling and listening throughout his art" (Strohm, "Chaucer's Audience(s)" 138). In this
respect the Tales goes further, given its fuller realization of the communicative situation,
than Chaucer's previous tale collection, the Legend of Good Women. The drama
touches not just on the composition of texts and their transmission and reception in
books, but on the pragmatics of telling, listening, and reacting to stories, and in this
setting we get a purchase on what exemplary texts can do.

Next, as to whether and how Chaucer might be called a moral poet, it will be
important to consider the Tales as a whole, despite the fact that it remains fragmentary
and unfinished and is transmitted to us exclusively via fifteenth-century scribes. What
kind of thing it is remains an interesting question. I acknowledge that if the collection
shows us how particular exempla get used, it doesn't come close to instructing us in the
general utility of the collection itself. In Pearsall's apt phrase, "Chaucer left the work as
a partly assembled kit with no directions" (The Canterbury Tales 23). But such
incompleteness is precisely where I should like to start to explore whether the Tales is not

---

188 Standing between his earliest poems and his last, Chaucer's secular legendary of good
women incorporates elements from the former, prefaced as it is by a visionary experience
following the study of old books, while anticipating elements of the latter, namely a
drama that frames a tale-telling sequence. See further Pearsall, The Life of Geoffrey
189 My invocation of "drama" is meant only to indicate that stories are not autonomous in
the Tales: they are not written down and circulated in parchment for the leisurely perusal
of the pilgrims (though in a way they are for us as readers, which is another story and one
I return to tell). At least some of the tales are situated in action, linked syntagmatically to
text and character, presenting themselves as performative speech-acts. I recognize
that dramatic criticism has a long and controversial history and do not mean to revive the
specter of Kittredge's Human Comedy, but I do take the dramatic moments of the frame-
narrative as sites of significant thresholds between exemplary narrative and its
motivations and effects. For a critique of the "dramatic principle" see Pearsall, The
Canterbury Tales, pp. 41ff.
profitably read as a whole. My claim will be that the Tales comprises a compilation of
exempla, facta et dicta memorabilia to be put to prudent use, in which case partiality and
incompletion is integral to the work’s total effect. Granted, the poet’s oftentimes critical
engagements with monitory rhetoric would seem to tell against the likelihood that his
collection is straightforwardly didactic. One of the pleasures of the text is the way it
turns on itself and seems to bedevil assimilation to any conclusive moral sentence, so that
we can never exactly say what Chaucer’s tales are finally “about.” But are there not
ways in which, in the absence of definite meaning, one might nevertheless talk about
what the collection is good for? Are there not ways in which we might look to be avysed
thereby by Chaucer?

2.1. Problems and Paradoxes

The Canterbury Tales is anything but univalent. Having situated speech acts
within a fictional frame with its own fictional audience (the Canterbury-bound pilgrims
who are speakers and listeners and intermittent interlocutors), mediated by a reporter-
narrator and thereby twice removed from an implied and actual audience (the ideal reader
and actual readers of past and present),¹⁹⁰ Chaucer produces highly polyvalent and
polyvocal narratives. On this score, the Tales provides no single authoritative voice that
could stand in as its own interpreter, and thus in Helen Phillips’s words it “lacks both the
limitations and the safety of a single focalization” (2). The extreme degree of diversity
and conflict among voices indeed remains the most challenging aspect of the Tales. The

¹⁹⁰ These categories are laid out in Paul Strohm’s “Chaucer’s Audience(s): Fictional,
Implied, Intended, Actual.”
diversity affects moral meaning in particular, with the result that, as Phillips rightly puts it, “conflicting moralities . . . seem to be present in the text” (1).

Chaucer, not unlike Gower in having fictionalized the process of exemplification, situates tales within a dialogical framework, but unlike the Confessio Amantis the Canterbury Tales exploits multiple frames of reference and so tends to be more demanding on the speech acts it contains. In Chaucer exemplification is consequently less pragmatic and paradigmatic, even if Gower is occasionally ironic about exemplary morality. Comparatively, the communicative situation is problematic in a way it simply is not in the Confessio Amantis, since that work contains a single fictional story-teller (Genius) and a single fictional audience and reporter (Amans) towards whom the actual audience stands in a relatively direct relation of surrogacy. With Chaucer on the way to Canterbury so many more variables are introduced—profession, class, gender, disposition, and so on—that it becomes difficult to take any teller at his or her word. It is difficult to know which, if any, of the variables we are to privilege. A common temptation, therefore, is to think of the polyvalence as operating to destabilize the exemplarity of the tales completely. Indeed, many critical accounts ascribe this kind of radical stance to Chaucer, which we might call anti-exemplarity.191 J. A. Burrow has argued accordingly that “Chaucer brings into question the teller of the exemplum and his motives, as well as those of his audience, rather as Gower does in Confessio Amantis but to much more subversive effect” (Ricardian Poetry 88). In this critic’s seductively

---

efficient phrase, "The exemplary mode is present everywhere in the Canterbury Tales, but everywhere subverted" (90). Why I think this otherwise attractive epitome is simplistic and underdeveloped should eventually become clear.\textsuperscript{192}

Considering how very subversive Chaucer can be, we are liable to forget that he was not only a comic poet or satirist. It is a marked modern tendency to emphasize the mischief rather than the morality in Chaucer's works, perhaps because, as A. C. Spearing has observed, "modern readers are apt to be biased against the very possibility of exemplary narrative by skepticism about the validity of general truths" ("Exemplum and fable" 161). (If this is so, I hope it is evident by now that the problem has as much to do with a misplaced skepticism as with the mistaken assumption that exemplary narrative is simply validated by "general truths.") At present it is unappealing to think of a virtuoso poet as having recourse to moral rhetoric, the narrow and narrowing speech of preachers and pedagogues, and so it will do well to begin with the obvious: Chaucer composed and translated several works in this vein, not to mention his devotional and philosophical short poems. The Second Nun's Tale, with which I began in the introduction to the thesis, is a fine example of the kind of gravity Chaucer is capable of sustaining in exemplary moral narrative, a pathetic gravity that judging by the surviving tale collection Chaucer was content not to send up or deflate. It has been suggested that the saint's life was composed early "as an act of personal devotion" (Frank, Jr. 147), yet the fact that this tale was not retracted at the end of Chaucer's life may indicate the longevity of that

\textsuperscript{192} Besides the fact that in its pithiness the observation fails to take in the nuances of Chaucer's actual critique. Burrow's interpretations of particular tales suffice to answer this particular objection, and I do not mean to ascribe all the prejudices I argue against to him; rather, I use his exaggerated formulation as a convenient placeholder for situating my critique of a prevailing trend which discounts exemplarity in Chaucer.
devotion rather than anything about its immaturity. Alongside the Tale of Melibee and the Parson’s Tale, the legend of Cecile is in any case one of Chaucer’s least equivocal exemplary pieces: like those other serious works, notable for the frequency with which they can be found in miscellanies, there is evidence that the Second Nun’s Tale circulated independently of the comic frame of the Canterbury Tales.\footnote{See Riverside Chaucer, Textual Notes, pp. 1118-19, where it is documented that the Second Nun’s Tale is found along with the Prioress’s Tale in Harley 2382.} Within the Tales, moreover, no one cuts the Second Nun off in midstream, as happens to the Monk or the Squire; nor does Harry Bailey interject at the end to disparage the expression of piety or, as is more typical, embarrass the morality by applying it eccentrically. And if the tale that follows serves to quite the Second Nun it is not by way of satirical riposte, in the manner of the tales of the Reeve or the Nun’s Priest: whatever else may be said about it, the Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale indeed succeeds in highlighting the righteousness of Cecile’s fruitful work in comparison with the vain and sweaty labours of alchemists. And to the extent that this legend and others like it (so-called “tales of pathos” or “religious tales”) calls forth a deeply affective response, surely a detached and ironical skepticism at the expense of the exemplary morality is displaced.

Yet there is ample evidence of Chaucer’s concern with the way moral rhetoric gets enlisted to manipulate and distort truth, and so it would be overambitious to try to identify the author’s moral agenda with a particular exemplary tale such as the Second Nun’s. A plausible route, given the diversity of viewpoints Chaucer inscribes in the collection, might be to conclude that he cannot be identified with any one tale because every one is partial. However, a common view that seems to be preferred is to read off
the poet’s intentions from the worldly cynicism exhibited in a few choice tales. Indeed, a popular critical view is that Chaucer is some kind of radical skeptic. Lisa Kiser thus characterizes the Tales in terms of “radical perspectivism” (1), in virtue of which the limitations of representation and the ruses of those authorities responsible for disseminating textual tradition are devastatingly revealed. Most emphatic about the ways Chaucer renders all textual and experiential truth nugatory, Kiser argues that the poet’s lasting legacy has been to show that human communication is inherently distorting, self-referential, socially constructed. This is a persuasive account. We cannot read the tales of the Wife of Bath or the Pardoner and not come away convinced that Chaucer was skeptical of the possibility of truth and textuality, even if as suggested this would privilege certain tales over others.

While Kiser is not wrong in her assessment of the “truth” of the Chaucerian text, neither is she right about its practical or exemplary aspects (its “profit of goodness”), which have less to do with epistemology than with ethics. For consider: such explanations are not ultimately subject to the theory of truth and textuality they describe. A reader cannot affirm the validity of Kiser’s perspective unless it is offered as a reliable view of Chaucer’s tales as they have been transmitted to us; by the same token, she cannot hold her view of radical perspectivism and also permit the validity of just any

194 “And whan we been togidres everichoon, / Every man semeth a Solomon” (Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale VIII. 961) could well serve as a handy gloss on the way the Chaucer makes us aware of the ulterior dimensions of moral authority. Moreover, “Lo, lo,” quod dame Prudence, “how lightly is every man inclined to his owene desir and to his owene plesaunce!” (Melibee VII. 1283) is a fine account of the way Chaucer shows that judgement gets distorted. It could also serve as a commentary if ever we could be sure of being able to purge our own literary judgements of falsifying desir. It is paradoxes such as these with which we must grapple in treating Chaucer’s irony, since it often includes reader response within its purview.
other perspective on Chaucer (e.g., as being non-perspectivist or dogmatic), unless she is willing to relinquish her claims (a maneuver which might come off as ironical and detached in some putatively Chaucerian way, but which does not describe the cogency of the critic’s interpretation or her actual investments). Here the problem or paradox is an ethical dilemma—more significant than a logical one, which would be tolerable if not laudable in literary criticism—because it focuses questions as to how one could possibly live with an attested set of assumptions or values. Kiser’s commitment to her claims, conceived as a commitment in practice if not in principle, shows she is willing to withhold certain cherished assumptions from the vortex of her otherwise radical perspectivism; she even finds reasons to recommend her own perspective. What she does thus affects her meaning. As Wittgenstein put it, “What people accept as justification—is shewn by how they think and live” (PI 106).

Now what needs to be introduced to cope with the difficulty of critics who pose skeptical accounts is a distinction between the matter of the text and what matters to the critic: for what was important enough to write a book about is the matter of Chaucer’s skepticism about the possibility of transmitting truth through texts, while what matters to the author is transmitting the truth of Chaucer’s skepticism. As should become clear, a reading which attempts to demonstrate Chaucer’s blanket skepticism will fail to apply its own insights unless it goes beyond the usual textual analyses. Failing to distinguish between what is known and how something is known (another way of stating the predicament), or even why it should be known, claims like Burrow’s and Kiser’s about the subversion of exemplarity come up short. The difficulty does not need to be circumvented so much as more fully accounted for (hence I say such formulations are
underdeveloped rather than false), if we are to describe the way readers genuinely read and live with Chaucer. In short, such critics fail to articulate what Chaucer’s texts are good for. The critics may even be right about the truth of Chaucer’s cause, his skepticism about exemplarity, but this begs the question unless it can be shown how the critic knows this to be the case.¹⁹⁵

Bearing such considerations in mind we are prepared to deal with Chaucer’s texts as they are used. Doubtless we want to know whether Chaucer intends his critique to be radical, whether (whatever the inadvertent or residual rhetorical effects may be) he would have wished to disavow the exemplarity of his own practice. The question to ask here is essentially, What exactly is the object of Chaucer’s satire? Is the very possibility of exemplification itself under attack? Or, is the abuse of exemplification all he is criticizing? Keeping such questions in mind, I aim to be attentive to the ethics of exemplarity even where it would appear to be most contested. To get at the substance of these concerns I begin with examples of homiletic material.

2.2. “This Hooly Bulle!”

In his major study of the “germs” of literary realism, satire, and political consciousness as found in the sermon tradition of the later Middle Ages, G. R. Owst argued that late medieval vernacular literature was in effect first declaimed from the preacher’s pulpit. In a chapter of his 1933 book, Literature and Pulpit in Medieval

¹⁹⁵ Invariably the critic comes to this understanding because even problematic examples are residually exemplary. Radical skepticism cannot explain the uses skeptics continue to make of texts, and as a theory lacks a certain self-lucidity about the ethical bases of its own judgements.
England, entitled “Fiction and Instruction in the Sermon Exempla,” Owst shows that fourteenth-century poetry and drama were profoundly influenced by elements common to sermon literature such as the travelogue, the “hypothetical example,” classical pagan tales, animal fables, and ribald and satirical matter (anticlerical, antimatrimonial, antifeminist). Although, as one later critic observes, “it is difficult to isolate sermon features in medieval poetry because the sermon theme and the central idea of a poem would be dilated and ornamented according to the same rules—through exempla, digressions, circumlocutions, repetitions, divisions of ideas, and ornaments of style” (Gallick 458), literary historians since Owst have gone on to corroborate and refine his thesis. The evidence has for a long time been mounting with regard to the genesis of Chaucer’s poetry. In “Chaucer and the Hand that Fed Him,” Robert Pratt finds evidence for the influence of a popular thirteenth-century mendicant preaching manual attributed to the Franciscan John of Wales. Siegfried Wenzel has done much to draw attention to the origins of Chaucer’s story plots, imagery, and lexicon in contemporary preaching. In “Chaucer and the Language of Contemporary Preaching,” homiletic analogues for the Friar’s Tale and the Prioress’s Tale are brought forward, and commonplace ideas and technical terms used in a variety of Chaucer’s poems are traced back to sermons; in “The Joyous Art of Preaching; or, the Preacher and the Fabliau,” Wenzel surveys common exemplary topoi (e.g., the guiler beguiled and the underdog figure) and finds in the comic tales of pulpit literature further analogues of contemporary fabliaux; finally, in Preachers, Poets, and the Early English Lyric, Wenzel explores the influence of preaching on secular

\[196\] Fraternal preaching is also credited with transmitting a “social gospel” that championed the cause of the poor and oppressed, something Langland among others would transform into poetry.
poetry and the incidence of lyric poetry in the preaching, focusing for example on the occurrence in late medieval sermons of some assimilated secular love poetry as well as satire and complaint.

So the genuinely "popular" exemplary matter of homiletic discourse is discoverable in Chaucer's poetry, though the next step is to ask to what purposes the poet has assimilated it to his fiction. It is commonly answered that sermon exempla and *sententiae* exist in Chaucer for the purpose of satire. This is often true enough, but we will need to go further and ask to what end the satire is applied. Satire is not Chaucer's original contribution, since it is found in sermons themselves prior to the poet's handiwork. So it is important to inquire whether he is embracing the same matter, refining it, or turning his wits against it somehow. I want to explore this issue in this section by considering the communicative situation of the *Tales*. As Susan Gallick observes, although Chaucer "incorporated into his poetry both structural and rhetorical features that were popular in sermons . . . he was more interested in the dramatic performance of a preacher trying to persuade an audience to act in a certain way and in the reaction of the audience to the person who preached to them" (458). The poet constructs a homiletic situation in order to advance a narrative about the application of exemplarity; hence we see in Chaucer not only what an exemplum *is* but what it is *for*, a distinction that might be elucidated in relation to a parallel contrast between the books that catalogue them and preachers who recite them.

In the *Canterbury Tales* the first religious or preacherly use of exempla occurs in the exchange between the Friar and the Summoner. The enmity between the two first reveals itself when at the end of the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* the Summoner reprimands
Friar Hubert for his outcry against the Wife’s prolixity (III. 831). Not exactly in the spirit of the game, the Summoner observes that a friar will invariably get himself mixed up in every kind of matter, and then chides this one for impeding their “disport” (III. 839). In response to the discourtesy the Friar promises to “Telle of a somonour swich a tale or two / That alle the folk shal laughen in this place” (III. 842-43). The Summoner pledges two or three insulting tales in return.

Wenzel recalls that the closest known analogue to the Friar’s Tale “occurs in the sermons of Master Ripon of Durham, who was an exact contemporary of Chaucer’s.” Pointing to other English analogues attested in an exempla collection and a monk’s commonplace book Wenzel concludes, “The evidence seems overwhelming that in Chaucer’s England this particular story ‘lived’ primarily in sermons” (“Chaucer and the Language of Contemporary Preaching” 143).\(^{197}\) Originally, the exemplum is told about a bailiff. Chaucer altered it, appropriately transforming the bailiff into a serio-comic façade for an impious and incorrigible summoner (hilariously, he is embarrassed by his true identity [III.1392-94]), to fit the theme of professional rivalry between mendicants and secular clergy. We could just as well say the pilgrim Friar alters it to equip his version with those punishing satirical barbs with which to catch his fellow pilgrim.

Despite the fact that the Friar calls his tale a “game” (III. 1279) his speech is, like certain other examples on the road to Canterbury, less than gamesome. In a brilliant performance the Friar tells of a summoner who, all unknowingly making himself into a negative “ensample” (III. 1580), shows himself to be both impious and inexpert: on the

\(^{197}\) For three other versions see Correale and Hamel, Sources and Analogues, Vol. I., pp. 94-99, or the earlier publication of Sources and Analogues, ed. Bryan and Dempster, pp. 269-74. Owst discusses Robert of Ripon in Literature and Pulpit, 2nd ed., pp. 162-63.
first count, the summoner has no “conscience” (III. 1441) and is worse than the fiends of hell, because at least they are constrained to do God’s will when they work (III. 1482ff.); on the second count, he is unable to extort money from a poor old widow on the edge of town, and in his crooked line of work (taken on its own terms as Chaucer often does) this points up a certain incompetence. We can’t be sure which charge the pilgrim Summoner will take most to heart, but the suggestion lingers that in lieu of a moral conscience the Summoner—for whom trickery seems to be a point of pride: “Ful prively a fynch eek koude he pulle” (General Prologue l. 652), and for whom extortion is the purpose of his summonses: “Purs is the ercedekenes helle,“ seyde he” (l. 658)—would find his sense of professional vanity duly molested by the tale. But he is attacked on other fronts too. In sum, the summoner of the exemplum suffers from over-literalism, remaining fatefully unconscious of the nature of intentionality in spiritual affairs. He must be taught by the devil no less that, from the penitential perspective, words gain their sense in view of entente, for in the divine accounting the fate of souls depends on what is meant rather than directly on what is said. Hence the scene with the frustrated carter who, when he is stuck in the mud, swears, “The devel have al, bothe hors and cart and hey!” (III. 1547), shows that meaning has its origin not in words but in thought. The fiend accordingly interprets, “The carl spak oo thing, but he thougte another” (III. 1568), in reply to the summoner’s naïve assumption that in merely swearing the oath the carter had consigned his goods. “For intention to be complete,” interprets Spearing, “thought must correspond

198 On the other hand, the pilgrim Summoner might be flattered by the Friar’s depiction of the summoner’s genuine-seeming curiosity and camaraderie, elements which Pearsall singles out to suggest that moral satire gives way to a more charitable sort of humour; see The Canterbury Tales, pp. 221-22. In the dramatic situation of the telling, however, the tale is ungenerous.
to words; this fundamental principle of the trade of both [devil and summoner] is understood only by the devil” (“Exemplum and fable” 164). From one vantage his failure of imagination might be expected, since in the summoner’s trade what matters is the act of paying up rather than genuine penance. But this only points up the original problem. Genuine penance, the express mandate of the ecclesiastical courts for which the summoner works, is what should be sought, in which case perceiving entente is essential to the practice of his profession.

So the summoner adds to his wickedness and ineptitude a certain simplicity, which the Friar drives home in his biblically-based moralization of the tale.

Herketh this word! Be war, as in this cas:
“The leoun sit in his awayt alway
To sle the innocent, if that he may.”
Disposeth ay youre hertes to withstonde
The feend, that yow wolde make thrall and bonde.
He may nat tempte yow over youre myght,
For Crist wol be youre champion and knyght. (III. 1656-62)

The paraphrastic moral, derived from Psalm 10.8-9, is according to Spearing incautious because “when we attempt to relate it closely to the story it begins to seem odd, for the summoner is the devil’s victim and plainly not innocent” (“Exemplum and fable” 162). It would not be the first place in the Canterbury Tales where the moral doesn’t suit the story, and where the resulting incongruency calls for a shift of critical attention away from the morality and towards the mechanics of moralization and its limitations. Yet Friar Hubert is superbly ironic throughout his tale and we may doubt that his moral is so obviously flawed. In fact, the moralization has an added ironical punch of polysemey: for “innocence” then as now signifies blamelessness and a lack of intelligence. The second sense pinpoints a defect in the fictional summoner (and of the “real” Summoner), while
the first might very well be calculated to impeach his integrity by ironic contrast. A Middle English translation of Proverbs 22.3, with its reference to the simple man’s folly, attests to the alternative moral interpretation: “A felle [clever] man seeth yuel, and hidith hem sul; and the innocent passede [proceeds, goes on], and is tormentid with harm” (The Holy Bible, ed. Forshall and Madden). Further evidence of contemporary usage—and putting an even finer biblical point on the tale where it touches the foolish literalism of the summoner—can be found in a spiritual handbook: “De Innocent leuep vche word [believes every word] and in ãaat he is a foole, seip Salomon” (The Recluse 77/4). The Friar’s summoner is like the innocent who is stalked by the devil, because he lacks a basic kind of practical intelligence.

The pilgrim Summoner likewise deploys the rhetoric of exemplarity for the purpose of satire, both in a warm-up exemplum in the prologue to his tale and in the main story. Although there is no known analogue to the tale, most of the friar’s lecture to Thomas on anger, including a set of three exempla with which I will preoccupy myself in the following discussion, is developed from material found in the Communiloquium, a preachers’ manual written by John of Wales, master of the Friars Minor at Oxford, dating to the second half of the thirteenth century. John’s very popular handbook is described by Robert Pratt as “the sort of manual which aimed to afford spiritual sustenance and moral advice and encouragement (together with illustrative sayings and stories) to preacher, friar, or layman” (“Chaucer” 619-20). In his prologue John of Wales says his book is intended for teachers and preachers. It is in fact just the sort of manual the Summoner’s sycophantic Friar John would have taken pride in, and the very idea of which he exploits in his attempt to extort money from the ailing old man, Thomas:
Now help, Thomas, for hym that harwed helle!
For elles moste we oure booke selle.
And if yow lakke oure predicacioun,
Thanne goth the world al to destruccioun. (III. 2107-10)

Thomas is not moved (go sell your books for all I care, we can hear him saying), and in this situation as in others we can imagine that Chaucer is expressing certain misgivings, conventional enough though they are, about preachers who go about and use the arts of preaching for profit.

The Summoner is explicit. His fictional friar is the embodiment of all the worst qualities attributed to his type—hypocrisy, rapacity, and flattery. The signposts are too many to follow in the present discussion, but certain features of the antimendicant caricature having to do with the arts of preaching are important to notice here. This friar has just come from a local parish church where he “Excited . . . the peple in his prechynge” (III. 1716), inspiring congregants to give donations which, we rightly expect, will not be put to honest use. On the way to Thomas’s house the friar begs for alms, serving the parishioners “with nyfles and with fables” (III. 1760). We quickly learn that the friar’s most efficient weapon is his smooth tongue and facility with language—what in reference to the pilgrim Friar Chaucer called “daliaunce and fair langage” (General Prologue l. 211). The preceding tale has already revealed something of the mendicants’ notorious competence in this regard: Friar Hubert is, oratorically speaking, a virtuoso preacher. In the Summoner’s tale, however, a friar’s virtuosity is made the object of sharp criticism via a remark he makes about his prior sermonizing to Thomas. Friar John says he composed it

    after my simple wit—
    Nat al after the text of hooly writ,
    For it is hard to yow, as I suppose,
And therefore wol I teche yow al the glose. (III. 1789-91)

Glose has a scandalous semantic value here as elsewhere in the Tales, conflating as the term does three senses: interpretation, falsification, and flattery.\textsuperscript{199} Given the term's polyvalence, we can infer that the friar's subsequent remark, "Glosyne is a glorious thyng, certeyn, / For lettre sleeth, so as we clerkes seyn" (III. 1793-94), does not indicate an honest and conscientious accession to the figural or spiritual sense in his exegesis—as in, if we were to finish the friar's tellingly incomplete biblical citation, "... the spirit gives life" (2 Corinthians 3.6). Nor can it be taken to signify a charitable accommodation of the biblical text to the understandings of his audience, in the way the Bible was thought mystically to modify itself to suit the particular needs and proficiencies of readers, nor in the manner of the friars' usual preaching \textit{ad populum} (of which the friar's glosing is plainly a travesty)\textsuperscript{200} The friar's usage instead betrays an improper cynicism and recklessness in his appropriation of the gospel text for personal advantage.\textsuperscript{201}

\textsuperscript{199} MED, "glose" (n.) q. v. 1-3; compare "glossen" (v.) q. v. 1-3. In Chaucer \textit{glose} has yet further nuances, as when in the \textit{Wife of Bath's Prologue} it signifies sexual enticement, or in the \textit{Parson's Prologue} it means falsifying speech with fictive and rhetorical ornament, or in the \textit{Merchant's Tale} it means speaking euphemistically about sex. In Chaucer the term is usually but not universally employed in the pejorative. See further Lawrence Besserter, \textit{Chaucer's Biblical Poetics}, Chapter 5, "Biblical 'Glossing' and Poetic Meaning," pp. 138-59.

\textsuperscript{200} On glossatory activity as a wider cultural phenomenon of modifying texts for and by specific audiences see further Dagenais, \textit{The Ethics of Reading}. Dagenais describes how reading as \textit{glosing} was "the chief 'support' of ethical reading in the Middle Ages" (33), pointing for example to the commonplace notion that the Bible "adapts" itself to readers (52). Lawrence, in \textit{The Friars}, describes the mendicant genre of "sermons \textit{ad status}, addressed to the particular needs of different classes and occupations... a genre in which the friars excelled" (123).

\textsuperscript{201} Besserter discusses the possible resonances of Chaucer's satire in the context of Wycliffite criticisms of biblical glossing, citing one document that says: "These be the arms of Antichrist's disciplines against true men: \textit{And the letter slayeth}" (p. 141). This did not stop the Wycliffites from exegetical glossing, but they never used extra-biblical
One facet of the friar’s *glosing* is his deployment of monitory exempla such as those found in his energetic harangue against the sin of wrath. Thomas, “angry as a pissemyle” (III. 1825), is ill and, as he sees it, none the better for all he has donated—“Ful many a pound” (III. 1951)—to the local foundation so as to ensure that the friars pray for healing. He already must have entertained doubts about the efficacy of their prayers after having lost a child, a delicate point Thomas’s wife brings up with the friar and for which he has a too convenient answer (III. 1851ff.). Thomas’s ire is newly aroused by the friar’s present grasping, and he will have something appropriate to offer in recompense. But first Thomas is treated to a private sermon on the virtues of mendicancy and the vices of wrath, a prolix speech illustrated by three short exempla.  

Prefacing the exempla is a brief description delimiting the sphere of wrath—“Ire is a synne, oon of the grete of sevene, / Abhomynable unto the God of hevene,” etc. (III. 2005-16)—by which we are made to understand the general import of the sin and its application to Thomas’s condition, yet as we might have anticipated the exempla will have additional resonances—ironical and serious—that extend their application beyond the immediate case.

The first exemplum tells of an “irous potestat” (III. 2016) who once sentenced three knights to death without just cause: the first knight is arbitrarily held responsible for

---

exempla in their preaching; see Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation*, on the Lollard reaction against *glosing* Friars.

Pratt observes that “over half of the wheedling friar’s lecture to old Thomas consists of stories from Seneca’s *De Ira* concerning Piso, Cyrus, and Cambyses. All three appear in the *Communiloquium*, but each in a form slightly different from that found in *De Ira*; comparison reveals that Chaucer’s retelling of each anecdote is closer to John of Wales’ redaction than to the original story as told by Seneca” (“Chaucer” 627). Hence the friar “took his exempla from the friars’ conversation book of the day, apparently putting this compendium to the very use for which John of Wales had intended it—morality at the dinner table and in the home” (639).
a missing second; the missing second, once found, is automatically condemned because he is the cause of the first knight’s death; and the third is sentenced because after the second was discovered alive he did not follow through on the order to execute the first.

Now the bizarre, almost comical (Three Stooges-like) anecdote does not exemplify every consequence of the sin (e.g., how an irate man is his own destruction, or that he is an abomination to God); like most exempla this one gives a partial view, to be supplemented by further cases. Nor does it address the particular circumstances of Thomas’s wrath, directed as his anger is, with not a little justification, against the hypocrisy of a false friar. Yet the case very adroitly shows that anger engenders homicide, that it is the executor of pride, and that setting a wrathful man in a high position is dangerous. It has about it the kind of concision and simplicity that makes for a memorable illustration.

The second and third exempla demonstrate similar aspects of wrath while adding further dimensions to our understanding. Cambises, king of Persia, is angry and drunk and shrewish. He is counseled by “a lord of his meyne / That loved vertuous moralitee” (III. 2045-46) and is lectured on the topic of how drunkenness causes a man to lose control over mind and body.

A lord is lost, if he be vicius;
And dronkenesse is eek a foul record
Of any man, and namely in a lord.
Ther is ful many an eye and many an ere
Awaiting on a lord, and he noot where.
For Goddes love, drynk moore attemprely!
Wyn maketh man to lesen wrecchedly
His mynde and eek his lymes everichon. (III. 2048-55)

Cambises, haughtily opposing the virtue-loving counselor, declares: “The rewers shaltou se”—
And preve it by thyn owene experience,  
That wyn ne dooth to folk no swich offence.  
Ther is no wyn bireveth me myght  
Of hand ne foot, ne of myne eyen sight. (III. 2056-60)

—and after imbibing more alcohol than usual he orders the son of the counselor to be 
brought before him, and thereupon with arrow fitted to bowstring Cambises “slow the 
child” (III. 2068).

“Now wheither have I a siker hand or noon?”  
Quod he; “Is al my myght and mynde agon?  
Hath wyn bireved me myn eyen sight?” (III. 2069-71)

The upshot is paradoxical and slightly more involved than that of the friar’s first 
exemplum, but it is pointed all the same. Cambises seems to have proven by
“experience” that the moral counsel is based on a factual error: a drunk man may actually 
have a steady hand and a clear eye, sufficiently so as to strike a sitting target at least. Yet 
the chosen means of empirical proof surely validates the other part of the counsel, that is, 
wine causes a man to lose his mind! Ultimately, Cambises’s refutation is based on an 
over-literal reading of the counsel: he has mistaken his limbs for the members of his 
physical body, when actually the counselor had included reference to the members 
(“many an eye and many an ere / Awaiting on a lord”) of the body politic dependent upon 
his headship. Cambises unwittingly enlarges the compass of social reference by adding 
hand and foot to the knight’s eye and ear; according to one contemporary sermon the eye 
comprises judges and counselors, the ear the clergy; the hands encompass knights and 
merchants and craftsmen, the feet peasants and labourers (Strohm, Social Chaucer 4).

The king’s reference to additional social strata is further self-indicting. Cambises is not 
unlike another “proud man” who, according to an early fifteenth-century handbook for 
nuns, “seel hise pore lymes seek & febled, þat is, poore folk, & þit wil not helpe hem in
her nede” (The Orchard of Syon, ed. Hodgson and Liegey, 363/12). Rather more ignorantly than this, he is like one who fails to recognize his limbs as his folk in the first place, and cuts them off.203 Having shot the son dead, he has injured his own body and exposed its weakness.

The exemplum thus establishes the friar’s main point that anger can be self-destructive, even socially destructive, in a sophisticated way that does not compromise but rather reinforces the apparent moral lesson. However, the friar ends the tale with an explicit moralization of a surprisingly different sort, proving that glossing is a glorious thing indeed:

Beth war, therefore, with lordes how ye pleye.
Syngeth Placebo and “I shal, if I kan,”
But if it be unto a povere man.
To a povere man men sholde his vices telle,
But nat to a lord, thogh he sholde go to helle. (III. 2074-78)

The friar is extending an earlier observations about the dangers of setting a wrathful man in a powerful position, but now he attaches to his general description some specific practical advice, given which the exemplum takes on another, mendacious aspect. The very behaviour that had betrayed Cambises’s faulty literalism is now taken as evidence that one should be obsequious before the powerful. Is the friar’s own glossing literalism sound? From the perspective of the present recipient of the exemplum the friar’s moralization is to some extent appropriate. The practical advice relates the tale to the condition not of a lord but of a vassal, from whose perspective what surely matters must be that a tyrant is literally a dangerous character. (As in the Manciple’s Tale, the moral is likely directed at those who must cope with the lord’s wrath rather than at the lord

203 See MED “lim” (n.) q. v. 4. (b): “a social dependent, a liegeman.”
himself.) Only in the presence of a ruler might it be sensible to emphasize the figurative valence of the events (as elucidated: lord assaults vassal = head injures body = ruler jeopardizes body politic) where the purpose would be to convince him that by hurting others he hurts himself, though if he is truly a tyrant it might be best to take the friar’s advice for the sake of self-preservation. Where the friar’s moral becomes problematic is in setting up a double standard, recommending that truth be suppressed in the event of having the opportunity to counsel a lord, “thogh he sholde go to helle” (a phrase that anticipates the Pardoner’s insensitivity to those who might go a-blackberrying), while suggesting that it is good to be forthright with the poor. This moral rule, which is not moral but in the worst sense prudential (which doubtless goes to expose Friar Hubert’s policy of avoiding the “poraille” and serving the “riche” [General Prologue l. 247-48]), could not be better designed to raise Thomas’s hackles. The friar is advocating, in the open, the kind of glosing which is analogous to that which Thomas—who knows it—is the present beneficiary of. Thomas will set him straight. What the friar will learn is that not only lords can be vengeful, and that lying to anyone can be imprudent.

The last exemplum is much shorter than the first two but drives home a related lesson that will rebound on the friar. Cirus the Persian king is said to have destroyed the river Gysen because on a military expedition his horse drowned in it. A moral proverb follows, set in juxtaposition with the exemplum, that puts a practical construction upon it:

Ne be no felawe to an irous man,
Ne with no wood man walke by the weye,
Lest thee repente. (III. 2086-88)

The friar derives his moral from the same principle of expediency which had informed his advice about singing Placebo to powerful men; but because the present proverb is taken
from the Bible (Proverbs 22. 24-25), we cannot as quickly condemn the friar for it.\textsuperscript{204}

This is a curious paradox only until we realize the applicability of this moral (as of that from the previous exemplum) to future events in the tale. If only he had himself been no “felawe” to irous Thomas!

Having finished his harangue, the friar instructs Thomas to “shewe to me al thy confessioun” (III. 2093), in reply to which the old man says he has already been shriven by his local pastor. Amusingly, the friar has lost business to a detestable “possessiouner” (III. 1722; 1926). Having travelled down this cul-de-sac, the friar attempts another route by appealing to Thomas’s generosity: “Yif me thanne of thy gold, to make oure cloystre” (III. 2099), he begs, noting that the fraternal order is already in debt and, as we have heard, risks having to sell off books to pay for the new building. Thomas, growing more angry and seeing through the friar’s “false dissymulacioun,” agrees to give “Swich thyng as is in my possessioun” (III. 2123-24), on the condition “That thou departe it so . . . /

That every freere have also mucho as oothe” (III. 2133-34). Friar John consents and Thomas proffers a truly inspired gift—“Amydde his hand he leet the freere a fart” (III. 2149)—at which point the friar becomes the profoundest satirical butt:

The freere up stirte as dooth a wood leoun—
“A, false cherl,” quod he, “for Goddes bones!
This hastow for despit doon for the nones.
Thou shalt aby this fart, if that I may!” (III. 2152-55)

Thus, “forth he gooth, with a ful angry cheere” (III. 2158) to complain to the local lord, all the while contradicting his moral advice and exposing his hypocrisy. Arriving at the house of the lord the otherwise garrulous friar is unable to speak. Thomas has managed

\textsuperscript{204} The instruction to sing \textit{Placebo} is not given as a moral in the \textit{Communiloquium}, while the citation of Proverbs is attested in the manual but not in the context of the exemplum of Cyrus.
to shut Friar John up by effectively repaying him in kind, having *glosed* him with a fart, something (noted by readers many times before) equivalent to the friar’s flatulent speech—so much insubstantial hot air ventilated from an aperture of the body. The lord in the *Summoner’s Tale* defines the fart thus:

The rumblynge of a fart, and every soun,
Nis but of eir reverberacioun,
And ever it wasteth litel and litel awey. (III. 2233-35)

The definition recalls the evocative description in the *House of Fame* of speech itself, where it is said that “spech is soun” and “Soun ys noght but eyr ybroken” (762, 765). (We may recall Gower in the *Confessio Amantis* saying that “word is wynd”!) In the *Summoner’s Tale* *eyr ybroken* is identified in a rather piquant way with mendicant preaching, which itself reverberates and wastes away. Corroborating the anal inference is the *Summoner’s Prologue*, wherein the Summoner had attacked the Friar with an irreverent introductory exemplum about how “a frere ravysshed was to hell / In spirit ones by a visioun” (III. 1676-77), in which vision it is revealed that the eternal dwelling-place of the friars is the “develes ers” (III. 1691, 1694).  

As is commonly noticed, the friar is angered not so much by the ignominy of having been farted on by a ripe old man as by the fact he has been stumped by a mathematical conundrum, a problem of “ars-metrike” (III. 2222). Thus the second stage in the friar’s degradation comes swiftly upon the first in what Robert Hanning has aptly called “a two-act farce” (“Roasting a Friar” 12), when the puzzle is solved. Friar John, threatening to avenge himself upon Thomas for having “charged me / To parte that wol

205 “In this parodic cautionary tale,” says Robert Hanning, “the Summoner depicts friars as the devil’s fart, a concept not only reflecting the traditional sulfurous stench of hell but also possessing theological significance. For the devil’s fart must be understood as a cosmic inversion and perversion of the *Verbum Dei*” (“Roasting a Friar” 14).
nat departed be / To every man yliche” (III. 2110-15), is quite bewildered. Happily the lord’s squire Jankyn, “That karf his mete” (III. 2244), steps in with a neat solution to the conundrum, “a pseudo-scientific plan for carving a fart” (Hanning 12), that utilizes a cart-wheel to distribute the stench equally among the twelve other friars of the convent, while yet ensuring the allocation of “the firste fruyt” (III. 2277) to Friar John. The lowly squire thus triumphs over the friar’s intellect, showing a facility for algebra and a keen eye for the iconography of Pentecost (which the cart-wheel solution is meant to parody), while also imposing one final physical humiliation in the end.

Now it hardly needs to be emphasized that the friar preacher becomes an example of the very thing he preaches against, and his preachment an example of his rank hypocrisy. All this is plainly held up in ridicule of the pilgrim Friar. But what is less immediately apparent is the way the Summoner’s Tale itself gets misapplied, as generally applicable as it might otherwise be, which is also the way in which Chaucer makes a subtle mockery of the pilgrim. We can elucidate the ironies by way of the degrees of the sins of wrath as spelled out in the Parson’s Tale. The Parson defines the sin as “wikked wil to been avenged by word or by dede” (X. 535), something both Thomas and Friar John clearly manifest. Following the Parson’s subtle analysis of the “two maneres” (X. 538) of Ire, Thomas would seem to exemplify an aspect of good Ire, “jalousie of goodnesse, thrugh which a man is wrooth with wikkednesse and agayns wikkednesse,” since he is justly angered by the iniquity of a false friar. The Parson elaborates:

This Ire is with debonairetee, and it is wrooth withouten bitternesse; nat wrooth agayns the man, but wrooth with the mysdede of the man, as seith the prophete David, “Irascemini et nolite peccare.” (X. 539)
Yet if Thomas were fully to exemplify such good ire he would have had to patiently suffer his adversary (X. 664). Because he hates the sinner and not just the sin, the old man lapses into the second manner of wrath which is designated wicked ire. Now wicked ire is itself subdivided into "two maneres" (X. 541), the first being

sodeyn ire or hastif ire, withouten avisement and consentynge of resoun. The menyng and the sens of this is that the resoun of a man ne consente nat to thilke sodeyn ire, and thann is it venial. (X. 541-42)

This excusable species of wrath Friar John comes closest to exemplifying when, automatically if not instinctually, he "up stirte as dooth a wood leoun" in reaction to Thomas's odious and odoriferous bequest. Yet the friar's wrath quickly takes on a more serious aspect, whence he actually comes to exemplify a fourth manner of ire called "ful wikked," which

comth of felonie of herte avysed and cast biforn, with wikked wil to do vengeance, and therto his resoun consenteth; and soothly this is deedly synne. This Ire is so displeasant to God that it troubleth his hous and chaceth the Hooly Goost out of mannes soule, and wasteth and destroyeth the liknesse of God—that is to seyn, the vertu that is in mannes soule—and put in hym the liknesse of the devel, and bynnemeth the man fro God, that is his rightful lord. (X. 543)

The old man and the incensed friar alike thus fall prey to mortal sin with their anger when after some rational deliberation they consent to retaliate. Thomas has already vented his spleen; the friar swears he will. Now if the behaviour of these characters is amenable to such relatively fine casuistic discrimination (i.e., good then wicked, venial then mortal), the Summoner's wrath is apparently not. No observable extenuating circumstance exists which would allow us to see the Summoner's premeditated behaviour as anything less than, from the Parson's perspective, *ful wikked*. The Summoner, who "Upon this Frere his herte was so wood / That lyk an aspen leef he quook for ire" (III. 1666-67), exhibits
such a high degree of wrath not because he simply fails to apply exempla about the sin of wrath, which more accurately describes the transgression of Friar John within his tale; more to the point, the Summoner misapplies a prudent exemplum about the perils of misapplication and so compounds his sin, a matter to which I will return.

My intention here is less to fit the Summoner and his tale to the rather unforgiving penitential framework of the Parson’s treatise than to draw attention to the speech situation of the tales described thus far. For the Friar is just as guilty of misapplying exempla as is his rival, and he too is motivated by anger—a wikked wil to been avenged by word or by dede—when he tells his tale. Both pilgrims use monitory rhetoric, then, as a weapon in a conflict of personal and professional rivalry. From one perspective, the tales represent what Harry Bailey in the Friar’s Prologue had called a “debaat” (III. 1288), a kind of verbal exchange based on mutual bad feeling which the Host seems to want to rule out of the game. From his less-than-sacramental perspective (i.e., in contrast to the one provided by the Parson) we appreciate that the tales might not show the best sportsmanship. But their transgression is profounder than this. Robert Hanning locates the nature of their hostilities when he describes the recurring competitive aspect of the Canterbury Tales in terms of “textual harassment.” In his superb analysis, Chaucer dramatizes the ways characters “misquote, quote out of context, misinterpret, vulgarize, and generally abuse textual ‘auctoritee’” (“Roasting a Friar” 3). What is more, in abusing textual authority the characters misuse one another. Chaucer is therefore showing that “we can, by our adroit handling of received wisdom, not only control, manipulate, vilify,

---

206 Yet Harry seems to encourage divisiveness when, separately, he tells the Friar and the Summoner not to spare anything in their speech; see his almost identical remarks at III. 1334-37 and III. 1762-63.
or discredit people but actually depersonalize them—turn them into stereotypes or quasi-allegorical parodies—and thus express with great effect our fear or hatred of them” (5).

Just so, the pilgrim Friar and Summoner do violence to one another by leveraging exemplarity rhetoric in an *ad hominem* fashion against one another, in an effort to ridicule and reduce each other to an invidious caricature. Employing the religious language of the Parson, which has its pertinence, we can say that the rivals fail to keep the commandment “Love thy neighboor as thyselfe.” By *glosing* one another, these pilgrims mistreat one another by means of what the Parson calls “wikked word” and, indeed, by “entissyng of wikked ensample” (X. 517, 520). The wicked example they set is thus contrary to that loving penitential activity the Parson describes at the end of his treatise as “discyplyne or techyng, by word, / Or by writynge, or in ensample” (X. 1052; emphasis added).

*Entissyng of wikked ensample* is plainly a travesty of the ethics of exemplarity I have described in earlier parts of the thesis, and it tells a cautionary tale of its own. Rather than reading for the moral, these pilgrims read their wretched antipathies into moral stories, *pointing* their tales with spiteful, piercing words rather than with morality. True, they are as creative in their selective application of the rhetoric as anyone could be; the ethical invention of the exemplum requires as I have argued a parallel kind of appropriation or punctuation of the text by turning it to one’s purposes. But theirs is not a moral tropology. In fact, as I eventually want to argue, their own exempla tell against the very applications that are found for the rhetoric.

Before going further to consider the compounding ironies and their morality I want to examine another instance of *entissyng of wikked ensample* that occurs later in the
Canterbury Tales. The Pardoner’s function in the Tales is, broadly speaking, a recursive
or interrogative one, because he serves to draw our attention to the shady underside of the
“bisynnesse” (VI. 399) of itinerant preaching. His merciless cupidity and arrogance are
also used by Chaucer to subject the sacerdotal trappings of pilgrimage to scrutiny. In this
the ethical valence of exemplarity is raised to another level, as we shall see, when the
Pardoner exposes himself for all to see but nevertheless betrays the depravity of his
condition unconsciously. As with the tales of the Friar and the Summoner, parts of the
Pardoner’s Prologue and Tale have sources in contemporary homiletic discourse: Pratt
finds parallels to the Pardoner’s sermon on the sins of the tavern in the fraternal
Communiloquium, and the main exemplum constituting the tale of the three rioters has
analogues in various sources, including sermon exempla.207

Falling on the heels of the “pitous tale” (Introduction VI. 302) of Virginia, the
Pardoner’s tale is requested by the Host as a distraction from the grim sentence of what
came before in the Physician’s Tale. Harry Bailey cannot stomach such high-dosage
moral medicine: “Forsaketh synne, er synne yow forsake” (VI. 286). He desires another
sort of curative:

By corpus bones! but I have triacle,
Or elles a draughte of moyste and corny ale,
Or but I heere anon a myrie tale,
Myn herte is lost for pitee of this mayde. (VI. 314-17)

---

207 The exempla of the Spartan ambassador and of Demetrius in the prologue are
originally from John of Salisbury’s statesman’s book, the Polycraticus, but, as Pratt
demonstrates in “Chaucer and the Hand That Fed Him,” already before Chaucer they had
been directed towards a less scholarly milieu. For sources and analogues of the main tale
see Correale and Hamel, Sources and Analogues, Vol. I, pp. 282-313 (or alternatively
Bryan and Dempster, pp. 420-23).
He requests "som myrthe or japes right anon" (VI. 318) from the Pardoner, and the preacher happily consents. Why Harry should think this pilgrim a good candidate for such a telling is easy to conjecture. Other pilgrims sense the fit, the gentils among them hastily intervening:

Nay, lat hym telle us of no ribaudye!
Telle us som moral thyng, that we may leere
Som wit, and thanne wol we gladly heere. (VI. 324-26)

The Pardoner is as amenable to this request just as he had been to the Host's:

"I graunte, ywis," quod he, "but I moot thynke
Upon som honest thyng while that I drynke." (VI. 327-28)

He evidently reasons that it is best to satisfy the greater part of his audience (after his thirst, of course). It is as if it makes good business sense to conform his speeches to the variable pressures of the marketplace. Before beginning his tale he repeats, "Youre likyng is that I shal telle a tale" (VI. 455), and "By God, I hope I shal yow telle a thyng /
That shal by reson been at youre likyng" (VI. 457-58). In a parody of the usual kind of accommodative logic which governs the good preacher's art, according to which the gospel is to be modified ad populum, the Pardoner thus employs his speech in the service of the majority, not morality. It is simply more lucrative.

For though myself be a ful vicious man,
A moral tale yet I yow telle kan,
Which I am wont to preche for to wynne. (VI. 459-61)

Something like a principle of consumer sovereignty governs the Pardoner's behaviour, particularly his application of exemplary rhetoric. In his prologue the Pardoner explains,

Thanne telle I hem ensamples many oon
Of old stories longe tyme agoon.
For lewed peple loven tales olde;
Swiche thynges kan they wel reporte and holde. (VI. 435-38)
Exemplarity is just another component of his entrepreneurial strategy. The real boldness of his approach in the present case lies in thinking he can actually pander to a majority, lewed and gentils alike, by reciting a sermon with an exemplum that is at once amusing and serious.

The Pardoner uses a confessional prologue to showcase his various fraudulent goods, including a reliquary of ensamples many oon. It is an exposé of honed homiletic skill and manipulative intent. One of the main things we learn here is that the Pardoner has discovered a reliable point of contact with his audience—Catholic guilt—by means of which he can purchase their sympathy. Thus he always recurs to the same topic: “My theme is alwey oon, and evere was—/Radix malorum est Cupiditas” (VI. 333-34).

Routinely appealing to this biblical proof-text (1 Timothy 6.10), the Pardoner quickens the conscience of his audience regarding the very sin that is most certain to stimulate his quasi-mercantile trade in indulgences and pardons and satisfy his cupidity. His preaching is, as he says, intended to make his congregation “free”—and here a witty pause is produced by a line break in the poetry, before continuing—“to yeven hir pens, and namely unto me. / For myn entente is nat but for to wynne, / And nothyng for correccioun of synne” (VII. 401-02). His preaching is thus ever an exemplification of his preaching, in an upside down sort of way: “Thus kan I preche agayn that same vice / Which that I use, and that is avarice” (VI. 427-28). His viciously circular method, in its very neatness, reveals a kind of splendid virtuosity—if utterly without moral virtue, of course. Where contradiction and hypocrisy plainly exist on one level, a certain amusing if not also instructive symmetry is evinced on another. We are thus apt to experience
some of the mirth Harry Bailey requested after all. Truly, as the Pardoner admits, “it is joye to se my bisynesse” (VI. 399).

The following Pardoner’s Tale, presented as a supporting exemplum embedded in a sample sermon, includes a lecture on the so-called “tavern sins,” much of which as I mentioned is derived from contemporary pulpit literature. Here, just as the tale gets underway the speaker veers off into a digressive harangue on the vices of gluttony and gambling and swearing, providing som moral thyng that the others in his audience seek. Within the digression itself the Pardoner employs a series of minor exempla concerning Lot, Herod, Adam, Sampson, Attila the Hun, and Lamuel, employed in the context of a speech condemning gluttony and recommending abstinence. The more expanded exempla of Stilboun and of Demetrius appear in a denunciation of gambling or “hasardrye.” The rhetoric is thus far unexceptional, except to say that the Pardoner’s whole speech is a demonstration of his usual vice. The simplicity and copia of the figures—ensamples many oon—he uses are conventional elements of pulpit oratory. The main exemplum of the tale, however, is a fine specimen. In it three dissolute souls are drinking in a tavern early in the morning when they see the corpse of one of their sort being carried away to his grave. The men are informed by a servant boy that Death took the man when he was drunk and that they should “be war of swich an adversarie” (VI. 682). The taverner reiterates the boy’s momento mori, instructing the men “To been avysed” (VI. 690). But with an arrogance nearing blasphemy the three swear, “we wol sleen this false traytour Deeth” (VI. 699), as if by means of their own clumsy triune efforts they could usurp Christ’s role as vanquisher of Satan. In sworn brotherhood the rioters set off “al dronken in this rage” (VI. 705), and very shortly they encounter an
“oold man and a povre” (VI. 713) who sets them on a new course. The old man presents a notoriously difficult interpretive crux, and here the Pardoner’s narrative departs from the usual stipulations of the arts of preaching that instruct sermonizers to keep exempla simple and plausible as well as short. The old man has been variously taken to be many things—the wandering Jew, Paul’s “old man,” the emissary of Death, and Death itself (see Riverside Chaucer, Explanatory Notes, p. 905)—and most recently he has been seen as the Pardoner’s alter ego, expressing a sophisticated despair expressive of the Pardoner’s own complex psychic condition that at last functions to challenge the simple moral psychology of the tale. Yet however equivocal or complex he may be, the old man remains one of the causes of the drunkards’ demise (their fault, not his). Whatever he symbolizes, that is, he literally points them in the direction of the “croked wey” (VI. 761) to a place under an oak tree where he says he had last met with Death.

---

208 See Leicester, pp. 48ff., and Patterson, pp. 402ff., who ascribe inner depths to the Pardomer vis-à-vis the figure of the old man, reflecting a recent trend that sees the exemplum as a symbolic venting of the innermost psychological turmoil of the teller. But compare Pearsall, The Canterbury Tales, p. 99-101, who argues that the Pardoner has “no capacity for change or self-awareness, and no insight into himself” and so essentially has no “within” (99). Another view is that the figure of the old man takes on an equivocal function within what Piero Boitani calls the “interrogative structure” of the tale. In this perspective the tale is finally more like a parable than an exemplum; see “The old man and the earth: Alterity and otherness of a medieval story,” in Boitani’s The Tragic and the Sublime. Spearing, in “Exemplum and fable,” says apropos this difficulty that “the impossibility of fitting [the old man] completely into any pre-existing category leaves us baffled and disturbed by a dream rather than instructed as by an exemplum” (166). I am persuaded by all the accounts which put emphasis on the old man’s ambivalent status but do not want to abandon exemplarity as a category whenever ambiguity arises; for even readings which dwell on the ambiguity come down to some basic set of instructions regarding what it means in the narrative. As I have noted earlier in the thesis, an interpretive crux does not always make for a practical difficulty—for reading must stop somewhere. Ambiguity can signify in a determinate way for an individual person.

209 Clearly, the old man is not dead and indeed he is oppressed by life. The obscurity of the figure is therefore provocative, could even be problematic for the moral structure of the exemplum. One of my best guesses is that he is a piece of wishful thinking on the
the root of the tree the men find a treasury of gold florins, serving to take their minds off
death but ironically hastening them towards it too. The rest of the exemplum gives a neat
account of the way the three rioters, when mutual distrust is heaped on avarice, destroy
one another for gold. All to prove, of course, *Radix malorum est cupiditas*.

The Pardoner ends his sermon with a peroration admonishing his pilgrim
companions to “ware yow fro the synne of avarice!” (VI. 905). Then he offers to pardon
them, but not without requesting “nobles or sterlynges” and other offerings (VI. 907-08),
pointing the pilgrims to the genuine spiritual pardon of Jesus Christ, “For that is best; I
wol yow nat deceive” (VI. 918). After this show of concern, designed to ingratiate
himself to the pilgrims, the Pardoner recurs to glib salesmanship and advertises his
relics and pardons. Mirth becomes morality as, curiously, we witness a mock sermon
transforming itself into a genuine sermon. No longer mimicking his method but plying
his trade, the Pardoner’s pretended impersonation of pulpit oratory has come to an end,
and, puzzlingly, he acts as though he had never revealed his pardons were bogus in the
first place. Is he counting on the power of the exemplum to move the pilgrims to
penitence even despite their knowledge of his subterfuge? Is Chaucer commenting on the
way even a demystified audience can be remystified by such narrative trifles? Susan

---

Pardoner’s part: figuring a desire never to die and face up to his sins. But the moral point
he stands to make—pointing as he does “this way to death”—need not suffer any
reduction in rhetorical force as a result of his allusiveness. One can be impressed by the
morality of the exemplum and find the old man interestingly ambiguous. Given the
views of Leicester and Patterson, we might conclude that the old man in fact enriches the
conventional morality of the tale by having “cathected” the Pardoner’s self-delusion and
despair on the symbolic plane.

210 The token of serious concern—what Kittredge famously called the Pardoner’s
“paroxysm of agonized sincerity”—has served very well to arouse the sympathies of
some modern readers. More recent critics find other grounds on which to base their
various humanizing readings of this depraved pilgrim; see further Pearsall, *The
Canterbury Tales*, pp. 92-95.
Gallick thinks “The tale of the rioters in search of Death is such a moving story and so vividly told that by the time he reaches the end, the Pardoner has the pilgrims in his grasp” (468). Responding to the request for som moral thyng the Pardoner is thus inviting the pilgrims, “if only for a moment, to see themselves in church with the Pardoner as their preacher, and most important, to contemplate the moral tale they have just heard” (469). Yet, when the Pardoner tries to address the pilgrim audience as earnest congregants, his speech is taken not as pastoral concern but as form of harassment. Suggesting that Harry Bailey “shal bigynne, / For he is moost envoluped in synne,” the Pardoner commands him to step forward to be shriven. The preacher’s instructions—

Com forth, sire Hoost, and offre first anon,
And thou shalt kisse the reliques everychon,
Ye, for a grote! Unbokele anon thy purs. (VI. 941-45)

—sounds to the Host like an affront to his masculinity. Belligerently swearing he will cut off the Pardoner’s “coillons” (VI. 952),211 Harry Bailey expresses his familiar opinion, now with greater force, that debaat springing from wrath has no place in the tale-telling game (VI. 958-59). At last, on the Knight’s orders the rancorous pilgrims make up with a kiss and the game resumes.

The Pardoner’s mastery of pulpit oratory drives the sermon exemplum into new territory, with his look-at-me style of expatiating on the value of the rhetoric he employs. We are now in a position to ask what comes of the rhetoric of exemplarity in the ecclesiastical context thus far. What exactly are the ramifications of the satire for the exemplum? Does Chaucer associate the rhetoric with such corrupt ecclesiastics in order

211 Carolyn Dinshaw, following a recent strand of theory, asks whether Harry’s rejoinder is not “the first threatened queer bashing in English literature” (Getting Medieval 134).
to discredit it as a vehicle for the transmission of moral ideas? In short, does the ethics of exemplarity survive Chaucer’s ferocious irony?

The foregoing three tales indicate that Chaucer indeed sees the exemplum implicated as an instrument of personal and institutional violence. “Boweth youre heed under this hooly bulle!” (VI. 909), the Pardoner had insisted after completing his demonstration sermon, meaning of course to urge the pilgrims to submit themselves to his institutionally vested authority as derived from the papal writ he carries. But we can see in this exhortation a further serio-comic, punning comment on the preacherly enterprise. Clerics, so we have seen, exploit pulpit oratory, particularly the monitory exemplum, under the auspices of the Christian Church, effectively turning the rhetoric of exemplarity into so much “hooly bulle” in a second, more familiar sense.\(^{212}\) In the terms of the *Cursor Mundi*, these ecclesiastics are full of “wickednes, tresun, and bull” (26371). We are doubtless invited to infer from this holy bull that preaching and pilgrimage are indicative of socio-cultural phenomena Chaucer finds unacceptable. One might conclude, specifically, that exemplification itself is just a powerful sedative with which the Church is able to opiate the masses. The exemplum is the tool of an exploitive hierarchy, an expression of individual self-interest, a mystification of social or institutional expediency: in every case a cog in the wheel of the system. Such arguments regarding the tyranny of the exemplum are found without searching very far. Larry Scanlon defines the narrative exemplum thus as “one of the Church’s chief vehicles for the reproduction of authority” (25) in mass culture, and in his book he reads the rhetoric as a contested site where a new kind of power struggle between the laity and clergy got

\(^{212}\) MED “boule, bul(e)” q. v. 1: “falsehood, trickery” derived from OF *boul* meaning “deceit.”
played out. In such analyses the exemplum is transformed from a moral and affective rhetoric into an ideological stratagem, an iconoclastic tactic permitting the people to appropriate or "laicize" the textual authority of the Church without being dominated by it. In this analysis, the rhetoric is largely instrumental to a larger social cause, since presumably no one accedes to the exemplum's moral signification anymore because everyone is busy usurping political power by means of it. I doubt, however, that Chaucer loses sight of the ethical potentialities of the rhetoric even when he is engaged in some form of sociological or political critique. Like anticlerical satire, which as it has often been observed functions to correct Church abuse without repudiating the Church itself (since it affirms the integrity of the corporation and the high calling of its members by rebuking certain bad personnel), a critique of exemplarity also might be seen to work to affirm the legitimacy of the rhetoric by condemning the occasions of its misuse.

The particular narrative Chaucer tells about the malpractice of preachers in fact seems to demonstrate or reassert the moral exemplum’s sphere of legitimacy rather than subvert it, in that the poet compounds exemplary meanings through irony. In the Summoner’s Tale, the most dramatic example of this phenomenon, the exemplary morality is elaborated on multiple levels. First, the errors of Friar John’s ways are duly pointed up by his failure to apply his own exempla. He is disgraced, his exempla are not. Actually, the corrupt friar is condemned all the more effectively by his three exempla, it being the case that the exempla serve by their obvious pertinence to put a gloss on his own hypocritical wrath and obtuseness. Particularly, the exempla of Cambises and Cirus, prudently warning against the dangers of counseling and befriending an ırous man respectively, should have taught Friar John some caution. On yet another level, and
equally without knowing it, Chaucer’s Summoner intensifies the moral and expands its ramifications. This pilgrim, as has been suggested, is himself doubly advised and so twice as incautious as his fictively incautious friar. Whereas the Summoner has the benefit of learning from an extremely germane example he ends up squandering its latent practical wisdom by employing his rhetoric in a furious war of words with his rival. For the other pilgrims who hear the tale, and for whom the exemplum and the situation of its telling might become exemplary in this extended, dramatic way, the Summoner’s evident lack of self-knowledge triples the force of the moral by adding a further recursive dimension to it. On an analogous third level, that is, Chaucer employs the satirical portrait of hypocrisy failing to learn from its own example to further concentrate the exemplary meaning, this time for whatever actual audience reads or hears the Canterbury Tales. The actual audience is given the widest purview, sensing as they must Chaucer’s satirical intent, giving them a perspective from which to appreciate the significance of the Summoner as an intentional literary figure and not just an individual fool. Whereas the Canterbury pilgrims would know a particular personality, we are acquainted with a product of Chaucer’s imagination, which the occupational stereotyping, here as elsewhere, does much to reinforce. The figure’s more nearly paradigmatic function as the Summoner, in other words, serves to enlarge his significance rather than diminish it because he is not just this corrupt ecclesiastic, but a typical figure made to represent the potential corruption of them all. (By the same token, the Summoner is an exaggerated type. And from this perspective one can pursue sociological or ideological analyses of the kind that are beyond the scope of the present study.). The thrust of the satire is thus undeniably moral. Ultimately, the tale is a tour de force of literary exemplarity employed
in the domain of ethics, deriving its powerful narrative-based morality from mutually
reinforcing but escalating levels of signification, as figures increase in meaning through
successively widening ironic frames of reference. The tale and the situation of its telling
thus come to resemble a concave mirror in view of which figures do not by reduplicating
themselves dissolve to a vanishing point (as in a *mise en abyme*) but intensify meaning by
folding into one another.

Considering the tales of the Friar and the Pardoner in the same light yields similar
results. The Friar is culpable in virtue of his failure to appreciate the damning *entente* of
having enlisted a moral exemplum about damning *entente* in a skirmish with the damned
Summoner. Thus he manifests no more conscience than that of the fictional summoner
whom he conceives as a stick with which to beat the “real” Summoner. Again, the
exemplum is misapplied by the pilgrim, but in such a way that it is applied all the more
justly by Chaucer to condemn the Friar on moral grounds. If anyone asks upon what
authority the moral is erected and whether it is not impeached along with the moralist, we
can point out that the reliability of the moral exempla is partly ensured by—besides some
very basic moral and theological ideals—the poet’s ironical intent, to which we witness
whenever we find it amusing that the Friar fails to observe the morality of his own tale.
The satire therefore does not discredit the moral; it rather drives it home. Likewise, the
Pardoner’s rhetoric serves the more efficiently to comment on and condemn his
pathological deceit. It has been suggested here, however, that the real purpose of the
Pardoner’s example is to show contempt for the literal-mindedness of those who would
take the exemplary morality of his tale seriously. Thus Marshall Leicester argues that the
Pardoner mocks the sermon exemplum by flaunting the fact that he remains alive: only
"iewed peple" such as the three rioters literally die for their cupidity because they "treat reality as if it were an exemplum" (47). The Pardoner's is a "disenchanted consciousness," in Leicester's view, discrediting the exemplum as a mode of rhetoric. However, this analysis is only cogent if the audience is as literal-minded as the three rioters and is prepared to dismiss as mere enchantment the ultimate threat of eternal damnation. What it also neglects is the Pardoner's own uncomprehending response to the tale he tells, which the audience can see through: as Lee Patterson rightly observes, "His own understanding of the spiritual life is as obstinately literal as that of the rioters . . ." (405). Like the rioters, this pilgrim misses the central import of the memento mori and does not heed his own moral theme, however sophisticated his obstinacy might otherwise be. He is going down the "croked wey" also, yet he chooses to ignore the fact or does not care. Revealing more than he knows, ultimately the Pardoner would appear cunning but is merely careless. More precisely, the Pardoner is an exemplary fool despite the fact that, or rather because he is such a masterful preacher.²¹³ He is his own best worst example.

Having his pilgrims enact the sins they preach against, Chaucer can be taken as repeatedly affirming the exemplary morality his characters transgress through ironic pointing. At last, these pilgrims are "bad" only because their exempla are "good."

Illustrating the Pseudo-Ptolemaic proverb cited by the Wife of Bath, "Whoso that nyl be war by othere men, / By hym shul othere men corrected be" (III. 180-81), we can

²¹³ Burrow argues that the "blatant contradiction" between the Pardoner's intentions and his moral theme is evidence for Chaucer's skepticism "about the exemplary mode, or at least about its workings in practice" (Medieval Writers 111). The latter conclusion is certainly right, but the former cannot be, since the mode is so expertly expanded by Chaucer himself.
understand the figures as having become exemplary in a special way: they are what we might call hyper-exemplary rather than anti-exemplary. In effect, rather than subverting the rhetorical bases upon which moral judgements are made they multiply them. For convenience, employing the conventional three parts of rhetoric, we might say that the exempla operate epideictically to allot praise and blame, then deliberatively to signify what it is good for us to avoid or to imitate, and finally forensically to get us to examine how the moral rhetoric operates in the dramatic situation. Whatever the case, the dramatic irony of the tale-telling situation operates on the assumption that the exemplified sins (e.g., wrath, negligence, cupidity) should have been avoided.

It may still be objected that the rhetoric is compromised by its complicity with clerical abuse insofar as it is widespread. Chaucer may be indicating that self-interest and expediency are the decisive motives for the deployment of sermon exempla so that what is important to derive from the Canterbury Tales is not moral instruction but a sense of skepticism towards religious or moral authority, in which case exempla are used to expose sociopolitical functions. This analysis is defective, however, because it is incomplete. Granted, the Canterbury Tales has much to teach us about the corruption of social institutions, and thus I would say it offers us examples somewhat less pragmatic than we get in Gower. But the de facto complicity of the rhetoric does not exhaust its moral application. When the rhetoric functions to serve self-interest and social expediency, this is for Chaucer a practical ethical problem. Analyzed as such, the motivations and effects in question are exposed as immoral and not just in some larger

214 I do not say that the tales correspond as neatly as this suggests to the parts of rhetoric; I only want to point out the moral validity of the exempla by putting the point in a different way. A definition of the parts of rhetoric can be found in the popular Rhetorica ad Herennium, 1.2.2.
sociopolitical sense *functional*.\(^{215}\) As we have seen, in at least three cases Chaucer reveals a commitment to strong ethical valuation in his exempla: the clerics are not presented as interesting social facts but are ridiculed as blameworthy characters.

2.3. “If Gold Ruste, What Shal Iren Do?”

Chaucer creates figures who become, as I earlier put it, their own best worst examples. By concentrating their rhetorical energies so resolutely on singular profit, certain pilgrims become singularly profitable examples. Yet when it comes to medieval preachers the best example is supposed to be a positively good example, and this raises other questions about the validity of the narratives analyzed so far. What kind of rhetorical force might the mercenary clerics embody, given their patent immorality? Are they the best examples for us?

Chaucer’s selfless Parson embodies a positive exemplary ideal which serves as an instructive contrast to the selfish pilgrims discussed so far:

This noble ensample to his sheep he yaf,
That first he wroghte, and afterward he taught.
Out of the gospel he tho wordes caughte,
And this figure he added eek thereto,
That if gold ruste, what shal iren do?


	To drawen folk to hevene by fairnesse,
By good ensample, this was his bisynesse. (I. 496-500, 519-20)

The emphasis is laid upon the priest’s exemplary way of living rather than upon his way of speaking, his eloquence. No “shiten shepherd” (I. 504), the Parson is a good man

\(^{215}\) If so presented, as a sociologist or literary critic might, Chaucer would have taken the edge off his critique: for then he would have not have composed value-laden satire but some kind of value-neutral, social-scientific description.
before he is a good preacher, as was thought obligatory in pastoral practice; his is no holy bull. John Myrc, recalling the scriptural warning against the blind leading the blind, thus prefaces his Instruction for Parish Priests with the commonplace admonition, "For luytel ys worthy by prechynge, / 3ef thow be of euyle lyuynge" (I). Gallick cites another contemporary instance:

In his thirteenth-century Treatise on Preaching Humbert of Romans devotes a whole chapter to the personal qualities necessary for preaching and notes that a preacher's life "ought to be irreproachable; for how can he reproach others with what he himself is guilty of?" (459)

The teaching represents an ancient rhetorical ideal. Quintillian, among others, held that the public orator must possess good character, or ethos (Institutio Oratoria II.xiv, XII.intro, VI.ii). Michaela Grudin argues that this classical pagan idea revived and flourished because of late medieval humanism, a phenomenon with which Chaucer was arguably affiliated, though it would seem that biblical ethics, in view of teachings about the blind leading the blind in Matthew 15.4 or the ideal faultlessness of spiritual leaders in 1 Timothy 3.2-4, have as much relevance. The priest is not just a good orator in virtue of his personal integrity, he is a type of Christ.

In the Parson's case, to live exemplarily means practicing what he preaches. He employs rhetoric when he teaches the gospel, but only after he has "folwed it hymselfe" (I. 528). Further, when he does teach, as the Parson's Tale reveals, he tends towards an ascetic style that is as one critic says "far more 'literal' than 'exegetical'" (Besserman 100). Notably, the only rhetorical gloss alluded to in the portrait of the General Prologue is the "figure" of gold and iron. When it comes time for the Parson to "knytte up al this

---

216 See further Jill Mann, Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire, p. 63.
feeste and make an ende” (X. 47) he is as austere, renouncing “fables and swich
wrecchednesse” (X. 34) and proudly declaring,

I kan nat geeste ‘rum, ram, ruf,’ by lettre,
Ne, God woot, rym holde I but litel betrre.
And therfore, if yow list—I wol nat glose—
I wol yow telle a myrie tale in prose... (X. 43-46; emphasis added)

What he tells is not the kind of myrie tale any Harry Bailey might expect or desire. The Parson prefers the pure “whete” of a prose treatise on the sacrament of pence to the “draf” (X. 35-36) of poetical fables with their rhetorical ornamentation and frivolous falsehoods. His criticism of the fabulous is expressed again within the treatise when he designates it a “delit for to lye” (X. 610), thereby categorizing fictional invention under Ire, the very sin that the Friar and the Summoner had exemplified in their tale-bearing against one another. While it is not entirely true, as Spearing maintains, that his is the “only tale with no narrative element” (“Exemplum and fable” 175), since the Parson makes sparing use of exemplary narrative (e.g., X. 323-36, the narrative of Adam and Eve’s fall; X. 363-64, the two causes of “drenchynge”; X. 670-73, the philosopher who beats his disciple), for the most part he does abjure rhetoric.

We might well suspect Chaucer of being slightly disingenuous in the Parson’s portrait, given the rhetorical and fictive basis of his own poetry. The idealization of this pilgrim seems to be achieved at the expense of the world of Chaucer’s literary art. Nor does the Parson’s tale at last make a very fine example in the tale collection, his penitential manual being one of the least read and excerpted items today, though judging by the frequency with which it circulated apart from the other tales we can assume it had
greater popularity in the past.217 But in context the reader’s nagging sense of the evasions or dislocations of the Parson’s performance probably registers an important ambivalence on Chaucer’s part, inasmuch as the Parson’s asceticism does not really comprehend the vitality and subtlety of literary narrative within the Canterbury Tales. So if the tales of the Friar, Summoner, and Pardoner call attention to certain failings of preaching by example, the Parson may do the same for penitential prose; contemplating the Parson’s good example we seem to be left with questions about the good of his example. And yet Chaucer composed the Parson’s Tale after all, investing such time and energy in the rendering of that didactic treatise as we may well find extremely difficult to sustain in simply reading it. A wholesale dismissal of this pilgrim’s “vertuous sentence” (X. 63) would only be achieved at the expense of Chaucer’s evident interest in penitential morality, of which we are given a further indication in the Retraction which follows on the tale of the Parson.

Withal, it is very difficult to know what to do with Chaucer’s extreme positive example. Only somewhat less certain is the nature of his extreme negative examples: those embodied by the Friar, Summoner, and Pardoner. If it is true that the good preacher must be a good man, what are we to make of these eminently pharisaical tale-tellers and the efficacy of their tales? Is any good to be derived from them? The truly shiten condition of the Pardoner’s life, for example, should perhaps render the power of his rhetoric nugatory. Recalling Humbert of Romans’s rhetorical question one may wish to ask, “How can he reproach others with what he himself is guilty of?”

217 The Parson’s Tale, like the equally sober Melibee, was a popular choice for inclusion in manuscript miscellanies; the former work survives along with the latter in Pepys 2006 and then by itself in Longleat 29. See Riverside Chaucer, Textual Notes, p. 1119.
There are two ways of approaching this question, one from the perspective of the drama of the fiction and the other from the perspective of the fiction of the drama. Both approaches lead me to believe that Chaucer did not doubt the efficiency of his negative examples. In the first place, *within* the fiction it is instructive that while the Pardoner's "entente is nat but for to wynne," and though he cares not if the souls of his audience "goon a-blakeberyed" (VI. 406), nevertheless his preaching is by his own account frequently morally effective:

But though myself be gilty in that synne,
Yet kan I maken oother folk to twynne
From avarice and soore to repente.
But that is nat my principal entente. (VI. 429-32)

Kiser suggests "he may be lying to us even about the success of his lies before others" (142), and perhaps he indulges in some wishful-thinking or deception in putting himself forward as a lady's man or even a successful businessman. But if we refuse to believe the Pardoner, we can find evidence elsewhere for the same disjunction between intention and effect. In the Retraction, for example, the poet addresses readers of his "litel tretys,"

the preceding Parson's tale, thus:

And if ther be any thyng that displese hem, I preye hem also that they arrette it to the defaute of myn unkonynge and nat to my wyl, that wolde ful fayn have seyd bettre if I hadde had konnynge. For oure book seith, 'Al that is writen is writen for oure doctrine,' and that is myn entente. (X. 1082-83)

Chaucer recognizes that his meaning may be deficient, though his *entente* was good, and so he seeks sanctuary in Romans 15.4 and, redundantly, in our prayers. We see in the Franklin's Tale too how even very trivial speech acts can become the occasion for a similar kind of guilty anxiety over the refractory effects of language, whatever the *entente*. Admittedly, in these cases the situation is the reverse of that of the Pardoner:
whereas Chaucer and Dorigen attract negative consequences despite good intentions, the Pardoner risks a positive penitential outcome notwithstanding his “yvel entencioun” (VI. 408). Thus he most resembles the devils of hell who, according to the *Friar’s Tale*, occasionally become the proximate cause of a soul’s salvation, “Al be it that it was nat oure entente” (III. 1499). Theirs is not a good *entente*, yet it has good effects. This asymmetry of intention and effect returns us to the issue of the legitimacy of the negative example. In 1 Philippians 1.15-18 St Paul articulates an alternative point of view which supplemented the teaching represented in the rhetorical and pastoral handbooks:

> Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. . . . What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice.

In this perspective—existing alongside the imperative that preachers *ideally* should practice what they preach, of course (e.g., Paul’s teaching at 1 Timothy 3.2-4)—the validity of the message is not limited by the bad character of the messenger or compromised by his *entente*. The gospel is thought to have a certain autonomous value

---

218 Similar teaching is elucidated in *Dives and Pauper* regarding demonic dreams. *Dives* asks whether a dream of uncertain provenance is to be acted upon when it stimulates him to flee from vice or to seek virtue. *Pauper* replies,

> Wheþir it come of God or of þe fend it is leful to hym to settyn feyth þerynne and don þerafþir, for it steryth hym to þyng þat he is boundyn to withoutyn ony drem. And oftyntyme bôþyn þe fend and þo fendis lemys techyn wol wel, alþou þey don euel. (ed. Barnum, 1.1.xlv [p. 179])

An analogous indifference to intent as a feature of ethical thought is a commonplace in medieval folklore, according to which lack of criminal intent or *mens rea* does not rule out convictions based on unintended consequences; see Richard Firth Green, *A Crisis of Truth*, pp. 116-17.

219 Alan of Lille, *The Art of Preaching*, p. 19. Regarding the Pardoner’s blasphemy Spearing asks: “but suppose it leads us not a-blackberrying but to Christ’s pardon? suppose the damned preacher can really bring us to salvation?” Spearing agrees the tale may be the more powerful for having revealed its “vicious purpose; but only at the cost of
in the face of the motives of particular preachers who exploit it. Just so, the Pardoner's moral exemplum—including himself as moral exemplum—has value independent of his "entente . . . nat but for to wynne." This is a tenable conception of the situation not least because, from the point of view of the drama of the fiction, the audience can take the exemplum differently. Witness Harry Bailey's retort.

What this means for readers of the Canterbury Tales, from the point of view of the fiction of the drama as I have put it, from a perspective outside the imagined pilgrimage, is that one need not place undue constraints on what extreme negative exempla can do. The poet is not such a humanist about language if it means that when words do not comport with deeds, words and deeds are to be abandoned to their immorality. Chaucer is always observant of the disjunction, to be sure, but it has yet to be proved whether he settles for an extreme pessimism about the possibility of their harmony (in audience response, for example). It is for this reason, incidentally, that I have not pursued a nominalist account of moral stories. Nor should we identify Chaucer’s ethics with the a fundamental disturbance in the relation between narrative and moral teaching. The power of narrative becomes merely aesthetic . . . ” ("Exemplum and fable” 168-69). I cannot concede such a “fundamental disturbance” because I think we understand the relationship between the narrative and the moral all too well.

220 In his short poem “Lak of Stedfastnesse” Chaucer says that if “word and deed, as in conclusion, / Ben nothing lyk,” it is due to “mede and wilfulnesse.” The lyric has frequently been taken as a sign of Chaucer’s linguistic skepticism, arising from a position that might be philosophically nominalist. From such accounts one is led to believe that Chaucer’s main interest in exempla will be in demystifying the pretension to harmonize word and deed, universal and singular, sign and signified—or, moral and story. If, as Chaucer says elsewhere, “wordes moote be cosyn to the deede” (General Prologue 742 and Manciple’s Tale IX. 208), then moral exempla which are incongruous might be said to underscore the way incongruity itself is an inherent flaw of moralizing. However, the division between word and deed in “Lak of Stedfastnesse” is an ethical failing rather than an epistemological one (see Stephen Penn’s comments in “Literary Nominalism,” pp. 181-82); cf. Confessio Amantis, Proli. 113-14. The problem is not that the “word” is reductive or implausible or mystifying or monological; it is that the “word” has been
Man of Law’s censorious attitude towards certain kinds of stories: this pilgrim, who would censor “cursed stories” (II. 80) from literature, cannot see past wicked examples to the virtuous uses to which they may be put.\textsuperscript{221} However blameworthy the fictional pilgrims, then, the poet does not share their guilt by simply having presented them in his fiction: for he is not thereby misapplying his exempla by showing how others misapply theirs.

Or is he? A detractor might make the case, given my earlier analysis of the Summoner’s and Friar’s dispute, that Chaucer’s literary activity is analogous and therefore as blameworthy, even immoral, since the poet does misapply his fictional exempla by exploiting them in a \textit{debaat} of his own. If satire in the hands of the hypocritical Friar and Summoner is \textit{ful wikked} Ire, if \textit{entissyng of wikked ensample} is a deadly transgression of the love commandment, then Chaucer must be as guilty—and the more guilty for having written against friars and summoners \textit{en masse}. Cannot the charge of textual harassment be levied against the poet for his uncharitable satirical writing? One might go on to suggest that the tales of the Friar and Summoner are just the sorts of tales which Chaucer, from the moral rigorist’s viewpoint, consequent upon an awareness of the imminence of death, would at some later date designate “the tales of Caunterbury, thilke that sownen into synne” (Retraction X. 1086), openly confessing his culpability. After all, his Parson had classified fables as \textit{angry lies}. It is not an argument

\textsuperscript{221} Chaucer is to be acquitted of the charge of prudishness with which the Man of Law would unwittingly embarrass the poet by claiming “certeiny no word ne writeth he” of wicked examples. Chaucer does exploit utmost wickedness in his poetry. It is the lawyer’s legalism about where the morality of literature lies that constitutes the butt of the joke. See further Middleton, “The Physician’s Tale and Love’s Martyrs,” p. 28.
I have heard before, but it stands to reason that the apparent dilemma occurred to such a self-conscious and ironical poet as Chaucer. However, in truth, Chaucer's situation is much complicated—and his imagined offense surely mitigated—by a consideration of the place of the fiction. For one thing, Chaucer's poetry satirizes immoral satirists. In penitential terms, he exemplifies that good species of Ire thurgh which a man is wrooth with wikkednesse and agayns wikkednesse. In this scheme, Chaucer, unlike Thomas, whose righteous indignation turns to sin, employs satirical exempla in a way that is proper: nat wrooth agayns the man, but wrooth with the mysdede of the man, it being the case that the targets of his satire are fictional and also generalized. So although Chaucer felt some anxiety over the moral character of certain unnamed tales, probably he should not have felt himself convicted upon the alleged immorality of the negative exempla (unless the scurrility of certain passages is a sufficient charge?). A tale is not unethical for having censured misconduct or, pace the Man of Law, for having failed to represent goodness. Nor need we conclude that the poet thrust himself beyond good and evil altogether—in some precocious, proto-Nietzschean manner—to assert the autonomy of will in the teeth of conventional morality. If anything, Chaucer's critique is a kind of "genealogy of morals" which, because it is so incisive rather than in spite of it, leaves the ethics of exemplarity intact even as he critiques certain practices associated with it.

Negating certain aspects of example-giving so far proves indispensable to the exemplary moral analysis Chaucer is carrying out.

In his Politicatiricus, John of Salisbury observes,

Poets . . . display philosophical subjects by demonstrating vices, not by teaching them (notant non docent). They pass through evil customs in order to reach virtue, just as Ulysses returned home withstanding the dangers of all kinds. For him the friends he lost on his wanderings were
true exempla, teaching him cautela, caution. (paraphrased in Moos 218-19)

Wandering through the Canterbury Tales must also seem like some Odyssean passage through strange lands with evil customs. Peter Von Moos comments on the passage in John of Salisbury, noting that it "represents a metaphorical development of the widely spread and even proverbial antithesis concluding the passage: 'Examples are often more useful than precepts and it is easier to avoid evils which are foreseen in a familiar way'" (219). It is a principle that describes the practice of preachers and poets alike. It is not too early to conclude, therefore, that Chaucer's method of proceeding is a morally preventive one of laying out examples of evils which he hopes his audience will avoid. Yet we surely misrepresent Chaucer if we conclude he is at last only or primarily interested in illustrating practical precepts, or, more precisely, that the precepts he illustrates are all of the usual practical kind. Chaucer engages exemplarity at a higher level, examining its conditions of possibility and effects, prior to if also by way of recommending a set of exemplary instances for our improvement. Alongside typical moral matter, Chaucer carries out a meta-pedagogical analysis into the conventionality of the rhetoric itself. The result is that Chaucer interprets moral problems at a remove from pragmatic instruction even as he presents interpretation itself in more or less paradigmatic and pointed terms having ethical urgency.

2.4. Lay Exemplarity

In the Canterbury Tales ecclesiastical figures are not the only sermonizers to employ the rhetoric of exemplarity, though its use is of course most conspicuous in the
tales of the Friar, Summoner, Pardoner, Monk, Prioress, Second Nun, and Nun’s Priest. Remarks one critic, “if it were not for the Host’s reluctance to hear sermons, the tale-telling contest may well have turned into a sermon-fest” (Gallick 460). The Pardoner calls the Wife of Bath “a noble prechour as in this cas” (III. 165), while Friar Hubert finds her speech altogether too pedantic and preacherly for what he perceives to be her didactic “scole-matere” (III. 1272), which doubtless includes her pulpit style of exegesis and exemplification. The Clerk, who may one day become a preacher if he can stand to give up his cozy student status, produces a serious homiletic exemplum despite having been told expressly to avoid sermonizing (IV. 12-14). And Oswald the Reeve, besides having a likeness of a preaching friar (I. 590, 621), sounds disconcertingly like one in the preamble to his tale according to the Host (I. 3899) and renders a fabliauesque story, with its closing moralitas and benediction (I. 4319-24), in the sermonic mode. In this latter respect his speech is not unlike that of still other lay pilgrims—the Physician, Canon’s Yeoman, and Manciple among them—who make their stories into supporting exempla of moral arguments.

Chaucer shows that the rhetoric of exemplarity extends beyond real and superficial homiletic settings to a diversity of secular contexts. Lay pilgrims enlist sets or series of exempla in the service of various lines of reasoning: the Merchant, attempting to verify that a wife’s counsel is always wise, advert to a mini-legend of good women (IV. 1362-76) that will appear to better purpose later in the Melibee; the Man of Law confirms God’s “prudent purveiance” with multiple biblical instances (II. 483-504, 934-42); and the Manciple demonstrates his theory of natural inclination by appealing to examples of animal behaviour (IX. 163-86). Others readily construe tales of any
kind—fabliau, saint’s life, allegorical dialogue, secular romance—as having exemplary import for them, in relation to their specific personal or professional preoccupations. The *Knight’s Tale* is received by pilgrims young and old as “worthy for to drawen to memorie” (l. 3112), having particular exemplary significance for the “gentils” (l. 3113). Roger the Cook thinks the *Reeve’s Tale* supplies a “sharp conclusion” to an “argument of herbergage” (l. 4328-29) portending the perils of taking in houseguests. The Pardoner, in the improbable guise of an affianced bridegroom, says he will gladly learn the trade secrets of the Wife’s “praktike” (III.187) before committing to matrimony. Harry Bailey thinks the *Shipman’s Tale* illustrates the rather invidious innkeeper’s policy, “Draweth no monkes moore unto youre in” (VII. 442), and just as opportune ly responds to the tales of the Clerk, Merchant, and Chaucer as though they had had specific therapeutic applications to his marriage. Nor is an exemplary rhetorical orientation confined to the pilgrims. In the *Miller’s Tale* John the carpenter adduces the exemplum of the astronomer who fell into a “marle-pit” (l. 3454-61) to prove that it is not wise to seek out God’s secrets, though in so doing he confirms his ignorance. The Wife of Bath’s fifth husband had a fondness for a certain parlor book filled with antifeminist exempla with which he was, for “desport” (III. 670), in the habit of brow-beating his wife. More benevolently, Egeus of the *Knight’s Tale* employs “ensamples and liknesse” (l. 2842) to “enhorte” (l. 2851) the Athenians out of their collective grief. Diverse men in the *Merchant’s Tale* instruct January about the pros and cons of marriage using “manye ensamples olde” (IV. 1470). Dorigen recites a catalogue of good women (V. 1364-58) for guidance in the *Franklin’s Tale*. And in the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* Chauntecleer rolls out
exemplary precedents to persuade his wife that dreams signify (VII. 2970-3156), only to ignore his own wisdom and imperil his life.

One could multiply instances, but suffice it to say that the Canterbury Tales is crowded with evidence of such "lay use" of the rhetoric of exemplarity. But what are we to make of its appearance in such secular contexts? As the above synopsis should begin to suggest, exempla are deployed in situations that are public and private, with aims that are political or interpersonal as well as grand or trivial, for the purpose of consolation or for censure or to give courage, out of good motives and bad, and to prove something or to improve someone. Consequently, our generalizations will have only limited value. Yet I think we can infer at least two things about Chaucer's treatment already. First, within the Tales exemplarity is a function of audience response as much as it is a technique or form, for besides giving morality the pilgrims are presented as taking it. Next, we can gather that in at least some very minimal respects Chaucer's approach to the topic resembles a conventional rhetorical mode of proceeding: employing copious narrative cases, exploring exemplification as a practice by exemplifying it in practice.

Notwithstanding the evident heterogeneity of exemplary materials in the Tales, there are commonalities existing among them which are worth remarking. One marked feature of the rhetoric here as elsewhere in the period is its disposition towards extreme or atypical cases, paradoxically, by way of illustrating a typical action or idea.222 Extreme cases become highly problematic in Chaucer's hands, as we have already seen in the examples of the hypocritical clerics, and I will be investigating other aspects of this element of exemplarity further when I come to the Clerk's Tale. A second characteristic

---

222 Lyons, Exemplum, p. 32-33.
is the frequent incongruity of narrative exempla and their concluding expository morals, a phenomenon, as mentioned elsewhere, which would seem to put pressure on any positive analysis of exemplarity within the Tales. When a moral fails to comport with the details of the story, modern readers are predisposed to think that the *non sequitur* has its source in prejudices which have no validity. To be sure, Chaucer frequently seems to make disjunctive moral application a thematic issue, yet as we have seen the fault can lie in the moralizer just as well as in the moral. Related to the inconsistency of moral and story is the way exemplary figures get misapplied, ignored, or taken out of context, a set of phenomena which in the drama of the Tales Chaucer uses to good effect as a means of characterization.222 A fourth feature, to which I want to turn in greater detail right away, is how Chaucer’s exempla nearly everywhere appear in contexts where the masculinity or femininity of the speaker, the audience, or the subject of the rhetoric seems constitutive of and not just incidental to the communicative situation. Male speakers deploy exempla to commend, criticize, or cajole women; female speakers avail themselves of the rhetoric to instruct or badger men. And women preponderate as the *subjects* of moral exempla, whatever other differences may exist among them. Female figures proliferate as exemplary protagonists—as in the personages of Custance, Griselda, Dorigen, Virginia, and Prudence—and in various inventories of exemplary types—as in Jankyn’s book of wicked wives, in the rolls of reliable women appearing in both the Merchant’s Tale and Melibee, in the list of nineteen suicides invoked by Dorigen, and in the citation of the female animals in the Manciple’s Tale. When gender is not specified as the subject or object of the matter, there is a propensity among characters to make it so: thus Harry

---

222 See MacDonald, “Proverbs, Sententiae, and Exempla in Chaucer’s Comic Tales.”
Bailey and the Merchant interpret the *Clerk's Tale* as though it has first and foremost to do with marital relations; Harry also turns the *Physician’s Tale* into an exemplum about the risks of feminine beauty, and then renders the allegory of the *Melibee* into an exemplum of womanly patience that he thinks his wife Goodelie ought to have heard. If these characters seem to misapply tales, then they do so in ways designed by Chaucer to call attention to themselves as specifically gendered practitioners of exemplarity. Hence the mechanics of exemplification and moral application intersect with questions of sexual politics, with the result that rhetoric is raised to a meta-ethical level where the ethics of exemplarity is put in question. The rampant antifeminism of some material in the *Canterbury Tales* makes for some pointed questions.

2.5. **“Whoso That First to Mille Comth, First Grynt”**

The most conspicuously gendered exempla appear in the *Wife of Bath’s Prologue* and *Tale*, together which in a longstanding critical tradition have been thought to initiate “a new act in the drama” kicking off Chaucer’s discussion of marriage.224 The discussion centers on a debate over sexual *maistrye*, and the Wife’s contribution to it is singularly her own. Drawing on her vast connubial experience, as well as on a not inconsiderable knowledge of biblical, patristic, and classical lore—much of which, interestingly, she seems to have acquired from her fifth husband’s book—Alison of Bath advocates a carnal and carnivalesque doctrine of female sexuality and marriage in which women seize

---

224 Following Kittredge’s landmark article, “Chaucer’s Discussion of Marriage.”
maistrye only to hand it back when it is won. Accordingly, she can be cool and calculating, as she goes about pursuing a husband’s “hous and lond” (III. 814), even if she betrays warm attachments to men. But in whatever she espouses (and particularly men), the Wife of Bath exhibits the expertise of a craftswoman who has learned to trade on her experience. Hers is a performance of self-assertion, staging what Lee Patterson in Chaucer and the Subject of History calls a “triumph of the subject.”

The Wife’s achievements are tied closely to her handling of rhetoric of exemplarity. Her prologue is replete with clerkish proverbs and proof-texts and exempla, and her subsequent tale is itself, as R. P. Miller says, “introduced in the manner of a supporting exemplum” (“The Wife of Bath’s Tale” 443). She describes herself as a clerk educated in “Diverse scoles” (III. 44c) and so expressly positions herself in opposition to those other “clerkes . . . withinne hire oratories” (III. 694) who allegedly never speak good of wives. Her style is polemical, pedagogical, in many respects sermonic, and her mode is empirical and literalist. Although she declares her “entente nys but for to

---

225 Guiding the Wife through the quagmire of sexual relations is her pragmatically conceived “sexual economics”—in accordance with her entrepreneurial supposition, “all is for to selle” (III. 414)—in which mercantile principles such as debt load, investment capital, commodity exchange, and supply and demand hold sway. See further Sheila Delany, “Sexual Economics, Chaucer’s Wife of Bath and The Book of Margery Kempe,” on the Wife of Bath as “both merchant and commodity” (73), and Mary Carruthers, “The Wife of Bath and the Painting of Lions,” on the woman’s economic dependence on the institution of marriage in the period.

226 Leicester, The Disenchanted Self, pp. 65-160, discusses the Wife’s ambivalent relationship to Jankyn in this respect. Robert Haller notes, “the refusal of the old hag of the tale to be satisfied with mere goods, and Alisoun’s own claim to her first three husbands that she could obtain more goods by selling her ‘bel chose’ outside of marriage, would seem to indicate that such [economic] control, while definitely a benefit of sovereignty, is not its ultimate rationale. She wishes secondly to be trusted by her husbands” (47).

227 On the Wife’s sermonic style see Patterson, Chaucer and the Subject of History, pp. 304-12, who describes her prologue as a parodic sermon, or sermon joyeux, on the theme
pleye" (III. 193), the misogynist clerical tradition prevailing upon her is the object of much serio-comic controversy. She was after all "beten for a book" (III. 712), and it made such an indelible mark on her that she must beat it back. At last she burns Jankyn's offensive "book of wikked wyves" (III. 685), an appropriate fate for such a heresy against her sex, but more drastic is the way she takes a page from it. Alison contests the limiting stereotypes and other forms of "textual harassment" men have wrought against her sex using the same rhetorical tools—exegesis and exemplification—men employ and in so doing unexpectedly returns us to the embodiment of the exemplary mode. She practices what she preaches, which is more than she can say for men (e.g., III. 436). In her prologue the Wife deploys autobiography as her chief exemplum and, in Alfred David's phrase, "makes a school for wives" (147) out of her life experience. I will get to this part of her performance soon. But initially, through a kind of guerrilla exegesis, the Wife of Bath reinvents exempla in the antifeminist tradition that address her condition as one who, as she declares, has been "so ofte ... ywedded" (III. 7).

The Wife of Bath begins by recalling the episode of Christ's having once attended a wedding feast (John 2.1-11), invoked by some exegetical authorities to illustrate that it

of the woe that is in marriage; and Andrew Galloway, "Marriage Sermons, Polemical Sermons, and the Wife of Bath's Prologue: A Generic Excursus," who compares the prologue to late medieval marriage sermons. On actual late medieval advice to women "to be preachers to their husbands" (as Thomas of Chobham put it in the early thirteenth century) see the immensely instructive article by Sharon Farmer, "Persuasive Voices." That the Wife of Bath exemplifies the rhetorical arts generally—"she is Dame Rhetoric herself" (110)—is cogently argued by John Alford; that her rhetorical activities in particular represent those of a compiler is developed by Ralph Hanna III, "Compilatio and the Wife of Bath." Dinshaw, Chaucer's Sexual Poetics, pp. 113-31, argues that the Wife represents "the literal body of the text" which is oppressed by the male gloss. Besserman, Chaucer's Biblical Poetics, pp.149-55, provides a good account of the Wife of Bath's rejection of glossing, suggesting that the Wife's literalism towards the Bible reflects Chaucer's preferred hermeneutics.
is lawful to wed only once. The biblical “ensample” (III. 12) has been glossed to fit a narrow and impractical pro-celibate dogma, all the more dismaying for us because it is corroborated outside Chaucer’s fiction in Saint Jerome’s Epistola adversus Jovinianum (at 1.40), a patristic tract which in the course of praising virginity nearly condemns marriage.228 A copy of Jerome’s epistle was contained in the Wife’s fifth husband’s beloved book (III. 673-75), and it profoundly shapes her own disquisition on the topic of the “wo that is in mariage” (III. 3; what Jerome following St Paul calls “tribulation in the flesh”; 1.13, Miller, Sources 423). Perhaps because the exegesis is “rare” (Besserman 150), or because it is just too outrageous to deserve comment, the Wife lets it stand as though it were an antique curiosity. Yet her seemingly innocent citation is likely more trenchant than it at first appears. A common view of the text expressed by Augustine (Tractates 9.2 [pp. 195-96]), attested in Chaucer’s Parson’s Tale (X. 919; cited in Besserman 150), and preached widely in contemporary marriage sermons on the text Nuptiae factae sunt in Chana Galilee (Galloway 5-6) was that Christ’s attendance at the wedding actually affirms the sacramental bond of matrimony.229 Consequently, if the

---

228 Excerpted in Bryan and Dempster’s Sources and Analogues and translated in part in Miller’s Chaucer: Sources and Backgrounds, pp. 415-36. While Jerome concedes the sanctity of marriage (e.g., Miller, Chaucer 420) and even permits the legality of remarriage (425) he comes down on the side of virginity so strongly that the alternative can only seem repugnant: thus virginity and marriage are compared to wheaten-bread and cow-dung respectively (418), and matrimony is called “the lesser of two evils” (421) and is by implication not good in itself. Warren Smith observes in his excellent “The Wife of Bath Debates Jerome” that the epistle is a satirical diatribe which takes a “scatter-shot” approach to its subject; the Wife of Bath, he argues, exploits Jerome’s hyperbolical style by remaining “calm, reasoned, and stick[ing] to the evidence” (143) and puts forward a moderate Augustinian position on the plain truth of scripture. Smith persuasively rebuts the view that the Wife’s literalist exegesis is merely distorting, reckless, or incoherent (e.g., see Kittredge, “Chaucer’s Discussion,” and Robertson, Preface to Chaucer).

229 Galloway, p. 21, finds no preachers who followed Jerome so that the Wife of Bath may not have had to plead her case very strongly.
Wife of Bath holds Jerome’s partial gloss up for tacit scorn she may also, as Edward Condren suggests, be “introducing important evidence for the legitimacy of marriage” (85).²³⁰

The Wife next cites Christ’s rebuke of the Samaritan woman (John 4.5-19), this time directly querying its hermeneutical validity as a precedent in the argument against remarriage. Christ’s statement as the Wife recollects it,

“Thou hast yhad fyve housbondes,” quod he,
“And that ilke man that now hath thee
Is noght thyng housbonde” (III. 17-19),

vexes her quite as thoroughly as it did some other early Christian interpreters. Her apparently befuddled response is not easy to read though its intentional thrust must be felt:

What that he mente therby, I kan nat seyn;
But that I axe, why that the fifthe man
Was noon housbonde to the Samaritan?
How manye myghte she have in mariage?
Yet herde I nevere telen in myn age
Upon this nombre diffinchion. (III. 20-25)

²³⁰ It has been suggested that the Wife of Bath is here making an even more profound comment on the rhetoric of exemplarity as a medium for ethics. Robert Longsworth argues thus that “not even the most obtuse medieval logician would have embraced the principle that a prescriptive rule of behaviour can properly be inferred from incidental circumstances. In this case the Bible is silent about other marriages that Jesus may or may not have attended. . . . The Wife of Bath may then have plausibly have deduced that Authority is treacherous—if the Authority of biblical interpretation can trample upon the Authority of logic” (“The Wife of Bath” 374). I do not find this analysis persuasive because, first, exemplarity does not aspire to formal logic but is rather a moral rhetoric and, second, it is wrong to imply that poets, preachers, or exegetes would have found it illogical to derive rules for behaviour from circumstantial evidence (e.g., cases, exempla, enthymemes). In the Aristotelian-Ciceronian tradition in which I am working it is the strength (if also the liability) of rhetoric rather than logic that it remains alive to the affective, contingent, and circumstantial by way of cultivating prudence, that is, “circumspection.”
The Wife of Bath puzzles over how Christ could in the same breath mention five husbands and deny the fifth’s espousal: rather unexpectedly, she assumes that “that ilke man” referred to by Jesus is an illegitimate fifth husband rather than a sixth man. Hers was not the only accounting available to contemporaries. Jerome imagined the Samaritan was married six times, illicitly whatever the number because “where there are more husbands than one the proper idea of a husband, who is a single person, is destroyed” (1.14; Miller, *Sources* 425). Thus Jerome misconputed and misinterpreted the import of the passage to support a severe antimatrimonial doctrine on which his otherwise instructive references to St Paul’s words at 1 Corinthians 7.39 (e.g., at 1.10; Miller, *Sources*, 421: “A wife is bound for so long a time as her husband liveth: but if the husband be dead, *she is free to be married to whom she will*”) should have set him straight. Other authorities, reading the biblical episode more literally, agreed with the Wife’s reckoning of the number of husbands. But, sensibly it seems, they do not stop with the husbands. Augustine, for example, made what seems the most plausible inference when he said that the Samaritan “was cohabiting with some man in an illicit relationship, an adulterer rather than a husband” (*Tractates* 15.20 [p.90]). What is the significance, then, of the Wife’s supposition that the Samaritan is reprimanded for having taken an illegitimate fifth husband?234

231 Warren Smith, p. 133-34, notes that Jerome inherits his multiple marriage exegesis of both the Wedding of Cana and the Samaritan Woman from Tertullian’s *Monogamia* 8.
232 As noted by Besserman, p. 151, and Robertson, Preface, p. 324 n. 86.
233 Longsworth, “The Wife of Bath and the Samaritan Woman,” gives a fuller treatment of Augustine’s figurative exegesis but ignores the question as to how it is that the Wife has become so preoccupied with what to Augustine would have been a non-issue (i.e., why the fifth is no husband).
234 In the majority of witnesses the Wife of Bath is made to ask after the fifth husband, but in a handful of variants she asks why the “first man” and in an even smaller number
How we read this early passage is important because it sets the stage for our reception of Alison as an interpreter of exemplary materials generally. Doubtless her fixation on the number five is explicable by the fact that Jankyn was her own fifth husband, and of course she is concerned to justify her own multiple marriages. The Wife of Bath effectively conceives of herself as the Samaritan woman and inserts her own experience into the authoritative biblical text, becoming one more case of the way individuals read themselves into exempla in Chaucer for authorizing purposes. By insisting that she has never heard anything mentioned about exact “nombre” (which cannot be discerned in the biblical text or in Jerome for that matter), Alison thinks she is drawing the issue to a close. And yet even as she passes judgement on the inflammatory clerical gloss, it is possible that she misapplies the exemplum in such a way that it judges her. For like Jerome she seems to (mis)interpret the episode as having cast doubts on the Samaritan’s espousal (not adultery), and hence keeps alive the issue of the legitimacy of remarriage where she actually had the opportunity to shift the discussion to safer ground.

As Priscilla Martin notes, it is as if “Jerome’s partisan, peculiar and misogynist gloss has become part of the ‘meaning’ of the sacred text” (213). To be fair, inasmuch as the

of variants why the “sixth man” is no husband to the Samaritan; see the collation for line 21 in Peter Robinson, ed., The Wife of Bath’s Prologue on CD-ROM. In the second set of variants, the Wife’s assumptions are made to align more nearly with Augustine (reading a sixth lover) or, albeit less likely, with Jerome (reading a sixth husband), but in any case she maintains her interest in marital status rather than, as we might wish she had, in adultery. The first set of variants is probably due to scribal error (copying “first” instead of “fifth”).

Cf. Robertson, Preface to Chaucer, 318ff. The parallels between the Wife and the Samaritan woman are enticing. Alison is also something of an outsider and, like the Samaritan before her conversion, she reads to the letter but not for the spirit. Unlike the woman at the well Alison does not feel any shame. Note that the Samaritan does not fare any worse for not being able to read allegorically, a fault which Robertson attributes to the Wife. For more on the parallels see Priscilla Martin, Chaucer’s Women, pp. 210-15.
Wife's understanding of the gospel is mediated by Jerome (via Jankyn) she might be expected not to have known any better. But she doesn't get Jerome right either. If only the Wife had seen that in the gospel account Christ refers to a sixth lover out of wedlock, she could have read the episode as a straightforward condemnation of unmarried love and been done with the remarriage argument. Are we to believe that she not only confounds scripture but misconstrues Jerome, at the same time effectively producing a self-indicting argument against her own five marriages?

Significantly, this analysis does not take account of the fact that the Wife of Bath's central and very pertinent question, "How many myghte she have in mariagye?," reveals a sufficient understanding of the import of the biblical account even as mediated through the evasions and distortions of Jerome. (The foregoing explanation also does not hold Jerome accountable for the fact that he himself, a male clerk and establisher of biblical authority no less, misreads the episode and might be responsible for the Wife's confusion.) It is not just that, as Ralph Hanna III suggests, the Wife's confession of ignorance as to "How many" thwarts closed reading and "restores the openness of the biblical account" ("Compilatio and the Wife of Bath" 9). More importantly, the Wife indicates by her questioning that although she does not understand exactly what Jesus meant, she knows very well what he did not mean: the gospel delimits no "nombre." Reasons Martin, "she senses a gap between the meaning of Christ's words, which she always takes as binding, and the interpretations she has been taught. She has in fact put her finger on a very weak link in the chain of clerical exegesis" (212). Retaining her respect for the letter of the text, the Wife of Bath impugns the spirit of clerkish glossing.

236 It is notable that even Jerome grudgingly admits its openness: "The number of wives which a man may take is not defined" (1.15; Miller, Chaucer 425).
From this perspective, her question about the fifth husband may also be read as a conscious and calculated kind of misprision directed at exposing her opponent’s feeble sophistry. Warren Smith indeed thinks “The Wife parodies Jerome’s mistake” (134), and Condren agrees that she “deliberately misconstrues the story to direct attention to Jerome’s misconstruction” (86). Thus she has not simply mistaken Jerome or the Bible; the Wife is in fact putting one over on an exegetical adversary with whom she is all too familiar—enlisted as Jerome was as an authority in her husband’s book out of which she was instructed, “nyght and day” (III. 682). She does not misremember her source; she comments on its literal mistake.

But if the Wife of Bath shows a kind of ironical facility with glossing here, it is only by way of exhibiting a preference for a literalist hermeneutics, as she goes on to make clear:

Men may devyne and glosen, up and doun,
But wel I woot, expres, withoute lye,
God bad us for to wexe and multiplye;
That gentil text kan I wel understonde.
Eek wel I woot, he seyde myn housbonde
Sholde lette fader and mooder and take to me.
But of no nombre mention made he,
Of bigamy, or of octogamy;
Why sholde men thanne speke of it vileynye? (III. 26-34)

In the last lines the Wife of Bath is implicitly opposing Jerome who said contemptuously, “I do not condemn second, nor third, nor, pardon the expression, eighth marriages. I will go still further and say that I welcome even a penitent whoremonger” (1.15; Miller, Sources 425). Jerome knows he is losing ground given what St Paul says about the permissibility of remarriage at 1 Corinthians 7.39 and so he resorts to bombast. The Wife
turns the letter against his hyperbolical gloss and, staying well within the bounds of orthodoxy, justifies herself.

In the face of the foregoing offending examples the Wife of Bath cites biblical counter-examples. She invokes Solomon who had “wyves mo than oon” (III. 36), then glances at the “shrewed” Lamech (III. 54), an unsavory bigamist whom Jerome mentions, opposing him with Abraham and Jacob, each of whom “hadde wyves mo than two” as did “many another holy man also” (III. 57-58). These counter-examples refer to concurrent polygamous marriages of course, and this is surely part of their suasive force. If it is acceptable for the holy patriarchs to have taken more than one spouse at a time, then how can it be wrong to take one spouse after another? The Wife’s next biblical exemplum follows in the midst of her discussion of virginity. In her essentially Pauline view, questions of marriage, like celibacy, should be left up to “oure owene juggement” (III. 68). Drawing on the theological distinction between “counsel” and “command” Alison reads St Paul’s exhortation to virginity as optative, a discretionary issue of individual choice (something Jerome will have to admit in Adversus Jovinianum 1.12; Miller, Sources 421; cf. Letters of St Jerome 150). The Wife of Bath does not disparage virginity, and in fact she lauds it, but in her case she remains content to yield that perfection to others: “Lat hem be breed of pured whete-seed, / And lat us wyves hoten barley-breed” (III. 143-44). To support her choice she alludes to the Feeding of the Multitude (John 6.9), making it into an exemplum for her exegesis: “And yet with barley-breed, Mark telle kan, / Oure Lord Jhesu refreseed many a man” (III. 145-46).\footnote{We need not pause long on her misattribution of the source. All the gospels have a version of the story, and while barley bread is not specified anywhere other than in John we can assume that that is all that is needed to establish its occurrence elsewhere—for, as}
comparison is as far-fetched as that which informs earlier exempla arrayed against her, but it is not her own idiosyncratic and sophistical invention: the distinction between virgins as wheaten-bread and wives as barley she inherits from the clerks (most famously Jerome, 1.7; Miller, Chaucer, p. 418). The Wife’s contribution is the way in which by free association, exemplifying her usual abreaction, and with characteristic bawdiness, she enlarges the comparison by linking Jesus’s restoration of the masses with sexual liberality. Putting aside the spirit of the text, the Wife proves she can play promiscuously on the letter too; thus arrogating to herself the clerical prerogative, she takes on the role of glossator. The innuendo produced by refreshed, a word she used earlier to refer to the pleasures of sex (III. 38) and now uses to mark her foray into the pleasures of the text, comically extends the biblical passage into the sphere of the Wife’s decidedly venereal interests. If in her hands the comparison is tendentious, she mitigates her crime by having exposed the equivalent tendentiousness of previous instances. She shows she can exploit the rhetoric of exemplarity as handily as do those exegetes who dare apply the Wedding of Cana or Christ and the Samaritan Woman to the question of serial marriages. Susan Schibanoff rightly observes, “In claiming her right to produce her own variable text, the Wife is at her most radical, for she demonstrates that Jerome’s text, no matter

Chaucer puts it later in reference to the gospel harmony tradition, the gospels’ “sentence is al sooth” (VII. 946). This is an important assumption in a pre-print culture that did not allow for easy checking of sources; Chaucer himself might not have had ready access to a Bible. If the Wife’s error is worth remarking, it is (again) only to say that she probably gets her biblical knowledge second- or third-hand.

238 An invidious comparison which appears in the Adversus Jovinianum and in Jerome’s famous letter 21 to Pammachius. See Katharina Wilson, “Chaucer and St. Jerome: The Use of ‘Barley’ in the Wife of Bath’s Prologue.” She cites the notorious letter 21 wherein the comparison is attributed to Ambrose: says Jerome, “Marriage he [Ambrose] compares to barley bread set before the multitude, virginity to the body of Christ given to the disciples” (247).
how sanctified by tradition and authority, is exactly that, Jerome’s text, not the Wife of Bath’s” (88). And Lisa Kiser notes, “the Wife plays the game of ‘glosyng up and doun’ as well as any exegete, but unlike the exegete she is willing to expose the fact that her discourse is interested” (139). Equally to the point, the Wife of Bath exposes the fact that clerical sophistry is in a certain basic sense illiterate.²³⁹

The expert Wife turns from biblical authority to the authority of her own past experience when, subsequently, with “ensamples mo than ten” she illustrates her own practice by way of cautioning and correcting others who would risk the nuptial venture. Here, employing the device of exemplary autobiography, she modifies her tactics: instead of opposing her adversaries with dissident glosing, directing her audience thereby back to the letter, she repositions herself as one who, as it were, “literalizes” exempla by imitation beyond the letter. She basically moves from an apotropaic stance, warding off the evil of foreign bodies, to an assimilative one, in which she embodies the opposition in order to make it matter to herself.

As Kiser argues, the Wife of Bath makes “the shape and purpose of her life story conform to those governing the collections of exempla read to her by Jankyn” (137-38). This might suggests the way even masculinist rhetoric can be used for the purposes of articulating female experience, and indeed I think this is to the point. If the Wife of Bath contests authority, she now shows she can co-opt it too. The first case in point is when the Wife illustrates the application of her controversial “lawe” (III. 219) of wifely supremacy by impersonating the way she would harangue her first three husbands with

²³⁹ Phillips, An Introduction, p. 94, suggests the Wife’s recursion to the letter is paralleled by “Wycliffite demands for plainer biblical teaching to replace the superstructure of elaborate interpretation of centuries of clerical exegesis.”
false accusations (III. 235–450), all of her material being drawn from misogynist and
misogamist lore which tell how a woman will exploit a man just so. Using all manner of
conventional verbal sleights and subleties, the Wife shows that she can outsmart (or out-
clerk) her husbands when she “quitte hem word for word” (III. 422). When addressing
her early husbands (e.g., at III. 362-78) she follows the narrative of her latest husband’s
book of wicked wives, indicating that she is retrospectively structuring her exemplary
autobiography through the teachings of Jean de Meun, Walter Map, and others.240
Inasmuch as she was actually purgatorial in her actions towards her first three husbands,
the reconstruction of her past does not make her any less exemplary a shrew; the
conventionality of her stance does not preclude its articulation as a genuine experience, in
other words, but in fact further authenticates it. Thus she shapes her life into an
exemplum,241 turning practical experience into authoritative discourse which she then
employs to teach “wise wyves,” at the same time that she shapes her life after exempla,
applying authoritative discourse in her practice—an emphatically vicious circle she revels in.

Regarding the circularity, Gottfried has argued that “patriarchal society generates
both the misogynist literature she protests against, and the opposition to it she herself
embodies” (203). The result may be self-defeating and dangerous to other women to the
extent that the Wife defines herself in opposition to, but invariably in terms of, dominant
sexual stereotypes: literally incorporating her opposition as she does, the Wife of Bath

240 The idea is that of Ralph Hanna III in “Compilatio and the Wife of Bath,” pp. 1-2.
241 As Delany argues in “Strategies of Silence,” Medieval Literary Politics, where she
notes that realistic information about the Wife’s work and travel is suppressed because “It
would have rendered her too much a person, too little a type or exemplum of fallible
human desire” (122).
could become her worst enemy. Caught in the cycle of conforming herself to a rhetoric that is biased against her, we might therefore ask whether she has any personal agency left. What is the use of exemplarity in this context? How can it matter to the woman? As everyone knows, in her vigorous tongue-wagging and otherwise "rampant femininity" the Wife is in peril of casting herself as a flatly negative exemplum. Remarks Lee Patterson, "the total effect cannot help but be appalling: she presents herself as a nightmare of the misogynist imagination, a woman who not only exemplifies every fault of which women have been accused but preempts the very language of accusation" (309). The Wife of Bath famously voices opinions that might embarrass the most embryonic of profeminist politics, remarking for example that "Deceite, wepyng, spynnynge God hath yive / To womman kyndely" (III. 401-02). Thus, as Helen Phillips says, she "may be intimidating but her principles are (to a misogynist) reassuringly low" (93). For many readers the Wife is indeed too much Blake's "scare-crow" since in attempting to master the rhetoric, she is for better and for worse mastered by it.\(^{242}\) Alfred David is not the first to suppose that Chaucer was extending the book of wicked wives into the present by effectively writing the Wife of Bath into it: "Adam and Eve, Samson and Delilah, Agamemnon and Clytemnestra—all lead up to Jankyn and Alisoun acting out the same

\(^{242}\) Leicester, *The Disenchanted Self*, pp. 73-76; Delany, "Strategies of Silence," *Medieval Literary Politics*, pp. 120-21; Kiser, *Truth and Textuality*, p. 140. Patterson says "she remains confined to the prison house of masculine language" (313). Alison not only embodies some of the worst stereotypes about her sex, but as Leicester argues she on occasion appreciates them. See also Gottfried, "Conflict and Relationship," 211, who argues that the prologue "in no way challenges the assumption that the worth of women can only be measured by their relationship to men. The Wife herself not only concurs, but encourages her audience to judge her on the basis of her wifely success, the measure of her matrimonial experience" (205).
old comedy" (David 151). Iconographically such tales say something about her pedigree. Perhaps, then, we can conclude that the Wife is yet another negative hyper-exemplary figure in the same manner of the corrupt clerics who reinforce conventional morality by transgressing it. Doesn’t she herself imply as much about her scare-crow status when she compares her autobiography to those transgressors who are destined to correct others when they fail to be corrected (III. 180-81)? Her status in this respect is a central crux: whether the “authority” of conventional antifeminism is reinforced by her “experience.”

Emphasizing the Wife of Bath’s exemplary victimization is always a good place to start, as long as we can do so without minimizing her agency, as indeed I think we can by appreciating what she has been able to achieve despite restrictions upon her. Her reasons for taking on the part of negative exemplum are telling if not genuinely poignant: “I koude pleyne, and yit was in the gilt, / Or elles often tyme hadde I been spilt” (III. 388). Thus, in a compelling two-line defense, Alison suggests that she employs antifeminist devices as a counter-weight just to maintain her balance. Deceit, weeping, and spinning are, as Gottfried says, “the only tactics available to women in a patriarchal society” (215). However, if incorporation is something of a triumph of the subject, we do not come away heartened by the potentialities of exemplarity. She can toss Jankyn’s book into the fire, but other books will remain in circulation. The Wife’s survival

244 See Robertson, Preface, pp. 323-39, for the iconographic view according to which the Wife of Bath is not a character with motives but a conventional abstraction annexed to an idea.
245 An important point raised by Schibanoff: “Soon after the Wife of Bath destroys the book of wicked wives, another Canterbury pilgrim, the Merchant, restores the text that offended her so: to his character Justinus, ‘the just one,’ the Merchant assigns an attack
tactics are themselves liable to be reinscribed in such example books, as we have seen,
and consequently even her most defiant protests against patriarchy can come off as man-
made. That her actions apparently matter to her does nothing to recommend
exemplarity generally.

It hardly needs to be emphasized that Jankyn’s “book of wikked wyves” is to
blame for the Wife of Bath’s double-bind. The Wife does not only tell her audience that
Jankyn had one but recounts many of the proverbs and exempla—certainly mo than ten
extending all the way back to Eve—contained therein (III. 715-85). Marshall Leicester
has shown that individual exempla hold in reserve meanings (“experience”) which are not
consistent with the morality (“authority”) appended to them, such that a reader can
unravel them at will and participate in a late medieval, proto-Weberian process of
“disenchantment” by attending to source texts and the play of circumstances and motives.
A veritable “rhizomatics of intertextuality that can lead in any number of directions”
(122) is released thereby. Yet it is fruitful to take a literalist approach to the same matter,
as the Wife of Bath herself does when she takes offense because the exempla she cites are
just what they appear to be: leading in one direction towards a single conclusion. This is

on matrimony which makes use of the same antifeminist exempla Alysoun had consigned
to the flames.” (87). Hence the critic maintains, as I do, that book-burning is not the Wife
of Bath’s “most radical challenge to the written traditions of patriarchy” (87);
appropriating offensive texts is more aggressive.

Her mastery of exemplarity is an act of self-preservation analogous to the way she
deploys other elements of the dominant male culture. Like her sexual economics, which
Delany calls “a defensive strategy against the special oppression of women in a society
whose sex and marriage mores were thoroughly inhumane” (“Sexual Economics” 73), the
Wife of Bath’s hermeneutics is a way of coping. Yet, as Gottfried notes, her coping
strategies will be “held against women by the very authorities who render those tactics
necessary in the first place” (215). Thus, with regard to her matrimonial career a
debilitating paradox of disempowerment obtains: “Women are forced to take advantage
of the possibilities of power within marriage because there are no other viable options
open to them; women are, therefore, at least in part, what men have made of them” (16).
not to say she is naive for failing to plumb the depths of intertextuality. The exemplary orientation towards texts admits that meaning (construed as use) will come to rest somewhere, and the Wife’s concentration on the prima facie authority of the present exempla is a lucid recognition of that fact. What matters to her is that reading for the moral stops here, on the bedrock where misogyny exists in reality, rather than going on indeterminately in theory. On the other hand, it is not clear that determinate meaning is invariable. Young Jankyn, though he relishes reading of wicked wives, has not actually subscribed to the one dominant construal of the meaning of his book. (This is the other way in which meaning is use.) By marrying Alison and effectively cutting himself off from the celibate life of the clergy, Jankyn has shown that the misogynous morality means little to him in practice.\(^{247}\) He reads the book not for instruction but for amusement—“Whan he hadde leyser and vacacioun / From oother worldly occupacioun” (III. 683-85)—as we still often read texts in school (from Greek skhole, “leisure”)—taking a detached scholastic view of his subject.\(^{248}\) Which is not to say that such schooling does not translate into practice: fireside reading here becomes a form of domestic abuse. Nor does this count as a material distinction from the vantage of his wife, for whom what matters is that he reads the book at all! Alison’s solution is as clear-

\(^{247}\) A point made by Pratt, “Jankyn’s Book,” p. 27, and Haller, “The Wife of Bath,” p. 53-54, both of whom note the book’s origin in Walter Map’s Letter of Valerius to Ruffinus. Pratt finds such works as Map’s that participated in the “struggle for celibacy” as having “brought about a sort of fourteenth century Oxford movement” (27). Jankyn, a sometime Oxford clerk, seems to have bucked the trend and married for material security.

\(^{248}\) See Pierre Bourdieu, “The Scholastic Point of View,” Practical Reason, pp. 127-40, about the modern European university context. Jankyn is not a very dedicated scholar since he has left Oxford for the domestic ease of a propertied older woman; but in other respects his reading remains academic, in the sense that he reads at leisure and out of no great urgency or practical concern, say, to improve his conduct—a characterization of the scholastic point of view that has implications in view of the pragmatic orientation of the ethics of exemplarity.
cut as any of the misogynist exempla she has heard. Infuriated by Jankyn’s reading, she
rips out some of the leaves of his book and strikes him on the cheek. Jankyn cuffs her on
the head in response, causing her to deafen in one ear and fall to the ground as though
dead. In the next few exigent moments, exploiting Jankyn’s remorse, Alison manages to
secure maistrye over her now uxorious clerk:

He yaf me al the bridel in myn hond
To han the governance of hous and lond,
And of his tongue, and of his hond also;
And made hym brenne his book anon right tho. (III. 813-16)

Yet, having attained supremacy Alison willingly goes on to surrender it—anticipating
events in her tale—becoming just as kind and true “As any wyf from Denmark unto
Ynde” (III. 824), proving no source of “debaat” (III. 822) and hence seeming to pose no
real threat to the status quo of sexual relations in all of Christendom. Has Jankyn glosed
his wife once more, as the Wife tells us he was wont to do in the marriage bed to make up
for his physical assaults upon her (see III. 505-12)? Arguably, he has flattered her into
submission through his obedience, while also effectively having incited Alison to act out
in exemplary fashion, thus reinscribing a common prejudice about the treachery of
wives.\(^{249}\) What the Wife gains by way of his abjection, then, may be finally difficult to
determine. Antifeminism, by contrast, though it gets burned, seems to rise again from the
ashes on the strength of the Wife’s hyper-exemplary behaviour.

And yet a stronger indictment of the misogyny of exemplarity cannot be found in
the period, even if it is ultimately reinforced by the Wife’s actions (paradox is
irrepressible). First, the rhetoric is here annexed to patriarchy in such a way that Chaucer
can be said to lay bare

\(^{249}\) As Hanning argues, p. 20.
the paradoxes of a culture in which one half of humanity is defined not in its own words or by observations of its actual deeds but by means of an autonomous, nonexperiential tradition of exemplary texts composed, handed on, and interpreted by a small elite drawn entirely from the other half of humanity and sworn by its clerical vocation to eschew legitimate sexual or familial relationships with those about whom it is writing. (Hanning 18)

It is not surprising that exempla should cause Alison so much sorrow: “Who wolde wene, or who wolde suppose, / The wo that in myn herte was, and pyne” (III. 786-87). The woe that is in marriage of which she promised to teach her audience is chiefly her own, and it is directly linked to a tyranny of the rhetoric of exemplarity which seeks to subsume her as another exemplary instance. Her husband’s exempla prove deafening, as if silencing her options; they serve to silence her own voice as well, to the extent that the female voice cannot be heard through (or except through) the din of clerical prejudice. Only after his book is disposed of does Jankyn acknowledge Alison’s desire; and then without delay her desires write themselves right back into his book. Her experience apparently substantiates the Theofrastian view that “it is impossible for anyone to attend to his books and his wife” (trans. Miller, Chaucer 412), but for very different reasons, ironically, than the antimatrimonial ones usually cited. So Jankyn’s book represents the rhetoric at its most biased and monological, embodying a pedagogy of intimidation and indoctrination reduced to assertions of exemplary “authority.” His tedious catalogue of bad women is so much propaganda in which “the cumulative weight of example piled upon example . . . is allowed to develop the force of universal statement” (Hanna III, “Compilatio” 5). Such exempla-books were not restricted to the realm of fiction. In a set of companion essays

250 Theofrastus and others argue thus by condemning women as an irritating distraction to married clerks; the Wife illustrates the notion by impeaching the clerical tradition of exemplification.
concerned with a case-study of one fourteenth-century collection of exempla, Jacques Berlioz and Marie Anne Polo de Beaulieu find a preponderance of negative images of women: “The exempla offer a ready guide to clerical reproaches of women, and they, along with the moral tales, can be read as a vade mecum to this aspect of medieval consciousness and of the male (clerical) predilection for denigration” (Berlioz 44). Robert Pratt, in “Jankyn’s Book of Wikked Wyves,” has traced “Valerie and Theofraste” back to analogous academic compilations filled with the pro-celibate arguments of Walter Map (“Valerius”) and Theofrastus among others, noting that like Jankyn himself, many such works have their provenance in Oxford. Fiction and the historical record thus stand as blunt challenges to the ethics of exemplarity, which must now seem like a quaint utopian ideal given what Chaucer has so far exposed of its sexual politics.

But this neat condemnation of the masculinist “authority” must remain preliminary in our analysis of Alison’s “experience,” which remains below or beyond the constraints of masculinist authority. Paradoxically enough, Alison’s autobiographical voice is a composite of the negative figures she rebels against. This evident syncretism

---

251 There are many images of ideal women but the historian concludes: “How far we can go toward erecting a positive image of women and womanhood on the basis of the exempla is a topic worthy of more study and discussion” (Berlioz 44). So much depends on what we are prepared to admit as a “positive image” that I suspect such an analysis to be very controversial; looking at how women make positive use of exempla might be more profitable. For more real-life analogues see Pratt, “Jankyn’s Book,” and Hanna III, “Compilatio.”

252 It seems therefore that she adapts exempla, reformulating their meaning and pitting them dialogically one against the other, just to survive their monological onslaught and not to adopt their wisdom. On the Wife’s performance as a paradigm of “Chaucer’s dialogic” see Grudin, Chaucer and the Politics of Discourse, p. 111. And yet it is not clear that the Wife of Bath is prepared to give up on the wisdom of biblical exempla or indeed on the function of exemplarity. I have argued that she reformulates their meaning by cutting through the clerkish gloss to the plain sense, advocating a scriptural hermeneutic that is literalist rather than anti-exemplary. The same may apply to the Wife’s literalization through imitation of antifeminist exempla.
confuses her status as an emancipatory profeminist figure, as has often been insisted, but it is also important to notice that it complicates the status of the rhetorical figures she uses. First of all, Chaucer manages things on more than one occasion so that the Wife can be heard articulating credible and subversive views about the stereotypes she herself embodies. She expresses strong opinions about the worrying consequences of a clerical monopoly over textual tradition—

For trusteth wel, it is an impossible
That any clerk wol speke good of wyves,
But if it be of hooly seintes lyves,
Ne of noon oother womman never the mo.
Who peynted the leon, tel me who? (III. 688-92)

—which are not undermined by the irony of her composite character so much as enriched by the fact that she is the creation of a poet who through re-composition could criticize the tradition from within. Chaucer may have been limited to biased exemplary material, but what he (or she) makes of its contradictions is extraordinary. For if the Wife of Bath is a compendium of bad wives, she is not reducible to one among others: she cannot be inscribed in Jankyn’s book as just another wicked wife acting out the same old comedy, to recall Alfred David’s phrase. She is instead a hybrid figure who attracts a different kind of interest due to her inconsistencies. On this score, several discrepancies touching her testimony—concerning whether she relies on experience or exploits authority, marries for love or money, enjoys sex or feigns an appetite, aligns herself with the profane values of her prologue or the spiritual ones of her tale, and whether she has actually ever committed adultery—such discrepancies and ambiguities indicate that a manifold tradition (or typology) is in play. “What Chaucer is giving us here,” explains Phillips, “are a number of different medieval anti-feminist stereotypes of women,
attributed to this speaker who is representative: they are not attempts to paint the sexual personality of a coherently conceived individual character” (90). Having thus incorporated *examples mo than ten*, the Wife of Bath consequently eludes totalization as one more representative wicked wife because she takes on certain aspects of them all, thematizing her representation as an exemplary figure. A typical subject created higgledy-piggledy from a tradition at odds with itself, the Wife of Bath essentially becomes No-woman because she is in a sense a construct of Every-woman, that is on the representational plane where clerical tradition is concerned.

So if the Wife of Bath is man-made, Chaucer shows off her artificiality. But what I have called her incorporation of exemplary figures is not just superficially strategic, for she thrives on exemplarity in a manner that is not only thematic for us but positively existential and personal for her. She is not only a type, but an individual personality (arguably the more individuated for her self-contradictions). The Wife as *this* wife makes antifeminist exempla her own, enunciating a controversial clerkish version of female experience, incorporating foreign bodies to constitute (as well as immunize) herself. But how can this be anything but self-destructive? Arguing as I do that the Wife composes herself, albeit always ambivalently, through the medium of the exemplary lore she internalizes, Gottfried submits the sensible caveat that “as long as she continues to work within the system she cannot avoid being co-opted by it” (213). However, the relationship goes both ways: for the Wife of Bath’s practice of literalizing clerkish texts by imitation, embodying them, making them matter, equally suggests that she has in a meaningful and heroic way co-opted the “system.” Granted, the Wife operates within the domain of patriarchal values, and this does not bode well for those who wished to escape
Oppressive sexual stereotypes; but in a very real sense there was no escape. Thus her real achievement is the way she has learned to survive against the odds in the place in which she finds herself: "More radical than the Wife’s attempt to censor and destroy offensive texts" is her "appropriation of them" (Shibanoff 87), the way she takes the gold out of Egypt, in the Augustinian metaphor. "The Wife survives . . . not because she burns books, but because she rereads old texts in new ways" (88). I want to add to this analysis that her victory is achieved in the way she practices old exemplary texts in new ways, or in ways that she finds meaningful. If Alison’s practice is over-determined because the roles she plays are ultimately "scripted" by a hostile textual tradition or system of values, she nevertheless remains self-determining when she translates traditional "authority" into immediate "experience." 253

On one hand, the literal translation via imitation is a masquerade: the Wife willfully "reduces herself" to an exemplary textual construct "in order to give that experience authority and the status of a counterexemplum that challenges masculine mystifications of conventional authority" (Leicester 77-78). In this respect her self-styled and ostentatious mimicry or parody, or what Leicester calls "miming" (132-33) and Kiser

253 The distinction I am making is basically this: If the Wife of Bath is not our ideal feminist foremother, she has nevertheless found a great deal of personal fulfillment. She is no passive victim. Instead of ascribing to her some kind of false consciousness that is the causal result of so much propaganda (a more or less tenable sociopolitical argument, but a problematic one because it deprives Alison of what autonomy she has courageously been able to secure for herself in circumstances where female autonomy is already afflicted), I wish to emphasize, along with some other recent critics, the Wife of Bath’s personal agency. I said earlier that causal, sociopolitical, or symptomatological explanations are inadequate as descriptions of ethical praxis given that moral agents do not think they are being expedient or fulfilling some dubious social function when they make their choices. The Wife thinks she is self-determining rather than man-made: seen from the "inside" that is what her choices mean to her. On the authority of her experience I also endeavor to describe her choices as meaningful.
calls “rhetorical posturing” (142), proves potentially destabilizing insofar as it
foregrounds the difference between inborn and impersonated qualities of persons—as
Dinshaw puts it, “making it clear who is not speaking in the very act of speaking”
(Sexual Poetics 154). Such is part of what it means to say that the Wife of Bath escapes
totalization because she thematizes her exemplarity on the representational plane. Yet,
more profoundly, if also unnervingly for those who now habitually privilege subversion
over submission, on the existential plane she also willfully reduces herself to an
exemplum in order to experience herself, that is, to be herself not just as a personification
but as a person. As problematic as that may seem, the Wife finds personal fulfillment
(sexual, marital, monitory, intellectual) in exemplary activities; she voluntarily
experiences life in exemplary terms that are meaningful and powerful for her.254 As a
result, exemplarity is not only a means of ironical self-advancement but a source of
earnest self-affirmation as well—for, in Luce Irigaray’s oft-quoted phrase, the Wife
“assume[s] the feminine role deliberately” and so “convert[s] a form of subordination
into an affirmation” (This Sex Which Is Not One 76).255 Hers is the mysterious power of
voluntary submission which Chaucer explores, from a very different vantage as we shall
see, in the Clerk’s Tale.

In erecting a feminine selfhood upon hostile ground, the Wife shows among other
things that exemplarity can be useful even when its content is prejudiced against the user.

254 For instance, although the institution of marriage causes her much woe and pain it is
not quite a chain of Satan binding her to hell, to use the stark image Chaucer invokes in
“Lenvoy de Chaucer a Bukton.” It is rather a purgatory which implies “kindness and
hope as well as pain” (Carruthers, “The Wife of Bath” 118). It is an eminently
conventional or exemplary mode of existence, but it is hers.
255 Cited in both Elizabeth Kirk, “Nominalism and the Dynamics of the Clerk’s Tale,”
p.118, and Caroline Dinshaw, Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics, p. 115 et passim.
By trading on the inherent flexibility of the rhetoric she effectively reminds us that exempla are amenable to diverse applications. As an applied ethics, exemplary morality exists to be reinvented and put into practice—as authority turned into experience—through selective application. Alison knows well enough that “Whoso that first to mille comth, first grynt” (III. 389), and promptly makes her husband’s book into so much grist. Her attitude is thus as one who is an active producer of meaning—characterized as one who “clappeth as a mille” (IV. 1200), to recoup the Clerk’s derisive phrase—rather than a passive consumer. She therefore treats reading, in the terms of de Certeau’s theory of everyday practice, as “making-do”:

In order to characterize this activity of reading, one can resort to several models. It can be considered as a form of the bricolage Lévi-Strauss analyzes as a feature of ‘the savage mind,’ that is, an arrangement made with ‘the materials at hand,’ a production . . . which readjusts ‘the residues of previous construction and destruction’ . . . . Another model: the subtle art whose theory was elaborated by medieval poets and romancers who insinuate innovation into the text itself, into the terms of a tradition. Highly refined procedures allow countless differences to filter into the authorized writing that serves them as a framework, but whose law does not determine their operation. (174-75)

The invocation of medieval poetics as a model for everyday reading practices, in de Certeau’s terms a kind of “poaching,” is apt. In my analysis the inventional practice of reading he theorizes is reflected in the medieval ethics of exemplarity, which the Wife’s incorporating performance exemplifies, albeit as an extreme case, on a continuum with less defiant types of reception and practice. Alison’s impertinent ruses, her makeshift procedures, her creative recombination of exemplary material which indeed resemble “poaching” on public property suggests that she internalizes the very ethos (e.g., embracing lateral thinking, case-analysis, copiousness) of the textual tradition she otherwise impugns. As a master craftswoman she weaves something new—or rather
more importantly, her own—from the skeins of old yarn, which is only what she should have been expected to do with hand-me-down material.²⁵⁶

The Wife of Bath’s Tale is cut from the same cloth. After a brief excursus, the Wife tells a tale about a knight who having raped a maiden is sent on the punitive quest to discover “What thyng is it that wommen mooste desiren” (III. 905), a practical question seeking an improbable exemplary answer. But the Wife of Bath does not outright reject the many possibilities available to anyone seeking such egregious wisdom; she plays with the wisdom. In the course of relating some of the conflicting answers the knight receives in a census of the people, the Wife of Bath detains her audience with a minor exemplum to prove what women definitely do not desire: to keep a secret. The exemplum features the wife of Midas who, unable to keep her husband’s bizarre anatomical secret, is at length impelled to go to a marsh to disburden herself:

“Biwreye me nat, thou water, with thy soun,”
Quod she; “to thee I telle it and namo;
Myn housbonde hath longe asses erys two!
Now is myn herte al hool; now is it oute.
I myghte no lenger kepe it, out of doubte.” (III. 974-78)

The moral of the story, “Heere may ye se, thogh we a tyme abyde, / Yet out it moot; we kan no conseil hyde” (III. 979-80), is an antifeminist exposition ostensibly sponsored by the Wife of Bath. She then refers us to Ovid for the “remenant of the tale” (III. 981), but the original text is of little avail because she has modified the story so drastically. In

²⁵⁶ Lévi-Strauss’s original distinction between the bricoleur and the engineer is instructive: “the engineer is always trying to make his way out of and go beyond the constraints imposed by a particular state of civilization while the ‘bricoleur’ by inclination or necessity always remains within them” (The Savage Mind 19). This explains the Wife of Bath’s disempowerment. Yet liberating power nevertheless resides in the bricoleur’s adeptness in reforming “whatever is at hand” (17), recycling “odds and ends” (22).
Ovid it is Midas’s barber and not his wife who betrays his secret. Perhaps she is obliquely referring us to the fact that a man really exemplifies the incontinence of the tongue. On the other hand, the misrepresentation of the source could serve as proof that Alison would make a poor clerk, pointed up by the irony that she has fashioned a misogynist exemplum where there wasn’t one to begin with.

We should by now be used to such ambiguities in a character who is a syncretism of the antifeminist tradition she opposes. At last Alison is ingeniously “making-do” when she puts forth an exemplum about how women can conceal nothing: for the changes she makes to her source, while momentarily concealing them, are conscious and playful and they have point. In Ovid’s version, which as noted the Wife directs us to, when the barber lets the secret out it is broadcast to all: the wind forever transmits the news via reeds which have grown up on the spot where he deposited the information. In Alison’s version, by contrast, the secret is contained to the marsh as if to exemplify the nugatory results of the woman’s lapse in comparison with the man’s. This may take some of the edge off the misogyny, but admittedly it doesn’t make the exemplum any more palatable as a generalization about women. And yet the Wife’s arch manner is sufficiently evident in the way she describes Midas’s ears as a “vice” (III. 955) and “disfigure” (III. 960) which he tries “Ful subtilly” (III. 956) to hide. The diction stands

257 It is not right, as Allen and Gallacher assert, that “the correct version has no relevance at all” (“Alisoun Through the Looking Glass” 100). In their estimation the Wife has misread Ovid’s tale about bad judgement and so reveals her own. For Richard Hoffman, in Ovid and the Canterbury Tales, the deafened Wife is like Midas because he exhibits an “asinine deafness” (148). And D. W. Robertson in “The Wife of Bath and Midas” recurs to an allegorical exegesis in which Midas is “betrayed by his sensuality” (11) in the figure of a “wife” who figures the Wife’s own sin. I find these interpretations limited by the very authority of the background texts they bring to bear on the Wife’s experience. They cannot imagine that it is the tradition of authoritative exegetical glossing which the Wife is knowingly contesting.
as a judgement upon his character if the ass’s ears hadn’t already. We understand therefore that if the wife is blameworthy, the husband is not praiseworthy. Actually, when the wife’s heart blazes as a result of trying to suppress the secret of the ears (III. 967, 971), we can say that she exhibits the greater probity and moral superiority because her conscience drives her, much as the Wife of Bath is herself driven, to speak the truth about the asses men can make of themselves.²⁵⁸

The remainder of the Wife of Bath’s Tale is as pointed if even more equivocal in its manipulation of exemplary rhetoric. I leave a full accounting to others, only focusing here on the ending where, after the knight is lectured on the true nature of nobility (as originating in virtue rather than heredity),²⁵⁹ the question of what women desire seems to shade into the more important matter, What do men most desire? The knight is given a choice: to have his wife fair and faithless or foul and faithful. As R. P. Miller demonstrates, at this juncture the tale most resembles contemporary sermon exempla which teach the doctrine of spiritual obedience. Typically, such exempla illustrate a conversion in the perceptual faculties of the subject rather than a transformation in the objects of perception (“The Wife of Bath’s Tale” 44-49). Variations on the motif are

²⁵⁸ Leicester says that this is the “secret women have to conceal all the time, especially about their nearest and dearest” (144). Patterson connects the ass’s ears to the typical masculinist behaviour of failing to listen well (286-88), a reading of the exemplum which also depends on our recollection of the circumstances of Midas’s punishment. Note the tendency to generalize about the meaning of the example—something not admitted as possible, or even desirable, in other cases according to these otherwise disenchanted critics.

²⁵⁹ In these lengthy passages the hag draws on biblical, classical, and contemporary wisdom—the stuff of “clerkes . . . withinne hire oratories” (III. 694) no less. Perhaps we are invited to put distance between the teachings of the Wife of Bath and of the hag, because the latter is uncritical of clerical tradition. But it is notable that the authorities the hag cites—Dante, Seneca, Boethius—are absent from Jankyn’s book. Perhaps, whatever other discrepancies exist between the Wife’s prologue and the tale, the Wife would find the hag’s lecture credible.
manifold but a common element all the same is the way obedience leads to a revelation through inversion: the true quality of persons is revealed as being contrary to what first appeared to be the case. Now one difference of the Wife of Bath’s tale is that the knight’s trial is not spiritual but domestic; he yields his will to his wife. (Like the events in the Clerk’s Tale, those in the present case are relentlessly conjugal; the Clerk will urge a spiritual reading, whereas the Wife of Bath remains on the literal plane). But there is a further difference. When the knight does put himself in her “governance” (III. 1231) he is rewarded beyond his expectations with a wife “bothe fair and good” (III. 1241). She satisfies the demands of both flesh and spirit, as Miller acknowledges, giving the knight an apparition of the beauty she embodies.\footnote{Thus Chaucer’s version parallels the ensample of the Tale of Florent in Gower’s Confessio Amantis in some respects. Gower’s tale too is about how “Obedience in love availeth” (II. 1401). And his version exploits the motif of inversion of appearances for the sake of satisfying the knight’s fleshly desire: what obedience in love avails is a beautiful wife. The Wife of Bath, however, adds another dimension to the outcome by making the knight’s choice into a double-bind. A fuller comparison is made by Fisher in John Gower, pp. 296-301, and Pearsall in The Canterbury Tales, pp. 87-90.} The knight “is saved,” argues Miller, “because he has joined the ranks of those who have achieved the state of mind in which, as Vincent of Beauvais describes it, ‘that which is truly foul seems to them fair, and that which is harmful seems to them delightful’” (456). However, the outcome finally favours the flesh rather more than the spirit: the vision of foul turning to fair is not just a “state of mind,” for the inversion is not limited to a conversion of the perceptual faculties. The tale chronicles how a certain kind of wish-fulfillment, which the Wife sponsors when she makes the wife all things to the knight, effects a literal change in the power differential of a marriage. The old woman pledges her life upon her promise that she will be as fair and good as any man could ever desire and, after her metamorphosis, she

\footnote{Thus Chaucer’s version parallels the ensample of the Tale of Florent in Gower’s Confessio Amantis in some respects. Gower’s tale too is about how “Obedience in love availeth” (II. 1401). And his version exploits the motif of inversion of appearances for the sake of satisfying the knight’s fleshly desire: what obedience in love avails is a beautiful wife. The Wife of Bath, however, adds another dimension to the outcome by making the knight’s choice into a double-bind. A fuller comparison is made by Fisher in John Gower, pp. 296-301, and Pearsall in The Canterbury Tales, pp. 87-90.}
“obeyed hym in every thyng” (III. 1255). Thus, when the knight has given over mastery, for all intents and purposes he has gained it back, just as Jankyn might have when he acquiesced and was repaid with an uncommonly common wife. The meaning of the process for the Wife’s doctrine of female mastery is not self-evident, and we are obliged to entertain the possibility that whatever men want is what women really want. That a wife can locate her own desires even within the restrictions of male fantasy threatens to embarrass our profeminist allegiances once again.

If instead Alison is promising mutual submission for a preliminary role reversal as some like to suggest, then she does not spell out the consequences—except to say in the wishful fairy-tale mode, “And thus they lyve unto hir lyves ende / In parfit joye” (III. 1257-58). For all we know, perfect joy such as she describes entails being as compliant as any wife from Denmark to India, or as fair and good “As evere was wyf, syn that the world was newe” (III. 1244)! (But perhaps we are meant to recall the threatening example of Eve in this last phrase, who, when the world was new, was “the los of al mankynde” [III. 720]). Whether the marriage is anything different from what the conventional matrimonial ideal would have stipulated is left to conjecture. The Wife may, in short, reserve for herself a certain “queyte fantasye” (III. 516) about submitting

---

261 Leicester suggests that “sovereignty is primarily a tool for achieving feminine independence within marriage so that more satisfactory relations between the sexes can have a chance to develop” (155). Patterson similarly thinks relinquishment of mastery here and at the end of the prologue effectively “allows both spouses to escape from the economy of domination that blights marriage” (314).

262 Gower indicates that a clerkish response to one version of the tale has been to take it as proof that men can sometimes regain power by temporarily submitting to a woman—therefore it is complicit with the conventional matrimonial ideal (see Confessio Amantis II. 1856-61).
to male desire.\textsuperscript{263} I leave the questions to others for debate—which it is no doubt Chaucer’s purpose to provoke—and only note that the Wife’s deployment of such ambivalent moral rhetoric, the way she embodies herself in a clerical tradition of stereotyped examples, seems to constitute the real point of her performance. Her voluntary submission is something of the cost of inventing her own authority and autonomy. And yet the concluding morality of the tale is an unequivocal benediction turned malediction of quite a different order—

\begin{quote}
\dots and Jhesu Crist us sende
Housbondes meeke, yonge, and fressh abedde,
And grace t’overbyde hem that we wedde;
And eek I praye Jhesu shorte hir lyves
That noght wol be governed by hir wyves;
And olde and angry nygardes of dispence,
God sende hem soone verray pestilence! (III. 1258-64)
\end{quote}

—such as might serve to keep the question of her real allegiances an open question. Like other appended morals her final sentiment, which is as Pearsall characterizes it a “resumption of comically monstrous aggressiveness” (The Canterbury Tales 91), does violence to the narrative because it reduces meaning to one possibility. But in the realm of present practice where the sexes are ever at debate, the Wife would not stand to gain as much without being so uninhibited.

\textsuperscript{263} Though in situating her tale in the long-gone days of Arthur perhaps she is indicating the illusive nature of the male-driven fantasy. Thus Carruthers, “The Wife of Bath’s Tale,” p. 218.
2.6. "As Was Grisilde"

Another tale which exhibits a certain monstrosity is the Clerk's Tale, a tale in which "conflicting moralities" protrude at all angles like grotesques menacing from the outer walls of a cathedral. With its juxtaposition of earnest and game, its interlace of spiritual and profane meanings, its literal and typological inscriptions, and its dramatic context framing the telling, the tale is a hybrid creation. Consequently, where the moral meaning lies is extremely difficult to judge. Would Chaucer advocate the Clerk's main morality, or has he impeached its authority? The question—for all readers including the Clerk it seems—is what to do with Griselda's voluntary submission. What is it good to do with her example? Is Griselda supposed to epitomize wifely perfection in acting as she does, or is she to represent a spiritual ideal to which readers should aspire without acting as she does, or is she morally repugnant for doing what she does? At what level of generality or specificity, in other words, are readers to take the example?

Such are the sort of questions which constellate around the tale—to use another metaphor I find useful in this context—like so many planetary bodies subject to simultaneous attraction and repulsion. There are no concessions to the inert mind. The Clerk would, though, provide his readers with a center of gravity when he refers events to a general Christian morality—

This storie is seyd nat for that wyves sholde
Folwen Grisilde as in humylitee,
For it were inportable, though they wolde,
But for that every wight, in his degree,
Sholde be constant in adversitee
As was Grisilde; therfore Petrark writeth
This storie, which with heigh stile he enditeth.
For sith a womman was so pacient
Unto a mortal man, wel moore us oghte
Receyven al in gree that God us sent. (IV. 1142-51)

—as if he could stabilize the narrative by transcending its worrisome literality. The
meaning of the tale is encapsulated in the apparently unambiguous spiritual exhortation
that follows: “Lat us thanne lyve in vertuous suffraunce” (IV. 1162). That the general
morality is not simply unambiguous will be one of my first points. Moreover, the Clerk
is translating his source very closely here and he keeps the audience alert to the fact so
that the spiritualization seems a little disingenuous. How invested he finally is in the
literal rather than the spiritual plane of the tale is put in question elsewhere, as for
example when he makes an ironic nod in the direction of the Wife of Bath and her
heretical “secte” or when he insists on the perfection of Griselda as a wife (a donnée the
Clerk never questions) rather than just any representative Christian soul. I return to these
issues below, but let it be noted at the outset that academic criticism offers no great
certainty either as to where the moral axis lies. The critical history of the tale is
instructive. An offensive monstrosity to some, an alluring and subtle moral fable to
others, and to others still an artistic failure or deliberate caricature of exemplarity, the
Clerk’s Tale remains a puzzle. Judith Bronfman concludes her book-length survey of its

---

264 The moralization is prefaced by “herknheth what this auctour seith therfoore” (IV.
1141) and is punctuated in the middle by “therfore Petrak writeth / This storie, which
with heigh stile he enditeth” (IV. 1147-48). The reference to Chaucer’s source recalls the
Clerk’s description in his prologue to what “a thyng impertinent” (IV. 54) Petrarch’s
poem is, written as it is in the Latin high style. Could there be the slightest hint that the
moral epilogue is another such irrelevancy, a thing just as impertinent to the main body of
the text? Probably the Clerk means what Petrarch says, but in other respects the way the
Clerk tells the tale may lead one to suspect that the moralization at the end is not the
whole story.
history of reception reflecting, “What does the story mean? There is no correct answer. And in this, I think, lies its fascination” (128).

And yet if there is no correct answer, this is because as Bronfman demonstrates there are several salient answers rather than one, or none. The narrative is fascinating because it is polyvalent in its exemplarity, not pointless; because it runs a surplus of meaning, not a deficit. Polyvalence is not the same thing as a kind of foggy indeterminacy. The tale in fact comes to us complete with alternative affective tonalities and moral valuators, the Clerk’s running commentary on Walter’s cruelty being one instance that we can easily sort out. Meaning is not so much irreducible or indeterminate, then, as it is polarized between deeply felt antithetical possibilities (e.g., Walter exhibits God’s absolute power on the one hand, yet is callous as a husband on the other; Griselda is saintly from one perspective, masochistic from another), it is just that it is difficult to choose between them. This is the case in part because, as Elizabeth Salter argued in the 1950s, the audience is obliged to negotiate the threshold between the symbolic religious capital of the narrative and its “pathetic realism” (Chaucer 50), the former supporting an other-worldly ethic at odds with the this-worldly ethic of the latter. “Basically,” concludes Salter, “the trouble originates in an inability to decide upon and abide by one single set of moral standards for the Tale” (Chaucer 61). Critics have over the years elaborated on the incongruity, some holding that it results in an aesthetic breakdown, others allowing that it enriches the tale.265 Bearing Salter’s original characterization of

265 Those besides Salter who take the first view include Robert Jordan who argues that the tale is “broken backed” in Chaucer and the Shape of Creation, p. 198; R. P. Miller, in “Allegory in the Canterbury Tales”; David, The Strumpet Muse, pp. 159-69; and Hi Kyung Moon, “Chaucer’s Clerk’s Tale: A Disrupted Exemplum.” For the opposite view see Dolores Frese, “The Clerk’s Tale: The Monsters and the Critics Reconsidered,” who
the problem in mind, I want to reflect on the process of moral deliberation by thinking
through the exemplary irresolution—the "inability to decide upon and abide"—audiences
can experience. Irresolution, I will suggest, is in this narrative as much a pragmatic
ethical problem as an aesthetic one.

The Clerk's Tale will appear to better purpose if we begin by understanding how
it is like a parable, a species of exemplum. Others have used this term in reference to the
tale, though usually without explaining the salience of the description. It was
Quintilian who in his discussion of public oratory went on to formulate a description of
the rhetoric of exemplarity that turns on a distinction between paradigma and parable.
In his Institutio Oratoria he describes the two figures of speech as methods of
comparison, the paradigm being identified as a kind of rhetorical induction that
presupposes relative similitude: "the adducing of some past action real or assumed which
may serve to persuade the audience of the truth of the point" (5.11.5-8). We have already
considered paradigms whose success depends on their simplicity—brevity, clarity, and
plausibility as Cicero would say. Parables, on the other hand, differ according to
Quintilian in that they compare things whose likeness is "far less obvious" (5.11.22). An
enigmatic figure, the parable is more provocative than directly persuasive because it

finds the "burden of bifurcated attentiveness" to be a stimulating challenge; Denise
Baker, "Chaucer's Clerk's Tale and the Monstrous Critics," where it is claimed that the
reader is set a deliberate "trap" by the duality of the tale; and most recently Linda
Georgianna, "The Clerk's Tale and the Grammar of Assent," who argues that the reader
is provoked to "wonder" at the disjunction between letter and spirit. For surveys of the
criticism see Charlotte Morse, "Critical Approaches to the Clerk's Tale," and Judith
Bronfman, Chaucer's Clerk's Tale.

266 For example, Salter, Chaucer, p. 38; A. C. Spearing, Criticism and Medieval Poetry,
p. 101-3; and Baker, "Chaucer's Clerk's Tale," p. 64. Baker gives one good reason for
considering it a parable rather than allegory, noting that the Clerk "does not draw an
allegorical equivalence between the husband and the deity, but rather an analogical
comparison between the process of obedience in the literal narrative and his moralitas."
challenges an audience to think through the terms of the comparison being made rather than to apply it immediately in action without reflection. It is also a trope we are familiar with from the Gospels. For Jesus, a near contemporary of Quintilian, parables have what has been called a “restrictive and defensive” quality, their sense having been purposely obscured by figurative language.\textsuperscript{267} In the Gospel of Mark, following on the heels of the Parable of the Sower, Jesus explains that parables are given to listeners so that “seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand” (Mark 4:12).\textsuperscript{268} The New Testament parables accordingly hold out the promise of revelation for a self-selecting group of listeners, those who are ready to hear; the rest will be confounded.\textsuperscript{269} So will the unlearned fail to comprehend, according to Quintilian. Like

\textsuperscript{267} See Suleiman, pp. 33-34, on this aspect. The phrase “restrictive and defensive” is from Jean Starobinski, whom Suleiman cites. For a useful introduction to the parables see John Drury, pp. 427-39, and the entry, “Parable,” in A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition.

\textsuperscript{268} He is in this phrase citing Isaiah in which a prophecy is spoken concerning divinely-imposed ignorance of the cities before an impending catastrophe (Isaiah 6:9-10). Jesus’s hidden meaning in the Gospels is frequently similarly dire and apocalyptic. Thus the Gospel of Matthew adds that Jesus uses parables so that “it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying, I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world” (Matthew 13.35). In this Jesus will reveal what was once concealed, making the meaning of the past accessible to the present; parables are apparently not always secretive. However, even in the more optimistic Matthean context, the sentiment is seriously qualified by the Parable of the Sower (a paradigmatic parable about the efficiency of parables, we could say). The seeds falling on good ground are like parables that yield understanding in the regenerate heart; those falling on the stony ground of unbelief lie moribund. Thus, the audience for whom enlightenment comes is always a select one; parables are not reassuringly egalitarian. “For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance; but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away everything that he hath” (Matthew 13.12).

\textsuperscript{269} Though this is perhaps not always the case. On at least one occasion Jesus dogs and provokes his opponents—stony ground though they be—by means of indirection: after hearing the Parable of the Vineyard the chief priests, scribes, and elders “realized that he had told this parable against them” and so schemed to arrest him (Mark 12.12). Of course, they do not really understand the parable because they fail to take the spiritual
Aristotle he assumes that paradigms are more commonly intelligible and so concludes that parables should be used sparingly. As Richard Rolle was to put it in the mid fourteenth-century, “to speke in parabils” is to employ “likyngis that all men kan noght vndirstand” (Psalter 48.4)

The Clerk tells a learned tale that bears the most important hallmarks of the parable (i.e., dissimilitude and secrecy), as if intending to rouse a select group of listeners to moral and theological reflection on a higher level. His is therefore less paradigmatic than other tales in the Canterbury group surveyed so far. However, for us the tale of Griselda has an additional incitement given its situatedness in the tale-telling game, in virtue of which we can distinguish between the narrative as it exists for its fictional audience and for actual audiences. For the fictional pilgrims it is restrictive, opaque, and learned—in short, parabolic. But for those who approach it as one among the other tales of Canterbury, the Clerk’s Tale is something more: more straightforward because the dramatic context fixes meaning according to use (i.e., both the Clerk’s implicit rejoinder to the Wife of Bath and the Host’s and Merchant’s literalist responses make the tale less than parabolic because ulterior motives come to the fore), while also more obscure because intentions are mediated by further layers of indirection than those intrinsic to the tale (i.e., the comic Envoy and dramatic links serve to obscure Chaucer’s and the Clerk’s intentions). Consequently, because we cannot approach the morality of the tale without encountering the morality of others, the Clerk’s Tale is less stable generically than it might otherwise have been. Put in mind of potential motivations and effects, we are faced with an exemplary narrative of unprecedented complexity. The actual audience is point. See Frank Kermode, Chapter II, “Why Are Narratives Obscure?,” of Genesis of Secrecy on how parables polarize hearers.
compelled to reckon with the tale as a phenomenon, the key to the moral of the story
being, so I shall argue, the morality of story (or, the story of morality) itself.

The Clerk’s Tale is therefore a parable of exemplarity, by which I mean to
designate an exemplum that obliges readers in various ways to think through the problem
of moral application that the tale poses. It might seem a stretch (and a cliché) to say the
tale is precisely about the problem of interpretation it generates. Yet so much about the
tale nevertheless seems to address the problem of ethical deliberation, analogous to the
problem audiences face in interpreting Griselda. Chaucer seems to have made the
problem of deliberation a cornerstone of the tale. Griselda’s practical dilemma is itself
highly exemplary of dilemmatic thinking generally. In what follows I pursue the issue
circuitously, as I must, asking first of all on what level of generality or specificity we can
possibly take the tale of Griselda. Then, once the major options have been surveyed, I
return to the parable with a better sense of the stakes involved and what they mean to
reading for the moral.

"Be Constant in Adversitee"

The Clerk, as we have seen, explicitly enjoins his hearers to assent to a general
morality about spiritual patience ("For sith a womman was so pacient / Unto a mortal
man, wel moore us oghte / Receyven al in gree that God us sent"), a reassuring generality
drawn from a complex narrative which makes a variety of applications possible. Having
been in this way, as J. V. Cunningham put it, “narrowed to relevance” (280), Griselda is
made to stand for an abstract virtue, one clearly spelled out in the end: *vertuous*
suffraunce (IV. 1162). And yet, in practice, the explicit morality does not entail a
predictable narrowing on the side of reader response—for not only words "punctuate" the
story, but also readers do. My purpose in beginning with the ending, then, is to forestall
certain deprecatory assumptions about the morality before calling attention to its
limitations as a general application. As a generality, the Clerk's moral can in any case
inspire responses that it behooves the critic to admit as ethical potentialities of the text.

Take for instance "al . . . that God us sent." Depending on how it is taken, on the
contexts in which it is taken, and on precisely who is taking it, the phrase might be turned
in various ways. The moral, in other words, awaits completion as to a determination of
its content through what I have called a process of tropological reduction, or reading for
the moral. The audience, reading morally, must supply something personal—say, the
recognition of some accident that has befallen me, or of any other difficulty I have in
securing my general welfare—to fill in the details as to what here and now constitutes, in
the Clerk's words, "sharpe scourges of adversitee" (IV. 1157). Likewise, how I will see
fit to express vertuous suffraunce in response to my adversity can only be something I
discover, by inference, in view of the particulars of my life experience. Just as I interpret
the moral in view of my past, I must interpret it in view of my present and possible
future. More could be said about the process of tropological reduction on this level, but
what I've just laid down should suffice to indicate that even with what would seem to be
an inflexible moral generality, the ethical response to exemplarity will enjoy some
considerable latitude. Patience in fact cannot be the same everywhere and for everyone.
Consequently, generalities such as this one give rise to a certain kind of relativity,\textsuperscript{270} which does not mean that there are no absolutes or that the Clerk's narrative is in a modern sense relativistic. On the contrary, since the virtue will have to attach itself to the details of contingent circumstance, relativity enables greater specification, and with greater specification can come a greater sense of responsibility for the circumstances that are one's own. The moral will have an absolute value for persons when it is seen to apply to them specifically.

The moral is fleshed out in another direction by association with exemplary Griselda, who is of course supposed to embody \textit{virtuous suffraunce}, and here we take our first step towards the narrative aspect of the text. The normative abstraction is not autonomous, in other words, supported as it is by typological and iconographic analogues. The virtue in question, we are made to understand, looks just like Griselda's virtue. Consequently, if Griselda is narrowed to relevance, so is the moral narrowed to a certain relevance in view of its concrete instantiation in the life of Griselda. By way of the religious motifs, moreover, we infer that Griselda's virtue is similar to other figures' virtue—that of Job (IV. 871-72; 932ff.), the Virgin Mary (IV. 294 recalls the Annunciation), and Christ (IV. 880 echoes the Via Dolorosa)\textsuperscript{271}—which means that her

\textsuperscript{270} Thomas Nagel's point that generalities are not all determinative is relevant here: "Reasons may be universal . . . without forming a universal system that always provides a method for arriving at determinate conclusions about what one should do" (\textit{The View From Nowhere} 152).

\textsuperscript{271} For more on the iconographical elements forming a consistent religious focus in the narrative see Frese, "Chaucer's Clerk's Tale." Typological correspondences between Griselda and the Virgin or Christ have been noted by many others; see Morse, "Critical Approaches." The religious imagery and ideology is not all on the side of Griselda. Walter exhibits something of God's character according to the theology of both bridal mysticism and nominalism. Frese notes that "the Clerk draws here on the solidly traditional view of Christ as a perverse, wife-testing husband" (137) as exemplified in
story opens onto the horizon of others. By way of association, then, Griselda’s example
is perhaps not so narrow after all. Instead of getting abstract definitions of a virtue, the
audience is given images and examples to fill out the meaning of the virtue, and these
further relativize—even as they concretize—the moral. Figures rather than formulas
constitute the morality, and depending on how one views the individual figures and
thinks laterally across cases, different applications may arise.

But meaning gets fleshed out in other directions as well when we begin to
consider the full narrative context of the Clerk’s morality. Other more or less explicit
moral imperatives, themselves subject to different applications, indeed present
themselves as more problematical ones than those touched on so far. We could call these
other possibilities competing rhetorical demands because they tend to be more literal than
the religious and spiritual valences of the tale seem to allow, and because they are not
best described with reference to the normative generality vertuous suffraunce. The most
important competing demands are those that issue from a feminist—and
antifeminist—perspective on the tale, to which I now turn.

“A Womman Was so Pacient”

Griselda from one perspective seems to have been enlisted in the service of a
marriage debate, that fourteenth-century fictional and not-so-fictional querelle des

one well-known section of the Ancrene Wisse: Salter remarked on the parallel years
before in Chaucer, pp. 38-39. As for the nominalist background, see Robert Stepsis,
“Potentia Absoluta and the Clerk’s Tale.” On the more common idea of God as
persecutor—in the form of the flagellum divinum, the scourge—providing “the Christian
with the opportunity to exhibit his patience” see further Hanna III, “Some
Commonplaces.”
femmes with which Chaucer was preoccupied in the Canterbury Tales. Never mind what the Clerk says at the end—

This storie is seyd nat for that wyves sholde
Folwen Grisilde as in humylyte,
For it were importable, though they wolde . . .

—one cannot help but notice that, from the standpoint of patriarchy which authorizes the Clerk, the narrative is conveniently easy to mistake for a marital exemplum. The story is literally one about “a womman” who was “so pacient.” Moreover, we are made to observe that two of the pilgrims—who hearing hear, but do not understand? or rather understand too well?—construe the narrative exclusively this way. The Host wishes his wife had heard “this legende” (IV. 1212d) which, he admits, is “to my purpos” (IV. 1212f). The Merchant likewise says, “There is a long and large difference / Bitwix Grisildis gret pacience / And of my wyf the passyng crueltie” (IV. 1223-25). Chaucer is highlighting a potentiality readers cannot ignore.

Several elements in the text conspire to suggest that the exemplum is offered by the Clerk as a story of a good wife in refutation of the heresies of the Wife of Bath, Griselda’s antitype. To begin with, there is the ambiguity surrounding the word importable, “intolerable,” in the Clerk’s morality. Does he mean to say that it would be intolerable for wives if they would so behave? And if so, is it because wives could not bear to follow Griselda as they should? Or does he mean that we would find it intolerable if wives would follow Griselda, because no one ever should? In other words, is the Clerk commenting on the capability of women to endure such humiliation or the justification of submitting to the humiliation? If only the capability, as Petrarch originally indicated in the Latin (saying that Griselda is beyond imitation, vix imitabilis,
rather than that imitation should never be attempted), then the Clerk would seem to betray attachments to the letter at the very moment he would appear to transcend it with a spiritual interpretation. For, he could be allowing that it is practically impossible to imitate Griselda, since as he accepts women nowadays are not so strong as they once were (IV. 1164-69), believing that a spiritual moral is the most germane—indeed he could allow all this without ruling out the possibility that for him Griselda still exemplifies textbook wifehood. In other words, the Clerk could hold the tale up as a model for the spiritual and the domestic realms, without thinking any woman could succeed in both. Rueful remarks at the end suggest as much (IV. 1163-69). On this account, if it is correct, the Clerk insinuates himself into the debate on marriage, opposing the doctrine of female mastery while proving that clerks can speak well of wives (defending himself against the Wife of Bath’s allegations at III. 688-91), all the while prevaricating on the real purpose of his narration. The spiritualization of the exemplum thus becomes so much chaff hiding the literal (male chauvinist) fruit of the matter. (The alternative reading of inportable is, again, that Griselda’s humility is not merely inimitable but morally unjustifiable—or as a variant in one manuscript of the French Le Livre Griseldis has it: hardly worthy, estimable—on which more shortly.)

That patience and obedience are specifically feminine virtues was the application of choice for other late medieval authors and it well describes many modern approaches

272 While Chaucer’s rendering of vix imitabilis as inportable may distance Petrarch’s misogynist implications, the translation does not disqualify them altogether. Chaucer’s English does not fix the meaning either way, since that which is unendurable is ambiguous.
to the tale.²⁷³ Before Chaucer got around to translating Griselda there circulated various versions in French, one of which Chaucer used as a second source, that expressly directed their morality at the improvement of women.²⁷⁴ Boccaccio’s original story too, which Petrarch had translated, presents the tale as a story of marriage. Treating the legend literally is consequently not anachronistic, nor is it difficult to do; what seems much more difficult—for us as for Harry and the Merchant and perhaps the Clerk himself—is to take it spiritually.

Now if the Clerk’s morality can barely avoid the implications of the letter, other parts of the narrative are still more revealing. The imperative to literalism asserts itself throughout, as the Clerk’s own asides indicate. In one place, the question is raised as to whether men or women are capable of greater humility: comparing Griselda favorably to Job’s “humblesse,” the Clerk concludes that although “clerkes preise wommen but a lite, / Ther kan no man in humblesse hym acquite / As womman kan” (IV. 932, 935-37). After crediting Griselda with such virtue, how are we to take the belated disclaimer, “This storie is seyd nat for that wyves sholde / Folwen Grisilde as in humylite”? Why

²⁷³ Bronfman’s first chapter of Chaucer’s Clerk’s Tale, “The Story Before Chaucer,” is the most complete account of all extant late medieval versions of the Griselda legend. Denise N. Baker in “Chaucer’s Clerk’s Tale,” pp. 61-64, reviews the literalizing of arguments by Bernard Huppé and Michael Cherniss, against which she sets what she takes to be the Clerk’s unproblematic exclusion of literalism. Most feminist analyses of the legend tend to literalism, just as Harry Bailey’s and the Merchant’s antifeminist responses do.
²⁷⁴ Bronfman notes that the French prose tale, Le Livre Griseldis, a translation of Petrarch which Chaucer consulted in his own translation, leaves out the spiritual moralization and appends a “preface which declares that the story is an example for all women, especially married ones [a l’exemple des femmes mariées et toutes autres].” The prologue to a late fourteenth-century French play dramatizing the legend of Griselda calls the story “a mirror for wives [le miroir des dames mariées]” (17). See Correale and Hamel, Sources and Analogues, Vol. 1, pp. 101-67, for the transcriptions and facing-page translations of Petrarch’s Latin and the French Livre Griseldis.
would we interpret Griselda any other way than literally, that is, as a figure of a good
woman rather than as some disembodied, neuter soul? The problem comes up again with
respect to Griselda’s spousal virtue in particular, which is never explicitly put in doubt.

Midway through her trial Griselda is called a perfectly attentive wife:

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. (IV. 719-21)

The Clerk could hardly have done more to affirm the relevance of the letter of the tale,
and of Griselda’s exemplary spousal qualities in particular. As the Clerk will emphasize
over and again, Griselda is a “flour of wyfly pacience” (IV. 919)—her virtue is her
wifehood—before he ever gets to the part where he says that wifely patience is not the
point (or inportable).

There are additional incitements to literalism one could explore, and yet
tracking them all would not necessarily lead us to the conclusion that Griselda is literally

275 Also encouraging us to take the tale as a marital exemplum are the emotions we are
likely to attach to Griselda’s specific actions or situation. The Clerk is susceptible to
these as well. As many readers have observed since Severs (see The Literary
Relationships, p. 247), Chaucer heightened the pathos of the tale in his translation by
augmenting its realism; and with greater pathos may come a fixation on the letter that
would distract us from its spirit (though I will grant that it could just as plausibly heighten
our sense of spiritual import, as others have argued). Argues Salter, “the more vividly
[Griselda] emerges as a sentient being, the less will be her power to move and instruct as
a pure religious symbol” (Chaucer 50). Also, there is the more general issue of the
Clerk’s own engagement with the specific difficulties of his story. Denise Baker
observes that the Clerk’s “explicit criticism of Walter forces the audience to regard the
Marquis’s behaviour literally and to evaluate it both psychologically and morally”
(“Chaucer’s Clerk’s Tale” 63). Encouraged as we are, so Salter says, “to believe in his
heartlessness rather than in his inscrutability” (Chaucer 59), we have trouble crediting
Walter’s purely symbolic significance. In this view the narrator’s preoccupations with
particulars forces the audience to turn their attention upon social and psychological
matters, and to be influenced by their affective dimensions, which may not be strictly
relevant to the morality of the story.
a good example. Griselda’s example may be construed diversely, even if we concede that the Clerk’s Tale is primarily a marital exemplum. For instance, Chaucer may have conceded that from the clerkly perspective Griselda “shewed wel” and yet have gone on to problematize wifedom one way or another. We could therefore pursue the idea that Chaucer is critiquing marriage (the very idea of wifedom Griselda represents) by pushing female submission to its logical limit. Here are the lengths to which a woman must go if she is to be a good wife, Chaucer could be saying, and here is what a man will do to a woman when she really is that good. A reductio ad absurdum leveled against patriarchal values, the tale might indicate that to keep faith with the institution of marriage is to sacrifice other important values, such as love and mutuality (or, more concretely, the duties of maternity). Walter’s exploitation of Griselda is, as the Clerk himself freely admits, a strong enough indictment of the status quo: “wedde men ne knowe no mesure, / Whan that they fynde a pacient creature” (IV. 622-23). Moreover, yielding up one’s children to be slaughtered in order to uphold any human institution might constitute a condemnation of it, if we grant that Griselda’s responsibility in the matter is mitigated by the restrictions set upon her.

We can end up with as negative a marital exemplum by emphasizing Griselda’s choice in the matter, with the result that this marriage rather than marriage as such is criticized. The point is easily made with reference to Walter, of course. He is regularly called an immoral husband, not an exemplary one: the Clerk garlands the man and his conduct with such epithets such as “yvele” (IV. 460), “crueel” (IV. 740), and “wikke” (IV. 785). Nor does the Clerk maintain the illusion that the relationship he describes is in any way ideal: “O nedelees was she tempted in assay!” (IV. 621). Now Griselda’s
particular responsibility is put forward as a problem when she agrees to the terms of Walter's prenuptial demand. The terms and conditions run as follows:

I seye this: be ye redy with good herte  
To al my lust, and that I frely may,  
As me best thynketh, do you laughe or smerte,  
And never ye to grucche it, nyght ne day?  
And eek what I sey 'ye,' ne sey nat 'nay,'  
Neither by word ne frownyng contenence?  
Swere this, and heere I swere  
oure alliance. (IV. 351-57)

Griselda, in response, makes a most significant refinement on the already severe restrictions laid down for her in what Spearings has called a “monstrous marriage-agreement” (Criticism 93). She vows, “And heere I swere that nevere willyngly, / In werc ne thoght, I nyl yow disobeye” (IV. 362-63), effecting a qualitative change in the nature of her servitude and her self-governance. Going further than what is asked of her, Griselda agrees neither to disobey her husband in any external expression (with words or frowning countenance) nor any internal disposition (in thought). The prenuptial vow is extraordinarily demanding, but it is made much more so by Griselda herself: unconditional assent to her cruel husband represents the terms she largely invents for herself. Of course, in principle female submission meets the formal demands of Christian marriage, and she probably could not have hoped to bargain for better terms and conditions—but did she need to bargain for worse? As Chaucer’s Parson elucidates, a wife ought to be subject to her husband first of all in her obedience (X. 930), and by the same token the “Man sholde bere hym to his wyf in feith, in trouthe, and in love” (X. 929).276 That Walter, in manipulating Griselda, fails to love his wife as he should is

276 In one common and still familiar version of the marriage ceremony a woman would have vowed to “obey” her husband, “forsaking all others on account of him,” while a man would promise among other things to “guard” her (Sarum Missal; see Miller,
contemptible. But that Griselda voluntarily submits to his excessive demands may not be a credit to her character either, insofar as she voluntarily submits to her husband to an extent he does not actually require.

In criticizing Griselda I am entering controversial terrain. All critics concede, however, that Griselda’s willful submission is prima facie difficult to accept, first because it leads not only to her extreme humiliation but also to potential infanticide,277 and second because it does little to correct her husband’s excesses and in fact is complicit with them.280 Parenthetically I already considered the possibility that wives are not to imitate Griselda because her example is inportable, in the sense of being unethical rather than merely improbable—a reading supported by at least one source and analogue279—and now we can see why this might be so. Grounds for establishing this negative application can be found elsewhere. Ralph Hanna III’s excellent discussion of period commonplaces about patience furnishes us with evidence that patience was never considered an unqualified good:

Chaucer: Sources and Backgrounds 375). Griselda seems to be taking the “forsaking” clause extremely seriously, but she is actually keeping an extraordinary prenuptial pledge (what Petrarch calls miraculo). 277 On the condemnation of infanticide, and, incidentally, the evident increase in ties of affection to children in the later Middle Ages, see David Herlihy, “Medieval Children.” 278 Griselda does not appear to heed the advice of penitential manuals and sermons that urged pious wives to use persuasion to influence their husbands for good (as does, for example, the wife of Melibee), though she does apply herself to reforming Walter for his next wife (see IV. 1037-43). For a brief history of such advice see Sharon Farmer, “Persuasive Voices,” who cites among other proponents of female persuasiveness Thomas of Chobham: “the sin of a man is often imputed to his wife if, through her negligence, he is not corrected.” 279 A variant in one reliable late fourteenth-century manuscript containing the Le Livre Griseldis, the main French source and analogue of Chaucer’s Clerk’s Tale, has it that Griselda example is hardly worthy, estimable, rather than hard to imitate, ensuivible; see Amy W. Goodwin, “The Griselda Story in France,” p. 138, in Correale and Hamel, Sources and Analogues, Vol. I. It seems Chaucer entertains puts in play the alternatives with his equivocal inportable.
[Augustine] sees clearly that triumphant endurance of pain is a great virtue but that some triumphs are not worth suffering for. The later medieval citation-version of Augustine puts the matter most succinctly: “Non facit martyrem poena, sed causa” (“Not suffering, but a good cause, makes a martyr”). In addition, Augustine introduces the usual theological standard for measuring the value of a cause, the eighth Beatitude: “Beati qui persecutionem patiuntur propter justitiam, quoniam ipsorum est regnum caelorum” (“Blessed are they who suffer persecution for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”). . . . suffering for a cause which is not God’s is viewed throughout the Middle Ages as less than meritorious, as indeed sinful. (“Some Commonplaces” 70)

On this score, when Griselda chooses to keep her prenuptial promise at the expense of the lives of her children and of her own well-being she may seem to go too far. She may appear hard-hearted rather than long-suffering when she consents to what she imagines is homicide. Her willful surrender to Walter makes her irresponsible on other, related grounds. When theologians took up the question as to whether one is bound to obey a superior in all things they commonly answered in the negative. In his Summa Theologica, for example, Aquinas argues sed contra.

It is written (Acts 5:29): "We ought to obey God rather than men." Now sometimes the things commanded by a superior are against God. Therefore superiors are not to be obeyed in all things. (2-2.104. 5)

This unexceptional piece of doctrine covers all sorts of hierarchical relationships, and by its lights we are bound to conclude that Griselda is deficient in attempting utmost obedience to her husband. As Pearsall has observed, her “readiness to die if it is her lord’s will is, in a literal sense, a blasphemy” (The Canterbury Tales 271). It is the literal sense, indeed, that we cannot easily ignore. Griselda’s obedience appears to be the polar opposite of that which Chaucer’s Parson, following the moral theologians, calls “parfit”: namely, “to parfoure the doctrine of God and of his sovereyns, to whiche hym oghte to

280 See Denise Baker’s “Chaucer and Moral Philosophy” 144 and “Chaucer’s Clerk’s Tale” 66.
be obeisaunt *in alle rightwisnesse*" (X. 675-76; emphasis added).\(^{281}\) Far from conducting herself with all righteousness she perhaps lapses into the specific kind of blasphemy called idolatry. The Parson notes that if a man loves his wife or child or "any worldly thynge" above God he is an "ydolastre" (X. 860), words that could very well apply to Griselda when she treats her husband as though he were, as the Clerk says, her "verray worldly suffisance" (IV. 759). (Interestingly, the *worldliness* of Griselda's attachments recalls the Parson's teaching in another place: "What seye we eek of wommen that mordren hir children for drede of worldly shame? Certes, an horrible homicide" [X. 578].) Chaucer could be counting on his audience to recognize as much. At the end when the Clerk declares "Grisilde is deed" and that he hopes no husband will test his wife "in trust to fynde / Grisildis, for in certein he shal faille" (IV. 1177, 1181-82), the joke may actually be that women are *better* than that nowadays, because they would not consent to idolatry and homicide!

To invoke terms that are now familiar from a series of modern discussions of the tale, Griselda may seem too much the monster and not enough the critic when she assents to Walter,\(^{282}\) and this brings us rather dramatically face to face with the problem that

---

\(^{281}\) In Aquinas's terms Griselda's behaviour also does not exemplify "perfect obedience, which obeys in all things lawful," but rather "indiscreet obedience, which obeys even in matters unlawful" (*ST* 2.2.104.5). This is one context among others that the audience might bring to the tale. I do not invoke such authorities to foreclose meaning but rather to show what is possible.

\(^{282}\) James Sledd, in his 1953 article "The Clerk's Tale: The Monsters and the Critics," picking up on prior critics' doubts, argued that if there is a problem with the morality of the tale it is ours, not Chaucer's. Sledd was responding to those who did not share his circular logic that "the judgement that [Griselda] is good is an essential preliminary" (79). For example, a late nineteenth-century scholar, Thomas Lounsbury, had called Griselda "weak-spirited, and even despicable" because she "does not even exhibit the degree of sensibility which exists in the females of brute creation" (3.340-41; cited in Sledd 78). Kittredge declared his feelings on the subject in 1912 but concluded that such negative
arises whenever one attempts to find a moral application for the tale. How is one to take Griselda? The dilemma is whether to take Griselda at all as an example of moral character or conduct.

Monstrous Morality; or, Exemplum Terrible

So far I have pursued figurative and literal interpretations, in each case showing that various levels of generality and specificity in the narrative allow for different applications. The analysis could certainly be extended. I have only surveyed some obvious options, without fully imagining even those possibilities, but the point I am after is that the tale is parabolic. Granted, in my general ethical analysis a certain

reactions are beside the point when it comes to the former age when there was an acceptance of “stories that exemplify a single human quality” and “show to what lengths this quality may conceivably go” (“Chaucer’s Discussion of Marriage” 307). Source study yield similar judgements of monstrosity. Writing about the story’s mutation from primitive folktale to Canterbury tale Severs encouraged the notion that Chaucer intensifies its irrationality. Nevill Coghill characterized the change by saying the story “has become monstrous” (The Poet Chaucer 140). In 1973 Dolores Frese revisited the controversy in “Chaucer’s Clerk’s Tale: The Monsters and the Critics Reconsidered,” where she insists on the tale’s complexity. Advancing the argument that there is a “rhythmic tension” (135) established between the “intellectual-religious and the emotional-human” (140), Frese claimed that the tale (not Griselda) is deliberately grotesque. If the tale is indeed monstrous—she speaks of the Clerk’s “two-headed creation” (138)—then it is so to good effect on this account. Later, in 1986 Denise Baker alluded to the terms of past discussions in “Chaucer’s Clerk’s Tale and the Monstrous Critics.” Like others before her Baker argues that the real monsters are the critics who fall into the “trap” of reading exclusively literally: “In the Clerk’s Tale Chaucer subtly warns us about the importance of careful reading and the dangers of confusing the letter and the spirit” (67). I explore Griselda’s monstrosity further because it remains one of the best characterizations of reading the tale that we have. However ambivalent past critics have been, we should take away from the debate something of what it is like to experience the narrative; for even if one concludes that the experience is finally misguided, it must be admitted that that experience (rather than the assumption that Griselda is good) is preliminary.
interpretability is intrinsic to the practical reasoning of the sort exemplarity allows, and no stated moral need be the final word. But in the Clerk's Tale there is reason to doubt whether it is a moral tale after all. According to the best accounts, the audience finds itself torn between incongruous valuations, each of which has salience in different interpretive contexts, a state of affairs that has led some to conclude that the tale is monstrous.

It is with an eye towards the so-called monstrosity of the tale that I now want to pursue the idea of application one step further, beyond the usual dichotomies of criticism. Keeping in mind the etymological link between our word “monster” and the Latin monstrum, “omen, portent, marvel,” akin to the verb monstrare, “to show,” we can perhaps see how the tale signifies, in practice, whatever its problems. The Clerk’s Tale is undoubtedly the more interesting for its deformity, abnormality, or hybridity—for being what the Clerk calls “swich mervaille” (1186), a kind of problem tale. The grotesque incongruity of its premises serve as a provocation to audience response, focusing our minds back on the tale. But what ultimately does this “show forth”? The revelation of the Clerk’s Tale, I suggest, has to do with the ordinary paradox of ethical responsibility: the instant of decision which—like the punctual moment of reading for the moral—excludes several alternatives by selecting just one. As a parable of exemplarity.

David Williams argues that in medieval art and literature monstrosity, “true to its etymology (monstrare: to show) . . . points to utterances that lie beyond logic” (Deformed Discourse 10). In this analysis de-monstration, unlike representation, thrusts upon the mind a consciousness of paradox, which encounter launches the intellect into the aconceptual outerspace Williams variously designates as the “is-not,” the transcendent One from which the Many is derived, or the coincidentia oppositorum. I do not claim the same mystical or metaphysical effects for Chaucer’s literary parable, since I am interested in practical reasoning, but even from the ethical perspective, as I will elucidate, the Clerk’s Tale achieves a certain sublimity.
the tale seems to draw the audience towards a pointed recognition of what is at stake every time moral application is sought in the ethics of exemplarity.

The assertion is borne out first of all in the record of modern academic criticism, where so much energy has been expended on the activity of trying, without much satisfaction, to fit the Clerk’s Tale to a moral framework. The more persuasive analyses, in my view, are the ones that perceive something recursive, interrogative, and paradoxical in the text, something beckoning the audience to think about the moral story as a story of morality. This analysis does not resolve the problem of morality, but rather serves to adumbrate it: for if it is the case that the audience cannot but feel the force of alternative claims pulling upon it, then the audience is forced to come to grips with the tale as a phenomenon. What Salter calls “an inability to decide upon and abide by one single set of moral standards for the Tale” (Chaucer 61) generates concern about what decisions are required and which standards apply. The Clerk’s Tale therefore forms, to invoke a metaphor, a dynamic force field that resists all static positions—including the most ironical ones. It is the energy of the force field (rather than the quandary of whether any “correct answer” exists, to recall Bronfman) that is truly instructive, for even when a decisive solution to the morality is so elusive—as so many readers attest—a magnetism remains. The tale attracts as much as it repulses. My contention is that the contrary forces describe the way one almost inevitably comes to feel something closer to responsibility than indifference for the example.

The energy of Chaucer’s parable resides in the way it summons the audience to judgement, to some kind of decision, to account for the undecided— which is not to say indeterminate—tale of Griselda. The distinction is vital. Derrida (who contrary to
popular opinion is no advocate of indeterminacy) defines undecidability in the following terms as

a determinate oscillation between possibilities (for example, of meaning, but also of acts). These possibilities are themselves highly determined in strictly defined situations (for example, discursive—syntactical or rhetorical—but also political, ethical, etc.). They are pragmatically determined. ("Afterword" 148)

Oscillation between determinate possibilities might characterize any audience’s reaction to Chaucer’s Clerk’s Tale, in which competing lines of force, simultaneously emanating from both positive and negative polar charges, mark out while failing to fix the moral.

Rather than being indeterminate, then, Chaucer’s tale remains so elusive to readers because it requires that we adjudicate among alternatives (rather than because there are no apparent candidates). That the tale demands a response is clear enough from the way it so startles modern readers with its monstrous incongruity—the way, consequently, it scarcely permits complacency. If it also scarcely permits us to interpret the tale, to reduce it to some obvious generalization ("This tale is about such and such"), the Clerk’s Tale does not at the same time preclude an ethical response; it instead prompts one.

Hence undecidability is a call to responsibility rather than a cause for indifference, for the

---

284 The interest in determinate possibilities rather than indeterminacy accords with Derrida’s interest in “relations of force, in differences of force, in everything that allows, precisely, determinations in given situations to be stabilized through a decision of writing (in the broad sense I give to this word, which also includes political action and experience in general)” ("Afterword" 148). The decision of writing is also, clearly, a moment of ethical decision.

285 Because the ethical response is as it were in the reader, not the text. Consider that in this limit case, where moral meaning is so elusive, articulating the elusiveness may be enough to have finally discovered it. My reading of the Clerk’s Tale is a development of this basic line of reasoning. It is an ethical or practical sort of reasoning because ethics is concerned with what stories do and not just what they mean. If the Clerk’s Tale is ambiguous as to “meaning,” then ambiguity is not itself experienced as ambiguous—is not, so to speak, ambiguous as to “doing.” A text may be devoid of structure without failing to structure the experience of a reader.
ambiguity that audiences experience can be an inducement instead of an obstacle to ethical deliberation. Ambiguity is in any case necessary for genuine decision, in which case the Clerk’s Tale is not quite unique for being so extraordinary. Decision can only come into being in a space that exceeds the calculable program that would destroy all responsibility by transforming it into a programmable effect of determinate causes. There can be no moral or political responsibility without this trial and this passage by way of the undecidable. (“Afterword” 116)

The trial by way of the undecidable constitutes the possibility of responsibility, one of the very conditions of ethics, an incalculable condition all live with. Ethics, envisaged as a

286 That we find a decision difficult does not preclude the experience of feeling as though a decision were required. Two recent critics who have emphasized the tale’s moral claims upon us are Charlotte Morse and Linda Georgianna. Morse, observing that we are used to sympathizing with literary characters rather than imitating them, thinks moderns hardly have the faith anymore to take the tale as it is intended to be taken; nonetheless she stresses that the Clerk’s Tale belongs to a class of medieval “literary texts that mean to effect a moral or spiritual change in us” (“The Exemplary Griselda” 54). Georgianna, using terms that the tale itself sets in opposition to one another, similarly argues that Chaucer wants us to assent to Griselda’s example rather than to avyse it in some detached, academic manner. As a result we are “forced to confront the radical demands of faith, and our need, as fallen people, to rationalize them” (“The Clerk’s Tale” 818). Both critics insist on self-improvement as the only adequate response to the tale. I enlarge the field of possibilities by insisting that self-consciousness about the risks and responsibilities involved in ethical decision-making may constitute another response. 287 Compare Wittgenstein on how in practice one must at every stage decide how to “go on” (e.g., PI 75). Reading, he argues, is not merely following rules, as though any rule were its own application; one has to “apply the rule in the particular case without guidance” (PI 100). See Timothy Potts’s discussion of conscience in medieval thought for relevant remarks: “a rule can never dictate its own application. However detailed it may be, a decision is always required as to whether it applies to a given situation” (18). On the importance of decision in the realm of practical reasoning in current thought we can recall Harpham’s adroit claim, “without decision, ethics would be condemned to dithering” (“Ethics” 398). I noted before Derrida’s discussion of the paradox at the center of law, and I cite it again because it gives a clear picture of what decision entails: “Each case is other, each decision is different and requires an absolutely unique interpretation, which no existing, coded rule can or ought to guarantee absolutely. At least, if the rule guarantees it in no uncertain terms, so that the judge is a calculating machine—which happens—we will not say he is just, free and responsible” (“Force of Law” 133). In this way, as Drucilla Cornell interprets, “judgement as judgement
kind of negative capability here, thus resides in ambiguities and uncertainty by its very nature. The *Clerk's Tale*, on my account, simply makes the incalculability of decision-making hard to miss.

There may be something unsatisfactory—possibly tragic—about any decision we finally settle upon because of its inherent partiality, crudity, or reductiveness, and this too is part of the story of the morality of Chaucer's tale. One may find an ethical use for the text, in other words, but only at the expense of others. We can bring out the significance of the point by invoking the by now routine comparison to the trial of Abraham recorded in Genesis 22, another tale of unconditional assent and one, interestingly enough, that Derrida calls "monstrous yet banal" (*Gift of Death* 75). It is monstrous because of the logic of sacrifice educed to represent ethical responsibility, banal because of the ordinariness of the sacrifice. Derrida interprets,

> The story is no doubt monstrous, outrageous, barely conceivable: a father is ready to put to death his beloved son, his irreplaceable loved one, and that because the Other, the great Other asks him or orders him without giving the slightest explanation. . . . But isn't this the most common thing? what the most cursory examination of the concept of responsibility cannot fail to affirm? (67-68; cf. 85)

The correspondences, in respect of plot at least, between the story of Abraham and that of Griselda are of course plain to see. What has been considered most interesting to critics demands the suspension of rule following, otherwise application of the law would not be judgement, but only calculation" ("The Call" 145). "For Derrida," she says, "judgment begins where calculation ends" (135). As noted earlier, Aristotle's discussion of equity in the realm of law yields similar insights into the way good judgement comes by way of a suspension or supplementing of law.
of Chaucer is that in both stories a criminal act ostensibly exemplifies an ethical or spiritual obligation. How, then, can it be said to exemplify something of the everyday?

If Abraham’s dilemma is exemplary, it is so because his decision to sacrifice his son exhibits the “aporia of responsibility”: first in the solitude and singularity of his decision, the way it cannot be accounted for by a cause other than his own free will, and second in the requisite sacrifice, the way it remains unaccountable in the economy of exchange. Abraham, Derrida reasons, “assumes the responsibility that consists in always being alone, entrenched in one’s own singularity at the moment of decision” (The Gift of Death 60). God’s “secrecy” about his intention to release Abraham of his obligation ensures the father’s “absolute solitude” (57) in a poignant way, as it requires him to make a decision without the benefit of considerations of outcome or calculable effects; he has to conduct himself without reckoning, knowing, or expectation. Accordingly, Abraham’s responsibility is itself characterized by secrecy because for the rest of us there is no

---

288 “Like Griselda,” A. C. Spearing argues, “Abraham is commanded to give up his child to death, in order to show his total commitment to an absolute system of values; and like her, having displayed his willingness to commit an act which by normal human standards is cruel and unnatural, he is eventually released from the test” (Criticism 99). Spearing describes such stories under the rubric of promise-and-release, a type, popular in the period, which dramatizes divided allegiances or a clash of values. “Medieval writers and their audiences were very fond of stories in which an unbreakable promise imposes on the person who has made it conduct that may seem irrational or even monstrous” (98). He mentions Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the Franklin’s Tale as other examples, but the tale of Griselda remains especially “monstrous”; the term is invoked on pages 93, 97, 98, and 101. Burrow lists Abraham and Isaac along with the Clerk’s Tale among what he calls test-stories that stage a contest between opposing virtues in A Reading of Sir Gawain, p. 160. One can look to Richard F. Green’s recent A Crisis of Truth for further examples of a type of oath-testing story, of which the “archetypal example” is “the story of Abraham and Isaac” (332). Thomas Lounsbury seems to have been the first to remark the comparison between Abraham and Griselda: “If Abraham is to be honored for his willingness to offer up his only son at the command of his Creator, she, in view of that age, is to be honored for yielding, without complaint, to a sacrifice of herself and her children . . .” (3.342).
accounting for the instant of his decision in rational or prudential terms. Now this same
double condition of solitude and secrecy is always our own: it constitutes the
"paradoxical condition of every decision" because every responsible decision "cannot be
deduced from a form of knowledge, of which it would simply be the effect, conclusion,
or explication" (77). The aporetic quality of responsibility, then, is that it is always
unaccountable at the moment one is called to account. No cause could suffice to explain
one's choices if they are freely made. Responsibility is in this way gratuitous, even
imprudent, because it circumvents the law of exchange: causality, calculability,
reciprocity. The only law it knows is sacrifice, a "law of exception." Abraham indeed
must sacrifice the general economy of exchange and all it implies to meet the singular
demands of the Other with a genuine offering. The biblical story is an extreme case, to
be sure, illustrating in a particularly vertiginous manner what is involved in ethical
responsibility: that in giving ourselves to another we sacrifice others. But Abraham's
tragic duty to give up a son whom he loves dearly in order to obey the divinity he also
loves—thus surrendering that which it is not easy to give up—is finally representative of
the dilemma of the ethical intention. It is a common enough "gift of death."

It is the same dilemma that is so movingly expressed, turning now to Chaucer's
tale, in those pathetic moments when Griselda hands over her children to the scary
sergeant of Saluces, in an effort to obey her husband whom she loves at the same time

---

289 Therefore, Abraham’s response does not exemplify the Kierkegaardian “suspension of
the ethical,” because the suspension of the law of exchange is the foundation rather than
the breach of the ethical. The paradox of Abraham is that to be morally responsible to
one another is to be irresponsible to other others.
that she surrenders her beloved children.\textsuperscript{290} What she transgresses most of all in maintaining utmost fidelity to her husband is the prudence of calculating means and ends according to a law of exchange. But hers is the ordinary condition of moral responsibility in a contradictory moral universe, whatever else we might say about the exact ideological bearing of her situation. As Chaucer makes clear, Griselda is fully aware of what she gives up. We are not invited to think that her submission is just part of the nature of things; nor can we settle complacently for an ideological analysis, as though Griselda had no freedom of choice. We are instead directed to the real issue which is the disposition and decisiveness of her responsibility. Her decision is profoundly her own, something the text insists upon by having Griselda intensify her submission to Walter when she freely vows never to disobey him in "werk ne thoght," as we have seen. If her decision is therefore not coerced, neither is it apparently caused. Not even Walter doubts that "parfitly hir children loved she" (IV. 690), though the question crosses his mind indicating that like us even he finds her behaviour to border on the perverse. Potentially perverse it will remain until we find an explicable cause (patriarchal ideology? pathology? self-interest? domestic abuse?). But none satisfy. Does she hate her children? No. Is she acting out of mere obligation to Walter? No, because she loves him too. Her dilemma, which is whether to keep her promise and transgress the maternal bond, or to attempt to rescue her children and transgress her promise, pushes hard against our capacity to account for her response even as it enables utmost responsibility. Her final decision, to sacrifice one for the other, is in this light exemplary: the bare fact of her

\textsuperscript{290} Actually, Griselda's seems the more profound example of the aporia of responsibility because her dilemma is more mundane than that of Abraham, who has the advantage of theophany, making his choice less controversial because it is God himself who demands sacrifice, whereas Griselda has only her oath to another human being.
dilemma and the enigmatic freedom she exhibits in dealing with it model something of
the ethical intention.\textsuperscript{291} Hers is the problem \textit{par excellence} of how to respond
responsibly, and what her response goes to show is that ethics invariably involves secrecy
and sacrifice—a gift of death. As Griselda says to her first-born upon handing her over
to the sergeant, “For this nyght shaltow dyeen for my sake” (IV. 560), acknowledging the
gift that makes her responsibility possible.\textsuperscript{292}

Hers is not a decision all readers can tolerate nowadays (but we observed that
Walter too doubts her maternal love, while the Clerk calls her actions inportable, in
which case suspicion is not just a modern reaction but is built right into the logic of the
tale). Recurring to prudential terms, we might rather call Griselda shallow or selfish
(“dyen for my sake”), or we might say she is mad. If she \textit{is} responsible, then it is to a
fault. The extravagance of her decision is made all the more problematic in light of her

\textsuperscript{291} Georgianna observes: “By internalizing the demands of the contract, Griselda moves
her assent beyond the bonds of the law, beyond Walter’s power (and ours) to scrutinize or
avyse” (802). In the feminist analysis of E. T. Hansen Griselda’s unintelligibility is
construed as a kind of challenge: “Griselda has threatened to escape Walter’s tyranny by
willfully refusing to resist it, and it is possible to argue that he keeps testing her because
given his view of selfhood and power, her behavior can only seem unmotivated,
implausible, irritating, and even inhuman” (194). My understanding is closer to that of
Georgianna who argues that the unintelligibility of Griselda indicates something about
the nature of moral responsibility, particularly its gratuity (rather than aggression). “The
only motive Griselda ever offers for her assent is love, which is less an explanation than a
synonym for her assent. . . . No practical purpose, strategy, or possible reward impinges
on Griselda’s assent, which is in every sense free” (805). For Georgianna her love is holy
or numinous; in my analysis it is earthly and pragmatic but no less mysterious.

\textsuperscript{292} The gift, representing the rupture in the economy of exchange in much recent theory,
here stands for the paradox at the center of responsibility: that in responding to an other, I
fail to respond equally to others. Derrida calls this the law of exception. In Chaucer’s
text, on the level of phraseology, there also seems to be a certain exceptionalism in
evidence, though I have been unable to place it in the context of my overall analysis. I
note that the phrase “save one thing” and similar reservations recur throughout the text
(see IV. 55, 76, 110, 507, 569, 680, 768, 1036, 1163 and see the oaths at lines 169 and
351), as if to draw attention to the question of value: what is and is not worth sacrificing.
Is this a latent recognition of manifest thematic content?
previously equitable administration of the commons: “whan that the cas required it, / The commune profit koude she redresse” (IV. 430-31). She had given “jugementz of so greet equitee” (IV. 439) then, exhibiting an even hand in public affairs. What happened to make her behave so irrationally and for the sake of such “singular profit”? By later freely transgressing prudential calculation with a final decision,293 Griselda responds to the singular demands of Walter with a conviction we can hardly muster. And yet we do so all the time, because conviction is in fact necessary for decisions of any real importance. Griselda’s unconditional but voluntary obedience therefore figures something of the secrecy and tragedy of all ethical dilemmas, even those we ourselves face in trying to account for her actions.

This returns us to the recursive level of the text where conviction is required. Our own dilemma is how to take responsibility for the tale, realizing full well what the cost might be (e.g., our conviction that Griselda is really immoral? our commitment to the complexity of the tale? our sense that Griselda has been hard done by?) in responding responsibly. Moreover, whatever decision we make, we may find ourselves trying to account for an application in the public sphere where no explanation is finally persuasive, no decision sufficiently justified, no response good enough. And yet, unable to give adequate reasons for our choices, we may still have an ethical response to give. It is just that our choice—our conviction—will amount to a selection from among a range of alternatives, so that responsibility will have about it an air of irresponsibility. If, on the other hand, we fall back on conventional interpretations rather than conviction we may avoid controversy, but then there is the danger of failing to take responsibility for

293 Georgianna, p. 805-6.
interpretation (or judgement). What we sacrifice in either case is perhaps the real secret of the parable. In this way Griselda may be like a monster that haunts our own reception of the narrative of her life—a “mervaille” for which we can hardly begin to account at the same moment that it holds us accountable to respond. 294

Reading for the moral in this problematic case surely requires patience, that rare virtue Griselda flawlessly exhibits. The Clerk, reaching the end of his narrative, by contrast seems quite impatient with the story when he turns to the “noble wyves, ful of heigh prudence” (IV. 1183) and tells them how imprudent Griselda’s example really is. In the end the Clerk seems to have abandoned the parable and to have settled for a reactionary reading that offers Griselda up—by inference—as a mere good wife. His turn away from “earnestful matere” (IV. 1175)—a tragic turn away from its complexity?—therefore seems to undercut its moral purpose, if there was one to begin

294 There are other readings to give. (As Quintilian does say the parable as a rhetorical figure is “far less obvious” than other kinds of comparison.) I could have postulated that the absurdity of her decision represents something more spiritual than I have so far allowed, requiring a full recognition of Griselda’s extravagant transgression of morality itself, sublimated to a higher register, much in the way readers are incited to a higher-level awareness through the forced comparison of spiritual welfare in heaven to the arbitrary dispensation of an earthly lord in the difficult Parable of the Vineyard. (See my discussion of the parable in “The Middle English Pearl: Figuring the Unfigurable.”) On this alternative reading, the less justification there is for Griselda’s passion from the ordinary terrestrial perspective, the more awe-inspiring is her example from the celestial perspective. Suffering for God will never be unjustified, so when we think of Griselda in those terms her apparent irresponsibility may not be strictly applicable, except insofar as it is necessary to fire our imagination or move emotion. For a related religious interpretation, which depends on the shocking nature of the tale, see Ian Robinson’s Chaucer, pp. 164-65, and compare Georgianna’s more recent comments: “Griselda’s grammar of assent is aimed not at persuasion but at the suprarational transport of the sublime” (809). Perhaps too she exhibits the folly of God’s wisdom that St Paul opposes to worldly wisdom in 1 Corinthians 3.18-25. We can recall, “The foolishness of God is wiser than men.” Griselda could also be responding to Luke 14.26: “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.” That famous desideratum is another bit of moral grotesquerie with all the force of biblical authority behind it.
with. The comic ending would likewise seem to desublimate the alleged aporia by giving it a simple, *cui bono* explanation: all this spiritualization is mere camouflage for the untoward motives of a man who wants to set women in their place. Perhaps the Clerk is more ironical than this, but we cannot be certain. The solution to the problem, however, is not to throw our hands up but to patiently abide the difficulty of formulating our own responses.

Chaucer's moral tale is more demanding than most because of its insistence on the question of its own exemplarity, the way it makes a parable (rather than a parody) of itself. A perverse *exemplum terrible*,\(^\text{295}\) the *Clerk’s Tale* invites us to think about moral thinking. A failure to come to grips with a unifying moral principle governing the tale is finally no objection to it, though it does make reading for the moral difficult.\(^\text{296}\) For inasmuch as a moral decision seems required, is in fact experienced as an unremitting demand, we are called to account for our responses—if only for our unaccountable irresolution. Avoiding the negative assumption that the tale is flawed, then, I hope I have elaborated the way instability can be a part of moral deliberation, is indeed the general condition of moral deliberation. We may fail to find an application for Griselda, but in the case of the *Clerk’s Tale* our repeated attempts, observed patiently, may constitute a properly ethical application after all. I for one have been fascinated not just by a lack of answers, nor even with the fact that the tale finally seems unanswerable, but with the way this parable demands attention anyway, perhaps even our *virtuous suffraunce*. If this is

\(^{295}\) I borrow the term from Joan Gregg's *Devils, Women, and Jews: Reflections on the Other in Medieval Sermons*, where it is used to describe tales of horror and intimidation; the term was used many years before by G. R. Owst.

\(^{296}\) For this argument see Youmans, “Chaucer and the Rhetorical Limits of Exemplarity,” p. 54, who observes that the *Clerk’s Tale* offers “no stable model for future action.”
not an agreeable conclusion, it is no doubt because it is a partial reading. It may also be because, as the poet of Patience wrote, "Paciense is a point, thatz hit displesse ofte" (1).297

2.7. Measuring the Case

If Griselda is in a certain manner imprudent, the example she sets does not necessarily contradict the prudential model of moral reasoning I have put forth in other parts of this thesis. The Clerk's Tale is in my reckoning about the instant of decision that is not, or rather can no longer be, prudent because of its inevitable secrecy, exclusivity, and crudity. First, Griselda's conduct is characterized by a certain quality of secrecy because it is inexplicable outside the context of her own free will; second, her conduct has about it an exclusivity because she has had to select one from among an array of possibilities; and finally her conduct shows evidence of crudity because when she

297 The final allusion to Patience (ed., Andrew and Waldron) is occasioned in my thinking by Burrow's claim that it "does not . . . bring with it any of the doubts and ironies which disturb the simple functioning of the exemplary mode in the Clerk's Tale" (Medieval Writers 116). Patience allegedly gives no grounds for subversion: "if we fail to see this, it can only be from a profound failure of interest in general moral concepts. We do not want to learn about patience" (116). Wittgenstein could have been describing this very type of understanding—which has less to do with "understanding the subject" than with what "people want to see"—when he observed, "What has to be overcome is a difficulty having to do with the will, rather than with the intellect" (Culture 17). Pace Burrow, similar claims about the will-to-patience have been made about the Clerk's Tale.
Charlotte Morse argues that ironizers and allegorizers alike diminish the tale because they will not accept it: "Thus displacing the tale from itself and from themselves, readers make it safe, acceptable, and comfortable. . . . Doubtless our resistance to patience is culturally conditioned. Patience is neither highly regarded nor much thought about, especially by notoriously impatient Americans" ("Exemplary Griselda" 52). It is an important point, although while Morse excludes the insights of the ironizers and allegorizers tout court, I have aimed to include those same insights by suggesting the way mutually exclusive meanings, literal and figurative, straight and ironical, work against one another and demand judgement (either/or).
sacrifices others in order to respond to one other her action is by its very nature no longer confined to the safe (but inert) realm of reflection. Obliged to choose between determinate possibilities, Griselda survives the ordeal of undecidability not by settling for some sort of moderate ground of indeterminacy (a contradiction in terms) but by acting on her convictions and surrendering the comfort and expectation of never having to decide. In this way, she may exemplify the ordinary, “monstrous yet banal” moment of decision after which prudential calculation has taken place and in the face of which no prior calculation can account, but without which ethical responsibility could not be said to be itself. To use terms found in the Clerk’s Tale, Griselda’s assent is supplemental to avysement. At the same time, the ethical intention she exhibits would not be ethical were it not for some prior exercise of judgement, measurement, or calculation. It is to this aspect of responsibility that I finally wish to return.

Chaucer explores practical intelligence of the calculating kind throughout the Canterbury Tales. Rather than analyze all the instances I will touch on a few of the main ideas that emerge, in order to leave the impression that there is more to be said for prudence than Griselda alone might lead one to conclude. Our understanding of ethics in

298 Here is where I differ from Georgianna who finds prudence and reasoning of any sort to be trivialized in the text. See her valuable discussion of the terms and their synonyms. Griselda, she correctly observes, represents the kind of assent that Walter can only attempt to avyse before yielding to wonderment. Likewise, Griselda’s grammar of assent disturbs “our frame of reference and the terms of our judgement, our avysement” (801). We also do not want to assent and so we try to calculate, analyze, and measure her example: “Like Walter and the narrator, we read against the grain, especially these days when as critics we pride ourselves on not being taken in by the text” (815). I too perceive the pair of terms working in the text to distinguish two very different ways of seeing, but unlike Georgianna who believes the text “asks us for once to forgo critical judgement in favor of wonder and sympathy, themselves forms of assent” (817), I suggest that the dilemma we are faced with involves something more fundamental: having to choose between assent and avysement. Reading against the grain remains a viable alternative.
Chaucer would I think be lopsided if we took away only the idea that decision is mysterious and unaccountable—as if non disputandum est told the whole story. Ethical practice also requires some care and caution, or circumspection. Practical intelligence as a category is in Chaucer frequently elaborated in the context of morality, as J. D. Burnley’s excellent Chaucer’s Language and the Philosopher’s Tradition established some time ago. Burnley, delineating what he saw as a medieval “secular ethics” derived from a Senecan tradition of moral philosophy (i.e., Stoicism), noted the recurrence of a lexical set in Chaucer that includes terms such as avyse, conseil, forncast, and prudence, indicating that prudent preconsideration remains central to the thought of Chaucer and his contemporaries. Prudence, as an allegorical figure in the tale of Melibee, for example teaches Melibeus to use “conseil” and to “avyse” himself rather than react hasty to his adversaries. The Manciple’s Tale is among other things an exemplum showing the destructive results of haste or recklessness, and we could add that the tales of the Monk and Physician are examples of what happens when prudence is lacking. Such instances need to be contrasted with the worldly prudence—what Aquinas calls prudentia carnis as opposed to prudentia proper—of the Man of Law, or that exemplified in the tales of the Reeve and Shipman. The selfsame word had two antithetical senses then as it has now, the one suggesting good sense and the other self-interest.

What characterizes prudence in Chaucer is a regard for the virtue of the mean: mesure, attemprance, sobrenesse. As we have seen in Gower already, where extreme cases are laid out for Amans to decide between, finding the mean requires some

---

299 Burnley, p. 56.
300 Burnley, pp. 116-27. The doctrine of the mean is explicitly mentioned in the Legend of Good Women F 165-66, Troilus and Criseyde 1.687-89, and Boece IV. pr. 7, 100.
diligence. Chaucer’s *Melibee* is an extended meditation on the problem of due diligence and good judgement and puts forth the idea that its exercise involves both consultation and circumspection.\(^{301}\) Good judgement begins, first of all, by taking counsel of oneself and from others. And then it entails careful stocktaking, or analysis of the evidence. One of the fundamental tenets of the treatise is that one cannot make an ethical decision without considering the circumstances. The recipient is enjoined to take account of as many factors as possible in determining what it is best to do in any given situation. Case-based reasoning pervades Chaucer’s text at its most basic level of instruction. Prudence goes so far to lay down the following emphatically casuistic principle:

> And take this for a general reule, that every conseil that is affermed so strongly that it may nat be chaunged for no condivioun that may bityde, I seye that thilke conseil is wikked. (VII. 1231)

Wicked is the advice that will not adjust itself according to time and circumstance, that is not conditional. It is the contingency and flexibility of her precepts which marks Prudence as an especially prudential persona, and it is the centrality of the responsibility of the recipient of counsel that makes the treatise so interesting as an ethical document. Good judgement arises when sufficient care is taken to match given precepts to the particular situations in which judgment arises; how one handles the judgements of others, what one *does* with them, is vital in this scheme of things.

There are numerous instances of good and bad judgement in the *Canterbury Tales*. John the Carpenter, Chauntecleer and Daun Russell, Apius, Phoebus, and of

---

\(^{301}\) James Flynn’s outline of the treatise in “The Art of Telling and the Prudence of Interpreting the Tale of Melibee” is helpful in that it sets forth the basic “sequential protocol” recommended by Prudence (56-57). He offers a corrective to those readings which attempt to show that the tale is a parody; for the parody argument see Waterhouse and Griffiths’s “‘Sweete Wordes’ of Non-Sense: The Deconstruction of the Moral Melibee.”
course Harry Bailey spring to mind as examples of poor or wicked judges. A representative sampling of those with apparently good judgement would include Theseus, the ladies of Arthur's court, and the squire Jankyn. Not all the examples are equal (an important qualification that ought to be extended to cover my discussion of exemplarity throughout), but this is the point of much of Chaucer's art: recipients of the Tales must judge the judgement of others, must make up his or her mind as to the validity of contradictory interpretations, by consulting personal experience and the wisdom of others. There is of course a whole cluster of marginal cases (e.g., Virginius, Arveragus, and Griselda herself) to make the importance of our own faculty of judgement obvious. What is at last important to notice is that Chaucer does not shy away from the problem of prudence, but rather insists on its centrality to all human affairs.

2.8. The Canterbury Compilatio?

Griselda's example is only one among others. Hers is in other words not the moral of every story, if it is nevertheless in a profound sense the story of every moral. The partiality of the Clerk's Tale, the fact that it offers one kind of wisdom, is both its strength and its weakness. But mitigating its deficiency is the fact that it belongs to a collection, a repertoire, an array of cases meant to be read together. Thus the last point to consider in my examination of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales is the function of the collection as a whole. That the Tales is a collection, more than the sum of its parts, is not something we should overlook, even if the state of the whole is a permanently piecemeal affair. But what does it add up to?
Like Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*, Chaucer’s *Tales* has been profitably viewed as a kind of *compilatio*, though there are competing notions about what this term might mean in the present context. The scholastic literary term seems to have been invoked by the Ellesmere scribe in his familiar colophon at the end of the *Tales*: “*Heere is ended the book of the tales of Caunterbury, compiled by Geffrey Chaucer, of whos soule Ihesu Crist have mercy. Amen.*” Chaucer’s authorial self-presentation frequently suggests as much about the nature of his literary activity, indicating that for all intents and purposes he was a miser for the gold of the literary world and not its real alchemist. It is often observed that Chaucer designates himself in *A Treatise on the Astrolabe* explicitly as “but a lewd compilator” (61), yet it must be acknowledged that a textbook on a scientific appliance is just the place where one might expect the poet’s powers of invention to be laid to one side. Chaucer’s usage here conforms itself to the ordinary Middle English meanings of *compilen*, “to compose or to collect,” and so has little to do with the reverberant root meaning of the Latin verb *compilator*, “to rob or plunder,” and even less to do with the encyclopedist historians.\(^{302}\) But elsewhere Chaucer appears, or rather attempts to appear, to be merely witnessing and reporting events—compiling facts or known stories—when he is actually exercising full poetic license, robbing and plundering apace. In the *General Prologue* (l. 732) and the *Miller’s Prologue* (l. 3173), where the narrator disclaims responsibility and describes his task as one of rehearsing facts independent of his own making, Chaucer is having some fun with the fiction of factuality. In *Troilus and Criseyde* (e.g., II. 13-20), where the narrator claims to be dispassionately translating the work of Lollius, Chaucer is as disingenuous.

\(^{302}\) Those “great compilers of the later Middle Ages” (Minnis, “Moral Gower” 58) such as Ralph Hig din or Brunetto Latini or Alan de Lille—but I anticipate.
The author’s diffidence is not hard to detect, and it constitutes one of the sites of interest for critical analysis, throwing into question the application of the very idea of *compilatio* to Chaucer’s work. A. J. Minnis in *Medieval Theory of Authorship* discusses Chaucer’s authorial stance in this regard, showing that the compilatory idea might be a mask behind which a more enterprising writer hides. Elaborately divesting himself of auctoritas, Chaucer ostensibly transfers it to his pilgrim narrators, treating his fictional characters with unprecedented respect perhaps, but shielding himself from accusations thereby. Unlike Gower, for whom apologetic appeal to limited auctoritas in terms of *compilatio* is made in earnest, Chaucer’s modest pose as compiler is another facet of his usual ironical self-image. The upshot, finally, is that the *Canterbury Tales* is no compilation after all because of its carefully designed concealment.

Focusing less on persona and turning to the question of formal composition and structure, Ann Astell in her *Chaucer and the Universe of Learning* has highlighted similarities between Chaucer’s collection and so-called academic *compilatio*. Her reading of Chaucer’s participation in the universe of learning takes its inspiration from the layout of the Ellesmere manuscript. Astell is guided by A. I. Doyle and Malcolm Parkes who observed,

The *compilatio* was developed as a genre in academic and legal circles during the course of the thirteenth century to make inherited material excerpted from the writings of established *auctores* accessible in a more systematic and convenient form. In theory the compiler added no matter of his own by way of exposition, but he was free to rearrange: he imposed a new *ordinatio* on the materials he extracted from the work of others. . . . The *ordinatio* of the Ellesmere manuscript interprets the *Canterbury Tales* as a *compilatio* in that it emphasizes the role of the tales as repositories of
The compilatory arrangement of Chaucer's work invites comparisons with the Confessio Amantis, except that Gower's apparatus is almost certainly authorial whereas Ellesmere's is scribal. However, the parallels are evidently striking. Astell observes that in the scribal copy "Chaucer is represented as playing the part of a learned commentator, explicating his own authoritative text, much as Gower does in the Latin commentary that frames his Confessio Amantis" (26). In this reading the Tales as compilatio is less than ironical or deceptive about its author's modest pose; more like Gower now, Chaucer as compiler and learned commentator is (or is made out to be) playing the earnest part of a "clerk among clerks," in Astell's phrase.

Astell ultimately moves beyond a strictly codicological reading of the fifteenth-century manuscript to suggest that the scribe has recognized in Chaucer's collection an authorial intention, a nascent design that conforms to the rationale of the academic compilatio. Compilatio in this usage is a term which designates a broad class of scholastic compendia: universal histories, epics, encyclopedias, and disputations. Chaucer's proximity to the genre Astell attempts to establish in other ways, not solely with reference to the Ellesmere layout. For example, alluding to J. B. Allen's ethical

---

303 Parkes elaborates in another article, "Here we find almost all the trappings of ordinatio: sources and topics are indicated in the margins, the word 'auctor' is placed alongside a sententious statement. The text is well-disposed in its sections, and each section is carefully labeled by means of full rubrics. There are running titles, and the final touch is the introduction of pictures of each of the pilgrims (the basis of the divisions of the work) in order to assist the reader to identify them with the General Prologue" (134; cited in Astell 2). Rouse and Rouse, "Ordinatio and Compilatio Reconsidered," offer compelling arguments against the view that the compilatio was invented in the thirteenth century.
theory of "parallel systems" and to his attendant notion of "normative array," Astell makes the following inferences:

the Ellesmere editor has perceived in Chaucer's collection of tales a definite ordinatio, and he has arranged them accordingly. . . . First of all, the interpreter of Chaucer's book observed its literal division into discrete parts—that is, into fragments or story-blocks of linked tales—and assumed that the division was meaningful. Second, in accord with the regular practice of medieval commentators, he sought to draw correspondences between the literal parts or divisions of the forma tractatus and a matching distinctio or external outline of topics in the public domain, 'in terms of which the author's literal material has its full significance' [quoting J. B. Allen]. Having perceived such a correspondence, the clerk saw the poem's unity emerge as the logical outcome of a 'dialectic between a poem's textuality' and an independent categorical set—the seven deadly sins, for instance, or the cardinal virtues, or the ages of man. (27)

In her book Astell sets forth just such a pattern, a normative array of distinctio, based upon the learned schema of the seven planets and the branches of philosophy, to which parts of the Tales are said to correspond.304 In her study, "Chaucer's choice of a basic ordering principle for the Tales is, in fact, discoverable and matches that actually found in the Ellesmere order" (228; emphasis added). Backing away from the particular scribal interventions of Ellesmere, Astell claims that Chaucer's work is—again, as "the Ellesmere editor has perceived"—inherently disposed towards some "independent categorical set."

On this reading the coherence and rationality of the Canterbury Tales is assured by its compilatory character, as defined in relation to the high-culture tradition of Latin literature. In Astell's parlance the Canterbury Tales shares the particular qualities of the

---

304 Her attempt at establishing such correspondences is as Astell herself observes in the tradition of Frederick Tupper's 1914 essay, "Chaucer and the Seven Deadly Sins," where it was first claimed that the Canterbury Tales is organized according to the distinctio given in the Parson's Tale, much as Gower's Confessio Amantis is arranged according to the capital sins. J. B. Allen proposed a four-part set of correspondences on the topic of marriage in A Distinction of Stories.
philosophical *quaestiones*, and can be described as a kind of social *summa*.

305 Yet the shape of the *Tales* may as readily suggest other comparisons, vis-à-vis demotic textual and oral traditions as well as more “popular” cultural practices, as Janet Coleman intimates when she remarks of the Ellesmere edition that it “sets the *Canterbury Tales* . . . into the tradition of ordered and indexed preaching handbooks” (199). Compendiousness and topical arrangement are not exclusive qualities of the learned Latin auctors after all; and not only preaching handbooks but legendaries and exemplaria evidence such basic structural traits as are found in the scholastic compendia, yet do so primarily for the sake of the functioning of the text rather than its form (i.e., rather than for the sake of some unifying argument or aesthetic). The apparatus of preachers’ aids allows for ease of reference and hence greater utility, because ultimately the exempla contained therein exist to be exported as proof to other discursive contexts, namely sermons. So, leaving aside the supposed “perceptions” of the Ellesmere scribe, which might lead us only to

---

305 Astell invokes the “great compilers of the later Middle Ages” for comparison. She follows both Minnis and Parkes, among others, in assuming that *compilatio* describes a scholastic genre or literary form; a *compilator* is no longer just a writer or collector or even a scribe but a scholar who carefully divides and orders texts to a unifying thematic or philosophical purpose. I wonder, in passing, whether such structured compilations as are typically classed under *compilatio* are not as unlike as they are like one another. A simple test would be to compare Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy* and Higdin’s *Polychronicon* and Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*; and then to consider Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*—to isolate four examples from among the many other *compilatio* frequently listed by critics. Actual books of compilations, compendia, or anthologies there undoubtedly were throughout the Middle Ages; labeling them all *compilatio* in some specific late scholastic sense of the term seems rather artificial and reductive, though this is not the place to pursue my doubts. See further Rouse and Rouse, “*Ordinatio* and *Compilatio* Reconsidered,” who point out the anachronism of the term and who consider evidence telling against its historical validity; the Rouses also lament the fact that modern “critics have most zealously and least carefully applied the language of *ordinatio* and *compilatio*” (124) to Chaucer, and I will not add to their dismay by affirming anything more than that the *Canterbury Tales* is like certain types of compilations.
academicize Chaucer’s work (a fourteenth-century vernacular work, removed both in
time and language from the compilatio of the thirteenth), or to presuppose some total
design (whereas the Tales remains manifestly incomplete and fragmentary), or to
privilege some external set of categorical moral meanings (begging the question as to the
legitimacy of their application if they are really fixed and exterior to the text), it is plain
enough that the Tales might in any edition present itself as an exemplaria. I indeed want
to suggest that we approach the work as though it were a collection of exempla, the type
of structured compilation oriented towards practical moral application.

The advantage of my hypothesis is that we can explore the work from the
perspective of what it has to say about practical wisdom (phronesis: the realm of ethics)
rather than speculative wisdom only (episteme: the realm of science). Whether the
Canterbury Tales is additionally ordered to some systematic end, related to an array of
external distinctio, and whether its meanings are exactly normative remain highly
speculative propositions. What is not disputed is that the collection is what it appears to
be: an unsystematic array of moral stories. There are good reasons to prefer this
unexceptional description, and they have to do with the way the exemplaria, envisaged as
a gathering of useful but yet-to-be-applied stories, consisting of facta et dicta
memorabilia, emphatically does not refer to some “normative array.” For although
exemplaria frequently are in actual fact ordered, indexed, alphabetized, rubricated, and
cross-referenced, and appear to share some of the qualities that go to make up more
scholarly compendia, their particular arrangement and apparatus does not add up to
anything so programmatic. In fact, a collection of exempla—as a particular kind of text
as well as a broadly conceived cultural and psychological phenomenon\textsuperscript{306}—is not restricted to a theme or a systematic agenda. Rather, it is a repertoire of stories with many different moral meanings.

Perhaps most importantly, the tale-telling game on the pilgrimage to Canterbury suggests that this is less than a controlled scholarly exercise. The compilation of tales represents a diverse assemblage of moral tales derived from a mixed group of individuals, in the vulgar tongue, ostensibly fashioned haphazardly and from memory (embodiment of the \textit{sensus communis} contained in pilgrims’ memories and then passed on via Geoffrey’s). We may think we know that this is not really the case, that the apparent disorder in fact conceals a design—e.g., veils conventional class privilege (as when “by aventure, or sort, or cas” “the cut fil to the Knyght” I. 844-45), reinforces social hierarchies and stereotypes (in its apparently predictable depictions of professional rivalries and individual characters), and is covertly directed towards a higher order (the soul moving on an itinerary towards the heavenly city, “thilke parfit glorious pilgrymage / That highte Jerusalem celestial” X.49-51). We may presume, too, that behind Chaucer the pilgrim lies Chaucer the poet who has smartly arranged things, in conformity to conventions of “authenticating realism” (see Morton Bloomfield’s “Chaucerian Realism”), so that what seems like mere reportage is actually artful. Yet these suppositions do not actually stand up to the scrutiny of experience. Although initially we may reject the idea that realism and the element of the aleatory are anything more than fictions, the alternative view, once it is made explicit, looks even more unacceptable. For

\textsuperscript{306} Following the definition of Piero Boitani: “\textit{exemplum}, which is both the typical medieval form of perception of reality and a literary genre” (2); cf. Burrow, \textit{Medieval Writers}, “Modes of Meaning,” where he defines \textit{exemplum} as a way of thinking in contrast to \textit{exemplification}. 
are we sure we can discover a definite direction or order within the Tales? When the
question is put bluntly like this, doubts must arise. Certainly there is no controlling frame
of reference as explicit as that which governs the Confessio Amantis, not even a gloss or
set of distinctions to follow; and only momentarily does a sequential order surface.
Given the different available tale sequences in different manuscripts, the incomplete tales
and the fragmentary nature of the collection, and in any case the intensely polysemous
character of individual tales, we remain hard pressed to establish a set of determinate
meanings or discover an organizing principle inherent in Chaucer’s work. Finally, as
Katherine Gittes observes, “In spite of the excellent theories that have been proposed, the
search for internal organizing elements in the Canterbury Tales has never been truly
successful” (Framing the Canterbury Tales 135).

Envisaging Chaucer’s Tales as an exemplaria may solve our problems with order
and meaning, if only because this conception does not demand that we resolve them
once-and-for-all. The proposed heuristic indeed makes room for the diversity of tales and
sequences, clearing a space for Chaucer’s powerfully centrifugal irony, enabling us to
explore the ethical aspects of the work without reducing it to univocal sentence. There
are limits to how far the analogy will go. I do not suggest that the Tales is as directly
didactic as the ordinary run-of-the-mill exemplaria, though this point surely depends on
what counts as instruction; nor that every tale within the collection is equivalently
exemplary, for most lack the qualities of ideal sermon exempla (e.g., brevity, simplicity,
and plausibility). Also, I recognize that the idea I am proposing is limited to the extent it
would seem to posit a stand-alone quality to individual tales, militating against
developmental readings like that of a “marriage group” for example, or
underemphasizing the role of tale links and the momentum of the pilgrimage. At the same time, I don’t think my conception risks flattening the tales, because the exemplaria does not impose any single generic constraint and it leaves the question of development open. One may concede the interrelation of parts without predetermining their positions in advance, so that the meaning is very much suspended in the way Pearsall suggests when he says, “Chaucer left the work as a partly assembled kit with no directions.”

The one explicit direction we are given is to allow ourselves to be guided by moral conscience: “And therefore, whoso list it nat yheere, / Turne over the leef and chese another tale” (l.3176-77). Chaucer already anticipates something of the freedom of readerly choice that his exemplary collection otherwise seems to require of us.

Doubtless, my idea must remain open to adjustment in light of the specific features and framework of the collection—with its interlaced themes, dramatic links, and unifying context of disport—and therefore with Chaucer I am very willing to put my words under correccioun and in youre discrecioun to encresse or maken dymynucioun. But finally the advantage of placing Chaucer’s Tales under the aspect of the exemplaria is that it enables me to bring out an under-analyzed aspect of the collection: its rhetorical and ethical potential, which is to say the way it anticipates a reader’s correccioun and discrecioun in just the manner suggested.

\[307\] In this light, the conception of the tales that is most persuasive to me is that of Helen Cooper, in Structure, pp. 69-71, who emphasizes interlacement of themes rather than strict sequence. For Cooper the tales of Canterbury achieve what she calls a cobweb effect rather than a linear design.

\[308\] Troilus, III. 1331-36.

\[309\] As Howard put it, “The book is put in our hands to make of it what we will” (Idea 123); compare Larry Sklute, Virtue of Necessity, 137.
In places, however, Chaucer expresses reservations that would seem to qualify the sense of optimism implied in my analysis of the open-endedness of the compilation. The problem with exemplary narratives, like any other kind of utterance, is that they can be misapplied since not everyone has the discretion to turn them to good purpose. For Chaucer, as the Retraction at the end of the Canterbury Tales attests, this means the old assurance that “Al that is writen is writen for oure doctrine” (X. 1083) is ultimately no defense against the obstinacy of a reading public. Nor do his own good intentions (X. 1083) protect him. Realizing the risks of making writing public Chaucer begs for our prayers and finally retracts certain “tales of Caunterbury, thilke that sownen into synne” (Retraction X.1086), betraying doubts about the capacities of his readers and registering a guilty anxiety over the fact that not all his fictions are safely exemplary (for he does not retract them all). As Melissa Furrow interprets, “It is not that the fictions are sinful in themselves; it is that they ‘sownen into synne,’ are conducive to sin; the author cannot trust his readers to use them right.” (250). What this indicates is that far from being indifferent to the ethics of exemplarity, or to questions of morality generally, Chaucer is deeply interested in—even felt he had a personal, or, more precisely, spiritual investment in—whether his audiences would read for the moral. Finally we need to say that Chaucer is highly exemplary for having shared with us his misgivings, as only an author concerned with prudence and virtuous living could. It is something he is troubled by in the tales of the Friar, Summoner, and Pardoner, hyper-exemplary narratives of extremely concentrated effect that prompt laughter and, through irony, censure abuses of the ethics of exemplarity. It is also something Chaucer manifestly thought long over in both the Clerk’s Tale and the Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale, in which he provokes us too to
think through the liabilities of reader response where the most pressing issues of personal choice are at stake. I have no doubt that other tales in the collection would yield similar practical wisdom about the risks and rewards of exemplarity. At last, pessimism and optimism about the rhetoric commingle in perpetual tension on the road to Canterbury, obliging the current succession of readers to figure out how to respond to the compilation responsibly.
CONCLUSION

If evil is a failure of the imagination, then from a practical point of view it becomes all-important that sufficient conditions for creative expression and reflection be established in and by a culture. Imaginative literature in particular becomes indispensable on this account for testing and perfecting our moral intuitions and their associated institutions; for showing what is entailed by living with timeless values in the contingencies of time and space; and for inspiring individuals to celebrate and seek after the right and the good. Much ethical criticism in the last two decades has been preoccupied with the nuances of literary expression in this regard, urging that literature can provide the sort of “thick description” that is so vital to moral education.\footnote{Something storytellers probably have always known. Bernard Williams in his \textit{Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy} develops the notion in his discussion of “thick ethical concepts.” Alisdair MacIntyre asserts a now common point of view on the importance of rich literary description when he says, “How individuals understand their relationships to their own actions and how these actions are generated is in part a matter of the size and subtlety of the vocabulary available to them for that understanding and the range of discriminations which their vocabulary enables them to make” (\textit{Whose Justice? Which Rationality?} 183). In the same regard Wayne Booth says, “for most of us our character—in the larger sense of the range of choices and habits of choice available to us—changes, grows, and diminishes largely as a result of our imaginative diet” (257). Charles Taylor, taking issue with the “proceduralist” ethics of the Enlightenment, similarly argues that what is needed are “qualitative distinctions” and “strong evaluations” as embodied in “story” and “history” (\textit{Sources of the Self} 97), which would allow moral agents to envisage and affirm the goods they are instructed to strive for.}

Exemplary narratives too are capable of educating the moral sensibility. They do this, first of all, by presenting character in action, depicting complex individual choices along with their consequences, and setting otherwise static ideals in motion, so to speak,
in the relatively consequence-free laboratory of the text. The most interesting literary examples, on this account, are ones such as Chaucer has composed that constitute something like a testing ground on which to explore human possibilities and their limitations. But as we have seen there is an aspect of the literature that can work to a more pragmatic end, and which stands out against the concerns of much current ethical criticism, preoccupied as that criticism still is with a version of the Arnoldian disinterested free play of the mind. Sidney should have been the first to remind us that, classically, poetry has as its end "well-doing and not . . . well-knowing only" (Defense of Poetry 510), which is a medieval distinction, constituting an early defense of poetry, invoked in scholastic commentaries on the division of the sciences. In these commentaries, exemplary rhetoric is said to have its telos in what Gower calls præctique rather than in mere reflection, or theorique.311 This brings out the other dimension of the rhetoric that I have insisted upon in the context of the work of both Chaucer and Gower, something I referred to as the reductive stage in reading for the moral: besides subtilizing ideals and enlarging perceptions, exemplarity can be called upon to cultivate or prompt practical responses, in order to reinforce high ideals or stimulate right actions. We are dealing, then, with a type of reader responses that might not linger quite as long as academic critics prefer over the complex nuances of a case. Indeed, reading for the moral is not always going to be scrupulous, comprehensive, or speculative; tropology is not necessarily close reading. Unsurprisingly, this fact frequently leads to complaints that moral rhetoric is crude and manipulative, and that the kind of reading it inspires is

311 Exemplary rhetoric, with its practical orientation towards that which is good and not only true, was subordinate to speculative science (e.g., theology). Consult excerpts from Abelard, Alexander of Hales, Bonaventure, Giles of Rome, and Pierre Bersuire in MLTC.
lamentably naive. I myself find the critique congenial, but only because it speaks to a suspicion that does not entirely comprehend the phenomenon to which it is applied. The critique is finally misguided. Like proverbs and other kinds of vital idiomatic expression we use daily, exemplary rhetoric can serve to give a much needed, rough and ready incentive to action.

Given the evidence, I have tried to go some way towards describing the moral rhetoric and its functioning on its own terms, sympathetically, even when this meant challenging habitual distrust of reductive and determinate meaning. It should at last be stressed that by defending the coherence and conceptual complexity of the rhetoric of exemplarity I am not endorsing the ideals that the rhetoric served in the period: what most of us would take as Gower's and even Chaucer's chauvinism is not built in to the rhetoric (defined as a means of persuasion). Looking back we can draw out three broad aspects of the ethics of exemplarity that go to form the basis of my analysis. First, exemplarity is a highly rhetorical phenomenon. What this description points to is the way the moral rhetoric comes out of a tradition of persuasion and probabilistic reasoning, depending as it does upon narrative cases as much as categorical norms. Essentially, echoing Edith Wyschogrod we can sum up this aspect by saying the rhetoric teaches practice by way of practice. But if the rhetoric desublimates morality in this way, it also multiplies the grounds for moral deliberation: it is as I have emphasized taxonomical. The ethics of exemplarity is in this second aspect a copious means of persuasion, for a practitioner reads from cases incrementally and laterally, deliberating upon problems by making inferences and drawing analogies from an array of cases. Each exemplary narrative is one among others. The important role of the reader in drawing conclusions
directs us to the final aspect, which I have labeled *reductive*. Responsible reading at
some point will take stock of a problem and make a decision about what is important in a
given case or array of cases to that problem. Therefore, making "what you will" of the
rhetoric constitutes this final move beyond the text into the life of an individual. I
described this transition from reflection to action in terms of "punctuation." I have of
course been conscious of the disfavour into which these key terms—rhetoric, taxonomy,
and reductive—have fallen, seeing as of late they are regularly cast as aspersions. But I
hope our having become sensitized to the methods of the ethics of exemplarity will help
us recognize what we neglect by refusing to admit the terms and practices they stand for
into our critical vocabulary. Exemplum itself might finally be liberated from its status as
bad word in light of our reappraisal.

"Example is better than precept," according to the old expression. "Examples are
*best* precepts," went a more emphatic proverb. The "heye wey of . . . ensaemple" (*Boece*
IV m.7.64), in Boethius's terms, was a path followed quite faithfully by Gower and
Chaucer, the two poets who thoroughly understood that the rhetoric of exemplarity
represented an effective means of communicating and testing moral wisdom. The
*Confessio Amantis* offers an example of a more traditional kind of moral communication,
since it more nearly approximates a true example-book or penitential treatise with its
florilegial array of moral cases, stabilizing apparatus, and comparatively uncomplicated
fictionalized communicative situation. But the tradition of case-analysis that informs the
work should have complicated the picture of Gower's didacticism immeasurably, and I
hope it corrects certain notions about medieval exemplarity still generally held. Now if I
have gone some way to subtilize "moral Gower," I have also attempted to coarsen our
usual impressions of "genial Chaucer." Emphasizing the reductive and punctual moment of reading for the moral and the importance of determinate value-judgements, I insisted that moral rhetoric turns out to be indispensable where we might have least expected it in Chaucer. Even Chaucerian irony is on my account not set against the use of monitory rhetoric so much as against those who use it badly—entisseyng of wikked ensample. Importantly, social satire is not one of Chaucer's original contributions to exemplarity. Granted, he additionally may discredit those exemplary narratives inherently disposed to harass certain groups of people with their stereotypes; the Wife of Bath's effort of "making-do" hardly recommends the ethics of exemplarity if the rhetoric is taken to be one with the principles communicated thereby. Even Chaucer is or becomes dubious about certain "worldly vanitese" (Retraction X. 1084) he himself had inserted into the developing Canterbury collection. Not all examples are equal in his reckoning, nor should they be in ours. But Chaucer did not denounce the whole collection, and indeed he works within the boundaries of the moral rhetoric to conduct his criticism of it.

Neither Gower nor Chaucer uses moral stories in an entirely conventional paradigmatic or pragmatic way, and both poets betray doubts about exemplary rhetoric. We sense this most strongly in Chaucer of course, who does not seem to apply monitory rhetoric to tell us directly what it is good to do. Like Gower in this respect, he employs the rhetoric at a higher meta-ethical register to inquire into what it is good to do with examples, as if the critical issue were getting people to learn to use the rhetoric better. Skepticism towards the rhetoric therefore does not lead to its condemnation, but to its reaffirmation as an ethical mode. Finally, this apparent distance from applied ethics should not trick us into thinking the poets are aloof to all specific valuations or
commitments. Saying so about Gower is uncontroversial. But the same holds for Chaucer. If the poet is heir to Aristotle's philosophy, as Hoccleve puts it, it is because Chaucer is at last, like the philosopher, deeply committed to making moral discriminations and cultivating prudence in the sphere of everyday practice. The difference between poet and philosopher is that the former employs the powers and properties of literary expression at his disposal to exemplify his moral concerns, something Aristotle probably only wished he could do.
WORKS CITED


Coady, C. A. J. and Seumas Miller. "Literature, power, and the recovery of philosophical


Crane, Thomas Fredrick, ed. The Exempla or Illustrative Stories from the Sermones Vulgares of Jacques de Vitry. London: David Nutt for the Folk-lore Society, 1890.


David, Alfred. The Strumpet Muse: Art and Morals in Chaucer’s Poetry. Bloomington:


---. “With Carmen’s Help: Latin Authorities in the Confessio Amantis.” Studies in


--- Whose Justice? Whose Rationality? Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press,


Miller, Robert P. " Allegory in the Canterbury Tales." Companion to Chaucer Studies.


---. "'Moral Gower' and Medieval Literary Theory." In Minnis et al., eds. Gower's Confessio Amantis, pp. 50-78.


Riddy, Felicity. “‘Women talking about the things of God’: a late medieval sub-culture.” *Women and Literature in Britain, 1150-1500*. Ed. Carol M. Meale. Cambridge:


Runacres, Charles. “Art and Ethics in the ‘Exempla’ of Confessio Amantis.” In Minnis,


Sledd, James. “The *Clerk’s Tale*: The Monsters and the Critics.” *Modern Philology* 51.2


Tinkle, Theresa. Medieval Venuses and Cupids: Sexuality, Hermeneutics, and English


Tupper, Frederick “Chaucer and the Seven Deadly Sins.” PMLA 29 (1914): 93-128.


