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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

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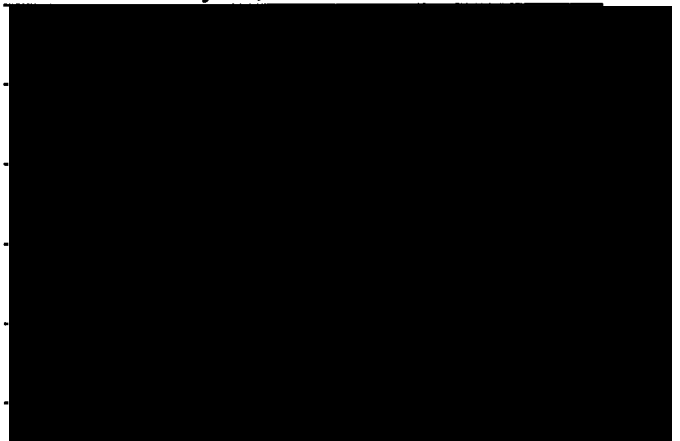
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To Maureen

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 <u>Confessio Amantis</u> and Chaucer's <u>Canterbury Tales</u>, 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., <u>Middle English Dictionary</u>

MLTC .... Minnis et al., eds., <u>Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism</u>

NE .... Aristotle, <u>Nicomachean Ethics</u>

PI .... Wittgenstein, <u>Philosophical Investigations</u>

ST .... Aquinas, <u>Summa Theologiae</u>

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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 celibate 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. Fatefully, 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, <u>Moralia in Job</u> I, 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 wyl and desyre ye have therto" (<u>The Mirror of Our Lady</u>: 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

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[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 <u>Legenda Aurea</u>, Cap. CLXIX [pp. 771-77]; a modern English translation is provided in Miller, <u>Chaucer, Sources and Backgrounds</u>, pp. 112-20. Middle English versions are included in <u>The Early South English Legendary</u>, EETS o.s. 87, pp. 490-96 (ed. Carl Horstmann); Bokenham's <u>Legendys of Hooly Wummen</u>, EETS o.s. 206, pp. 203-25; <u>The Golden Legend as Englished by William Caxton</u>, London: J. M. Dent, 1900. The legend is most famously recollected by Chaucer and versified in his <u>Second Nun's Tale</u>, which Florence H. Ridley claims, against a widespread critical underestimation of the tale, is "the finest saint's life in Middle English verse" (<u>Riverside Chaucer</u>, 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, <u>Book of Memory</u>, p. 164.

[3] Wogan-Browne, <u>The Idea of the Vernacular</u>, p. 262. The <u>Mirror</u> 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,

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[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 whech 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 cummys to men þairthrow as þe filth or |sp|ottis of þe face schawis in þe myrrour of glas" (Craigie, ed. The Asloan Manuscript, p. 272). The same metaphor-complex informs the anonymous poet's comment, "For Caton seiþ, the gode techer, / Oþere mannes lijf 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.[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 *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

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[6] For recent discussions of the inadequacy of *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 <u>Confessio Amantis</u> and Chaucer's <u>Canterbury Tales</u>. 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]

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[7] For my understanding of medieval ethics I am indebted to Mary Carruthers, <u>The Book of Memory</u>, particularly Chapter 5, "Memory and the Ethics of Reading"; and John Dagenais, <u>The Ethics of Reading in Manuscript Culture</u>, pp. 3-108. Judson B. Allen's <u>The Ethical Poetic of the Later Middle Ages</u> 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.[8] 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

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[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).[9] In yet other accounts, a "formalism" and "idealism" characterized the old ways of thinking: "Every question which presents itself," one

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[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

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[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)[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

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Geoffrey Galt Harpham too speaks in the modern vein when he states that "narrative invariably disturbs and de-stabilizes the principles it is enlisted to exemplify" (Getting it Right 160). But he is at least clear that "without decision, ethics would be condemned to dithering" ("Ethics" 398).

[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.[13] Thus Burrow goes

on to laud Chaucer for "his strong tendency to fictionalize the process of exemplification

itself" (Ricardian Poetry 88).[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, Writing From History,

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[13] Cf. Scanlon, 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 Canterbury Tales] . . . it is simply because people are too weak or too wicked to heed the voice of history and traditional wisdom" (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 <u>Journal of the History of Ideas</u> 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.[15] 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

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[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 I. 3186) where fun and disport are indulged. Nonetheless, medieval writers held that even poetry of pure *delectatio* 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."[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

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[16] I will use both terms interchangeably throughout.

should be doing. ("De Tribus Maximus Circumstantiis Gestorum," 264–65; emphasis added)[17]

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

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[17] Excerpted in Carruthers, Book of Memory, Appendix A. See Bonaventure for a similar definition in MLTC, ed. Minnis, p. 233-4.

[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 *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, "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 *deeds* can be exemplary (e.g., "This noble ensample to his sheep he yaf, / That first he wroght, and afterward he taughte," General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales, I. 496-97) and so can *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., The Exempla or Illustrative Stories, p. xviii, note, and Tubach, 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" (L'exemplum 1). Burrow, in Medieval Writers, posits the useful distinction between *exemplum* and *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 Tribus Maximus Circumstantiis Gestorum," 264-65).

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

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[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

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[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.[21] 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.[22] 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

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[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" (PI 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).[23] 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.

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[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 autum 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 intellection 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.[24] 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

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[24] For a definition of this term of rhetoric see Isidore of Seville, <u>The Etymologies</u>, II. 14 (Miller, et al., <u>Readings in Medieval Rhetoric</u>, 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?[25] 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

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[25] Many virgin saints were not meant to be emulated, but were rather thought to serve as helpers, intercessors, and protectoresses; see Eamon Duffy, <u>The Stripping of the Altars</u>, pp. 176-7, but also p. 170 where the <u>Golden Legend</u> 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" (PI 34).

To be functional the example need not be condensed into a moral proverb or preachment, 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

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[26] "Only let us understand what 'inexact' means. For it does not mean 'unusable'" (PI 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 *delectare* 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, I, 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.[28] 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.[29] What a given abstraction or

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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, undertermination, 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.[30] 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

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[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 behaviour, 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.

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[31] Whence the true indispensability of examples to any system of morality. Alasdair MacIntyre 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]

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[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 *invisibilia Dei*.[34] 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.[35]

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

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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 *invisibilia 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 Hennryson: "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 fenʒeit 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 paedeia. 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.[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

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[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.[37] 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.[38]

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

ydelnesse 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

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[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]

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[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.[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

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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, De Oratore 3.26.60, I effectively dispense with the Socratic dichotomy between philosophy and rhetoric.

[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 *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 Ways of Worldmaking, Chapter 1, and 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.[43] 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.[44] In Middle English the verb *reducen* had positive connotations. It meant to bring the mind back to virtue, to restore, apply, summarize, and interpret.[45] (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

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[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., 1-3.

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 <u>Reading for the Plot</u> 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:

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[46] Cf. Aquinas's definition of prudence as discovering "the ultimate point, that which is singular, becase that which is to be done is singular . . ."; cited in Bradley, <u>Aquinas</u>, 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, 1.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 <u>Ricardian Poetry</u>, 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

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[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

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[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).[50] Thus the inventional 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.[51]

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

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[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 Orcherd 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.[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?[53] How else does one come to a moral decision without fixing on

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[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.

[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.

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similarly, for the three wounds of contrition, compassion and 'wylfulle 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 transcendental 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.[54] It is this kind of moral thinking—a

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[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 <u>Gawain</u>-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.[55] Given the

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conducted under the name of 'casuistry'" (Medieval Writers 116). On casuistry and its antecedents I have learned a great deal from Kenneth E. Kirk, Conscience and its Problems: An Introduction to Casuistry; Albert R. Jonsen and Stephen Toulmin, The Abuse of Casuistry; James F. Keenan and Thomas A. Shannon, eds., The Context of Casuistry; Richard B. Miller, Casuistry and Modern Ethics; Edmund Leites, ed., Conscience and Casuistry in Early Modern Europe.

[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 (Encyclopedia of Ethics, ed. Becker and Becker) cites the 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 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

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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" (<u>Casuistry and Modern Ethics</u> 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 inventional 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.[56] 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

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[56] For this innovative but controversial turn towards case-reasoning and narrative ethics in the field of medicine I am informed by John D. Arras, "Getting Down to Cases: The Revival of Casuistry in Bioethics" and "Principles and Particularity: The Roles of Cases in Bioethics"; Richard B. Miller, "Narrative and Casuistry: A Response to John Arras"; and James F. Childers, "Narrative(s) Versus Norm(s): A Misplaced Debate in Bioethics," among other essays collected in Stories and Their Limits: Narrative Approaches to Bioethics, ed. H. L. Nelson; and Mark Kuczewski's entry on casuistry in the Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics (ed. Ruth F. Chadwick), Vol. 1, pp. 423-32.

> 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.

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[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" (PI 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.[58] 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

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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.
[58] 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 transcendental 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").[59] 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.[60]

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[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

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Rome, and—writing in Middle English in the 1380s—John Trevisa) were found commonly in texts written in the genre of the *speculum principis*. Book 7 of Gower's Confessio Amantis is one such adaptation of Aristotelian ethical and political doctrine for the scholar-statesman. Notably, at least one religious order and those who sought a university degree in Paris at around this time were expected to know the Ethics. For further details consult the relevant articles in Kretzmann and Pinborg, eds., The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy, especially pp. 61, 72, 77, 657-72, and in addition see the helpful citations in Robins, "Romance, Exemplum, and the Subject," p. 166-67, notes 17 & 22.

[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.[62] 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

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[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.[63] 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.[64] 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,

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[63] 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.

[64] 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.[65] 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

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[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

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[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

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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 <u>Classical Rhetoric and its Christian and Secular Tradition</u>, 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 *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: *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.[68]

A sensitive regard for the way exemplary cases express the substance of moral dilemmas is evident throughout Cicero's corpus. Cicero's De Officiis, it has been said, is the first "case book" of moral dilemmas.[69] A Stoic following in the footsteps of Aristotle, Cicero is ever preoccupied with *probabilia* (2.2.7). His treatise is accordingly set forth to address not necessary truths, the supreme good, but rather the probable truths of

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[68] 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, 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" (Metalogicon 2.12). When in the third book of 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" (*id si posset*) (3.9.39). See Trimpi, p. 279.

[69] 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 <u>De Inventione</u> 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.[70] 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

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[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 <u>Rhetorica ad Herennium</u> 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 <u>Institutio</u>

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.[71] 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)

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[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]

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[72] On thirteenth-century reforms in pastoral care and confessional theology I have benefited from Henry Lea, A History of Auricular Confession; L. E. Boyle, "The Fourth Lateran Council and Manuals of Popular Theology"; Mary E. O'Carroll, A Thirteenth-Century Preacher's Handbook; John Shinners and William J. Dohar, Pastors and the Care of Souls; C. H. Lawrence, The Friars: The Impact of the Early Mendicant Movement. G. R. Owst's Literature and Pulpit and Preaching in Medieval England are useful for their discussions of how literature was shaped by the sermons.

[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. (<u>Summula of Exeter</u>; excerpted in Shinners and Dohar 178)

A penitent is to confess "not in general terms but as specifically as he can" (<u>Summula</u> 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).

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[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 (<u>Narrative, Authority, and Power</u> 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]

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[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 Owst, 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. Owst argues that pulpit 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 <u>De modo artificioso predicandi</u>, 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

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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 <u>Rhetorica ad Herennium</u>]. If it is too long or too obscure or hardly probable, it will not please his audience" (trans. Kemmler 223-24).[77] Richard of Thetford in his early thirteenth-century <u>Ars predicandi</u> 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 <u>Alphabetum narrationum</u> consists wholly of exempla arranged by topics in alphabetical order so that the preacher may easily find a suitable narration, while the <u>Speculum Exemplorum</u> 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

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[77] For more on the <u>Summa de arte predicandi</u> 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.[78] 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]

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[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).

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[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 McInery, 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 <u>Nicomachean Ethics</u>—and so we must exercise caution whenever we judge them. Judgement, moreover, is a personal matter (<u>Commentary</u> 2.2.259). Prudence, which Aquinas defines in the second part of his <u>Summa Theologiae</u> as "right reason about things to be done" (*recta ratio agibilium*, IaIIae, 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.[81] 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*

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[81] 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 McInery 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 Iallae, 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.[82]

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 <u>De Regimine Principum</u> 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" (<u>MLTC</u> 248).[83] 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 <u>Ethics</u>, book ii, are very uncertain |in scientific terms| because of the

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[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 Iallae, 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 (<u>Governance of Kings</u>, ed. Fowler): "Þanne it is to wetyng þat in al moral mater, þat is to saye mater touchyng mannys maner, the maner of processe, as þe philosofer seith, is figural, þat is to say by liknes, rude and boystous. For in suche mater it nedeþ to passe by fygures and liknes. For moral dede fa|l|leþ nouȝt complet, þat is to saye fullich, vnder tales" (6).

variability of their nature" (MLTC 248).[84] 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)[85]

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).[86] 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 <u>Middle Commentary on the Poetics</u>, translated out of Arabic into Latin by Hermann the German, shows us another

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[84] "... it is iseid moral mater (þat is to say þis derke mater) suffreth nouȝt sotil serchyg, but it is |of| syngulers doyngs þat ben ful vncerteyne, for þei ben ful changeable and varyant, a|s| it is declared, secundo Ethicorum . . ." (<u>Governance of Kings</u> 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" (<u>Governance of Kings</u> 7).

[86] "Þanne for nouȝt al the people may comprehende sotil thinges, the processe in moral mater mote be boistous and by liknes of figuris" (<u>Governance of Kings</u> 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."[87] 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.

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[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

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[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[89] 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

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

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manipulative or monolithic.[90] 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

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[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.[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 "fixat[ed] 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.[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

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[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."

[92] I favour Charles Altieri's critical view towards those "various hermeneutics of
suspicion" that have "trap[ped] 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.[93] 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).[94] The moral rhetoric was frequently incongruous and confusing, which shows that moral

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[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 personas*), 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.XXV [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

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[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*.[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.[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

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[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)[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

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[98] See Scanlon, 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

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[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.[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,[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.

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[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.

[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 <u>Confessio Amantis</u>

Gower's <u>Confessio Amantis</u> 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" shrift, 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 myhten noght procede" (Prol. 1024-25)?[103] 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

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[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 <u>Vox Clamantis</u>, but the poet seems to have given himself special license in the <u>Confessio Amantis</u>. 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 <u>Confessio Amantis</u> eludes easy categorization and compass, as much because in its vast prolificacy the poem contains all categories as that it resists any single one.[104] 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.[105] 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 <u>Confessio</u> 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,

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[104] Hence like the handbooks of vices and virtues to which Gower's poem is routinely compared, the <u>Confessio</u> 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).

[105] The scholastic terminology is detailed in A. J. Minnis, <u>Medieval Theories of Authorship</u>.

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.[106] 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."[107]

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[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).

[107] I allude to Michael P. Kuczynski's essay, "Gower's Metaethics" (in John Gower: Recent Readings, ed. R. F. Yeager, 1989), in which the critic treats Gower's contribution

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 <u>Confessio Amantis</u> 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" (<u>Sciences and the Self</u> 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 <u>Confessio</u> 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" (<u>Sciences and the Self</u> 14). Russell Peck, too, draws attention to this important phenomenological aspect of Gower's work when he says, "From beginning to end, the <u>Confessio</u> 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

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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, <u>John Gower</u> 18). As is widely recognized, therefore, an adequate criticism will have to come to terms with the way Gower's <u>Confessio Amantis</u> 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.[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

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[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 <u>Confessio</u> is already a "person-shaped poem" (<u>Sciences of the Self</u> 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 Pygmaleon 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. Pygmaleon will represent one aspect of his teaching that diverges from others, as we shall see. Before going on to consider the example in detail,

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[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.[110] 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

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[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.[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). Pygmaleon and the Statue in Book 4, to return to my example, is placed under the rubric of Pusillanimity—

> Which is to seie in this langage,
> He that hath litel of corage
> And dar no mannes 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)

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[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 Pygmaleon, 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).[112] But what is to be attempted?

According to Genius, Pygmaleon 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

penance / 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 <u>Roman de</u>

<u>la Rose</u>, with its climactic drama of conflagrant lust, where Pygmaleon 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 Pygmaleon goes about his amorous

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[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 Pygmaleon 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.[113] Furthermore, Gower's artist-figure is not that same one alluded to by Chaucer's Physician, a certain Pygmaleon who despite all his superlative artisanal skill is unable successfully to "contrefete" the authentic work of Nature (Physician's Tale VI. 9-18). Pygmaleon 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 Pygmaleon signifies *in bono* the virtue of steadfast speech as against the vice of Sloth (genus of Pusillanimity):

> 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)

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:

> 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)

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[113] 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.

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*.[114]

Gower's famous remarks in the Prologue to the <u>Confessio Amantis</u>, 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 *in propria persona*:

> ... 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)

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

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[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 <u>Confessio</u>, notably the Prologue, the *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, <u>John Gower</u>, pp. 185-203, and the whole of Peck's <u>Kingship and Common Profit</u> 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 <u>Confessio</u>. 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 *un*Boethian purpose. If Pygmaleon

> . . . 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 emblematizes 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 hemselve 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:

> Lo, hou he can the hertes trouble,
> And makth men drunke al upon chaunce
> Withoute lawe of governance. (6.362-64)

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 wile" (1.35) are most apposite:

> For wher as evere him lest to sette,
> Ther is no myht which him may lette.
> But what schal fallen ate laste,
> The soothe can no wisdom caste,
> Bot as it falleth upon chance. (1.37-41)

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.[115]

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[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 "lusti 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 Pygmaleon 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 Bachus 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 <u>Confessio Amatis</u> 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

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nonetheless—as though to afford fortune at least the opportunity to grace him arbitrarily if she so chooses! Other teachings in the <u>Confessio</u> rest on the same shaky ground: e.g., Genius teaches that reason cannot prevail in matters of romantic love, but advises right reason nonetheless; he also tells tales that prove how utterly unpredictable fortune can be, at the same time that he cautions against it. Much in the poem is from this perspective inconsistent and hyperbolical, which is not to say uninstructive.

[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 <u>Confessio Amantis</u> 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 Pygmaleon, 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 Amans's situation, even if they remain incompatible with one another. Amans'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. Amans must make his choices in the present with the aid of the

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[119] Gower's <u>Confessio</u> 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; Phebus 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 Polixenen) 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; Phebus 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

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[120] Hugh White, Nature, Sex, and Goodness, pp. 203-7. And see Theresa Tinkle, Medieval Venuses and Cupids, pp. 190ff, and Olsson (1982), pp.249ff. Gower I believe

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 *remedia 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 *spede* 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.[121] Moreover, 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

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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

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[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, <u>Incest Narratives and Structure of Gower's Confessio Amantis</u>, 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 <u>Sciences of the Self</u>, 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 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, Pygmaleon-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 <u>Confessio</u>

<u>Amantis</u>, 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 <u>Confessio Amantis</u> 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.[123] In one such gloss in the margins of the <u>Confessio Amantis</u> it is said that the author despite poor health diligently compiled (*studiosissime compliauit*) his poem, *set tanquam fauum 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

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[123] On Gower in his role as *compilator* see Minnis, <u>Medieval Theory of Authorship</u>, pp. 194-200, Copeland, <u>Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation</u> (1991), pp. 202-20, and Olsson, <u>John Gower and the Structures of Conversion</u> (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 <u>Canterbury Tales</u> and the <u>Confessio Amantis</u>." 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*).[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 *florilegium* that is arguably the origin of later

compilations.[125] As a collection of narrative exempla, the <u>Confessio</u> also seems to be

related to the preacher's example-books, such as the <u>Alphabetum Narrationum</u> or

<u>Speculum Laicorum</u>, as well as to the penitential handbooks, most familiar of which is

Robert Mannyng of Brunne's <u>Handlyng Synne</u>. Moralized stories, not just sententious

extracts, fill Gower's pages.

Now in specifically resembling a honeycomb *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 *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 *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, /

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[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, <u>The Latin Verses of the "Confessio Amantis": An Annotated Translation</u>, 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, <u>John Gower: Confessio Amantis: Volume 1</u> (2000), Explanatory Notes, p. 286.

[125] Rouse and Rouse, "*Ordinatio* and *Compilatio*." For definitions see Rouse and Rouse, <u>Preachers, Florilegia, and Sermons</u> (1979), pp. 3, 36-37, 113-17. Cf. Olsson (1992), pp. 5-6.

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.[126] 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,
> Whan we ben dede and elleswhere,
> Beleve 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. . .

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[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.

. [T]he exegetical procedure of *compilatio* allows him to reorganize his inherited material in accordance with his own *intentio*. (207)

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

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[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 <u>Confessio Amantis</u> 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 <u>John Gower</u>

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[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 sublimates 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

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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.[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.

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[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 <u>Confessio</u> 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.
> (<u>Medieval Theory of Authorship</u> 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*

amantum 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*

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[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.
[131] Lewis, <u>The Allegory of Love</u>, p. 199. Hugh White, in <u>Nature, Sex, and Goodness</u>
(2000), pp. 210-14, is on the contrary most emphatic regarding the fundamental

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 *un*moralized 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 *praeceptor 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 "honeste" or chaste married love, with the following reflections on the laws governing human behaviour:

> For god the lawes hath assissed
> 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 modefie,
> 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 "consitutional" 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*.[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

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[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.[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 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

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[133] Hugh White, in 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 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 better readers than Amans (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 <u>Confessio Amantis</u> what it is. But *inventio* and *compilatio* need not—and do not—stop there. Against Copeland, therefore, I contend that strategies of inventional 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.[134] 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 <u>Confessio Amantis</u>—conditional on different linguistic competencies. Simply

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[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 <u>Confessio</u> 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 Latin*s* 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).

For similar critical appraisals of the destabilizing nature of the glosses vis-à-vis the poetry see Wetherbee, "Latin Structure and Vernacular Space" (1991), and Batchelor, "Feigned Truth and Exemplary Method" (1998). For reference to others besides Copeland who emphasize the stabilizing and limiting function of the Latin apparatus see Richard K. Emmerson, "Reading Gower in a Manuscript Culture" (1999), pp. 147-55, who provides a useful résumé of critical opinion on the issue. Critics of mention include A. J. Minnis, <u>Medieval Theory of Authorship</u>, pp. 188-90, Yeager, "English, Latin, and the Text as 'Other'" (1987), and Derek Pearsall, "Gower's Latin" (1989).

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, glossatory "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

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[135] Cf. Olsson (1992), p. 20.

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.[136] 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, somwhat 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

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[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" (<u>Medieval Theory of Authorship</u> 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.[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 ethopoetical. Gower's first version epilogue

elaborates a crucial point about his kind of Horatian approach to "lust" and "lore":

> In som partie it mai by take
> As for to lawhe and for to pleye;
> 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*)

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).[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.[139] What I think Gower is indicating here, though, is that reading

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[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 *ad status* (as certain sermons were designated; see for example Crane, <u>The Exempla of Jaques de Vitry</u>, xxxviii-ix). As noted earlier, scripture was thought to work on a similar accommodative principle.

[138] Peck, Introduction, <u>John Gower</u>, p. 15. Cf. Runacres, pp. 106-7.

[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 <u>Confession</u> 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 <u>Cursor Mundi</u>, 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, / Þe thynges þat þam likes best. / Þe wisman wil o wisdom here, / Þe 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 <u>The Wars of Alexander</u> (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

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recension Prologue it is certainly the case that the poet recognizes the way in which responses correspond to dispositions. As anyone would have known, "Many men there ben that, with eeres openly sprad, so moche swalowen the deliciousness of jestes and of ryme, by queynt knyttying coloures, that of the goodnesse or of the badnesse of the sentence take they litel hede, or els non" (Thomas Usk, <u>The Testament of Love</u>, Prol.; in <u>Chaucerian and Other Pieces</u>, ed. Skeat, p. 1). Julian of Norwich would also censure that kind of selective reading; see the explicit to the Long Text, p. 734 n. 29, <u>A Book of Showings</u>, ed. Colledge and Walsh. Amans of course prefers to read those books which will "spede" his love (4.2672ff.), and he becomes less attentive when Genius speaks of things not apparently immediately pertinent (7.5408ff.). It is open to question whether Gower is registering the further point, in the passage I quoted above, that dispositions will not just coincide with but necessarily determine selection of reading material.

"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. Moverover, *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*,

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[140] See Minnis, "John Gower, *Sapiens* in Ethics and Politics" (1980), on the poet's imitation of the Heroides 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 *praeceptor 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)[142] 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 hii victus amore pari*
> *Vt discant alii, docet experiencia facti,*
> *Rebus in ambiguis que sit habenda via.*
> *Deuius 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.

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[142] The commonplace, *aliena vita nobis magistra est*, "The lives of others are our teachers," attributed to Cato in John of Salisbury's <u>Historia Pontificalis</u> |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).[143] 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.

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[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 <u>Confessio Amantis</u> 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, "Whan 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.[144] 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 hiere" the lover's shrift,

which involves listening but more often a sort of catechistical moral instruction.[145] As a

good orator, moreover, Genius is equipped with *exemplorum copia* and so instructs by

the particular means of storytelling.[146] Genius assures Amans that he will be educated

accordingly in things "touchende 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

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[144] For the idea of the priestly confessor as *medicus animarum* (physician of the soul) see Leonard E. Boyle, O. P., "The Fourth Lateran Coucil 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 <u>Confessio Amantis</u>. 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 <u>Confessio Amantis</u>, "remembrance" (a word occurring over fifty times in the poem according to Pickles and Dawson, <u>A Concordance</u>), which, as is of course self-evident, is closely related to confession. "So schal I moche thing foryete: 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 confessant (see <u>Mirour de l'Omme</u>

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

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[147] See <u>Kingship and Common Profit</u>, p. 30, and his Introduction to <u>John Gower</u>, pp. 7-18.
[148] Peck, <u>Kingship and Common Profit</u>, 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 <u>Middle English Sermons: Edited from British Museum MS. Royal 18 B. xxiii</u>, ed. W. O. Ross, for a concise vernacularized account of the rules of confession. For example: "The fourte reule is quod confessio sit plena—þi 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 felishippe 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 ȝeres afore, by þe wiche þou shalt gadur all þe synnes of þi soule to-þeþur 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[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

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[149] See Ricoeur, Oneself as Another, pp. 113-68, where he refines a term originally given currency by MacIntyre in 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.[150] 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.[151]

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-

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[150] See Eugene Vance's excellent "Saint Augustine, Language as Temporality," and Brown's discussion, Contrary Things, p. 19 et passim. Peck also draws on elements of Augustine's useful comparison in his Introduction, John Gower, p. 3. William Robins, in "Romance, Exemplum, and the Subject," pp. 165-67, invokes Aristotle's notion of the telos of a human life to make similar points about the contingency of moral evaluations.
[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.[152] 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)[153] 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)

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[152] I allude to Brian Wicker's The Story-Shaped World: Fiction and Metaphysics (1975).
[153] Closely resembling the proverbial *Plures plura sciunt et seipsos nesciunt*, "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 Nebuchudnezzar 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]

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[154] The classical humanist imperative to self-examination—the Delphic maxim *gnothi 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 teipsum*); 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 Teipsum) 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 seth 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 thei 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.[155] 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).[156] 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

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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.

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

[156] 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 <u>Confessio</u>, 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

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[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, <u>Sciences of the Self</u>, 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 mislokynge 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

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[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 Interpretaion" 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 ymaginacion" (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

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[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.[160] 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.[161]

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 fulofte he hath deceived, / Er that he mai ben aperceived" (2.2136-38).

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[160] Something Scanlon discusses in Narrative, Authority, and Power, pp. 260-61 and pp. 277-82.

[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 soth 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 "enchantement" (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

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[162] See Grabes, 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'Omme). 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 <u>Canterbury Tales</u>, "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:

> This Angel with hise wordes wise
> Opposeth hem in sondri wise,
> Now lowed wordes and now softe,
> That mad hem to desputen ofte,
> And ech of hem his reson hadde.
> And thus with tales he hem ladde
> With good examinacioun,
> Til he knew the condicioun,
> What men thei were bothe tuo. (2.307-15)

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

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[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,"[164] recalling the manner in fact in which Genius as priest proves Amans (note that the speaker markers *Opponit Confessor* and *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.[165]

Rhetoric, as Gower clearly recognizes, is therefore a powerful verbal science. We learn elsewhere in the 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

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[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.

[165] Does the angel's approach refer to a manner of speaking (loud = harshly; soft = intimately, 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" (General Prologue I. 518, 523)? See further Jill Mann, 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 vertu grete" (6.449) and "word above alle erthli 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 schalt hiere 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 <u>Tale of Melibee</u> 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

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[166] The pair of rhyming words (*conscience : evidence*) occur in no less than eight places
in the poem; see Pickles and Dawson, <u>A Concordance</u>, Appendix III.

A kingdom hath to justefie,
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

(*conscientia/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*.[167] *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

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[167] On the important distinction see T. C. Potts, <u>Conscience in Medieval Philosophy</u>, and
Denis Bradley, <u>Aquinas and the Twofold Human Good</u>.

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.[168] 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).

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[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.[169] But again in a manifestly mutable world that is as Augustine famously described it *nihil solidum, nihil stabile* (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 *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,

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[169] Ethics in the Aristotelian tradition is concerned with what is usual and approximate (*hos epi tou polu* for Aristotle, NE 1.3, 1094b21 and 2.2, 1104a1-10; *probabilia* throughout Cicero), rather than what is exceptionless and necessary, or apodeictic. What one relies upon are commonplaces 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 (þat is to say þis derke mater) suffreth nouȝt sotil serchyg, but it is |of| syngulers doyngs þat ben ful vncerteyne, for þei ben ful changeable and varyant, a|s| it is declared, secundo Ethicorum . . ." (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,[170] yet how one actually practices a narrative text remains

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[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

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I likewise assume that character and conduct, rather than concepts only, form the ends of exemplary rhetoric.

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 unpredictablity of moral application in this regard by considering the potential disjunction betweeen 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 laste" (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 <u>Confessio</u>, 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 enforme,
> 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 Pygmaleon. 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 Pygmaleon, among others. But one other tale stands out as an interesting counterpoint to the Phebus story. It is the story of Demephon and Phillis, better known for its place in Chaucer's <u>Legend of Good Women</u>. 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, Demephon, 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 offendit, quod cuperare 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 Pygmaleon 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 5.7815ff.).[171]

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 Demephon 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

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[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 Pygmaleon tale of Book 4.

accommodation. In <u>Pastoral Care</u>,[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 <u>Confessio Amantis</u>, 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 <u>Confessio Amantis</u>. Each vice requires a different

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[172] A text Gower alludes to in the Prologue, lines 284ff.

[173] See Peck, <u>Kingship and Common Profit</u>, pp. 22-23 and 170-171, on the important link between harping and the commonwealth. Robert Yeager's <u>John Gower's Poetic: The Search for a New Arion</u> 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

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[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: "Ocupye 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

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[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 falth in aventure" (1.20ff.). Something like luck again holds sway. See also the verse at 8.ii: *Sors tamen vnde 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 <u>Clerk's Tale</u>, 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 <u>Confessio Amantis</u> 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" (<u>Oneself as Another</u> 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 Handlyng 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.[178] 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 *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" (Rhetoric 1.2.19, 1357b). The same practical method of lateral reaoning, 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

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[178] 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 *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 *moralitates* 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.[179] 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 <u>Nicomachean Ethics</u> 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" (<u>On Evil</u> 2.4.13; p. 64). Moral practice is variable. Because cases tend to be, as Aquinas plainly elaborates in his exposition of Aristotle's <u>Ethics</u>, "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" (<u>Commentary</u> 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.

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[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 <u>Confessio Amantis</u> 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 <u>Confessio</u> 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,[180] however constructive or therapeutic it is otherwise meant to be (in curing division and

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[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 <u>Confessio Amantis</u> 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 <u>Confessio Amantis</u> 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.[181] 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 <u>Confessio Amantis</u> 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" (<u>Medieval Theory of Authorship</u> 205).[182] 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

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[181] Aers, "Reflections on Gower," passim; Yeager, <u>John Gower's Poetic</u>, Chapter II.
[182] Minnis's remark echoes that of John Trevisa in his late fourteenth-century translation of Ralph Higden's <u>Polychronicon</u>: "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, <u>Medieval Literary Politics</u>, pp. 4 & 26).

medieval mind, ultimately exists in its plural and partial subjective effects, in concrete

practique, among persons in the world.

CHAPTER 2:

Chaucer's <u>Canterbury Tales</u> 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" (<u>Chaucer</u> 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 Englissh" (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 hool" (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

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from "moral Gower."[183] 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.[184] 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

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[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'Omme. 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 <u>Confessio Amantis</u> (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

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[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 <u>Canterbury Tales</u> 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" (<u>The Canterbury Tales</u> 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.[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

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[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 *whether* critics or artists moralize, but *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?"[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.

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[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.[188] 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.[189]

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

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[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 Chaucer, pp. 214-15.

[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 context 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 <u>Tales</u> 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 <u>Canterbury Tales</u> 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 <u>Tales</u> 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 <u>Tales</u>. The

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[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 <u>Confessio Amantis</u> the <u>Canterbury Tales</u> 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 <u>Confessio Amantis</u>, 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 <u>Confessio Amantis</u> but to much more subversive effect" (<u>Ricardian Poetry</u> 88). In this critic's seductively

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[191] For a representative sample see Anne Middleton, "The <u>Physician's Tale</u> and Love's Martyrs: 'Ensamples Mo Than Ten' as Method in the <u>Canterbury Tales</u>"; Joerge O. Fichte, "Incident-History-Exemplum-Novella: The Transformation of History in Chaucer's <u>Physician's Tale</u>"; A. C. Spearing, "<u>The Canterbury Tales</u> IV: Exemplum and Fable."

efficient phrase, "The exemplary mode is present everywhere in the <u>Canterbury Tales</u>, but everywhere subverted" (90). Why I think this otherwise attractive epitome is simplistic and underdeveloped should eventually become clear.[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 <u>Second Nun's Tale</u>, 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

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[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 <u>Tale of Melibee</u> and the <u>Parson's Tale</u>, 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 <u>Second Nun's Tale</u> circulated independently of the comic frame of the <u>Canterbury Tales</u>.[193] Within the <u>Tales</u>, 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 <u>Canon's Yeoman's Tale</u> 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

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[193] See <u>Riverside Chaucer</u>, Textual Notes, pp. 1118-19, where it is documented that the <u>Second Nun's Tale</u> is found along with the <u>Prioress's Tale</u> in Harley 2382.

the poet's intentions from the worldly cynicism exhibited in a few choice tales.[194] 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*

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[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 enclined 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, <u>Literature and Pulpit in Medieval</u>

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[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).[196] 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

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[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

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[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 I. 652), and for whom extortion is the purpose of his

summonses: "'Purs is the ercedekenes helle,' seyde he" (I. 658)—would find his sense of

professional vanity duly molested by the tale.[198] 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 thoghte 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

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[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 thral 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 polysemy: 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 silf; 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: "Þe Jnnocent leueþ vche woord |believes every word| and in þaat he is a foole, seiþ 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 bookes 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 prechyng" (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 I. 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.[199] Given the term's

polyvalence, we can infer that the friar's subsequent remark, " Glosynge 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 *ad populum* (of which the friar's

glosing is plainly a travesty)[200] The friar's usage instead betrays an improper cynicism

and recklessness in his appropriation of the gospel text for personal advantage.[201]

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[199] MED, "glose" (*n.*) q. v. 1-3; compare "glosen" (*v.*) q. v. 1-3. In Chaucer *glose* has yet further nuances, as when in the Wife of Bath's Prologue it signifies sexual enticement, or in the Parson's Prologue it means falsifying speech with fictive and rhetorical ornament, or in the 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 Besserman, Chaucer's Biblical Poetics, Chapter 5, "Biblical 'Glossing' and Poetic Meaning," pp. 138-59.

[200] On glossatory activity as a wider cultural phenomenon of modifying texts for and by specific audiences see further Dagenais, The Ethics of Reading. Dagenais describes how reading as *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 The Friars, describes the mendicant genre of "sermons *ad status*, addressed to the particular needs of different classes and occupations. . . . a genre in which the friars excelled" (123).

[201] Besserman 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: *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 pissemyre" (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.[202] 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

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

[202] 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 meynee / 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 revers shaltou se"—

> And preve it by thyn owene experience,
> That wyn ne dooth to folk no swich offence.
> Ther is no wyn bireveth me my 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, <u>Social Chaucer</u> 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, "seeþ hise pore lymes seek & febled, þat is, poore folk, & ȝit wil not helpe hem in

her nede" (The Orcherd 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 povre man.
> To a povre 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

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[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 insensibility 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 I. 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 expedience 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.[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 frere have also muche as oother" (III. 2133-34). Friar John consents and Thomas proffers a truly inspired gift—"Amydde his hand he leet the frere a fart" (III. 2149)—at which point the friar becomes the profoundest satirical butt:

> The frere 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

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[204] The instruction to sing *Placebo* is not given as a moral in the 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 evere 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 helle / 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).[205]

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

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[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, thurgh 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, "Irascimini 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 displesant 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 bynymeth 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 <u>Friar's Prologue</u> 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.[206] 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 <u>Canterbury Tales</u> 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,

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[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 neighebor as thyselve." 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 "disciplyne or techynge, 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 "bisynesse" (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)

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[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

preachment, 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.[208] 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.[209] There at

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[208] See Leicester, pp. 48ff., and Patterson, pp. 402ff., who ascribe inner depths to the Pardoner 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,[210] 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

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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 relikes 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

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[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 <u>Cursor Mundi</u>, 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

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[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 *irous* 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 <u>Canterbury Tales</u>. 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

"lewed 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

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[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.[214] 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 <u>Canterbury Tales</u> 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 <u>Canterbury Tales</u> 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

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[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 <u>Rhetorica ad Herennium</u>, 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 shepherde" (I. 504), the Parson is a good man

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[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 þy prechynge, / 3ef thow be of euyle lyuynge" (1). 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.[216] 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 hymselve"

(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

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[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 bettre.
> 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 penance 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 <u>Canterbury Tales</u>. 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 <u>Parson's Tale</u> 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 <u>Retraction</u> 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?"

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[217] The <u>Parson's Tale</u>, like the equally sober <u>Melibee</u>, 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 <u>Riverside Chaucer</u>, 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 unkonnynge 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 <u>Friar's Tale</u>,

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.[218] 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*.[219] The gospel is thought to have a certain autonomous value

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[218] Similar teaching is elucidated in <u>Dives and Pauper</u> 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 þeraftir, for it steryth hym to þyng þat he is boundyn to withoutyn ony drem. And oftyntyme boþyn 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 folklaw, according to which lack of criminal intent or *mens rea* does not rule out convictions based on unintended consequences; see Richard Firth Green, <u>A Crisis of Truth</u>, pp. 116-17.

[219] Alan of Lille, <u>The Art of Preaching</u>, 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 <u>Canterbury Tales</u>, 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.[220] Nor should we identify Chaucer's ethics with the

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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 dede" (<u>General Prologue</u> 742 and <u>Manciple's Tale</u> 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. <u>Confessio Amantis</u>, Prol. 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.[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 *debaat* of his own. If satire in the hands of the

hypocritical Friar and Summoner is *ful wikked* Ire, if *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 *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 *angry lies*. It is not an argument

neglected in "deed." Cf. Burrow, Medieval Writers, pp. 111-12. The same sort of
nuance is attended to throughout in my pragmatic analysis of ironies of exemplarity
within the Canterbury Tales.
[221] Chaucer is to be acquitted of the charge of prudishness with which the Man of Law
would unwittingly embarrass the poet by claiming "certeinly 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 Policraticus, 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, adverts 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" (I. 3112), having particular exemplary significance for the "gentils" (I. 3113).

Roger the Cook thinks the Reeve's Tale supplies a "sharp conclusion" to an "argument of

herbergage" (I. 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 opportunely 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" (I. 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" (1. 2842) to

"enhorte" (I. 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 <u>Canterbury Tales</u> 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 <u>Tales</u> 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 <u>Tales</u>, 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 <u>Clerk's Tale</u>. A second characteristic

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[222] Lyons, <u>Exemplum</u>, 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.[223] 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

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[223] See MacDonald, "Proverbs, *Sententiae,* and *Exempla* in Chaucer's Comic Tales."

Bailey and the Merchant interpret the <u>Clerk's Tale</u> as though it has first and foremost to

do with marital relations; Harry also turns the <u>Physician's Tale</u> into an exemplum about

the risks of feminine beauty, and then renders the allegory of the <u>Melibee</u> into an

exemplum of womanly patience that he thinks his wife Goodelief 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

<u>Canterbury Tales</u> makes for some pointed questions.

2.5. "Whoso That First to Mille Comth, First Grynt"

The most conspicuously gendered exempla appear in the <u>Wife of Bath's Prologue</u>

and <u>Tale</u>, 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

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[224] Following Kittredge's landmark article, "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage."

maistrye only to hand it back when it is won.[225] 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.[226] 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.[227] Although she declares her "entente nys but for to

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[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

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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 compilator 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 glosing, 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

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[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 thyn 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 tellen in myn age
> Upon this nombre diffinicioun. (III. 20-25)

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[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).[231] Thus Jerome miscounted 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.[232] 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|).[233] What is the significance, then, of the Wife's supposition that the Samaritan is reprimanded for having taken an illegitimate fifth husband?[234]

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[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,[235] 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

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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").

[235] 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 mariage?," 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).[236] 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.

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[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, <u>Chaucer</u> 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 lete fader and mooder and take to me.
> But of no nombre mencion made he,
> Of bigamye, or of octogamye;
> 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 <u>Adversus Jovinianum</u> 1.12; Miller, <u>Sources</u> 421; cf. <u>Letters of St Jerome</u> 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 barly-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 barly-breed, Mark telle kan, / Oure Lord Jhesu refresshed many a man" (III. 145-46).[237] The

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[237] 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).[238] 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 refresshed, 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

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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

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[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 subtleties, 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

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[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, spynnyng 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

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[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).[243] Iconographically such tales say something about her

pedigree.[244] 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.[245] The Wife's survival

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[243] Cf. Robert Haller, "The Wife of Bath," p. 54.
[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.[246] 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

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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 aggresive.

[246] 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 naïve 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 misogamous 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-

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[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 tonge, 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

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[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.[250] 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

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[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).[251]

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.[252]

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

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[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 *ensamples 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

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[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.

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[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 <u>Wife of Bath's Tale</u> 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

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[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" (<u>The Savage Mind</u> 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,[257]

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

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[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

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[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.[260] 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

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[260] 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,[261] 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.[262] The Wife may, in short, reserve for herself a certain "queynte fantasye" (III. 516) about submitting

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[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.[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—

> ... 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)

—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.

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[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 <u>Clerk's Tale</u>, 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,[264] 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

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[264] The moralization is prefaced by "herkneth 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 proem 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 valuations, 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

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[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.[266] 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 *parabole*. 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, pp. 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.[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).[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.[269] So will the unlearned fail to comprehend, according to Quintilian. Like

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[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.

[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).

[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

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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,[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 *vertuous 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)[271]—which means that her

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[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" (The View From Nowhere 152).

[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*

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one well-known section of the <u>Ancrene Wisse</u>; Salter remarked on the parallel years before in <u>Chaucer</u>, pp. 38-39. As for the nominalist background, see Robert Stepsis, "Potentia Absoluta and the <u>Clerk's Tale</u>." 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 <u>Canterbury Tales</u>. Never mind what the Clerk says at the end—

> This storie is seyd nat for that wyves sholde
> Folwen Grisilde as in humylitee,
> For it were inportable, 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 crueltee" (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 *inportable*, "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.[272] 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 <u>Le Livre Griseldis</u> 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

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[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 humylitee*"? Why

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[273] Bronfman's first chapter of <u>Chaucer's Clerk's Tale</u>, "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 <u>Clerk's Tale</u>," 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, <u>Le Livre Griseldis</u>, 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'exemplaire des femmes mariees 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 mariees|" (17). See Correale and Hamel, <u>Sources and Analogues</u>, Vol. 1, pp. 101-67, for the transcriptions and facing-page translations of Petrarch's Latin and the French <u>Livre Griseldis</u>.

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,[275] and yet

tracking them all would not necessarily lead us to the conclusion that Griselda is literally

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[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 <u>Clerk's Tale</u> 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 wifehood one way or another. We could therefore pursue the idea that Chaucer is critiquing marriage (the very idea of wifehood 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: "wedded 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 yow 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 contenance?
> 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 Spearing has called a "monstrous marriage-

agreement" (Criticism 93). She vows, "And heere I swere that nevere willyngly, / In

werk 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

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[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.[278] 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

analogue[279]—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, *ensuivable*; 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 gounds. 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.[280] In his <u>Summa Theologica</u>, 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" (<u>The Canterbury Tales</u> 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 parfourne the doctrine of God and of his sovereyns, to whiche hym oghte to

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[280] See Denise Baker's "Chaucer and Moral Philosophy" 144 and "Chaucer's <u>Clerk's Tale</u>" 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

thyng" 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

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[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

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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,"[283] 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,

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[283] 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
transcendental 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 *undecidable*—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)[284]

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.[285]

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

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[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.[286] Ambiguity is in any case necessary for genuine decision, in which

case the <u>Clerk's Tale</u> 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.[287] Ethics, envisaged as a

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[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 <u>Clerk's Tale</u> 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., <u>PI</u> 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" (<u>PI</u> 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 <u>Clerk's Tale</u>, 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" (<u>Gift of Death</u> 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

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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.[288] 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

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[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.[289] 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 an other 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

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[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.[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

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[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.[291] Hers is the problem *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 dyen for my sake" (IV. 560), acknowledging the

gift that makes her responsibility possible.[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 *is* responsible, then it is to a

fault. The extravagance of her decision is made all the more problematic in light of her

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[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.

[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 "juggementz 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

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[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

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[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*,[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.[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 *vertuous suffraunce*. If this is

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[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 <u>Patience</u> wrote, "Pacience is a point, thaz hit displese 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 <u>Clerk's Tale</u> 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

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[297] The final allusion to <u>Patience</u> (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 <u>Clerk's Tale</u>" (<u>Medieval
Writers</u> 116). <u>Patience</u> 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" (<u>Culture</u> 17). *Pace* Burrow,
similar claims about the will-to-patience have been made about the <u>Clerk's Tale</u>.
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*.[298] 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

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[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 <u>Chaucer's Language and the Philosopher's Tradition</u> 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 <u>Melibee</u>, for example teaches Melibeus to use "conseil" and to "avyse" himself rather than react hastily to his adversaries. The <u>Manciple's Tale</u> 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[299]—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.*[300] As we have seen in Gower already, where extreme cases are laid out for Amans to decide between, finding the mean requires some

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[299] Burnley, p. 56.
[300] Burnley, pp. 116-27. The doctrine of the mean is explicitly mentioned in the <u>Legend of Good Women</u> F 165-66, <u>Troilus and Criseyde</u> 1.687-89, and <u>Boece</u> IV. pr. 7, 100.

diligence. Chaucer's <u>Melibee</u> 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 condicioun 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 <u>Canterbury Tales</u>. John the Carpenter, Chauntecleer and Daun Russell, Apius, Phoebus, and of

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[301] James Flynn's outline of the treatise in "The Art of Telling and the Prudence of Interpreting the <u>Tale of Melibee</u>" 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 <u>Melibee</u>."

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 <u>Confessio Amantis</u>, Chaucer's <u>Tales</u> 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 <u>Tales</u>: "*Heere is ended the book of the tales of Caunterbury, compiled by Geffrey Chaucer, of whos soule Jhesu 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 <u>A Treatise on the Astrolabe</u> 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 <u>General Prologue</u> (I. 732) and the <u>Miller's Prologue</u> (I. 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 <u>Troilus and Criseyde</u> (e.g., II. 13-20), where the narrator claims to be dispassionately translating the work of Lollius, Chaucer is as disingenuous.

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[302] Those "great compilers of the later Middle Ages" (Minnis, "Moral Gower" 58) such as Ralph Higdin 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 <u>Medieval Theory of Authorship</u> 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 <u>Canterbury Tales</u> 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 <u>Chaucer and the Universe of Learning</u> 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 <u>Canterbury Tales</u> as a *compilatio* in that it emphasizes the role of the tales as repositories of

> *auctoritates-sententiae* and aphorisms on different topics which are
> indicated by the marginal headings. (190; cited in part in Astell 2)[303]

The compilatory arrangement of Chaucer's work invites comparisons with the <u>Confessio</u> <u>Amantis</u>, 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 <u>Confessio Amantis</u>" (26). In this reading the <u>Tales</u> 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

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[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

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[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

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[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 <u>Tales</u> 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 <u>Tales</u> 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 <u>Canterbury Tales</u> 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[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 *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

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[306] Following the definition of Piero Boitani: "*exemplum*, which is both the typical medieval form of perception of reality and a literary genre" (2); cf. Burrow, <u>Medieval Writers</u>, "Modes of Meaning," where he defines *exemplum* as a way of thinking in contrast to *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."[307] The one explicit direction we *are* given is to allow ourselves to be guided by moral conscience: "And therfore, whoso list it nat yheere, / Turne over the leef and chese another tale" (I.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.*[308] But finally the advantage of placing Chaucer's <u>Tales</u> 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.[309]

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[307] In this light, the conception of the tales that is most persuasive to me is that of Helen Cooper, in <u>Structure</u>, 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] <u>Troilus</u>, III. 1331-36.

[309] As Howard put it, "The book is put in our hands to make of it what we will" (<u>Idea</u> 123); compare Larry Sklute, <u>Virtue of Necessity</u> 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 <u>Retraction</u> at the end of the <u>Canterbury Tales</u> 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" (<u>Retraction</u> 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 <u>Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale</u>, 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.[310] Studying exemplary rhetoric should now add to our understanding of the ethical potentialities of literature by broadening our conception of what it means for literature to engage practice.

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,

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[310] Something storytellers probably have always known. Bernard Williams in his <u>Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy</u> 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" (<u>Whose Justice? Which Rationality?</u> 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" (<u>Sources of the Self</u> 97), which would allow moral agents to envisage and affirm the goods they are instructed to strive for.

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 *practique*

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

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[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 . . . ensaumple" (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—*entissyng 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 vanitees" (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.

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