THE SPIRITUAL PURPOSE OF THE CANTERBURY TALES

Constance Woo and William Matthews

Unlike Milton, Chaucer did not open his work with a statement that his purpose was to justify the ways of God to man. Yet when a reader ponders the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole, he can scarcely fail to be impressed by the fact that it has some spiritual purpose. The intent of the present essay is to run over the evidence for such an intent. The essay falls into two sections: the first, which sets up the frame of the discussion and deals with the pilgrimage, the various ecclesiastics among the pilgrims, the Parson and his tale, and Chaucer's retraction is by Constance Woo; the second, which further develops Miss Woo's thesis and applies it to the rest of Chaucer's masterpiece, is by William Matthews.

I

The pilgrimage is mentioned at the beginning of the tales and also near the end. In the opening lines, the poet describes nature wakening to Spring. April's showers pierce the drought of March and bathe every vein in liquor that engenders the flower. Zephirus' sweet breath quickens the tender shoots. It is mating season, and the birds sleep all night with open eye. In short, it is a time when nature experiences a physical regeneration. But it is also a time when men and women begin to think of spiritual regeneration: "Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages" (*Gen Prol*, 12). The two regenerations are in fact inter-related. The water that renews plants and flowers also suggests baptism, spiritual regen-

eration. April, the month when the pilgrims assemble at the Tabard, is the month when Easter occurs, and so in "that seson on a day," people "from every shires ende / Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende, / The hooly blisful martir for to seke, / That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke." The religious motif is both overt and implicit. People went on pilgrimages to enjoy the trip, but were they in any wise serious (and probably even the worst of them was), they went to do penance, to give thanks, to seek a miraculous cure. Chaucer himself goes "with ful devout corage." The Canterbury pilgrims, even the ungodliest of them, realize wherein lies the source of their help and blessings, as they reveal in the benedictions at the end of their tales: "God save al the rowte!" cries the Miller; "God . . . save al this compaignye," says the Reeve; and the Pardoner, most paradoxically. is most pious of all, for he calls the whole company to confession.

The pilgrimage is mentioned again in the prologue to the Parson's Tale and at the beginning of his Tale. Chaucer's collection therefore begins with a pilgrimage and ends with one. The concluding allusion, however, is less gay. At the end, when the Parson says he will "knytte up al this feeste, and make an ende," he asks Jesus to send him wit to show the pilgrims "the wey, in this viage, / Of thilke parfit glorious pilgrymage / That highte Jerusalem celestial." The passage is of course metaphorical. The "wey" refers to the double path they are treading; the "viage" refers to the pilgrimage to Canterbury; the "glorious pilgrymage" that is called heavenly Jerusalem refers to the pilgrims' journey through life and to their eternal home that will follow in course of time. The purpose of the Parson's sermon is to show the good way, the full noble way, the right way to the heavenly Jerusalem (*ParsT*, 76, 79). Thus the spiritual framework of the *Canterbury Tales* is clear and explicit.

With this spiritual context in mind, it should be instructive to look carefully at what Chaucer does with the ecclesiastics on the pilgrimage. Essential to the spiritual meaning of the *Canterbury Tales* are several themes implicit in the characterization of the ecclesiastics. These themes, body versus soul, ideal versus real, are most evident in the portraits of the *General Prologue*.

The Prioress is the first ecclesiastic to be described. What immediately strikes the reader or hearer about this portrait is its

romanticism. "Symple" and "coy" belong to the terminology of romance poetry. "Eglentyne" is a name appropriate to a courtly lady. The account of her table manners is based on a passage from the *Roman de la Rose* in which a more than dubious old lady instructs a young woman in a somewhat dubious art of love. Yet for all these indications of worldliness, Madame Eglentyne is a nun. What Chaucer presents in her is a juxtaposition of two worlds: the court and the nunnery. "Ful weel she soong the service dyvyne" contrasts with "And Frenssh she spak ful faire and fetisly." Many details of her behavior, appearance, dress, are worldly, even amorous: her table manners, her pets, the roasted flesh, milk and fine white bread, the pinched wimple, the graceful nose, the gray eyes of a courtly-love lady, the small, soft mouth, the fair forehead, the not undergrown size, the cloak, the coral beads, the gold brooch with its ambiguous legend. If one were to weigh such details against the few spiritual details, there would be no doubt how the scales would tip. The Prioress is pious, as her tale later reveals, but the absence of spiritual details in the portrait clearly reveals the lack of something in her spiritual life — a concept of Christian virtues. Thus, in this first portrait, the opposition of abundant courtly details and minimal spiritual details introduces the theme of spirit versus flesh.

The next ecclesiastic is the Monk. Just as the Prioress is a courtly lady in spirit and a nun in habit, the Monk is a religious in habit and a horseman and hunter by choice. His portrait does not imply any such mild discrepancy as the Prioress'; with him the gap is obvious and undeniable. In fact, he actually denounces what he should practice as a monk, and he dismisses all that belongs to the soul. In this portrait, the point of the spiritual details, ironically, is that the Monk denies them: "He yaf nat of that text a pulled hen, / That seith that hunters ben nat hooly men." On the contrary, the positive description is the depiction of his worldly pleasures, self-indulgences, and possessions. That he owns swift greyhounds and a stable full of horses emphasizes the physical, sensuous desires of the man. Then there are such bodily details as grey fur, gold pin, supple boots, fat swan, a fat, shiny face. The contrast between ideal and real is very clear when one juxtaposes "a lord ful fat" with "a forpyned goost." And if one recalls the high spiritual com-

pliment of anointment in the Bible, the image of his fat anointed face juxtaposes very fitly the physically healthy and the spiritually perverted. Thus, the Monk is frankly worldly, and his physical wealth is directly proportionate to his spiritual poverty.

Hubert the Friar is another typical yet atypical ecclesiastic who is used to develop further the theme of spirit versus flesh. In his characterization, the spiritual condition progresses from worldliness, as with the Prioress and the Monk, to stark materialism. The gap between ideal and real is much wider, and the sin is explicit. The opening lines are immediately suspicious. The words "wantowne," "merye," "solempne," and "daliaunce" may be interpreted as either complimentary or derogatory. Again the supposedly spiritual and the worldly are mixed: Hubert the Friar is well beloved and familiar with franklins and worthy women. The rhyming of "penaunce" and "pitaunce," in "He was an esy man to yeve penaunce, / Ther as he wiste to have a good pitaunce," reveals this confusion and combining of the religious and the materialistic. In "Therefore in stede of wepynge and preyeres / Men moote yeve silver to the povre freres," silver replaces prayers. Then in accordance with the Friar's materialistic theme, lines 224 to 234 are interlaced with a series of quantitative elements: "pitaunce," "povre ordre," "silver," "povre freres," "knyves" and "pynnes" for "faire wyves." The curious thing is that these elements are confused in the Friar's mind and practice with the notion of real penance. As his sin becomes more obvious, his associates degenerate from "worthy wommen of the toun" to "tappesteres" of the taverns. His principle for avoiding the company of beggars and lepers is that "It may nat avaunce." His dislike for "poraille" and his preference for "riche and selleres of vitaille" shows the gap between what he should be and what he is. Lines 243 to 248 also reveal that the Friar is guilty of one of the seven deadly sins, pride; and his wantonness rather suggests that he is also prone to lechery. Thus Chaucer's praise of him, "Ther nas no man nowher so vertuous" (251), is supremely ironic. The nature of the controlling theme, ideal versus real, in these portraits makes the technique of irony most appropriate. The conflict between poor and rich continues throughout the description of the Friar, in "a wydwe hadde noght a sho" and "yet wolde he have a ferthyng, er he wente"; in the "thredbare cope" (260) contrasted

with "of double worstede was his semycope" (262); in the "povre scoler" (260) contrasted with "a maister or a pope" (261). Thus, the Friar is another variation on the theme of spirit versus flesh, and in his case the spiritual details are completely perverted.

If we leave the Parson to the last, the only remaining ecclesiastic to be fully described is the Pardoner. In his portrait, sin is undeniable and horrifying. The gap between the ideal and the real takes the form of lies and deceit. That gap is the very gap between Our Lady's true veil and an old pillow-case. The Pardoner is a complete hypocrite, and his relics are admittedly bogus. He is even less of a "noble ecclesiaste" than Hubert is a "noble post." Although, as the Prologue to his Tale suggests, he has inclinations to bawdry and lechery, he is less than a man, a eunuch and homosexual in fact, as is clearly shown by his yellow hair, his erotic song with the Summoner, his lack of beard, his goat's voice, and the comparison of him to a gelding or a mare. There is also a gap between what he is and what he thinks he is: "Hym thoughte he rood al of the newe jet" (682). And this anticipates his misconception of what people are really like and his shock at the reception of his Tale. The last lines in his portrait epitomize his double character: he sings merrily the offertory and preaches with vigor (spiritual acts) to win silver (materialistic motive).

The Prioress, the Monk, the Friar, the Pardoner are all ecclesiastics, and one expects a certain amount of religious detail in their depiction. But each portrait is characterized by either the absence of such detail or the perversion of it. The antinomy of spirit versus flesh is presented neatly and beautifully at all times, but perhaps most neatly in the Monk's anointed face, in his bridle bells jingling against the chapel bell, in the Pardoner's two songs, "com hider, love, to me!" and his offertory, and in the ambiguity of the Prioress' *Amor vincit omnia* (Christian charity or secular love?).

In total contrast with the spiritual hypocrisy, materialism, and discrepancy between spirit and flesh manifested in these worthy ecclesiasts is the attitude and behavior of the Parson. He is the only religious man among the pilgrims who brings together the real and the ideal. What he does conforms with what he sincerely believes in and with what he teaches. First, his portrait in the

General Prologue is an idealization supported by reality. The first line is straightforward (in contrast with the previous technique of irony) and very emphatic: "A good man was ther of religioun" (477). The last two words emphasize what the Parson truly represents. He is poor but rich in holy thought and work, in contrast to the Monk, Friar, Pardoner, and even the Prioress, who have much silver but little of holy thought or work. The Parson is also a learned man, a clerk; but he is not a clerk who studies astronomy in order to make money and to cuckold a simple old man, nor a clerk who reads antifeminist literature to his wife. He is a clerk who "Cristes gospel trewely wolde preche" (481). The word "trewely" reveals the contrast between the Pardoner and the Parson: if "trewely" is omitted, then the Pardoner also "Cristes gospel . . . wolde preche." "Devoutly" in the next line also serves to distinguish the Parson. He is not benign, diligent, and patient simply in appearance; he is often proved to be actually so (485). In him, there is no discrepancy between appearance and reality.

The next few lines prove how absolutely opposed he is to materialism. Whereas the Friar would have yet a farthing from a poor widow, the Parson would rather give of his own offering and substance to his poor parishioners. The Monk likes a fat swan, but the Parson "koude in litel thyng have suffisaunce" (490). Going on foot, with a single staff in his hand, he visits, in any kind of weather, every single person in his parish who is in any sort of trouble. This image suggests a shepherd, and indeed, the metaphor is picked up and developed throughout his portrait (496, 504, 506, 508, 512-14). The effect of the metaphor and its explication is to associate the Parson with Christ, the true Shepherd. Line 496 is the clearest opposite of hypocrisy: "This noble ensample to his sheep he yaf." "Out of the gospel he tho wordes caughte" anticipates his sermon, of which almost every sentence is supported by a verse from the Bible. Lines 500 to 506 are an indirect quotation of the Parson and reveal how seriously he holds his duty and purpose. He is also exceptional to the extent that he does not participate in the usual practices of his profession. He would not run to St. Paul's to seek a chantry or a brotherhood. "He was a shepherde and noght a mercenarie" sets in clear contrast the difference between himself and the other ecclesiastics among the pilgrims. His holi-

ness, virtue, wisdom, and benignity are mentioned again in lines 515 and 518. Line 527 concerning his teaching of Christ's lore recalls line 481, and line 528 that declares he practised what he taught recalls line 497. That he is a good example to his sheep is stated three times (496, 505, 520). Thus, when Chaucer says, "a bettre preest I trowe that nowher noon ys," he says so wholeheartedly and without irony, in contrast to his backhanded praise of the Friar ("Ther nas no man nowher so vertuous").

The portrait of the Parson is, moreover, noteworthy in containing no details about his clothing, what he likes to eat, or what his earthly pleasures are. The only comment concerning his material existence is that "He koude in litel thyng have suffisaunce." The absence of physical details in his portrait indicates the absence of these things in his actual life. As the whole description is built on spiritual details, so is his inner and outer life. He represents the union of ideal and real, and in this he is in complete contrast with the other ecclesiastics who represent the usurpation of spirit by flesh.

The Parson's later actions confirm this initial description. He appears next in the Man of Law's Epilogue. Harry Bailey swears "by Goddes dignitee!" and the Parson rebukes him: "What eyleth the man, so synfully to swere?" His rebuke recalls the line in the *General Prologue* which records the Parson's habit with other obstinate persons: "Hym wolde he snybben sharply for the nonys." The Parson's own prologue is also consistent with his initial portrait. Again the Parson chides the high-handed Host "sharply for the nonys," and rebukes him by quoting a verse from *Timothy*. That his own tale will deal with "moralitee and vertuous mateere" has also been prepared for by the *General Prologue*. He is humble as to his limited literary abilities and willing to "stonde to correcioun"; his taste runs to prose, and about poetry of any kind he is more than a little dubious. A metaphorical link between the *General Prologue* and the Parson's Tale is the continuation of the shepherd metaphor in the Prologue and in two passages of the Tale (720, 774) which condemns false shepherds who allow wolves to strangle Christ's sheep.

His tale also supports the description in the *General Prologue*. The relationship between the two may be expressed by Chaucer's

own line, "first he wroghte, and afterward he taughte." The *General Prologue* shows how the Parson wrought, e.g., trudging through rain and thunder to the farthest cottages in his parish, and perhaps from the Tabard to Canterbury, and his tale shows what he taught. Thus the pilgrims have proof that "first he folwed it hymselve" before he taught Christ's gospel. One knows that he is "in adversitee full pacient" (*Gen Prol*, 484). In his tale he teaches that "thanne is discipline . . . in suffrynge paciently wronges that been doon to thee" (*ParsT*, 1055). One knows that he would rather give of his own goods to his poor parishioners (*Gen Prol*, 487-90) and that he visits them when they are "in sikness or in meschief" (493). In his tale, he preaches "largenesse to povre folk" (1050) and that a man should take heed when his neighbor "hath nede of foode, . . . hath nede of clothyng and herberwe, . . . hath nede of charitable conseil and visitynge in prisone and in maladie" (1030-31). When he exhorts "bodily peyne," his hearers remember that he must have suffered bodily pain himself, when he trod his long way to visit his sick parishioners or as he trudged on his way to Canterbury. So all the pieces of the Parson's characterization fit into a whole.

Furthering the spiritual purpose of the *Canterbury Tales*, the Parson's Tale is a commentary upon the theme of spirit versus flesh. It states the conflict: "the flessh coveiteth agayn the spirit, and the spirit agayn the flessh" (*ParsT*, 341), and its relationship to sin: "God, and resoun, and sensualitee, and the body of man been so ordeyned that everich of thise foure thynges sholde have lordshipe over that oother; . . . But soothly, whan man synneth, al this ordre or ordinaunce is turned up-so-doun" (260-262). Verses 457, 458, 460 state the same. That "the flessh coveiteth agayn the spirit" is the problem of the ecclesiastics, and if they fail to resolve it, the Parson implies, they will have fit punishment in hell. In uttering his warning, the Parson describes infernal punishment in terms which underscore the conflict: "Agayns the richesse of this world shul they han mysese of poverte, and this poverte shal been in foure thynges: / In defaute of tresor . . . in defaute of mete and drinke . . . in defaute of clothyng . . . in defaute of freendes . . . they shul have defaute of all manere delices" (191-206). The Monk, Friar, Pardoner, and Prioress would surely miss treasure, wealth,

meat, drink, and fine clothes, which they have in abundance in this world.

The Parson's remedy for the general sin is true repentance, confession, and satisfaction. Not only does he exhort the pilgrims to love God first, thus counterbalancing the sinful power of the body, but he also offers a resolution to their problem of hypocrisy and deceit. Once they have the right goal, to love God first and their neighbor next, they should work in such a way as to bring their outer behavior into conformity with their inner motive. One remedy is to be humble in heart, in mouth, and in works (477). One's humility in confession "shal been in herte, and in signe outward ; for right as he hath humylitee to God in his herte, right so sholde he humble his body outward to the preest" (988). The Parson is trying to bring into accord body and soul, appearance and reality. Another remedy is "constaunce, that is, stablenesse of corage; and this sholde been in herte by stedefast feith, and in mouth, and in berynge, and in chiere and in dede" (736). Chastity is also enjoined, to be clean "in herte as wel as in body and in thought" (946). The Parson further stresses sincerity, stating that penitence is "verray repentance of a man that halt hymself in sorwe and oother peyne for his giltes" (85). The adjective "verray" takes on great importance (recurring in vv. 86, 88, 93, 97, 106, 128, 997, 10111) as it reminds the pilgrims that only true repentance and not a feigned piety will save them.

Thus the Parson insists that the spirit and flesh should join to work toward a single end. This union of the two components of man, which are at odds in the ecclesiastics, is the Parson's general answer to the pilgrims. He also answers certain pilgrims in more specific ways.

The relationship of the Parson's sermon to the Pardoner's tale is an example of such a requital. The Pardoner as we have seen is the Parson's exact opposite. The "povre person" (*Gen Prol*, 702) which the Pardoner tries to trick may refer to the Parson, since the same phrase is used to introduce him in line 478. They are contraries: the Pardoner is rich, the Parson poor. The Pardoner exclaims, "What, trowe ye. . . . that I wol lyve in poverte wilfully? . . . I wol have moneie, wolle, chese, and whete" (*Pard Prol*, 441-448); but the Parson can have sufficiency in little. The Parson

teaches Christ's lore and his apostles twelve; the Pardoner "wol noon of the apostles countrefete" (*Pard Prol*, 447). The Pardoner indeed may be the very wolf that the Parson fears (*Gen Prol*, 513). The identity of a wolf with a false shepherd is specifically developed in the Parson's tale (767, 768, 774), and the Pardoner may well be one of the wolves "that pilen and doon extorcions to hooly chirche." He is like "the develes wolves that stranglen the sheep of Jhesu Crist" and like "thilke lords that been lyk wolves, that devouren the possessiouns or the catel of povre folk wrongfully, withouten mercy or mesure."

The Parson and the Pardoner have contrary intents. The Parson's objective is to draw folk to heaven by fairness and by good example. The Pardoner's intent "is nat but for to wynne, / And nothyng for correcioun of synne. / I rekke never . . . though that hir soules goon a-blakeberyed!" (*Pard Prol*, 403-06). Even their preaching styles are expressly opposed. The Parson's speech is not "daungerous ne digne" (*Gen Prol*, 517). Waiting after no pomp or reverence, he takes only the sentence, the meaning (*Pars Prol*, 58). The Pardoner, on the other hand, has "an hauteyn speche." Seeking admiration and applause, he cares more about the manner of his delivery than his meaning: "Myne handes and my tonge goon so yerne / That it is joye to se my bisynesse" (*Pard Prol*, 398-99). The method of their sermons is different too. The Pardoner's sermon is entirely negative. He condemns the sins without offering counsel to overcome them. The Parson also condemns sins, but he offers a remedy for each of them, and his sermon is put in a larger framework of penitence, confession, satisfaction, which is likewise constructive. Indeed, his overall intent is to show the right way to heaven.

The pilgrims' reactions when the two tales are proposed is interestingly different. The Pardoner first intends to tell some mirth or jape, until the "gentils" protest, "Nay, lat hym tell us of no ribaudye!" (Intro. to *PardT*, 324). But when the Parson would begin his tale, the pilgrims seem eager to hear: "Upon this word we han assented soone, / For, as it seemed, it was for to doone, / To enden in som vertuous sentence, / And for to yeve him space and audience" (*Pars Prol*, 61-64). Even Harry Bailey is gracious, "Sey what you list, and we wol gladly heere" (*Pars Prol*, 73).

Lastly, the Parson is the perfect Christian and the Pardoner the absolute hypocrite. The Parson teaches the Bible, but first he follows it himself. But the Pardoner practices the very vices he preaches against. One is the union, the other the separation of appearance and reality.

Although both men preach much the same thing, many passages in the Parson's tale recall the Pardoner's personal sin. As a result, the two tales are antithetical. At first the Pardoner seems guilty only of the deadly sin of avarice, but the more the Parson explains, the more his sermon becomes a commentary on the Pardoner and the more sinful the Pardoner proves to be. The Parson first deals with the sin of pride, and the reader recalls that the Pardoner is proud of his "hauteyn speche." He also exemplifies some of the offshoots of pride: "Avauntyng," "Ypocrisie," "Arrogance," "Impudence," "Swellynge of Herte," "Veyne Glorie" (390). Under the sin of anger, the Parson explains "lesynges," and the reader begins to see more and more clearly that this sin applies to the Pardoner: "lesynges" is "fals signyficaunce of word, in entente to deceyven his evene-Cristene. . . . som lesynge turneth to the ese and profit of o man" (607-08). The Pardoner also exemplifies "the vice of flaterynge" (611). In the *General Prologue* he reveals that he tricks the parson and the people "with feyned flaterye and japes" (705). He is further guilty of the sin of double tongue: "They maken semblant as though they speeke of good entencioun . . . and yet they speke of wikked entent" (*ParsT*, 643). Verse 640 is a warning against such men as the Pardoner: "man shal nat taken his conseil of fals folk . . . ne of folk that loven specially to muchel hir owene profit."

Then, of course, the Pardoner is guilty of avarice. His motto is *Radix malorum est cupiditas*. The Parson too quotes St. Paul, "The roote of alle harmes is Coveitise" (738). The word "coveitise" recalls a line by the Pardoner himself, "I preche nothyng but for coveitise" (*Pard Prol*, 424). The definition of avarice itself clearly applies to the Pardoner: "Avarice is for to purchacen manye erthely thynges, and no thyng yeve to hem that han nede" (741). The Pardoner also "hath moore hope in his catel than in Jhesu Crist, and dooth moore observance in kepynge of his tresor than he dooth to the service of Jhesu Crist" (746). One recalls that the Pardoner

will have money, wool, cheese, and wheat "al were it yeven of the povereste page, / Or of the povereste wydwe in a village, / Al sholde hir children sterve for famyne" (*Pard Prol*, 449-51). He is guilty of gluttony, which is "unmeasurable appetit to ete or to drynke" (817). Then too the Pardoner sometimes hears confession. The Parson urges that one should shrive himself by "free wil, noght constreyned, ne for shame of folk" (1011). These remarks encompass the Pardoner's very tricks for winning silver. When the Parson advises that "the preest that hereth thy confessioun [must] . . . verraily [be] in the feith of hooly chirche" (1014), the reference is inescapable.

In addition to parallels to the Pardoner's Prologue, the reader finds parallels to his sermon. Like the Parson, the Pardoner treats of drunkenness, superfluity, "hasardrie," oaths, and false swearing, the stinking sin of lechery, and the particular variety of it which is too horrible even to mention, although Holy Writ speaks openly of it (*Gen Prol*, 672-73; *ParsT*, 907-08).

The sins treated in the Parson's tale are also manifested in the Pardoner's exemplum. All three rioters are proud, yet there is a "proudeste" (*PardT*, 716). Their deaths recall the Parson's line, "sometyme the richesse of a man is cause of his deth" (471). The Parson explains the real meaning of "brother" (514-515) in contrast with its false meaning in the rioters' relationship. The rioters are guilty of drunkenness and unjust anger (*PardT*, 705). One of them is guilty of bodily manslaughter. All three are avaricious. The Parson advises "ne swereth nat so synfully in dismembrynge of Crist by soule, herte, bones, and body" (590); but the rioters swear by God's arms, by God's worthy bones, by God's dignity, by God and by the holy sacrament (*PardT*, 692, 695, 701, 757).

The purpose of these parallels is complex, but they all function in the spiritual purpose of the *Canterbury Tales*. The Parson explains the Pardoner's sins as clearly as the Pardoner reveals them in his own Prologue. The Parson's purpose is to show the right way to the heavenly Jerusalem. The Pardoner, holding to a completely contrary purpose, nevertheless by his own horrible example and by the horrible example of the characters in his tale and the fate that befalls them, points clearly in the same direction: "For certes, many a predicacioun / Comth ofte tyme of yvel entencioun" (*Pard*

Prol, 407-08). In his own modest way, Chaucer, like God, works in many and often mysterious ways. Even a pardoner, as nearly compact of evil as it is possible for a man to be, can be a spur to good. The Pardoner of course is utterly false. His relics are false; the repentance expressed in his pardon is false. The Parson offers the right way to Jerusalem, the "full noble way . . . that may nat fayle to man ne to woman" (79). The pilgrims have a choice between two ways. The false way is put forth as a permissive evil that brings about ultimate good if the folk discern and choose the right way. The Canterbury pilgrims do refuse the Pardoner's way. They protest even before he begins his tale, and at the end, they utterly reject him.

Since the Parson's tale ends Chaucer's collection, the only evidence of its effect on the pilgrims is Chaucer's own retraction. Whether Chaucer speaks for them all is simply a matter for conjecture. What is more important is that Chaucer himself, who created the Parson, takes the Parson's advice. He repents humbly for his compositions of worldly vanities and praises God for those works that glorify Him. This sincere, religious statement is an extension of the Parson's Tale. Indeed, the whole retraction, from its first words to its last, is a prayer. Chaucer learns the secret for a godly life as he repeats exactly the structure and the major elements of the Parson's sermon: "and graunte me grace of verray penitence, confessioun and satisfaccioun" (1089).

To conclude this section of the essay, which deals with the obvious religious elements in the *Canterbury Tales*, this summary may serve: Chaucer's spiritual purpose is made evident by the framework of a pilgrimage, by the relationship between the Parson's tale and the ecclesiastics among the pilgrims, and by Chaucer's own retraction. If the pilgrims have one thing in common, it is that they are all sinners, but also that they may all partake of Christ's salvation. Looking at the *Canterbury Tales* in this context, it is reasonable to claim that Chaucer's prime purpose was to justify the ways of God to men.

II

Constance Woo's discussion is limited to the obviously religious matter in *The Canterbury Tales*. But what she has to say is no less

true of the rest. To keep the discussion within the bounds of an article, support for this dictum will have to be succinct, but enough will be accomplished, or so it is hoped, to establish the point.[1]

First, I would like to restate the matter, since Chaucer must be approached by many roads. While I agree that his collection of pilgrimage tales has a spiritual purpose, that it is a sort of sermon, I would also maintain that from its first word to its last it also deals with love, love in its widest range, *caritas* to *cupiditas*, philosophy to lasciviousness, love of self to love of others, and that throughout the collection this love, divine and secular, is largely presented in an ambiguous and ironic blend.

We may begin with the pilgrims who are given no tales or only begin them. The Haberdasshere, Carpenter, Webbe, Dyere, Tapycer, and their Cook form a group. The splendor of their gear and clothing shows they were well-off and loved to be so; that they were fitted to sit in a guildhall and be aldermen proves they were well on in age. They were all married, to wives who loved to be called "madame" and go to vigils "al bifore, / And have a mantel roialliche ybore." So, although Chaucer did little more to characterize them, it seems likely they were all like the old husbands whom the untender Alice of Bath married in her tender youth — lechers, cuckolds, materialists to a man. That they carry their cook Roger along with them, a cook who specialized in rich and abundant foods, shows they were gluttons to boot. The Cook himself, Roger of Ware, as the *General Prologue* and his own prologue show, was a cheat, swearer, quarreler, drunkard, and generally lazy, dirty fellow, as the flies in his shop and the mormal on his shin make plain. Chaucer finished only fifty-eight lines of his tale, but its direction is clear: it was to be a fabliau involving an

[1] These notes inevitably repeat a good deal that appears in Murial Bowden's *A Commentary on the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* (New York, 1948) and Walter Clyde Curry's *Chaucer and the Medieval Sciences* (New York, 1926). Autobiographical matters that are partly dealt with in Skeat's 7-volume edition and in J. M. Manley's *Some New Light on Chaucer* (New York, 1926) and elsewhere will be taken up in a book I mean to write about Chaucer's private life. I am deeply obliged to my colleague Florence Ridley for reading this part of the essay with her usual good sense: *sufflaminandus erat*, and she used the bit more than a bit: three full pages in fact.

old husband and a young wife, the old man akin to one of the Cook's masters and the young wife very like young Alice of Bath. That is, in moral terms it was to deal primarily with lechery and overconcern with the goods of this world.

The Plowman is quite another kettle of fish. In medieval works such as Aelfric's *Colloquy*, the plowman (or farmer) comes next to the scholarly preacher-teacher in the scale of true values. This is so with Chaucer's Plowman: he is the Parson's spiritual or blood brother, a true laborer, a good man; he lives in peace and perfect charity, loving God with a whole heart and his neighbors as himself, helping people without pay, and paying all his tithes. He is really the bridge between the religious and the seculars among the pilgrims.[2] What his tale was to be is too complicated to discuss here; for Chaucer apparently had at least three under consideration.

The first pilgrim to tell a tale is the Knight. It is always asserted that Chaucer arranged the straws so as to begin with the pilgrim highest in rank. That may not be true, for as Sir Anthony Wagner, the Richmond Herald, has shown,[3] knighthood had gone down a lot in social esteem and esquires were rated a good deal higher. It is possible the Knight comes first because he was old-fashioned, but that is merely to trifle, for the real reason for his primacy is that he was a good man. There is no need to belabor the details: "He was a verray, parfit, gentil knyght." Thus *The Canterbury Tales* begin as they end, with a model Christian narrator. His tale continues the pilgrimage theme, "This world nys but a thurghfare ful of wo, / And we been pilgrymes, passynge to and fro" (2214, 2847-8), and it is told prosaically and with some of the slow dignity of the *Parson's Tale*. It deals with two young men who in different but equally unbalanced ways fall in love with the same woman. The one worships Venus, with her bawdry, lying, flattery, jealousy and so on; the other worships Mars, with his anger, fear, treachery, and open war. When the lovers have made their prayers to their false gods, they fight; one dies, but for the other, of course, *amor*

[2] In one of the extant Plowman's Tales, he is first encountered while plowing his field — something that makes him rather like the Canon's Yeoman in the developing structure of Chaucer's pilgrimage.

[3] Sir Anthony Wagner, *English Genealogy* (Oxford, 1960), 104-6, 209.

vincit omnia. Thereafter, Theseus, the Knight's probable and Chaucer's almost certain *alter ego,* delivers a lengthy sermon in which, in properly Christianized Boethian terms, he stresses the consolation of a virtuous life and a good name. Allowing that the Parson is a religious and the Knight a secular, both are good men and their tales are sermons towards goodness; the knight's themes are erotic love and love of violence.

According to the *General Prologue,* the Miller was a jangler, braggart, thief, and harlot. His own prologue shows him to be also a drunk, swearer, and churl. His tale, told against "leve brother Osewold," the Reeve, is a fabliau. It has been argued that it is a vile parody of the story of Joseph and Mary, but that is far from certain.[4] In any case, it is the tale of a rich and foolish old "gnof," a carpenter who married a weasely young woman and was stupid enough to take a student as a lodger. The results, ingenious as they are, are quite predictable. Lechery reigns throughout, and everybody gets his poetic due.

The *General Prologue* describes the Reeve as a competent accountant but hints that he has the usual bad name of medieval stewards and that he has filched his lord's goods; his own Prologue says he is old, white-haired, rotten as an "open-ers" (medlar) and that like Jack Falstaff he has a "hoor heed and a grene tayl." In short, he is a thief, tyrant, and lecher; and to add to the tally, he admits that as an old man he is also "Avauntyng, lying," given to anger and "coveteise." His tale is a riposte to the Miller's. The Miller had told how two Oxford clerks had deceived a carpenter; the carpentering Reeve tells how two Cambridge clerks from the North cuckold the Miller of Trumpington. The two millers are of course very similar; but although the Reeve is a more heinous person than the Miller, Chaucer did not devise a more heinous tale for him. Its moral theme seems much

[4] This is Professor Beryl Rowland's suggestion. I am doubtful about it. My mother and grandmother used to distinguish clean dirt (physical and spoken) which was fine but still had to be scrubbed off, quite literally, with soap and water, from stinking dirt, which was appalling and should be shunned like the plague: their normal punishment for spoken forms of it was, I remember: a hearty slap on the backside, which was fun, and breakfast porridge for six days, which was insufferable but had to be borne.

the same as the Miller's. It stresses lechery more than avarice, but to balance the matter the Reeve's characterization stresses avarice, love of money.

The Man of Law is a shifty and money-grubbing rogue. The *Prologue* to his tale says that he finds himself unable to tell a thrifty tale; but at its end, the Host, an expert on several kinds of thriftiness, declares it to be indeed a thrifty tale. Yet there is something odd about this tale in relation to the avaricious lawyer. For one thing, he says he is going to speak in prose and he speaks in verse; and his tale, although it does have details that might be related to thrift, does not really fit the theme of greed. It is more like the tale of patient Griselda, and so I would venture a rash guess that at some time Chaucer may have pondered assigning it to the Clerk of Oxford — at least, it has the same verse-form as the Clerk's, and since prose would have suited the Clerk more than verse, that may explain the odd reference to prose.

The Wife of Bath is obviously perverted, in the sense that she reverses all accepted Christian and social values in religion, money, love, the relationship of husbands and wives. Although she is the darling of professors, what Chaucer himself thought of her is clear from her own tale, the envoy to the *Clerk's Tale*, the *Merchant's Tale*, the *Franklin's Tale*, and the direct personal comment in "Lenvoy de Chaucer a Bukton." Her tale is an exemplum for her doctrine: the old transformed wife establishes a natural-unnatural sovereignty over her young husband, one she had forced into marriage; and at the end, for all her promises of truth and humility, her intent and accomplishment is still to be an empress with full "maistrie." Love of money, love of men, love of power are the flags she flies.

Constance Woo has discussed the Friar himself in revealing detail, but there is need to talk a little about his tale. Directed against the Summoner, it concerns a false thief, an avaricious and lecherous summoner who sets out to cheat a poor widow but is himself tricked by a fiend, similar enough to himself to be his own "leeve brother." So it is an attack on a friar and a summoner for love of money and lechery mainly.

The *General Prologue* presents the Summoner as a detestable person. His lechery illumines his face in the legacies of venereal

disease; he is also a glutton, a pretentious ignoramus, and so fond of money that he would betray all religion — his very job shows he was an extortioner, and his own words indicate he was ever ready for bribes. His prologue reveals him to be a man of uncontrollable anger. In short, he seems guilty of all the deadly sins. His tale relates how a lecherous friar of Holderness preaches to a young willing wife a sermon that goes counter to God's word.[5] The wife sends him to her husband, who rather resembles the Parson. When the friar had preached good old Thomas an impious sermon to the intent that he should give all his gold to the friars, Thomas directs him to the right place, and the friar gets the right trumpet-call from the place where all friars dwell. The outraged friar then takes his story to the manor. The lord's lady sympathises; the lord is puzzled, especially about Thomas' directive that the gift should be divided among the friar's brethren. But his squire has a plan. The friar should get a twelvespoke wheel and arrange for the thirteen friars of his company to stand around it and for Thomas to sit in the middle and repeat his offering. If the friar stands in the prime place, he will get the best share — "And certeinly he hath it weel desserved." The tale, concentrating ingeniously on the theme of avarice and lechery, reinforces the characterizations of the Summoner and the Friar of the pilgrimage. Except to the extent that they are both children of God, they are sons of Satan.

The *General Prologue* describes the Clerk as being similar to the Parson: poor, thin, a scholar and philosopher, religious, chary of words, "sownynge in moral vertu," and "gladly wolde he lerne and gladly teche." In his coy quietness, he is much like Chaucer himself in the *Tales*, and probably he is meant as one of his *alter egos*. The familiar tale he tells about patient Griselda is an inhumane one, and the Clerk's attitude toward it (in marked difference from Petrarch's) is that Walter's behavior is indefensible. It is evil to put a wife in anguish and dread when there is no need, he says (460-2); she was needlessly tempted in assay, "But wedded men ne

[5] The fact that the wife has had a child recently has been held as an argument against this. But the matter is fishy. The child died two weeks before, the very day the friar left town. Chaucer prefers not to do more than hint at the matter, and so I had better follow his example and merely refer the reader to the details about groping and fish-hooks.

knowe no mesure" (621-2). Although there are few woman like Griselda, not more than two or three in a town, nevertheless "no man can be half so true as woman can" (935-8).[6] No less than the *Franklin's Tale*, the Clerk's is a plea for Christian tolerance and love in holy marriage.

The Merchant, judging from the *General Prologue*, was solemn, getting on in years, much concerned with money and far from scrupulous, but in debt. His own prologue shows he had been married for two months to a shrew, and to judge from the fact that his tale is apparently autobiographical, he was sixty and his wife was certainly well under thirty. So the Merchant and his tale present a further variation on the theme of Alice of Bath and her old husbands, the themes of lechery in old and young, the themes of avarice, desire for supremacy by both husband and wife, the rottenness of courtly love, the natural-unnatural tyranny of married women, and their God-given endowments of cunning, lies, tears, and beauty.

From the *General Prologue*, the Squire represents youth. Twenty years old, goodlooking, an athlete, a good soldier, a lover, and endowed with the gifts appropriate to love — singing, writing poetry, dancing, drawing — he is his father's son, "curteis," "lowely," and "servysable." But he is young, and Chaucer goes no further: the proof of any promising wine lies in the aging. His tale is a fragment of pure romance, which takes the form of a pathetic story of female innocence deceived and corrupted by masculine falseness and lechery, of a gentle female falcon who put her faith in the hypocritical promises of a peregrine, is jilted, and almost dies of grief. In its discursive style, the tale also touches on loves of other kinds: on Lancelot, who was a true lover, but he is dead; and on Canace's incestuous love. It is not quite true that Chaucer wrote no word of "thilke wikke ensample of Canacee," but it is true enough that he did not actually write the story. Some things Chaucer drew the line at, leaving them to moralists like Gower.

[6] It may perhaps be assumed that if there were only two or three Griseldas in a town, there were only the same number of Walters.

For a worldly man, the Franklin stands high in Chaucer's scale of moral values. Old enough to know life and men, he loved good food of a simple kind, mostly from his own estate; was very hospitable; did his public duty. In short, there "Was nowher swich a worthy vavasour." His tale concerns "gentilesse," and his style of telling it is "gentil." Told as a Breton lay, and therefore obviously removed from the realities of human behavior, it recounts a story not unlike those of the Miller and the Merchant in that the love of a married couple is endangered by love of a young man for the wife. But the difference is that the danger is easily repulsed. Indeed, it is hardly a threat at all. All the personages, husband, wife, lover, magician, behave with utmost consideration for each other's feelings and interests. The tale of course complements the Wife of Bath's, Clerk's, and Merchant's tales on the subject of sovereignty and gentilesse in marriage, although it really deals with more than marriage. But it is not Chaucer's solution, as Kittredge seemed to think. Such gentilesse, such consideration is not to be found this side of heaven. The Clerk's and the Wife of Bath's positions are the best that can be hoped for in this world, in which there are fortunately few Griseldas and as few Walters.

The Physician, according to the *General Prologue*, is learned and a fine practitioner: "In al this world ne was ther noon hym liek. . . He was a verray, parfit praktisour." But he is indifferent to religion, and certainly his one real love is money: "he lovede gold in special," even though, as the Host says, he looks like a prelate (*Intro PardT*, 310). His tale concerns another kind of love, that of the lecherous, learned judge Appius for the innocent Virginia. Some critics take the tale to be an exemplum of lechery, and this is reasonable enough, for it is the way Gower uses it in Book VII of *Confessio Amantis*. But it may also be taken as an exemplum of the ruthlessness of people in high places. "I know a minnium of 'em" says Jimmy Durante, and there is good reason to think that Chaucer had his eye in this instance on John of Gaunt.

From the *General Prologue*, the Shipman seems to have been a "good felawe" and a stout, brave man; but he is not hampered by any "nyce conscience" as regards murder, and he is given to cheating and petty stealth. His tale deals with both lechery and greed. A lecherous priest borrows money from a merchant and

gives it to the merchant's wife. On the strength of this "generosity," he then obtains her willing cooperation in cuckolding the merchant while that wise worthy is away earning money in Flanders. When the merchant returns and asks for his money, the priest says he gave it to the wife. Thus the tale excellently fits the Shipman, in the sense that it deals with cheating and theft, with love of money in two places, and with love of one's fellow-man in a most fleshly way.

Constance Woo has discussed the Prioress' character. Her tale reflects the superficiality of her religion and her sentimentality. Charming as it is in some ways, it is on all fours with the Prioress' tearful "love" for mice and small dogs ("Whoever hates children and dogs can't be all bad" said another great comedian). Her love for jewelry is matched by her absorption with the little martyr's marble tomb, and below all the piety lies (at least to a modern sensitivity) a most unpleasant and ingrained anti-Semitism.

The pilgrim who told all these tales, Chaucer the poet and pilgrim, is not described in the *General Prologue*, and on the pilgrimage he goes unnoticed until the Host spots him as if by accident and wonders who he is, says he looks on the ground as if he would find a hare, and encourages him forward. He then describes him as well-shaped in the waist (not "fat"), a poppet, small, fairfaced, and elvish. There can be little doubt that this is a pretty true portrait of Geoffrey Chaucer himself, for it conforms to all the portraits, most of them nearly contemporary. Of course, it is not the whole story.

Chaucer's first tale is another romance, a superb exercise in parody and burlesque. It certainly fits the portrait, for it is entirely elvish; but it is unfinished, cut off by Harry Bailey as "drasty ryming," "nat worth a toord!" There are many reasons why Chaucer failed to finish it: for example, one can have quite enough of parody; Chaucer may have shared the Host's opinion; he respected prose rather more than he respected poetry. Anyway, he immediately passes to his second tale, "a litel thyng in prose," "a moral tale vertuose," which, together with the Knight's tale and the Parson's, he may have thought the most worthwhile in his collection. It is significant that his Ellesmere portrait shows him, finger outstretched, pointing to the beginning of *Melibee*. Just as

Sir Thopas had dealt with romantic love and fantasy, the *Tale of Melibee* deals with love of mankind and reality. In the characteristic form of the best medieval teaching, a spirited debate or drama, it deals with the grave problem of peace and war, the dramatic conflict being resolved by the wise and patient advice of Melibee's wife Prudence, who counsels peace and manages to pacify her opponents. It is an extraordinary piece, and one most appropriate to our own times. It is therefore a sad comment on our understanding of Chaucer and literature that Wells should be representative in calling the work "dull" and that many Chaucerians and almost all students have never read this spirited debate on love of wisdom lost irretrievably and found elsewhere.[7]

The Monk's character has been well dissected by Miss Woo. Harry Bailey expects him to tell a tale about hunting, but instead he tells a string of short moral tragedies. Had the Knight not mercifully stopped him, he might have gone on to the full hundred he threatened. Although all are tragedies of Fortune, they are certainly not Boethian in the original sense; they are Boethian in the later medieval way, for all the victims had either committed some mortal sin or sins or were the victims of one or more of them: pride, uxoriousness, lechery, drunkenness, married chastity of Margery Kempe's kind, cruelty, malice, imperialism, envy, sloth, and so on. Since all these sins are rooted in self-love in some way or other, they all provide variations on the common theme of Chaucer's collection.

The Prioress' chaplain, the "Nonne's Preest," is merely listed in the *General Prologue*, but the Host's prologue ironically speaks of "this sweete preest, this goodly man Sir John" and his epilogue declares "Iblessed be thy breche, and every stoon! / . . . if thou were a secular / Thou woldest ben a tredefoul aright." So it would seem the Nun's Priest was inclined towards lechery, restrained only by being in holy orders. I would not go so far as some critics who think he was actually a lecher and that his nunnery was a sort of private brothel. I think Chaucer merely meant that his lechery lay in his mind, which is bad enough (in religious thinking, just

[7] "What happened to Sophie?" is a question we should all do well to ponder.

as bad as the deed itself). In its birdlike way, the tale is again about marital relations, about uxoriousness and the dalliaunce of a cock with seven hens. But it is also a tale about treachery and murder. In subtler and livelier fashion, this story of a murderer fooled by flattery is not unlike one of the Monk' tales: certainly Don John's tale is closely related to Don Piers' collection, as the references to Nero (3370) and Fortune (3402-3) show.

In the *Second Nun's Tale* (65), she calls herself an "unworthy sone of Eve." From this, critics have deduced that the tale was never really adapted to Chaucer's collection; but since "son" can mean "daughter" just as "man" can mean "woman" (cp. OED), a better reason for thinking the tale was not fully worked into the collection is the line "Yet preye I yow that reden that I write," which obviously refers to Chaucer himself rather than to his lady pilgrim. The tale itself is the legend of the lily and virgin St. Cecilia, and unless it contains some deep irony beyond my seeing, I think it must be one of the "storial" things that "toucheth gentilesse and eek moralitee and hoolynesse" (love of God and one's fellowmen) of which Chaucer speaks at the end of the *Miller's Tale* when he recommends those who do not care to hear an evil tale to turn over the leaf. How they were to know which was which was clear enough if they had read the prologue with attention: the portraits make plain what kinds of tales the pilgrims will tell. Chaucer may well have thought anyone who did turn the leaf would have made a mistake, however, since the most wicked of these tales are those which give the liveliest examples towards holiness.

The *Canon Yeoman's Tale*, probably the most brilliant if not the best of the tales, is so involved with Chaucer's own life, that it is best to leave discussion of it to a later occasion. From the point of view of the present essay, its main theme is love of money. It is for that reason that the "false chanon" is a cheat, a liar ("Trouthe is a thyng that I wold ever kepe" 1045), a "theef," and two-faced (1300). As for his victim the priest, his weakness is "coveteise" and his inclination towards courtly love.

According to the *General Prologue*, the Manciple was not a highly educated man, but he was much shrewder and wiser than the more than thrice-ten learned men who were his masters at the Temple.

In his own prologue, he begins by rebuking the Cook for drunkenness and filth. Clearly, the Manciple, from the trick he plays on the Cook, is a man of quiet resource and no lover of drunks and crooks; indeed, he has a good deal in common with the Parson, as the sermon element in his tale shows, for a good half of it is made up of discussions of the faithlessness of wives, scandal, and problems of rank. The story-line is consistent with this sermonising: Phoebus' wife commits adultery with a man of lower rank; the lovers are betrayed by the white crow; Phoebus angrily kills his wife and then falls into grief; finally he takes revenge on his pet crow by plucking out its feathers and throwing it out.

This part of the essay has turned out to be something of a sermon ; and that is perhaps not malapropos, for *The Canterbury Tales* not only contains sermons, far more than is usually suspected, it is in its entirety one persistent sermon with one pious objective, to do what any good Christian should do: try to save his fellow-Christians and himself from their wicked ways. But in saying this, and therefore in agreeing with one eminent critic, let me hasten to add that Chaucer's collection is a sermon on the wide range of love, with many differences. Thus, it is solemn, absurd, fantastic, wildly comic, bawdy, genteel, sentimental, tragic, hilarious, and largely ironic. It is not only Christian, it is also philosophical in the long tradition of Plato, Boethius, and the school of Chartres; it is a work learned in a great many matters, secular and divine. In form it is many things: a *comédie humaine*, a *tragédie humaine*, a collection of debates and therefore of dramas. Above all, it is *The Canterbury Tales*, twenty-four tales and parts of tales with appropriate accompaniments. It is not much, not nearly so much as Chaucer hoped to do. It is fragmentary, and some parts of it seem not to belong, or appear in the MSS in strange order. But despite all these impediments, and despite the odd critic, who alleges that Chaucer had no interest in telling a story, it somehow contrives to tell tales so entrancing that all one dumb admirer can do is to say after an old poet:

> Hyd Hemyngwaye thy grisled tresses drere;
> Updyke, ley thou thy upnesse al adown!
> Hyde Flannarye, al thy freendly manere;
> Ovidius Naso, Georges Louis Buffoun,

Make of youre wrytyng no comparysoun;
Hyde ye your beautes, Bellowes and Spylleyne,
Chaucer is here, that al that may disdeyne.

Ballades are notorious for exaggeration and litotes, so let me close on the less heady thought that the more I read Chaucer's masterpiece, the more its variety recalls the smaller creation, two centuries later, of another English poet who also admired *The Canterbury Tales* extravagantly — as a work so various that it seems to be, not one but all good tales' epitome.