ETHICS AND EXEMPLARY NARRATIVE IN CHAUCER AND GOWER

J. Allan Mitchell

Chaucer Studies

CHAUCER STUDIES XXXIII

ETHICS AND EXEMPLARY NARRATIVE
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Why do medieval writers routinely make use of exemplary rhetoric? How does it work, and what are its ethical and poetical values? And if Chaucer and Gower must be seen as vigorously subverting it, then why do they persist in using it? Borrowing from recent developments in ethical criticism and theory, this book addresses such questions by reconstructing a late medieval rationale for the ethics of exemplary narrative. The author argues that Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Gower's *Confessio Amantis* attest to the vitality of a narrative – rather than strictly normative – ethics that has roots in premodern traditions of practical reason and rhetoric. Chaucer and Gower are shown to be inheritors and respecters of an early and unexpected form of ethical pragmatism – which has profound implications for the orthodox history of ethics in the West.

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D. S. BREWER

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Acknowledgements

Abbreviations

EETS   *Early English Text Society*
ELH   *English Literary History*
MED   *Middle English Dictionary*, ed. Hans Kurath and Sherman M. Kuhn
PMLA   *Publication of the Modern Language Association*
SAC   *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*

Introduction

What is the *good* of examples in late medieval literature? That deceptively simple question first animated my study of two Middle English poets, Chaucer and Gower, and I think it serves as a useful point of entry into the larger topic of what I call the ethics of exemplarity. Ethics and exemplary narrative somehow interrelate. But before getting anywhere near answering the initial question, I want to begin with some remarks that serve to make my working assumptions and methodology explicit.

A main premise of this book is that the *pragmatic* orientation of medieval rhetoric forestalls generalities of the order we may be tempted to ponder in academic inquiry. One thing medieval writers ordinarily presuppose is a cultural context of reception in which examples are given and taken as precepts; examples are meant to move or improve you. Characteristically, medieval examples do not solicit static generalities (though they constantly seem to) so much as a particular and practical result, which is why, as should become clear, I take as my topic the *ethics* of exemplary narrative. Derrida for one has suggested that the example is just the sort of figure to issue in an ethical practice: "An example always carries beyond itself: it thereby opens up a testamentary dimension. The example is first of all for others, and beyond the self."[1] Given the "beyond" to which the example moves or projects itself, the speculative work of academic criticism can scarcely comprehend the full scope of what it means to respond ethically to medieval rhetoric. Often enough, as medieval writers well knew, the temptation is to retreat from practice to the realm of theory anyway. "What moral philosopher [and we may wish to add: literary theorist] does not fairly bubble over with laws of ethics, so long as these remain merely verbal? But it is a far different matter to exemplify these in his own life."[2] This is an important if possibly discomfiting issue I will have occasion to revisit – one Chaucer and Gower compel those with scholarly inclinations to examine for the prejudices speculative work itself can conceal – a problem best approached by way of specific examples.

At the beginning, though, it is helpful to lay out first principles presupposed in my examples, which for the purpose of this book include the privileging of practice, or a certain idea of practical reason, over speculation. Practice lies at the heart of the problem of deliberating about the good, no less so in the medieval context of exemplary narrative, with its routine reference to the singular case and

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1 *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London, 1994), p. 34.
2 John of Salisbury, *The Metalogicon*, trans. Daniel D. McGarry (Berkeley, 1962), 2.9.

its prospective realization in the life of individual practitioners. Therefore, part of my purpose must always be to resist or at least put in question the temptation to generalize.

In thinking through what is good about medieval examples it is also important to resist a prevailing critical preoccupation (one I originally found congenial) that focuses only on with what is *bad* (e.g., coercive or ulterior) about exemplary narrative. In analyzing the rhetoric the tendency has been to emphasize ideological causation *cui bono*: to demonstrate ways in which the example subserves or at best subverts political discourses in virtue of which conventional morality is legitimated. Critics have thereby regularly fixated on the closed and conclusive form, hence what they see as the basically manipulative sociopolitical function, of exemplary narrative – so in one account they are disparaged as "authoritarian fictions."[3]

Much may be learned from such analyses and so the line separating the ethical from the ideological should never be over-drawn. And of course moral rhetoric, like anything else, can be abused. It will be an important aim of this study to explore Gower's candid moral skepticism and Chaucer's celebrated tendency to subvert moral rhetoric – or rather, as I shall argue, his propensity to use moral rhetoric subversively. But an exclusively ideological focus is inadequate for several reasons, not least because it ends up explaining away the *moral* phenomenon it is meant to explicate. As is increasingly being acknowledged, ideological or sociopolitical readings by their very nature displace and erode the subject of ethics.[4] A space must therefore be preserved for the ethical as against ever proliferating versions of *Ideologiekritik*, now fairly entrenched as forms of professional suspicion, if only to prevent them from colonizing all critical-historical discourse. But the reasons for putting such suspicion in question go deeper than polemic: for it is the very skeptical and presumed "objective" stance implied in much sociopolitical analysis (otherwise its virtue) that renders the subject of ethics irretrievable to history. History must include the history of the moral subject. Now you cannot simply adduce a sociopolitical context to explain the production of exemplary narratives, because the context is what is produced or

3   Susan Suleiman, *Authoritarian Fictions: The Ideological Novel as a Literary Genre* (New York, 1983). Critiques of exemplification along similar lines can be found in Adam Zachary Newton, *Narrative Ethics* (Cambridge, 1995); Edith Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy* (Chicago, 1990); Joan Young Gregg's *Devils, Women, and Jews: Reflections of the Other in Medieval Sermon Stories* (Albany, 1997); and Alexander Gelley's *Unruly Examples: On the Rhetoric of Exemplarity* (Stanford, 1995). Bruno Gélas echoes the general sentiment when he describes the example as a "manipulative fiction," as cited in John D. Lyons, *Exemplum: The Rhetoric of Example in Early Modern France and Italy* (Princeton, 1989), p. 21.

4   For recent discussions of the inadequacy of current 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: Wayne Booth, Charles Taylor, David Parker, Richard Freadman and Seumas Miller, Charles Altieri, Andrew Gibson among others. If there is anything like a consensus among these diverse writers it would be the opinion that prevailing sociopolitical discourses in the humanities are reductive with respect to individual agency. Even Michel Foucault, exemplar of a certain postmodern critique of agency, in one of his last recorded remarks said, "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," trans. P. Aranov and D. McGrawth, in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York, 1997), p. 294.

altered in their application: as mentioned, exemplary narratives are directed at *improving* the world. Moreover, from a time-honored medieval perspective, the ethical subject is prior to politics. So only in light of some alternative approach to the subject, one which permits us to view medieval ethics from a "testament-ary" vantage (recalling Derrida), can the history of ethics hope to be understood; and only thus has medieval literary history a chance to engage now seemingly foreign regions of its subject. We can start by acknowledging that exemplary rhetoric manifestly did mean something *good* to subjects in the past (Chaucer and Gower are no exceptions), with the consequence that there is little use in demystifying the phenomenon without giving fair descriptions of it first. Moral agents in any period do not usually think they are being mystified or fulfilling some dubious social function when they take up moral positions; to employ an old distinction, the ethical is typically distinguished from the expedient.[5] That is the *priority* of ethics which makes history possible.

My approach, then, will be basically phenomenological because of the way it seeks to describe conditions of practice *internal* to ethics, from the point of view of the moral subject: in other words, to understand what it might be like to inhabit the cognitive and communal space where medieval exemplary narratives serve as guides to personal deliberation and action. As the evidence permits, I should thus like to give descriptions of the phenomenon priority over skeptical analyses that try to explain it away, and as a result the first object of this book is to propose an account of reader response that leaves exemplary narratives open to ethical practice, whatever that may be in the event, despite the allegedly closed form of the rhetoric and whatever its social functions. To this end I will attempt to recover the history of a practical ethical orientation which, while it does not delimit any specific moral applications or delineate a system of norms (in part because it takes them for granted), should allow us to think medieval exemplarity afresh, in such a manner as to return us to the moment of moral application with a heightened sense of what it could have meant for individual moral cognition and conduct in the later medieval period.

Given the much vaunted "ethical turn" across the humanities today it would seem an opportune time to bring out a study of the intersection of medieval ethics and aesthetics. But the Middle Ages is not an obvious choice for such a study, as ongoing developments in literary theory that touch on moral aspects of literature suggest. Current ethical criticism and theory has on the whole bypassed *medieval* literature and culture. My second aim is therefore to broaden

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5 Wittgenstein's remarks on the proper sphere of philosophical investigation stand behind my distinc-tion between "explanation" and "description"; see for example Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, 2nd ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscomb (Oxford, 1981), p. 57. For a discussion of the consequences of "objective" versus "subjective" analysis see Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere* (New York, 1986), p. 208 *et passim*. Neither expedience nor ideological coercion exhausts our description of the nature of the language game called ethics, and so "objective" ideology cannot tell the whole story of the ethics of exemplarity. Importantly, the reasons anyone actually will give for ordinary moral behaviour are not the ones put forth by the theorists; if they were the reasons, a moral agent might lose all motivation. As Paul Johnston notes, "if one considers our actual moral practices what is striking is that they are *not* a social institution"; *Wittgenstein and Moral Philosophy* (London, 1989), p. 54.

the horizons of expectation of the new ethical criticism and theory, bringing the surprising complexities of medieval exemplarity onto the scene. There is a profound scarcity of theorizing of the practical dimensions of medieval narrative ethics, surely due (again) to an absence of fair descriptions. Perspicuous and patient description has, one can only assume, been routinely neglected because some presumptive account has taken its place. A widespread and uncritical presumption, especially common among those outside medieval studies, is that morality in the Middle Ages was impersonal, legalistic, exploitive, and primitive. What interesting things can ethical critics possibly say about the moral dimensions of literature in this benighted period? Medieval moral rhetoric is therefore made out to appear as monolithic as it is putatively manipulative. Probably as a result of such dismissive and uncritical assumptions, to date none of the major proponents of ethical criticism has done work on a medieval text.

And so a third but equally important object of the book is to inaugurate a larger-scale critique of modern versions of medieval exemplary morality, in particular 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. As will become clear, the evidence attests instead to a sophisticated phenomenon we can place under the rubric "reading for the moral." Reading for the moral describes the *narrative* (as opposed to strictly *normative*) ethics exemplarity promotes, something I will elucidate in this book with reference to a variety of texts and terms. Above all, I am proposing that a practical approach to paradigmatic cases, greatly underestimated in the modern critical literature on the topic, presupposes an orientation to moral decision-making that is ethical *and* poetical.[6]

Chapter 1, "Reading for the Moral: Controversies and Trajectories," sets out to explore in greater depth some common misconstruals of late medieval exemplary rhetoric. I begin here by putting in question popular characterizations of medieval morals and didacticism, and end with a brief consideration of alternative terms (i.e., tropology, pragmatic reduction, punctuality) useful for literary-critical study of narrative in the period. My aim is simply to meet head-on certain modern prejudices about the nature of morality and moral rhetoric in the Middle Ages. Admittedly, it is tempting and sometimes very useful to bring such skeptical attitudes to bear on the phenomenon of exemplarity, unmasking the ideological forces that repress diversity and impose codified norms on narratives. Isn't this

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6   For my understanding of a pragmatic medieval ethics I am indebted to Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge, 1990), particularly Chapter 5, "Memory and the Ethics of Reading"; and John Dagenais, *The Ethics of Reading in Manuscript Culture: Glossing the* Libro de Buen Amor (Princeton, 1994), pp. 3–108. Judson B. Allen's *The Ethical Poetic of the Later Middle Ages: A Decorum of Convenient Distinctions* (Toronto, 1982) has proven to be of less use because of its Neoplatonic bias towards morality. 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 many others who bring to bear an ethical criticism on the literature, usually novels, of later periods. However, my critical approach differs from that of the major proponents of ethical criticism to the extent that I am concerned not exclusively with the reading experience as such, but with the consequences of reading.

the sort of rhetorical mendacity Chaucer exposes so well? Indeed it is so; yet those who confine themselves to any of the current varieties of "hermeneutics of suspicion" miss something important if they persist in holding that moral examples are everywhere and always manipulative or monolithic.[7] I will contest the view that the rhetoric is strictly normative, reductive, or ideological, at the same time as I acknowledge that *some* norms and *certain* reductions remain indispensable to deriving practical precepts from exemplary cases.

Chapter 2, "Rhetorical Reason: Cases, Conscience, and Circumstances," then sketches a tradition of case-reasoning, originating in the ethics and rhetoric of Aristotle, passed down in a variety of philosophical, rhetorical, and homiletic sources to the later Middle Ages. Here I focus on works of antique and medieval writers in an effort to recover the vitality of moral casuistry – i.e., a case-based as opposed to categorical ethics – in the premodern past. Moral casuistry is a flexible and improvisatory approach to formulating practical precepts (guides to action) based on the rhetoric of exemplarity (cases and circumstances) and the deliberation of readers (conscience), and it is based in the simple recognition, eloquently expressed throughout Chaucer's *Tale of Melibee*, that circumstances alter cases. The relevance of casuistry is simply that it gives historical precedence to the ethical pragmatism I posit as a significant context for later medieval exemplary narrative.

In the next set of chapters I turn to closely focused readings of selected examples, shifting attention to the virtues and vices of the ethics of exemplarity as Gower and Chaucer seem to have understood them. Both the *Confessio Amantis* and the *Canterbury Tales* are compilations of problematic and unproblematic cases, and I explore both types. Problematic cases are undoubtedly most illuminating. On the whole, of course neither Chaucer nor Gower is as straightforwardly didactic or pragmatic as are many contemporary practitioners (e.g., sermon exemplists), and so it is their metaethics that most interests me. Yet ultimately it remains significant that both poets choose to employ paradigm cases to address practical concerns. I will argue that an appreciation of the poets' use of the case-based rhetoric allows us to recover a sense of the moral dimension, so little emphasized in literary criticism today, of their exemplary art – where we have become accustomed least to expect it.

Accordingly, Chapters 3 and 4 examine exemplarity as a matter of form and function in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*. Chapter 3, "Gower For Example: *Confessio Amantis* and the Measure of the Case," will set out certain features of Gower's ethics of exemplarity, describing the salience of a comprehensive and casuistic rather than coherent moral rhetoric to his work. Yet Gower seems always to be alert to what is at stake in using the rhetoric as a means of moral persuasion and theorizing about moral matters. Chapter 4, "All That Is Written For Our

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7   The phrase "hermeneutics of suspicion" alludes to Paul Ricoeur's well-known characterization of modern intellectual trends – exemplified in the work of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud – which seek to expose mystifications of the real; see his *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven, 1977), p. 5.

Doctrine: Proof, Remembrance, Conscience," will go on to track an important lexical set associated with the risks and rewards of exemplary morality. The argument supposes that Gower can be seen sorting out the benefits and liabilities of the case-ethics he employs to educate Amans, at the same time as he leaves it to Amans to make the best of (i.e., *avyse* and *mesure*) diverse moral examples; the actual audience of the *Confessio* is similarly situated. Concentrating on instances of sharp incongruity among manifold cases, my general aim in these two chapters is to establish that, while incongruity offers *prima facie* reasons for doubting the efficacy and integrity of exemplary morality, what it points to are aspects of the rhetoric – elements of suspense and surprise – that cannot easily be assimilated to the usual critical paradigms. Critics have drawn salutary attention to the many ways Gower tries to "control" his text in its transmission. But such ideas need to be reconceptualized to include the surprising unpredictability of audience reception. I contend that strategies of inventional reading (*after* writing) have an ongoing and additive role to play in constructing and reconstituting the exemplary tales to conform to sometimes idiosyncratic intentions situated inside the conscience of a moral agent and outside the diegesis of the text. I finally conclude, by way of comparison with scholastic commentary, that Gower's theory of conscience is remarkably empirical and anti-metaphysical for the age. Here the benefits of ethical criticism should become apparent: for while other types of criticism are often not wrong about the *truth* of the text, they are not on that account always right about its *goodness*. My discussion of Gower should thus go to show that the medieval rhetoric of exemplarity exhibits not a failure of the moral imagination, but rather a useful mode of proceeding inductively and imaginatively towards the good and the right.

In Chapters 5 through 7, I turn to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, which for some will no doubt stand as the ultimate test of any claims for the ethics of exemplarity. Of late, critics have urged variously that Chaucer's aestheticism, perspectivism, nominalism, or dialogism undermines the reductive moralizing of the period. Such critiques naturally find fault with exemplary rhetoric, and so I start by exploring preliminary objections to it in Chapter 5, "Moral Chaucer: Ethics of Exemplarity in the *Canterbury Tales*," where I contend that for too long criticism has lacked a certain lucidity both about Chaucer's ethics and about the critic's role vis-à-vis Chaucer's skepticism. Chapter 6, "Pointing the Moral: The Friar, Summoner, and Pardoner's Satire," then goes on to show that instead of discrediting moral exemplarity Chaucer frequently gives the rhetoric a specifically *moral* credence. And finally in Chapter 7, "Griselda and the Question of Ethical Monstrosity," I take up the question of exemplarity in what is no doubt Chaucer's most challenging moral tale, the *Clerk's Tale*, where the apparent imprudence and oft-remarked "monstrosity" of Griselda stands in instructive contrast to the good sense of Dame Prudence in the *Tale of Melibee*.

The tales of Canterbury tend to be more problematic than those of "moral Gower," and in this respect we must be sensitive to the differences between the two poets. Chaucer, like Gower in having fictionalized the mechanics of exemplification and moral deliberation, situates tales within a dialogical framework, but unlike

the *Confessio Amantis* the *Canterbury Tales* exploits multiple frames of reference and so tends to be more demanding on the speech acts it contains. Comparatively speaking, the communicative situation is compromised in a way it is not in the *Confessio*, 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, personality, class, gender, and so on – that it becomes difficult to know which, if any, of the speakers or tales to privilege. So if it is a moral work, the *Canterbury Tales* hardly seems to encourage moral generalizations. Yet such peculiarities are just the sort exemplarity can and does embrace. Chaucer and Gower are not so different when it comes to the final cause of rhetorical practice, and at last, as I will insist throughout, sometimes their most negative, evasive, or aggressive exemplary narratives succeed in reality *because* they fail in fiction. What both poets share is a concern that their audiences learn to use examples *better*. So I will conclude that Chaucer is frequently as morally serious as Gower (who can be mischievous like Chaucer), in the sense we can give the term "moral" in its connection with Aristotelian traditions of casuistry – with a difference: both are exemplary genealogists of morals rather than just representative moralizers.

My ethical criticism is not motivated by any prior commitment to the morality of Chaucer or Gower, and in fact my interest in these two poets originated in an attitude altogether alien to the one expressed most memorably by that didactic Duchess, full of sententiousness but no sense, who scolds Alice in Wonderland: "Tut, tut, child . . . There is a moral in everything, if you can but discover it." Naturally predisposed against the sentiment and all it implies, I have in fact had to learn from Gower and Chaucer how to read for the moral all over again.

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Reading for the Moral:
Controversies and Trajectories

> 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.[1]

My characterization of the ethical potentialities of exemplary rhetoric admittedly flies in the face of a commonplace critical presumption about the teleology of morals and the authoritarian nature of didactic literature. A composite sketch of the teleological account might take the following form: morality took an unfortunate turn in the Middle Ages when it assimilated itself to Church-dominated dogmatism, until moral rationalism found its feet again in the autonomous ethics of Enlightenment reason and Reformist spirituality. The assumption is that modern philosophy forever made ethics personal and appealingly complex again; and so in the vicissitudes of history, medieval morality stands out for its inflexibility, severity, or naive simplicity.

The plotline of this grandest of narratives is discernable in the work of Michel Foucault, in whose view the move from Hellenic to Christian morality is analyzed as one of a post-lapsarian descent into "a very strong 'juridification' – more precisely, a very strong 'codification' – of the moral experience."[2] Prior to medieval times, so Foucault argues, the pagan morality of the Greeks constituted an "art of life." In contrast to this salutary "aestheticism" of the ancients, medieval Christianity offered only a cold, otherworldly moral "asceticism," preoccupied with austerity practices rather than the use of pleasure, with the removal of desire rather than regulation of it, with the uncertain condition of the soul instead of the real goods of the community, and finally (does this follow?) with care of others more than care of the self.[3] In other histories medieval morality is similarly disparaged, but now for how it fails to stack up against modern philosophy. G. E. M. Anscombe is surely not the first to attribute to the premodern centuries a primitive "divine-command theory" and archaic "*law*

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1   Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York, 1982), p. 9.
2   *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality: Volume 2*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1990), p. 30.
3   For a concise overview see "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow and Hubert Dreyfus (New York, 1997), pp. 253–80.

conception of ethics."[4] The opinion still has currency today. J. B. Schneewind begins his very recent history of moral philosophy with remarks on how medieval ethics was rule-bound, legalistic, "heteronomous" (mediated by divine or institutional authority rather than availing itself of the progressive idea of rational self-governance), antedating the great Kantian "invention of autonomy."[5] Such uncharitable views are unfortunately corroborated by earlier generations of medievalists for whom medieval morality is enthralled by superstition, fixed by the ordinances of natural law, and held under the sway of an "idea of papal-imperial absolutism."[6] In yet other accounts a high degree of "formalism" and "idealism" is attributed to the old moral systems, with their "eternal verities."[7] Medieval ethics is thus painted *en bloc* as unchanging, unitary, inescapably political and, to say the least, rather uninteresting.[8]

Perhaps it is due to the calumny attached to medieval morality generally that didactic rhetoric has not fared well in modern critical appraisals either. Medieval narrative of all kinds is of course distinctive for its blatant didacticism, a distinction that has not endeared the old literature to periods such as our own, for whom normativity in the realm of art can seem patronizing, unsophisticated, outright eviscerating. *Exemplum*, not unexpectedly, has become a term of invective in so much criticism. Indeed it is a common sentiment that exemplary literature is intolerable because enslaved to traditional wisdom, even if the supporting assumption is faulty: surely *some* received ideas are worth transmitting.[9] Even so, such criticisms do locate a significant limitation of exemplary morality, of which certain medieval writers were well aware, and I will return to the point in discussing my literary exemplars in the chapters that follow. Yet the idea that exempla simply circulate past prejudices needs further questioning so as to dispel the notions that morality is transmitted just one-way (from norm to narrative), that moral meaning is unaffected by historical circumstance, and that readers are passive consumers. Such assumptions are commonly built in to definitions of the

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4   See "Modern Moral Philosophy," *The Definition of Morality*, ed. G. Wallace and A. D. M. Walker (London, 1970), p. 216.

5   J. B. Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 3–33.

6   David Saville Muzzey, "Medieval Morals," *International Journal of Ethics* 17.1 (October 1906), pp. 29–47.

7   Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages: A Study of the Forms of Life, Thought, and Art in France and the Netherlands in the XIVth and XVth Centuries* (New York, 1924), pp. 195–6 and 212.

8   The work of Alasdair MacIntyre, in *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, 1984), and Charles Taylor, in *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, 1989), largely breaks with the stereotype and provides detailed treatments of medieval ethics, though finally even their work charts a historical teleology, from simple (premodern) to complex (modern), that is inauspicious for medieval developments.

9   For example, J. A. Burrow owns that "stories which represent themselves as 'examples' . . . are something of an embarrassment," because through exemplification "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: Chaucer, Gower, Langland and the* Gawain *Poet* (New Haven, 1971), p. 83. Burrow offers a subtler and more positive analysis of exemplification in a later book, *Medieval Writers and Their Work: Middle English Literature and its Background, 100–1500* (Oxford, 1982), pp. 82–4 and 107–18.

medieval exemplum, and they have the effect of writing off medieval rhetoric as a serious vehicle of moral deliberation, and of prescribing for audiences practices they themselves may never have approved. For example, Joerg O. Fichte thinks the exemplum "has a definite meaning, which should be accepted and not reflected upon."[10] Similarly, Alexander Gelley writes that "Since the truth of Christian teaching was not open to question, exempla served to educate and persuade, not to analyze or test doctrines."[11] Speaking of the preaching of the English friars W. A. Hinnebusch likewise claims, "The anecdote was kept in proper subordination as an auxiliary and not allowed to usurp the place of doctrine."[12] Other critics, moreover, hold that the doctrinal aspect serves to repress any genuine historical narrative. As Karlheinz Stierle argued long ago exemplarity "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."[13] Others have reiterated that the "reproducibility"[14] of the example privileges correspondence over time, and that medieval exemplarity posits "uniformity in history."[15] Timothy Hampton generates a teleology of Western epistemological thought based on such notions: he claims medieval exemplarity, with its tendency to conceive of the simultaneity of past-and-present in "eschatological time," was soon outmoded by an enlightened Renaissance humanism for which discrete historical events take on true singularity and originality.[16] Given the prevailing view of what must seem to be the tyranny of the medieval exemplum, the rhetoric has lately become interesting only inasmuch as norms attempting to contain narratives seem to get subverted.[17] So, for instance, Chaucer is now acclaimed for being the first English writer to transcend the exemplum form and experiment with a newfound and more interestingly complex genre, the novella.[18]

10 "Incident–History–Exemplum–Novella: The Transformation of History in Chaucer's *Physician's Tale*," *Florilegium* 5 (1983), p. 198.

11 "Introduction," *Unruly Examples: On the Rhetoric of Exemplarity*, ed. Alexander Gelley (Stanford, 1995), p. 4.

12 As cited in Fritz Kemmler, *"Exempla" in Context: A Historical and Critical Study of Robert Mannyng of Brunne's "Handlynge Synne"* (Tübingen, 1984), p. 169.

13 "Three Moments in the Crisis of Exemplarity: Boccaccio-Petrarch, Montaigne, and Cervantes," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 59.4 (October 1998), p. 581. See further Karlheinz Stierle, "Story as Exemplum: Exemplum as Story," in *New Perspectives in German Literary Criticism*, ed. Richard Amacher and Victor Lange and trans. David Wilson, et al. (Princeton, 1979).

14 John D. Lyons, *Exemplum: The Rhetoric of Exemplarity in Early Modern France and Italy* (Princeton, 1989), pp. 11–12.

15 Peter Von Moos, "The Use of *Exempla* in the *Policraticus* of John of Salisbury," in *The World of John of Salisbury*, ed. Michael Wilks (Oxford, 1979), pp. 258–9.

16 *Writing From History: The Rhetoric of Exemplarity in Renaissance Literature* (Ithaca, 1990). In a series of papers from the 1994 Renaissance Studies colloquium published in the *Journal of the History of Ideas* 59.4 (1998), Stierle among others also credits the evolution of exemplarity away from the demonstrative and prescriptive rhetoric of the Middle Ages, with its supposed moral certainties and eternal verities, to the more reflective and cautious rhetoric of Montaigne and Cervantes.

17 Cf. Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power: The Medieval Exemplum and the Chaucerian Tradition* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 3, 26, and 62, on the way moral authority is ordinarily construed as "simple" vis-à-vis narrative "complexity."

18 Fichte, "Incident–History–Exemplum–Novella," p. 203.

Part of the reason for the overwhelming impatience with medieval didactic rhetoric is that modern literary critics have, as Wayne Booth explains, come to prefer stories that speak to them less as teachers and more as friends. Medieval *exempla* have a distinctly pedagogical aim that is clearly anathema to contemporary aesthetic sensibilities. Contemporary literary criticism of nearly all schools prefers narratives that are oblique, inexplicit, and irreducibly complex if not subversive: "techniques or styles or plot forms that 'close' questions are always inferior, the very mark of the non-literary or non-aesthetic or didactic."[19] It remains a familiar view as a result that exemplary narratives are no more than debased forms of literature: unimaginative and sub-literary on one hand, politically suspect functions of hegemonic cultural authority on the other. Exactly how far outside academic circles such skepticism has spread is open to question, given that today industries still thrive on a popular taste for didactic exemplary narratives (e.g., anecdotes in books of pop psychology). Even so, critics insist on a dramatic break with the didactic and exemplary past. François Rigolet among others speaks of a Renaissance "crisis of exemplarity."[20] Hampton also outlines the evolution of exemplarity from benighted medieval past to early modern daybreak. Chaucerians like Fichte date a comparable crisis in literary exemplarity to the late fourteenth century, the period with which this book is concerned of course.

The disagreement over exactly when the "crisis" occurred perhaps indicates that every period has its usual suspects. But what is common to most accounts is the assumption that it is no longer feasible to yoke art and morality in the old ways. New ways now seem possible, however, with the advent of the so-called "ethical turn."[21] The intersection of ethics and aesthetics – specifically the exemplarity of narrative art – has become topical again thanks to renewed interest in literature as a distinctive form of instruction. From the standpoint of medieval exemplarity, though, the ethical criticism in vogue nowadays is not always helpful when it comes to conceptualizing premodern practices. For one thing, ethical critics have almost uniformly ignored the Middle Ages, choosing to focus instead on classical or (more frequently) modern works. For another, certain exponents of the ethical turn continue to perpetuate distinctions that are inimical to understanding medieval forms. A variety of avant-garde ethical criticism rules out the possibility that exemplification as medieval writers practiced it could ever have been "ethical." For example, J. Hillis Miller in his *The Ethics of Reading* impugns traditional didacticism when he observes that "ethics involves narrative" ideally "as its subversive accomplice,"[22] leaving no room for more

19 *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley, 1988), p. 61.
20 Rigolet speaks of "the humanist's disenchantment with imitative symbols of moral conduct"; "The Renaissance Crisis of Exemplarity," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 59.4 (October 1998), p. 559. Stierle, in "Story as Exemplum: Exemplum as Story," made much the same argument in the seventies and restates his views in the *Journal of the History of Ideas* 59.4 (1998). The collected papers indicate that Stierle and his colleagues continue to be fascinated with an early modern break with the past, even after dutifully questioning "any teleological reading of history and literature" (p. 562).
21 The phrase "ethical turn" of course serves to obfuscate a venerable tradition of the moral criticism of literature reaching from Dante to Sidney and Arnold to Leavis.
22 *The Ethics of Reading; Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin* (New York, 1987), p. 23.

direct or demonstrative forms of expression. Geoffrey Galt Harpham in *Getting it Right: Language, Literature, and Ethics* speaks in a similar postmodern vein when he states: "narrative invariably disturbs and de-stabilizes the principles it is enlisted to exemplify."[23] At issue in these analogous formulations is the question of where to locate the ethical in the realm of the aesthetic, and whether the ethical (traditionally conceived) can endure the pressure of the aesthetic. Given the perceived conflict between art and morality, how do such critics conceptualize a narrative ethics that meaningfully engages moral practice? Adam Zachary Newton, sharing Miller's and Harpham's suspicion if not disdain of traditional modes of moral exemplification, attempts to solve the dilemma: "literary fiction . . . 'infects' better than it 'teaches'."[24] Should we wish to understand medieval rhetoric, we could do much better than to adopt such a view – especially one that makes morality out to be much more coercive than it is usually thought to be.[25]

Such are among the most common presumptions arrayed against medieval exemplary narrative: i.e., medieval morality is primitive and monolithic; the medieval exemplum is sub-literary and ahistorical; and didactic literature is simply outmoded. For these and other reasons literary critics now almost universally indicate a preference for literary texts that are non-didactic and even anti-exemplary. My line of defense against such prejudices will be two-pronged: on the one hand, I will make a case that the qualities others describe as vices of the medieval rhetoric are its potential virtues; on the other hand, I will propose a more accurate and conceptually coherent conception of the ethics of exemplarity that conforms to the historical evidence.

Reading for the Moral

It is easy enough to appreciate how exemplification could come to be seen as authoritarian or doctrinaire. Many moralizations are indeed plainly incongruous, reductive, seemingly alien to the drama of the narratives to which they are attached. One can also see that exemplary rhetoric might limit one's perception of historical change by emphasizing continuities and circumstantial similarities. Medieval exemplarity in this context may seem to veil diversity and singularity, to suppress contingency and temporality, to tyrannize difference. Hyperbole aside, we may simply want to say that examples fail to live up to the complexities of real life.

However, as Larry Scanlon observes in his useful recent study, criticism that focuses exclusively on such consequences is blinkered because it sees

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23 *Getting it Right: Language, Literature, and Ethics* (Chicago, 1992), p. 160.
24 *Narrative Ethics*, p. 67.
25 Newton (otherwise suspicious of moralizing) does not seem to be bothered by the nefarious implications of contagion, though an *infectious* rhetoric sounds more frightful than traditional pedagogy. Why Newton, Miller, and others should be so loathe to admit direct moral imperatives or unambiguous affirmations and prescriptions into their conceptions of narrative ethics remains unclear.

exemplarity and literary didacticism only as a kind of "pure mystification,"[26] and this, as I shall contend, is to underestimate the rhetoric *and* its practitioners. First of all, rhetoric that is overt in its pedagogical aims can be treated with less hostility for its at least being forthright about its motivations and effects. Exemplarity is not viral; aiming to teach rather than infect, medieval exempla are as it were honest about their intentions.[27] Indeed medieval literature was rarely an avowedly neutral or innocent occupation. Further, it is not the case that the exemplum forecloses on historical change and contingency; to the contrary, exempla open themselves to a diversity of responses in the futurity of decision and the freedom of ethical practice *because* they apply across time. It will take some effort to think through such practices. Accustomed to contemplating stories rather than using them, historical scholarship typically focuses on what texts *mean* rather than what they can *do*, and so we easily miss the multiple ways texts are practiced. Finally, the evident simplicity or indeed crudity of didactic rhetoric is not in itself discreditable: "Crude thoughts," wrote 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."[28] Action must in the end have about it a decisiveness and simplicity – choosing to do *this*, not *that* – which exemplary rhetoric may well do much to nourish and sustain.

The value of exemplary rhetoric, then, may be seen as lying beyond the boundary lines drawn by our current political preoccupations with subversions of mystifying discourses. 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. John Dagenais argues along such lines that to think of medieval texts existing only "to signify,"[29] is mistaken. There is in fact an integral personal or subjective process involved in the reception of exemplary texts that further ramifies the ethical potential of medieval rhetoric. Rhetoric since Aristotle has itself been conceived of as a practical science, with human action and edification as its end; late medieval exemplary rhetoric, as we shall see in the next chapter, can be situated within this tradition of rhetorical ethics. For now we need only observe that the *end* of exemplary rhetoric is not to find a determinate moralization or thematic

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26 *Narrative, Authority, and Power*, p. 29.
27 John Lyons correctly observes, "when viewed in the context of fictions generally, the example seems less manipulative than many non-exemplary fictions"; *Exemplum*, p. 23. We must of course acknowledge the presence of literature for recreation, and indeed as Chaucer admonishes it would sometimes be impertinent to "maken ernest of game" (*Miller's Prologue* I. 3186) where fun and disport are indulged. Yet medieval writers held that even poetry of pure *delectatio* had a profitable use, according to Glending Olson, *Literature as Recreation in the Later Middle Ages* (Ithaca, 1982). Booth's generalization is not without merit: "Almost all writers until quite recently have claimed to teach virtue *while* giving pleasure"; *Company We Keep*, p. 211.
28 Cited in Hannah Arendt's "Introduction" to *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York, 1968), p. 15.
29 *The Ethics of Reading in Manuscript Culture*, p. xvii.

closure, but to discover how to live a moral life. To combat the old stereotypes I want to insist upon the pragmatic orientation towards life-application that constitutes a potentiality in a certain form of reception: reading for the moral.[30]

Reading for the moral can be taken to describe what medieval exegetes called the "tropological" response. Hugh of St Victor set out what he conceived to be the basic adequation between the concepts of tropology and exemplarity in his "De Tribus Maximus Circumstantiis Gestorum." Granted, Hugh is speaking of scripture, yet, as I hope to establish, tropology need not be restricted to exegetical activity:

> 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 should be doing.[31]

In this conception exemplarity is a function rather than a form of rhetoric, perhaps just as well given the lack of consensus over defining the exemplum.[32] The exemplary text is, simply, the one in which *we recognize what we should be doing*. Scholars have heretofore 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, be composed of empirical fact or fiction, consist of opaque doctrine *sub integumentis* or a self-evident intentional meaning – or some hybrid combination of all these things. The question of what kinds of narrative count as exemplary – history, saints' lives, Bible stories, fables – further exercises critics. In this book, however, "exemplarity" will not circumscribe a genre or mere textual property, though a shared set of features surely recur in the examples I examine. Rather, for my purposes, exemplary narrative is a phenomenon to be associated with, but never limited to, the didactic exemplum as found in sermons, devotional writing, amatory poetry, and political treatise, all of which share a practical concern with respect to *doing*. Ethical action is, in truth, motivated by a limitless number of

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30 My phrase "reading for the moral" is inspired by Peter Brooks' *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Oxford, 1984), the echo of which should signal my distance from more than indebtedness to his interesting analysis. The main difference between our approaches is that whereas Brooks emphasizes the ways narrative plots generates a desire to *keep on reading*, I analyse the moments when it seems right to *stop* reading and to start putting what one has read into practice.

31 Excerpted in Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, Appendix A, pp. 264–5 [emphasis mine].

32 A summary of opinion is given in Lyons's excellent "Introduction," and Notes, pp. 243–7; 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 definition. In accepting the heterogeneity of exemplary materials I am following Kemmler as well as Thomas Fredrick Crane, ed., *The Exempla or Illustrative Stories from the Sermones Vulgares of Jacques de Vitry* (London, 1890), note on p. xviii, and Frederic C. Tubach, *Index Exemplorum: A Handbook of Medieval Religious Tales*, Folklore Fellows Communications 86, no. 204 (Helsinki, 1969), p. 523. J.-Th. Welter's definition, because it is so capacious, remains very 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 dans la littérature religieuse et didactique du moyen âge* (Paris, 1927), p. 1.

things, and so in principle many more things besides narrative texts (e.g., glass, sculpture, music, and so on) could and did serve an exemplary purpose in the later Middle Ages.

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

> . . . 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.[33]

As other medievalists have theorized using different terms, the business of what I call reading for the moral in this literary context involves the "making one's own" of what one reads,[34] the "projection" of oneself and one's personal condition onto the text through selective interpretation,[35] the "inventional" dislocation and appropriation of texts to new reading contexts[36] – or as I prefer to put it, keeping the metaphor of tropology in mind, a reflexive and improvisatory receptive activity of turning.

Medieval didactic theory was signally preoccupied with the impact of the ethos of art upon the will and affections, or the way art effects a change in persons.[37] The didacticism of the ethics of exemplarity likewise gestures beyond or operates outside the 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 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 by passive consumers of exemplary morality. Rather, the exemplary text preserves individual agency and autonomy at the same time that it prompts moral agents and gives them practical guidance concerning future action.[38] Tropology works on texts *and* readers, which means that it is not always easy to know how best to describe the phenomenon. Are we

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33 Excerpted in Carruthers' *Book of Memory*, pp. 264–5.
34 Carruthers, *Book of Memory*, p. 164.
35 Dagenais, *The Ethics of Reading*, p. 14.
36 Rita Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages: Academic traditions and vernacular texts* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 7–8.
37 See Robert L. Montgomery, *The Reader's Eye: Studies in Didactic Literary Theory from Dante to Tasso* (Berkeley, 1979).
38 John Dagenais concurs 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" (p. 15).

speaking of texts, or a reading practice? Are exemplary texts distinguishable by properties intrinsic to them, or only by extrinsic uses or effects? How do we know when reading for the moral has taken place? We should not shy away from such questions, even if they yield contradictory answers. By respecting the contradictions we shall better understand the unpredictable and complex nature of the ethics of exemplary narrative and its relation to "what we should be doing."

Wittgenstein, upon whose later work one can profitably draw to make sense of the good of examples, makes one of the strongest modern cases for exemplification as a cognitive and pedagogic mode, and not surprisingly his influence is deeply felt in recent discussions of ethics and literary aesthetics.[39] He is well-known for having argued that, if one wants to know what anything means or is good for, it is useless merely to adduce abstract rules because they are not self-interpreting; nor do they comprehend the specific practices actually derived from them. Every rule makes alternative applications possible, and no rule is a sufficient description of its eventual application.[40] And so remarks Wittgenstein, "nothing has so far been *done*, when a thing has been named."[41] Ordinarily, understanding comes about only when the "name" is seen as belonging to a form of life: "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."[42] All thought is in this sense exemplary; and instruction which utilizes the insight will be the more effective in teaching us, precisely, what we should be *doing*. Accordingly, what one really requires for everyday understanding is examples, illustrations, descriptions: appropriate and perspicuous samples, specific instances of a rule being followed, embodied forms of life. One acquires knowledge by seeing it put into practice, because as Cora Diamond puts it, "the capacity to use a descriptive term is a capacity to participate in the life from which that word comes."[43]

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39 Modern theorists of exemplification from whom I have taken courage include Nelson Goodman and Charles Altieri. Both are influenced by Wittgenstein. Moral philosophers who are influenced by Wittgenstein's "ordinary language philosophy" include Stanley Cavell, Cora Diamond, and Paul Johnston, from all of whom I have learned a great deal. In such recent developments there is a concerted effort to include rhetoric or literary expression in the field of ethics.

40 See *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Toronto, 1958), §§ 77, 190–201. For exposition of the following ideas see Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford, 1979), p. 185, and Robert J. Fogelin, "Wittgenstein's critique of philosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein*, ed. Hans Sluga and David G. Stern (Cambridge, 1996), p. 53.

41 *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 24.

42 *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 34.

43 "Losing Your Concepts," *Ethics* 98.2 (January 1988), p. 267. Cavell has some relevant remarks about exemplification in the context of theories of language acquisition that help clarify the point. In his Wittgensteinian analysis, 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" (p. 178). Cavell enables us to see that all kinds of expression – not just pedagogical kinds – can be taken as exemplary. Charles Altieri, *Canons and Consequences: Reflections on the Ethical Force of Imaginative Ideals* (Evanston, 1990), p. 101, also has argued 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." Cf. Booth, *The Company We Keep*, p. 13 and pp. 151–3.

Exemplification has a particularly important place in moral cognition for Wittgenstein: ". . . always ask yourself: How did we *learn* the meaning of the word ('good' for instance)? From what sort of examples? in what language-games?"[44] To be intelligible and useful, moral generalities must be given specific content. Medieval exemplary rhetoric assumes the same radical insight – close to the grammar of Wittgenstein's thoughts, but in fact rooted in an age-old tradition of Aristotelian practical rationality that matured into moral casuistry, about which I will speak further – regarding the immanence of ordinary understanding where morals are concerned. Exemplary narratives generate morals "from below" even at the moment morality engenders them "from above." Normative moral meaning is not taken to prescind "upward" from the particular and concrete without a simultaneous and corresponding "downward" turn to the level of narrative specificity. A reciprocal movement between narrativity and normativity (apparently circular, but in fact involving mutuality without tautology) thus constitutes a pragmatics of exemplarity, and it presupposes nothing less than the initiation of the reader into a form of life.

The Pragmatic Reduction

Edith Wyschogrod argues that saints' lives "teach moral practice by way of practice,"[45] and to that extent exemplary morality is *constituted* in the very process and particularity of its exemplification. Exemplary narrative gives flesh and bones to abstract morals.[46] But when and how are morals so embodied? Ultimately, we only know for certain that they are incorporated into the understanding when they motivate a singular practical response of a moral kind in their recipient. Reading for the moral is incomplete without the transition from text to meditation and action, or the projection of meaning from textual object to reading subject. Until it is realized in the conscience or conduct of a practitioner as a form of life, exemplary morality exists only *in potentia*. How the text moves a reader to action deserves close consideration.

One way to describe the transition from objective text to subjective response is to speak of a pragmatic *reduction*. In current academic usage the word "reductive" indicates a negative value judgement, for example when it is used to disparage language that falsifies the real complex nature of things, but reductiveness is not an intrinsic evil (nor does it seem unnatural), and it locates an essential aspect of the ethics of exemplarity which we cannot ignore. Literary historians should come to appreciate that reductive moralization represented an acceptable and in fact indispensable way of putting exemplary narrative to use.

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44 *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 36.
45 *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy* (Chicago, 1990), p. 52.
46 Alan E. Bernstein, "The Exemplum as 'Incorporation of Abstract Truth' in the Thought of Humbert of Romans and Stephen of Bourbon," in *The Two Laws: Studies in Medieval Legal History Dedicated to Stephen Kuttner*, ed. Laurent Mayali and Stephanie A. J. Tibbetts (Washington, 1990), pp. 82–96.

First, there is an epistemological point: we would not have examples so much as clusters of discrete and meaningless data if it were not for the reduced reference we abstract from them.[47] Examples will have to bear aspects of their exemplarity within them to be examples *of* something. But an ethical analysis takes us further. Exemplary narrative lends itself to pragmatic reduction insofar as it has a point, and the whittling down of exemplary narrative to a point is in fact vital to practices of everyday life. In Middle English the verb *reducen* had multiple positive connotations, signifying variously to bring the mind back to virtue, recollect, restore, apply, summarize, or interpret.[48] So it is appropriate that the moralizations in at least one copy of the *Gesta Romanorum* are labeled *Reduccio*, and that Gower will on occasion gloss his exemplary tales with the Latin *ad memoriam reducens*. Titles of moral treatises such as Bonaventure's *Reductio artium ad theologiam* and Bresuire's *Reductorium morale* – the fifteenth book of which contains the *Ovidius moralizatus* – attest to comparable usage. We should be able to see, then, that one vital aspect of tropology has to do with making exemplary narratives yield a *point*.[49]

My emphasis on the reduced point, or what I shall call the "punctuality" of reading for the moral, should allow us to explore the importance and complexity of decision in relation to exemplary narrative. A point, in whatever form it takes, may be arrived at through an open-ended or a closed text, but in any case it is something determinate. What I have described speaks to something that is no doubt generic to ethics of any period: it asks for decisive action alongside careful reflection. Harpham puts the point memorably: "without decision, ethics would be condemned to dithering."[50] But *pointing* is also a profoundly medieval phenomenon.[51] Basically, it expresses an either/or practical precept reduced from the both/and quality of narrative. Karlheinz Stierle describes very well the doubleness of exemplarity in this regard:

47 Cf. Peter Von 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' " (p. 231).

48 *MED*, "reducen," (*v.*) q. v. 1–3.

49 Cf. Aquinas's definition of prudence as discovering "the ultimate point, that which is singular, because that which is to be done is singular" [*prudentia autem extremi, id est singularis, quia est operabilis quod est singulare*], in *Sententia libri Ethicorum*, *Sancti Thomae de Aquino opera omnia*, vol. 47 (Rome, 1969), 6.7.1142a23, as translated in Dennis J. M. Bradley's *Aquinas on the Twofold Human Good: Reason and Human Happiness in Aquinas's Moral Science* (Washington, 1997), p. 189.

50 "Ethics," *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, 2nd ed., ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago, 1995), p. 398.

51 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 a different technical sense of "point" see J. A. Burrow's *Ricardian Poetry*, pp. 69–78.

> The exemplum is a form of expansion and reduction all in one – expansion as regards its underlying maxim, reduction as regards a story from which is extracted and isolated that which the speech action of the exemplum needs in order to take on concrete form. As far as the direction of the text composition is concerned, there is no doubt. The basic rule underlying the unity of the whole is the 'purpose' of the exemplum – the moral precept.[52]

The moral point, which in my own view may or may not actually unify the whole in a stated precept, is that at which the reader arrives in any text so as to discover its utility. The use may be highly personalized, adapted to individual circumstance, relative to time and place. 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."[53]

Ultimately, getting at the pith of the matter means deciding 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" – a decision which as he specifies "is implied by the moral category of responsibility."[54] 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 point up more than a single persuasive alternative.[55] 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 problem inspires Peter Von Moos to ask, "which binding rule, which standard of control can eliminate arbitrary treatment of interpretable texts?"[56] Yet the text does not necessarily yield that kind of executive "control." 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 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 moral agents. Tropological reduction need not be a purely cognitive or even fully conscious exercise. We must allow that a recognition of particular moral relevance will now and again 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 defence, but to finding a fit."[57]

52 Stierle, "Story as Exemplum: Exemplum as Story," p. 23.
53 *The Ethics of Reading*, p. 15.
54 "Story as Exemplum: Exemplum as Story," pp. 23 and 36.
55 Moos, pp. 233–4. D. W. Robertson's comment in *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton, 1962), p. 316, "there is also no single definitive interpretation of something said *per integumentum*," is still very instructive.
56 "The Use of *Exempla*," p. 245.
57 Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis, 1978), p. 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 intellective.[58]

Etymologically, exemplum derives from the Latin *eximere*, "to take out, to cut," and so signifies a selection or sampling from some greater whole. Again, an example is *of* something. Gower for one acknowledges this selective or restrictive aspect of exemplary narrative with an occasional nod in the direction of alternative meanings that lay outside his immediate purview; in marginalia he will admit that his tales have at least (*saltem*) or especially (*presertim* or *in speciali*) a stated moral application; that they could have other applications does not bother him, and perhaps one of the more audacious claims of this book is that they need not always detain us either. The ethics of exemplarity I am describing also encourages the process of cutting meaning from exempla themselves – a further pragmatic reduction; not necessarily close reading. Many medieval texts indeed encourage readers to amend and adapt stories to the contingencies of life. "This adaptation process," explains Mary Carruthers, "allows for a tampering with the original text 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.' "[59] Thus the inventional activity of "making one's own" of what one reads entails a subjective approach to textual objects, which to some might seem a scandalously irresponsible tampering with textual integrity, a selective and erratic kind of interpretation that lacks consistency or rigour. Yet reading for the moral never seems to have been a wholly predictable phenomenon; nor is it always documentable, 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.[60]

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58 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!"; *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 172. Meaning 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 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 s*eeing* and *seeing as* are two very different experiences (see *Philosophical Investigations*, 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 right application, rather than finding oneself bemused by the way it merely seems right.

59 *Book of Memory*, p. 164. In *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400–1200* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 156–9, Carruthers discusses the way medieval etymology similarly violates the philological integrity of words.

60 Exegesis becomes eisegesis. See Dagenais, pp. 24–5, 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),

   To conclude: If morality is the theory, examples are the practice. Ultimately, the relations which obtain between particular examples and any given audience are not stable ones which apply across all instances; nor do all exempla signify equally well. Gower and Chaucer show that exempla are by their nature diverse and need to be approached case by case. My propaedeutic is simply meant to address the case of a reasonably responsible reader who puts exemplary narrative into moral practice.

though handy for figuring the praxis of reading for the moral, admittedly represents contested terrain; Lawrence Besserman, *Chaucer's Biblical Poetics* (Norman, 1998), pp. 140–4, discusses the Wycliffite reaction against the orthodoxy of biblical glossing.

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Rhetorical Reason: Cases, Conscience, and Circumstances

In its ethical capacity exemplary rhetoric has been maligned at least since the time of Kant's fatal pronouncement, "worse service cannot be rendered morality than that an attempt be made to derive it from examples."[1] The eighteenth-century rationalist could not accept that moral philosophy might legitimately be based upon the rhetoric of example, or rather, as it was known, reasoning from cases *a posteriori*.[2] When it came to the metaphysical grounding of morals Kant famously rejected cases and everything circumstantial for that matter, preferring "categorical imperatives" over all things "hypothetical." Such a tectonic shift away from rhetoric towards pure *a priori* reason comes as close as we're likely to get to locating the real modernity of Enlightenment thought and the origins of what Wittgenstein lamented as "the philosophers' contempt for the particular case."[3] Wittgenstein himself defied modern prejudice, invoking the example routinely in his own investigations (e.g., about the meaning of *good*), and a number of theorists, often following his example, now extol its virtues and acknowledge that moral reason "cannot be elucidated apart from its exemplifications."[4] Actually, examples have always been employed in philosophical ethics (e.g., Gyges' Ring, the Trolley Dilemma, the Brain in a Vat, etc.), serving in practice as a form of persuasion if not also assisting the formulation of solutions. In Kant's case it is now widely accepted that his ethics founders on an unwillingness to give the example, irrepressible in his own moral rhetoric, a rightful place in theory.

Medieval philosophers, orators, and poets were demonstrably more candid about the rhetorical dimensions of the ethical claims they sought to advance, and it is the purpose of this chapter to consider briefly the history of ideas informing medieval practice. Medieval practice can be defined as a type of

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1 Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis, 1981), 2.408.
2 See H.-D. Kittsteiner, "Kant and casuistry," *Conscience and Casuistry*, ed. Edmund Leites (New York, 1988), pp. 185–213. However, Kant's aesthetics and his treatment of "taste" does allow for reflection upon cases in the formation of judgement, on which see David Parker, *Ethics, Theory, and the Novel* (Cambridge, 1994), Chapter 1, note 3; Alexander Gelley, "Introduction," *Unruly Examples*; and Hans Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed., (London, 1975).
3 Cited in Paul Johnston, *Wittgenstein and Moral Philosophy*, p. 14.
4 Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 10.

case-reasoning, or moral "casuistry" (a word pejorized only in the mid-seventeenth century thanks to Pascal), which has roots in traditions of Aristotelian thought passed down through the Middle Ages in a variety of philosophical, oratorical, and homiletic sources. Although the genesis of casuistry in antiquity and the Middle Ages is itself fairly well documented, the kinship between case-based morality and the medieval rhetoric of example has not yet been elucidated.[5] The exemplum may be seen as a privileged site for an early form of case-reasoning or casuistry, or what has most aptly been described as "rhetorical reason."[6] There is no total homogeneity among medieval writers and thinkers who appeal to rhetoric as the ground of practical deliberation, yet it may at least be observed that in earlier centuries there was a shared conception of morality attaching itself to particular cases, working itself out in accord with circumstances rather than over against them, and striving to serve the diverse needs of conscientious moral agents. In what follows, after giving a fuller definition of casuistic reasoning, I will explore key texts and social practices that constitute the legacy of rhetorical reason with its grounding in cases, conscience, and circumstances.

Defining Cases

Exemplary rhetoric and the kind of moral thinking it engenders occupied a most important place in intellectual traditions of the West. 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. Others argue that casuistry flourished much earlier, manifesting itself in particular in penitential theology and speculative philosophy of the later Middle Ages. All writers on the subject agree, though, that various antique and medieval moral discourses were at least precocious of casuistry at its height.[7] Given the scope of this study and the long history of casuistry, I confine

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5   The only critic I have found linking them is J. A. Burrow, who remarks in passing that the application of moral ideas was in the period "a delicate and difficult art, conducted under the name of 'casuistry'"; *Medieval Writers and Their Work*, p. 116. The standard account of the theory and transmission of case-reasoning is Albert R. Jonsen and Stephen Toulmin's *The Abuse of Casuistry: A History of Moral Reasoning* (Berkeley, 1988). I have consulted Kenneth E. Kirk, *Conscience and its Problems: An Introduction to Casuistry* (London, 1927); James F. Keenan and Thomas A. Shannon, eds, *The Context of Casuistry* (Washington, 1995); Richard B. Miller, *Casuistry and Modern Ethics: A Poetics of Practical Reasoning* (Chicago, 1996); and Edmund Leites, ed., *Conscience and Casuistry in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1988).

6   James M. Tallmon, "Casuistry and the Role of Rhetorical Reason in Ethical Inquiry," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 28.4 (1995), pp. 377–87.

7   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"), among others. Keenan and Shannon associate full-grown casuistry with the Reformation period but extend its high watermark to the eighteenth century, and among its precursors mention medieval mendicant preaching and philosophical nominalism. Casuistry fell into disrepute with the publication of Blaise Pascal's *Provincial Letters*, a satirical polemic against the Jesuits' alleged permissive doctrine of probability. Ever since, the term has been synonymous with all manner of so-called "medieval" hair-splitting, obfuscation, and unprincipled expediency.

myself here to a discussion of historical precedents that serve to illuminate the ethics of exemplarity, for I am interested in casuistry less as a discrete historical phenomenon, associated with a school of thought, named personages, or time period, than as an enduring pragmatic orientation to problem-solving that cuts across time and is thus irreducible to any single epoch. Casuistry so-conceived simply gives us a useful account of the kind of practical, case-based analysis persons of any period may draw upon.

Casuistry is a diagnostic technique that enables the practitioner to make sense of new cases and unfamiliar circumstances by drawing on analogies with the old and familiar. The best approach to practical dilemmas, according to the casuist, is to model present solutions on successful past ones.[8] And so the practitioner proceeds in an incremental 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, looking for ways to accommodate new cases and circumstances by placing them under an existing genus, or modifying known genera, or a combination of strategies thereof. The essence of the casuistic approach lies in the mind's natural capacity to draw probable conclusions and make independent inferences based on past experience, something we do all the time – in contrast to strict logical deductions from *a priori* axioms à la Kant. In view of its basically experimental aspect, moral casuistry is an especially useful method of resolving ambiguous or marginal cases, or "cases of conscience," for which objective 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 who favor "case-driven" analysis and concomitantly reject "top-down" approaches to ethical dilemmas. Law gives us one useful vantage from which to view casuistry at work, medical practice another.[9] Given that the dilemmas judges or juries and physicians confront can be unprecedented, it makes sense that practitioners in both areas should prefer a kind of deliberation that works from the "bottom up," deriving practical precepts from case-analysis rather than reading off principles from some pre-established moral code. For instance, in any working theory of jurisprudence the practitioner consults existing codified norms for guidance on the understanding that the normative has meaning only in light of a history of actual cases elucidating it. Medical and legal practice, in theory at least, therefore entail an adaptive casuistic approach to problem-solving *par excellence*. In both areas allowance is made for continual tinkering and adjustments and evolution in the classification of cases – even when the capacity to identify new cases

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8   Miller, *Casuistry and Modern Ethics*, p. 21.
9   For the turn towards case-reasoning in the field of medicine see John D. Arras, "Getting Down to Cases: The Revival of Casuistry in Bioethics," *The Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 16 (1991), pp. 29–511, and "Principles and Particularity: The Roles of Cases in Bioethics," *Indiana Law Journal* 69 (1994), pp. 983–1014; H. L. Nelson, ed., *Stories and Their Limits: Narrative Approaches to Bioethics* (New York, 1997), pp. 252–71; and Mark Kuczewski's entry on casuistry in the *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics*, vol. 1, ed. Ruth F. Chadwick (San Diego, 1988).

depends on the relative stability of a classification system. Nothing is immune from contextualization in casuistic practice: the practitioner 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-based reasoning allows for an open-ended dialectic to continually run on between general paradigms and the specific practices yielded up by them.[10] Kenneth E. Kirk spells out the practical consequences of case-reasoning for the fate of moral norms by analogy with 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."[11] Gadamer likens this process of measured change to the "creative supplementing of the law" occurring in the courts whenever a body of legal code is interpreted. So it happens that a "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."[12] Casuistic ethics is simply a recognition of that contingent and creative aspect of practical reason, and in its broad outlines the history of case-reasoning can be traced back to the most ancient debates about philosophy and rhetoric.

Hypotheses, Probability, and Prudence

Says 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."[13] Plato and Aristotle were roughly of the same mind with respect to samples, or what they called "hypotheses," but each philosopher goes on to offer an altogether different appraisal.[14] In the *Republic*, where mention is made of the convenience of

10 Arras remarks in "Getting Down to Cases," pp. 35–6, 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." Keenan and Shannon likewise observe in *The Context of Casuistry*, p. xxi, "This hermeneutics is developmental; its contours are spiral, not circular."
11 *Conscience and its Problems*, p. 125.
12 *Truth and Method*, pp. 37 and 294. Derrida has relevant remarks in "Force of Law: The 'Metaphysical Foundation of Authority,'" *Cardozo Law Review* 11.5–6 (1990), p. 133: "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." See further Drucilla Cornell's *The Philosophy of the Limit* (New York, 1992), where in a chapter entitled "The Call to Judicial Responsibility" she argues that in every case law is put on trial by justice. On "judges judging law" one can also note Aristotle's observation on "equity," which is expressed in a judge's discretion in applying "law." An equitable judge "corrects" the law, as the case requires: "The reason is that all law is universal, but in some areas no universal rule can be correct"; *Nicomachean Ethics*, 5.10, 1137b10–30. For the argument that literary fiction has traditionally grounded itself in equity as against law see Kathy Eden's *Poetic and Legal Fiction in the Aristotelian Tradition* (Princeton, 1986).
13 *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 34.
14 For the following discussion I am greatly indebted to Wesley Trimpi's *Muses of One Mind: The Literary Analysis of Experience and its Continuity* (Princeton, 1983), especially Chapter 2, "The Hypothesis of Literary Discourse." For further context see Owen Barfield's *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry* (New York, 1958), specifically his remarks in the chapter entitled, "Appearance and Hypothesis."

particular figures in the abstract field of geometry, Plato asserts that a truly philosophical mind hastens to dispense with "hypothetical" cases once and for all so as to apprehend eternally existent archetypes.[15] Reason surpasses the shadowy images of this world to apprehend things in themselves, progressing, in other words, beyond examples (as in "one *among* others") to the pure exemplars ("the *only* one").[16] In the realm of ethics, this means that the archetypal Idea of the Good has utter primacy over all particular goods because it exists outside appearance and probability – beyond the ontology of the particular case. Now in a very different spirit Aristotle affirmed that the things in themselves are indivisible from their manifold and concrete instantiations in the world – a rhetorical view contrasting sharply with Platonic reason. Specifically with regard to ethics, Aristotle held that "the good is not something common which corresponds to a single Idea," an expressly anti-Platonic claim which informed a later medieval system of morality and politics.[17] On his fundamentally empirical account of the world and human cognition of it, hypotheses are in their way *constitutive* samples: so for instance, to use Aristotle's own analogy, the study of geometry proceeds by bringing forward to the mind's eye specific figures or shapes, in view of which abstract definitions come alive. Aristotle clearly anticipates the radical rhetoricity of Wittgenstein: "It is impossible to think without an image."[18]

And so it is to Aristotle and his legacy that we must look for the history of rhetorical reason and its connections with exemplary narrative. Like his mathematical thought, Aristotle's aesthetic and rhetorical systems also depend upon the diverse approximations one is able to derive from the sensible realm. In respect of the theatrical arts Aristotle is preoccupied with individual figures and hypothetical action, or as he says noble men of outstanding virtue involved in "the sort of things that *can* happen"[19] – ensuring that the drama has an exemplary

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15 *The Republic*, 2nd ed., trans. Desmond Lee (London, 1974), 533CD.

16 The way of putting the distinction is that of Michael B. Naas in his "Introduction: For Example" to *The Other Heading* by Jacques Derrida (Bloomington, 1992).

17 *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1.7, 1096b25. Aristotle's *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; see further Jean Dunbabin, "Robert Grosseteste as Translator, Transmitter, and Commentator: The 'Nicomachean Ethics,' " *Traditio* 28 (1972), pp. 460–72. In the century before Grosseteste there already circulated books two and three of Aristotle's work, known as the "old Ethics"; at some time in the thirteenth century, an anonymous translator supplied the missing first book to form the "new Ethics." By the fourteenth century various other partial translations and adaptations of Aristotle's *Ethics* (by Nicholas Oresme, Brunetto Latini, Giles of Rome, and – writing in Middle English in the 1380s – John Trevisa) were commonly found 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, and I will turn to Trevisa's translation of Giles of Rome below. For further details consult relevant articles in Normal Kretzmann et al., *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1982), especially pp. 61–77, 657–72, and see the comments in William Robins, "Romance, Exemplum, and the Subject of the *Confessio Amantis*," *SAC* 19 (1997), pp. 166–7 nn 17 and 22.

18 *De memoria* as translated in John H. Randall, *Aristotle* (New York, 1960), p. 96.

19 *Poetics*, trans. George Whalley (Montreal, 1997), § 31.

application offstage in the life of its audience. But it is in the *Rhetoric*, where Aristotle turns to discuss the example, that the practical value of a case-based rhetoric gets spelled out. The example is in Aristotle's account proposed as a form of argument, that is, a mode of persuasion useful in situations where 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 rhetoric.[20] The example, from this vantage conceived as a figure of thought rather than a figure of speech (to make a distinction common among the medieval grammarians), constitutes something like a second-order proof or confirmation. Aristotle calls example "a rhetorical induction."[21] The qualification – *rhetorical* induction – is important to notice, not just because Aristotle is contrasting probable reasoning with the higher-order dialectical reasoning of the analytic induction. Unlike dialectic which strives to ascend to the highest reaches of epistemological certainty, reasoning from example so to speak goes up *and* comes back down, indicating something about the real utility of the rhetoric. William Lyon Benoit, from whom I take much of my direction in this context, 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."[22] Aristotle accordingly describes the example as proceeding 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."[23] One can find no better epitome of case-based reasoning. Aristotelian example thus designates a mode of applying knowledge by moving crab-wise or laterally across known cases, and as such his discussion is at the root of a tradition of problem-solving rationality eventually known as casuistry.

Aristotle's rhetoric of example dovetails with his ethics, an inexact science concerning practice in the contingent realm of particulars.[24] Already in the *Rhetoric* Aristotle teaches that the rhetorical induction has a purpose in guiding action. Deliberative oratory, which seeks to persuade an audience to take a certain course of future action, puts induction to good use when it makes predictions based on past examples.[25] Now the rhetoric is also well matched to the sort of pragmatic and inductive deliberations required of ethical decision-making according to which human moral action is guided by the conditional knowledge of cases and circumstances. One approaches specific cases by recalling past

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20 Rhetoric is conceived functionally, as the "ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion"; *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, trans. George A. Kennedy (New York, 1991), 1.2.1, 1355a. Similarly, exemplarity does not designate a fixed genre or form, but is rather a manner of ethical reflection.
21 *Rhetoric*, 1.2.8, 1356b.
22 "Aristotle's Example: The Rhetorical Induction," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66 (1980), p. 188.
23 *Rhetoric*, 1.2.19, 1357b.
24 *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1.3, 1094b21 and 2.2, 1104a3–7. Jonsen and Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry*, p. 73, note that the *Rhetoric* includes "a digest of books I–IV of the *Nicomachean Ethics*," so that the two disciplines literally converge in Aristotle.
25 *Rhetoric*, 1.9.40, 1368a; and see also 3.17.5, 1418a; 2.20.7–8, 1394a.

ones. And according to Aristotle, case-reasoning of this kind proves necessary to the development of the virtue of prudence, which is a type of practical intelligence that "come[s] to know particulars, since it is concerned with action and action is about particulars."[26] The virtue is clearly a matter of rhetorical reason because it applies itself to reasoning in the sensible and contingent realm, deriving practical precepts from the perception of exemplary cases.[27] Because prudence is concerned with the right judgement of cases and circumstances, it is a form of "circumspection."[28] The circumspect person deliberates upon cases and circumstances and, owing to relatively sound perceptions of the particulars, discovers how to make prudent choices and 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."[29]

The antique treatises on rhetoric follow Aristotle in their assessment of the example and of its connections with moral deliberation. A sensitive regard for the way exemplary cases express the substance of moral dilemmas is evident throughout Cicero's *De Officiis*, the first "case book" of moral dilemmas.[30] Like Aristotle, Cicero is preoccupied with *causa* and with *probabilia*, not necessary truths, but probable truths and precepts setting down what is right in a given case.[31] Such precepts for action are derived by interrogating the *circumstantiae*,[32] and it is through habitual deliberation upon them that one acquires "circumspection" and cultivates the virtue of *prudentia*, "namely, the practical knowledge of things to be sought for and of things to be avoided."[33] In *De Inventione* we find further evidence of Cicero's pragmatic approach to ethics via rhetorical reason, with emphasis on the role exemplarity in particular plays within it as a form of proof or *confirmatio*. Exemplum, in Cicero's Aristotelian-derived analysis, is an inductive mode constituting a principle of "probability which depends on *comparison*."[34] Here Cicero speaks of the kinds of narration or exposition of events that are most persuasive in the prosecution and defence of a legal case (*fabula, argumentum*, and *historia*), and he goes on to say that in pleading cases the narrative should in any event be brief, clear, and plausible – a

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26 *Nicomachean Ethics*, 6.7, 1141b15.
27 *Nicomachean Ethics*, 6.8, 1142a25–30; cf. 2.9, 1109b20–25 and 4.8, 1126b1–5.
28 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" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 3.1, 1111a5). For more on the tradition of the *circumstantiae* than I am able to provide in this brief discussion see Jonsen and Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry*, p. 71 *et passim*, and especially D. W. Robertson, "A Note on the Classical Origin of 'Circumstances' in the Medieval Confessional," *Studies in Philology* 43 (1946), pp. 6–14. Robertson, p. 9, explains that in treating of hypothetical cases one assesses "seven circumstances, which St Augustine . . . quoted as follows: *quis, quid, quando, ubi, cur, quem ad modum, quibus adminiculus*." Rhetorical reason throughout the tradition entailed deep contextualization of cases.
29 *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2.9, 1109a25–30.
30 Jonsen and Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry*, p. 74.
31 *De Officiis*, trans. Walter Miller (Cambridge, 1921), 2.2.7.
32 *De Officiis*, 1.18.59.
33 *De Officiis*, 1.53.153.
34 *De Inventione*, trans. H. M. Hubbell (Cambridge, 1976), 1.30.49.

triad that recurs in medieval homiletic literature when reference is made to exemplification.[35] The pseudo-Ciceronian *Rhetorica ad Herennium* develops similar ideas in the part of the treatise dealing with style, where it is written that exemplification is a kind of comparison "used to embellish or prove or clarify or vivify."[36] In this discussion examples need be no more than ornamental, a way of rendering thought more transparent or attractive, but it may also constitute a thought. Example "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."[37] The notion that the example can substantiate the matter expressed, so that it might almost be felt or handled, is one of the more perceptive statements made about exemplarity and it points to the way ideas are embodied in the rhetoric. Equally important to the tradition of casuistic reasoning are the stock ideas that the rhetoric of example aims at probabilities, calls for prudent deliberation, and can be used as a comparison to ornament as well as clinch an argument and motivate action. Not least important is an idea articulated by Quintilian in his *Institutio Oratoria*, that the more examples one has to give, the better. The good orator is always the one prepared for every sort of contingency by having stockpiled his memory with *exemplorum copia*, an abundant repertoire of exemplary cases for the provision of various occasions.[38]

Conscience, Confession, and Sermon Making

Christian discussion of cases and circumstances takes us into the realm of conscience and accepted techniques for its examination. Historians argue that the Christian origins of a casuistic ethics can be found in the confessional manuals of the Middle Ages.[39] These penitentials are significant because of their preoccupation with what Venerable Bede called the "distinctions of all cases." It is their thoroughgoing and minute specifications of cases that makes the manuals so remarkable, for they assume that "not all are to be weighed in one and the same balance, although they be associated in one fault,"[40] and go on to anatomize sin

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35 *De Inventione* 1.19.27 and 1.20.28. Cf. Thomas of Chobham's *Summa de arte predicandi*, cited in Fritz Kemmler, *"Exempla" in Context: A Historical and Critical Study of Robert Mannyng of Brunne's "Handlynge Synne"* (Tübingen, 1984), p. 82.

36 *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, trans. Harry Caplan (Cambridge, 1964), 4.45.59.

37 *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, 4.49.62.

38 *Institutio Oratoria*, trans. H. E. Butler (Cambridge, 1959), 12.4 and 11.1.43.

39 Admittedly, as Kirk argues in *Conscience and its Problems*, p. 195, early penitential literature "deals scarcely at all with problems of conscience." A quick glance at such manuals reveals how unfriendly they would have been to the deep introspection and self-discovery such as was stimulated by later Lateran reforms. Neither are they interesting as specimens of rhetoric, with their bald and tedious catalogues of sins and punishments; they were meant to be consulted, not read through.

40 *Penitential of Bede* as excerpted and translated in John T. McNeil and Helena M. Gamer, eds, *Medieval Handbooks of Penance: A Translation of the Principle* libri poenitentiales *and Selections from Related Documents* (New York, 1965), p. 223.

and sinner accordingly. But it was the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 that gave special impetus to a pastoral movement, now agreed to have been already well under way in the twelfth century, which was to subtilize considerably penitential theology and confessional practice as well as preaching in the later period. Such complex developments in ecclesiology are well documented.[41] Conciliar decrees formulated in Rome stimulated broad Church reform, opening the way for new orders of preaching friars and inaugurating a far-reaching catechetical program across Christian Europe. Amounting to what scholars have called a kind of "charter of the new casuistry,"[42] the decrees developed out of Lateran IV set forth a progressive mandate for educating all believers and encouraging a new degree of diligence in the examination of conscience.

The initiative that promoted penance demonstrably transformed pastoral care in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Canon 21, *Omnis utriusque sexus*, made yearly confession compulsory for all over the age of about fourteen, and it also specified the priest's role: "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."[43] The priest is envisaged here as cautiously applying spiritual salves to sick patients, positioned in a quasi-clinical role as *medicus animarum*, or physician of the soul. The analogy between medicine and ethics is one moral theorists and homilists frequently drew upon in antiquity, and it of course has the benefit of recalling the practical ways in which cures are sought in both domains; such ethical pragmatism is epitomized in the thirteenth century in the bishop Jacques de Vitry's notion that "one medicine is not for everyone, nor is the doctor wise who wants to cure everyone's eyes with one type of salve."[44] In Canon 21 the priest is likened to one who examines and diagnoses moral cases, discretely and cautiously, on an individual basis, and the "new theory of discretionary penances"[45] resulting from Lateran IV is thus conspicuously similar to that case-based orientation of casuistry itself. But of course it is not only the priest who must practice discretion in the examination of conscience. The spiritual doctor has a vital role to play; but in confessing the patient must apply circumspection to his or her own case. As one English manual of confession teaches, the penitent is obliged to confess "all those circumstances and everything which

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41 On thirteenth-century reforms in pastoral care and confessional theology I have benefited from Henry Charles Lea, *A History of Auricular Confession and Indulgences in the Latin Church* (New York, 1968); Leonard E. Boyle, "The Fourth Lateran Council and Manuals of Popular Theology," in *The Popular Literature of Medieval England*, ed. Thomas J. Heffernan (Knoxville, 1985); Mary E. O'Carroll, *A Thirteenth-Century Preacher's Handbook: Studies in MS Laud Misc. 511* (Toronto, 1997); John Shinners and William J. Dohar, eds, *Pastors and the Care of Souls in Medieval England* (Notre Dame, 1998); C. H. Lawrence, *The Friars: The Impact of the Early Mendicant Movement on Western Society* (London, 1994).

42 Jonsen and Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry*, p. 121.

43 As translated in Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 1 (Washington, 1990), p. 245.

44 Cited in Carolyn Muessig, "Audience and Preacher: *Ad Status* Sermons and Social Classification," in *Preacher, Sermon and Audience in the Middle Ages*, ed. Carolyn Muessig (Leiden, 2002), p. 265.

45 Shinners and Dohar, *Pastors and the Care of Souls*, p. 122–4.

could aggravate the sin in any way . . . not in general terms but as specifically as he can." The manual here provides a conventional mnemonic (who, what, where, by whose aid, why, how, and when) to be used by those who probe the "circumstances of sin."[46]

The other Lateran reform that was to have important implications for ethics as well as ecclesiology 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 and effectively. One of the changes brought about by the canon was a renewed concern with preaching *ad status et ad populum*, that is, accommodating the message to the various conditions of an audience. The preacher would aim to target his message to various social strata and spiritual cases – says Jacques de Vitry, to "measure out his doctrine to the strength of his listeners"[47] – in a new push to reach as many as possible. Connected 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. Lateran IV is reflected in an efflorescence of new genres of *pastoralia* (a term coined by Leonard Boyle): 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, and the strategies they recommend vis-à-vis exemplification compare with the teachings of classical and antique rhetorical theory surveyed above. In Richard of Thetford's *Ars predicandi* the exemplum is counted among the "modes of reasoning in preaching,"[48] and in general such handbooks commend the rhetoric as memorable, pleasing, and edifying or moving. The sermon aids which are most germane to the present study are collections of model exempla, *exemplaria*.[49] These often anonymous works were variously alphabetized, indexed, cross-referenced, and rubricated in an effort to facilitate

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46 *Summula of the Synod of the Diocese of Exeter*, as translated in Shinners and Dohar, *Pastors and the Care of Souls*, p. 178. The *circumstantiae* used by priest and penitent in the interrogation of conscience are the same ones epitomized in the mnemonic distich of the rhetors. See Lea, *A History of Auricular Confession*, vol. 1, p. 368. While the technique was taught in the schools of Paris and practiced with especial facility by the mendicant orders, the laity would have been the real beneficiaries of such minute attention to the details of conscience and moral context; and they would likely have picked up the new habits of thought. So we can safely say that 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 while also promoting a new inwardness, enabling the objectification of the self in ways that could be said to have produced an interiorized, casuistic ethics. One historian of casuistry in the confessional nearly puts matters in their proper light when he says (unduly lamenting the fact), "Subjective morality had superseded objective"; Lea, *A History of Auricular Confession*, vol. 1, p. 410. Lawrence in *The Friars*, p. 126, observes without any of his predecessor's disapprobation that the "practice of the confessional was being quietly transformed by a nascent science of casuistry or applied moral theology." For another view see Larry Scanlon's more suspicious and now rather predictable remarks in *Narrative, Authority, and Power*, pp. 12–14, about the construction of a "confessional subject" by the new penitentialism.

47 Cited in Muessig, "Audience and Preacher," p. 265.

48 Translated in Appendix V of Kemmler, *"Exempla" in Context*, pp. 224–5.

49 The term is G. R. Owst's, in *Preaching in Medieval England: An Introduction to Sermon Manuscripts of the Period c. 1350–1450* (New York, 1965), p. 299.

ease of use as a reference tool. Some contained moralized stories, others unmoralized. For instance, the *Alphabetum narrationum* consists of exempla arranged by topics in alphabetical order so that the preacher may easily find a suitable specimen, while the *Speculum Exemplorum* offers moralized stories but is not arranged alphabetically. Now the relationship between exempla collections and actual practice – the oral event that is the sermon declaimed from the pulpit – is most important to notice. Sermons are the result of improvisation and translation: from text to performance, from Latin to vernacular.[50] Exempla are subject to the same changes when fitted into a sermon. "It was left to the preacher, speaking in 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*."[51] The discretion of the preacher would have a role to play in the choice of which story suited a given topic and a given audience. Once an exemplum had been selected, "The moral lesson to be drawn . . . was left entirely to the judgement of the preacher," even if the story had already been moralized; a moral could be added or altered.[52] Siegfried Wenzel argues accordingly there was much room for originality and variety in the sermons of the post-Lateran period. The effectively improvisatory aspect of preaching in the period would be the expected result of the homiletic art of *modi amplificandi*, a principle of variation and ornamentation in pulpit oratory widely taught in the arts of preaching and according to which dilation by means of narrative exemplification was an accepted way of enhancing a sermon.[53]

In a history of casuistic reasoning there are a couple of things to notice about such practices. First, there is the inclination to use particular cases. Owst expressed this feature of medieval sermons well when he said 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.' "[54] Second, there is the preacher's art of adjusting illustrative materials to specific topics and audiences. An accommodationist rhetoric, the sermon exemplum is self-consciously used by preachers

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50 See Augustine Thompson, OP, "From Texts to Preaching: Retrieving the Medieval Sermon as an Event," pp. 13–37, and Beverly M. Kienzle, "Medieval Sermons and Their Performance: Theory and Record," pp. 89–124, in *Preacher, Sermon, and Audience in the Middle Ages*, ed. Carolyn Muessig (Leiden, 2002).

51 Lawrence, *The Friars*, p. 121.

52 Thomas Frederick Crane, ed. *The Exempla or Illustrative Stories from the Sermones Vulgares of Jacques de Vitry* (London, 1890), p. lxxx.

53 *Preachers, Poets, and the Early English Lyric* (Princeton, 1986), p. 76. See further H. L. Spencer, *English Preaching in the Late Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1993), p. 9 *et passim*, who 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 according to Wenzel (frequently Lollard) opposition to those who would "saffron" their "predicacioun" with rhetorical embellishment, pandering to audiences and indulging in verbal display. Further complaints were levelled against undue prolixity. Detractors were concerned that the marvellous tales that went by the name of exempla were an excuse to indulge in frivolous and carnal fantasy. Dante in Italy, Chateau-Thierry in France, Wycliffe in England all criticized preachers' fables; and preachers themselves regularly denounced story-telling; see Joseph A. Mosher, *The Exemplum in the Early Religious and Didactic Literature of England* (New York, 1966), pp. 16–18.

54 *Literature and Pulpit*, p. 110.

to address the diverse circumstances in which audiences puzzle out their spiritual lives, and therefore homiletic discourse encourages or at least mirrors something of the same habit of thought as that required by any moral agent who applies cases-based rhetoric to the solution of present dilemmas.

Neo-Aristotelian Practical Reason

One must look to academic developments for more explicit analyses of conscience and of how cases and circumstances relate to morality and the imparting of morals. Thomas Aquinas's philosophy of practical reason stands in close relation to the thinking of Aristotle and demonstrates a continuity of moral and rhetorical thought in the late medieval period. Aquinas's discussion was of course highly specialist.[55] Nevertheless, academic theology took a pragmatic approach to morality comparable to that with which medieval people would have been familiar from penitential and pastoral practice, and therefore Aquinas serves as another touchstone for the possibility and even desirability of casuistic ethics in the later Middle Ages.

Moral cases are in Aquinas's account highly variable – no less than "infinitely diversified," as he says in his exposition of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*[56] – and so it is imperative to exercise caution and circumspection whenever moral judgements are made. Judgement is a matter of prudence, defined in the *Summa Theologiae* as "right reason about things to be done,"[57] entailing the derivation of practical precepts from the eternal precepts of natural law. This formulation points to a distinctly late medieval innovation on Aristotelian ethics in the doctrine of natural law. For philosophers like Aquinas, conscience gives moral agents access to immutable moral principles. But conscience is not a simple faculty, nor is it unfailing; in it lies the human necessity for case-reasoning. Aquinas divides the mental labour of the conscience between *synderesis* and *conscientia*: the former is infallible and contains the indemonstrable first principles of morality, but in itself *synderesis* remains ineffectual; *conscientia* is fallible, but proves necessary for the proper application of first principles to cases. So, if natural law says "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," conscience figures out just what is to be done (i.e., doing *such and such* unto *this* person *here*).[58]

55 The *Nicomachean Ethics* is by far the most cited of Aristotle's works in Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*, and it forms the basis of his exposition of ethics in the moral part of the *Summa* and of his *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*; see Mark D. Jordan, "Aquinas Reading Aristotle's *Ethics*," in *Ad Litteram: Authoritative Texts and Their Medieval Readers*, ed. Mark D. Jordan and Kent Emery, Jr. (Notre Dame, 1992), and Ralph McInery, *Aquinas on Human Action: A Theory of Practice* (Washington, 1992), and Denis J. M. Bradley, *Aquinas on the Twofold Human Good*.

56 *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, vols 1–2, trans. C. I. Litzinger, O. P. (Chicago, 1964), 2.2.259.

57 *Summa Theologiae: Latin Text and English Translation*, vols 1–60, Dominican Editors (New York, 1964), IaIIae, q.57, a.4.

58 A good example is found at the end of Book 2 of Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, in the Tale of Constantine and Sylvester, where the emperor recollects the "lawe of kinde" consisting of the golden rule, "man,

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."[59] Deliberation has as its end action, not theory.[60] And while according to Aquinas one always has access to the correct theory (natural law), it is up to the individual moral agent to put theory into prudent practice.

Paired with the high regard given Aristotelian ethics in late medieval theology is a corresponding concern with moral rhetoric in the writing of the period. Giles of Rome, a student of Aquinas, sets out what he sees as the best way to impart moral knowledge in his immensely popular *De Regimine Principum*. In the words of the fourteenth-century English translation, Giles recommends the inexactitude of rhetoric:

> "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."

The language one uses to address moral matters should be rough-hewn, rhetorical rather than dialectical; one had best use "fygures and liknes," or exemplary comparisons. Giles says this is the preferred approach given the nature of the *materia*, because "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." The second reason to use rhetoric has to do with the *finis*: for one undertakes "moral work," according to Aristotle, "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." The third reason rhetoric is appropriate to the matter of moral science concerns the *auditor*: "Þanne for nouȝt al the people may comprehende sotil thinges, the processe in moral mater mote be boistous and by liknes of figuris."[61]

What Giles says about the nature of ethics and rhetoric and of their basic interrelation is an astonishing testament to the vitality of Aristotelian moral philosophy in the period. As we have seen, from the standpoint of the medieval Aristotelian, the complexities of individual cases escape the language used to address them; actual moral situations are infinitely variable and audiences diverse; and the most effective way to solve real-life dilemmas is to address them by means of comparisons. Only if rhetoric has a sufficiently wide angle can it

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such as he wolde / Toward himself, riht such he scholde / Toward another don also" (2.3275–9). Constantine applies the rule to his own peculiar situation and decides to forbear killing children to cure his leprosy.

59 *Aquinas on Human Action*, p. 151.

60 *Summa Theologiae*, IaIIae, q.19, a.1. Unlike Abelard who maintains that moral valuation of action depends solely on intention, Aquinas holds that "every bent and motion is completed by reaching its term and attaining its goal" (IaIIae, q.20, a.4), and to this extent the goodness or badness of an act is analyzed teleologically.

61 *The Governance of Kings and Princes: John Trevisa's Middle English Translation of the* De regimine principum *of Aegidius Romanus*, ed. David D. Fowler et al. (New York, 1997), pp. 6–7.

hope to cope with a range of potential cases. Exemplary rhetoric, with its capacity to adapt to cases and summon conscience, is well suited to such a task, and its ubiquity particularly in the vernacular of the period attests to the persistence of habits of thought which both Gower and Chaucer presuppose in their respective exemplary tale collections.

3

Gower For Example: *Confessio Amantis* and the Measure of the Case

Gower's *Confessio Amantis* is a veritable anthology of literary kinds, a miscellany of discourse both pragmatic and speculative, entertaining and edifying, as though its maker had aspired to join together all of the genres current in the later Middle Ages. In this respect it hardly differs from many other voluminous medieval works that combine so much "lust" and "lore." But Gower's massive poem of more than 30,000 lines and about 110 exempla, spread liberally over eight books and a prologue, with accompanying Latin verse headings and marginal glosses, appears to spare nothing. The work puts itself forward as at once a Boethian consolation, Augustinian confession, and moralized (and just as often *un*moralized) Ovid; and it compendiously incorporates elements of amatory lyric, allegory, satire and complaint, fabliau, mirror for princes, conduct book, debate poem, scholastic disputation, and dream vision – all within the frame of a mock-confession. And in the same spirit, individual tales within the larger fictional frame are seen to have classical, scriptural, and historical provenance. Doubtless further sources of inspiration could be catalogued, but at last what is important to remark about the work is how its very inclusiveness and superabundance might signify something in its own right.

The very scale of Gower's encyclopaedic enterprise, which the most assiduous readers have found difficult to harmonize into a coherent normative signification, 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 has a self-avowed moralist of "good mesure" resorted to such a potentially confounding variety of rhetoric? Especially perplexing is Gower's habit of blending and sharply juxtaposing subject matter, creating what amounts to sexual and spiritual montage, and his proclivity for protracted excursus as well as blatant incongruity, to the detriment of a consistent moral argument. Has Gower thereby failed to realize a premeditated intention to imitate a tidy "point to point" shrift, as he occasionally describes the penitential fiction of the *Confessio*? Is the total effect of his work another unintended casualty of the world's miserable "divisioun," a post-Babelian instance of "Ther wiste non what other mente, / So that thei myhten noght procede"?[1] Then

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1 *Confessio Amantis*, Prol. 852 and 1024–5. All citations of the poem are taken from *The Complete Works of John Gower*, vols 1–2, ed. G. C. Macaulay (Oxford, 1899–1902); subsequent references will

again, perhaps the poet proceeded with ends in view other than the efficient com-munication of a programmatic moral message.

If Gower had had something straightforward to say, surely he could have said it with greater economy and directness. Indeed, Gower proves his facility with no-nonsense Jeremiad in the Prologue of the *Confessio*, as to a greater extent he does in *Vox Clamantis*, a poem that wears its social reformism on its sleeve. But the poet seems to have given himself special license when it came to the greater part of his last major work, for notwithstanding the penitential framework of the seven sins, readers are faced with a profoundly inclusive and indeterminate poem in the *Confessio*. Now the question facing us becomes whether inclusion and indeterminacy are in any sense at odds with the sort of ethical and poetical work Gower has undertaken. Gower's work is indeed a fine test case for whether "all that is written" can be "for our doctrine." Towards the formulation of an answer to this most pertinent question, I will argue here that the indeterminacy of "all that is written," far from undermining moral meaning, is constitutive of any ethical response worth Gower's effort.[2]

The *Confessio Amantis* indeed eludes easy categorization and compass, as much because in its vastness the poem contains all categories as that it resists any single one, and this fact gives us an important clue as to the special proper-ties and moral purpose of the poem: that is, its method of proceeding (*forma tractandi*) and its final cause (*utilitas*) respectively, to invoke the scholastic idiom appropriate to Gower's poetical practice.[3] In this regard, one useful way to come to terms with the *Confessio* is to look at it from a fresh perspective that doesn't beg questions as to moral determinacy or consistency: for if the poem does not ultimately yield any sort of wished-for coherence, normative or other-wise, then we should modify our expectations. A shift in expectations will be signalled in this chapter by saying that Gower's work is a *liber exemplorum* that is comprehensive rather than coherent.[4]

be given parenthetically in the text and an asterisk will indicate first or second recension, i.e., not the supposed third recension (Fairfax 3) used as a base text in the editions of Macaulay and Peck. Translations of Latin prose commentaries are my own, except when (wherever possible) I use those provided in the TEAMS edition of the text, *John Gower: Confessio Amantis*, ed. Russell A. Peck, vols 1 and 2 (Kalamazoo, 2000–3). Translations of the poetry are supplied by *The Latin Verses in the "Confessio Amantis": An Annotated Translation*, trans. Siân Echard and Claire Fanger (Michigan, 1991). For a fine discussion of how the "design of the poem" reflects "Gower's concern with division" see Hugh White, "Division and Failure in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*," *Neophilologus* 22 (1988), pp. 600–16; see further his carefully argued *Nature, Sex, and Goodness in a Medieval Literary Tradition* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 174–219, where he has developed the argument.

2   The biblical verse (Romans 15:4) is cited by Gower in a gloss at 4.2348: *Apostolus. Quecumque scripta sunt, ad nostram doctrinam scripta sunt*. The biblical principle is, clearly, one of comprehen-siveness and inclusiveness rather than rigorous coherence.

3   The terminology is detailed in A. J. Minnis, *Medieval Theories of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia, 1988); consult the Index of Latin Terms, pp. 312–16.

4   Hence like the handbooks of vices and virtues and the handbooks of exempla to which Gower's poem is routinely compared, the *Confessio* evokes order even as it ultimately exhausts it. Ralph Hanna III describes the *exemplaria* 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 provoca-tive – disorder, which allows ample room for the initiative and imagination of the individual cleric."

It is not that the poem fails to communicate anything morally determinate, for it does make strong claims upon its audience, and the structural arrangement of the whole (its *forma tractatus*) is unmistakable, if not always strictly adhered to.[5] It is evident to anyone who reads the Prologue, too, that the *Confessio* is meant to pertain to ethical wisdom (for "it to wisdom al belongeth," Prol. 67; *ethicae subponitur*) in view of the conventional divisions of the sciences. After all, it would make no sense for Gower to set before his readers something that served simply to confuse them. But henceforward we have to adjust our expectations in order to see just how the manifold body of Gower's poem could have been conceived as a *moral* work. I think the key to understanding the morality of the *Confessio Amantis* is to be found in a medieval tradition of ethical pragmatism much neglected by modern criticism of the text, and in this chapter I will be pursuing the hypothesis through a consideration of the rhetorical dimensions of Gower's art. Gower is emphatically concerned with *Practique* rather than *Theorique*, according to the Aristotelian parts of philosophy expressly laid out in Book 7, which is to say his work is preoccupied with human character and conduct.[6] Conceptual problems are secondary. Accordingly, as Giles of Rome was known to have said about the nature of ethical discourse, Gower's work should seem to have less to do with truth than with goodness: "the ende and the entent in this sciens is nouȝt knowleche bote work and doyng; nother sothnes, but profit of godenesse."[7] Virtue takes precedence over verity; rhetoric by definition reaches beyond itself, to change the practice of its readers, inevitably so inasmuch as any "moral dede fa[l]leþ nouȝt complet, þat is to saye fullich, vnder tales."[8] To put the point another way, no *tale* is identical to its moral application. The real substance of ethics invariably occurs off the page, or, to reverse a fashionable recent formula, *hors-texte*.[9]

To see that Gower aimed at a comparable ethical object it is necessary to reckon with the potentialities of reader response as much as with properties intrinsic to the *exemplaria* that is the *Confessio Amantis*. My inquiry here will therefore be directed principally towards answering the *how* rather than the *what* of Gower's exemplarity, as I attempt to delineate the particular ethos (rather

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See Ralph Hanna, III, "Some Commonplaces of Late Medieval Patience Discussions: An Introduction," in *The Triumph of Patience: Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. Gerald J. Schiffhorst (Orlando, 1978), pp. 65–87.

5   Any consistency the poem does receive thanks to its structural arrangement is minimal because it is subverted first by the positioning of Book 7, which breaks from the pattern of the seven sins to give an account of the civic virtues of the king, and then by the surprising reduction of the sin of lust to incest in Book 8.

6   On Gower's conventional division of *philosophye* into practical and theoretical domains see J. D. Burnley, *Chaucer's Language and the Philosophers' Tradition* (Cambridge, 1979), pp. 54–5, and the analysis in James Simpson, *Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry: Alan of Lille's* Anticlaudianus *and John Gower's* Confessio amantis (Cambridge, 1995).

7   *The Governance of Kings and Princes*, ed. David D. Fowler et al., p. 7.

8   Ibid., p. 6.

9   A comparable idea regarding how, practically speaking, the moral meaning of texts lies beyond the manuscript page is well elucidated by John Dagenais, *The Ethics of Reading in Manuscript Culture: Glossing the* Libro de Buen Amor (Princeton, 1994).

than, strictly speaking, the subject matter) of the *Confessio*. My interest is in the assumptions informing its exemplary rhetoric and the effects it can have. In this discussion, then, I am revisiting the matter of what has been called, whatever the exact merits of the anachronism, "Gower's metaethics."[10] In medieval terms we may prefer to speak instead of Gower's "tropology," invoking an old critical term to describe the potentialities of reader response. Above all, the claim here will be that Gower situates his work in a tradition of "moral casuistry" by which I mean to describe a *rhetorical* approach to morals that is case-based, copious, and taxonomical and a *pragmatic* orientation to ethics that is improvisatory even as it remains imitative.

As indeed other critics have remarked before, Gower's is a particularly "practical" rhetoric. William Robins rightly observes at the end of a valuable recent essay that the *Confessio* is meant to stimulate reader response: "Gower is not primarily concerned to *represent* the subjectivity of a character, but rather to *provoke* the subjectivity of the reader."[11] In his superb study, James Simpson likewise acknowledges the centrality of ethical reception: "The ultimate aim . . . is not so much to represent the formation of the soul, but to enact that formation in the reader."[12] Russell Peck, too, draws attention to this aspect of the work when he says, "From beginning to end, the *Confessio* is a cluster of tales (texts and propositions) that require one to respond. It is a poem best understood as a sequence of queries rather than an anthology of answers."[13] As is widely recognized, then, an adequate criticism has to come to terms with the way Gower risks provoking idiosyncratic personal responses outside his text – practice beyond mimesis.[14] It is the same practical potentiality, or tropology, that I want to elucidate further by situating the *Confessio* in relation to the phenomenon of moral casuistry, the relevance of which has so far escaped notice. The inspiration for the casuistic ethics of exemplarity lies in a commonplace medieval perception of the moral agent's capacity for discretion and self-governance, though its theoretical formulation is as ancient as Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.[15]

10 I allude to Michael P. Kuczynski's essay, "Gower's Metaethics," in *John Gower: Recent Readings*, ed. R. F. Yeager (Kalamazoo, 1989), in which the critic treats Gower's contribution to "medieval metaethics – that branch of moral philosophy concerned with the nature of moral language, the meaning of moral terms" (p. 189).

11 William Robins, "Romance, Exemplum, and the Subject of the *Confessio Amantis*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 19 (1997), pp. 157–81. The critic, making connections to ancient moral philosophy, speaks of "Gower's deep Aristotelianism" (p. 180).

12 Simpson, *Sciences and the Self*, p. 14.

13 Peck, *John Gower: Confessio Amantis*, vol. 1, p. 18.

14 All the same, the critics have important things to say about the representational plane of the poem, as would I space permitting. Simpson argues that the *Confessio* is a "person-shaped poem" (*Sciences and the Self*, p. 7), in that it gives coherent expression to the education of Amans and the regeneration of Genius. I would say instead that the incoherence of the poem goes some way towards shaping a personal response, noting that, paradoxically, the work is the more person-shaped for its relative *shapelessness*, for my primary interest lies in the way a compilation of exemplary tales like this one can become amenable to practice and so is eventually determinable of character, conduct, and choice beyond the manuscript page.

15 Hereafter I will refer to the edition by R. A. Gauthier, *Aristoteles Latinus, Ethica Nicomachea*, XXVI-1/3, fasc. 4 (Leiden-Brussels, 1974). The first to argue for the relevance of Aristotle's ethical

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), cast like dice by the agency of blind chance (*Mundus in euentu versatur vt alea casu . . .* [Prol. v]), a mutable world famously described by Augustine as *nihil solidum, nihil stabile*,[16] 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 the contingencies of circumstance. This fact goes a long way towards explaining the incongruities in and among Gower's examples: he is providing 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. There is truly much need for morals to adjust to the pressures of surprising and sometimes unprecedented situations. What makes adaptation and adjustment yet more urgent for Gower is the way the world has declined as of late, as he saw it. It is the argument of this book that a customary way of reaching a kind of homeostasis between ethical practice and precepts is through a process of reading for the moral, a mode of apprehending what it is good to do.[17] 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, and it is in view of these accommodations that we can gain an 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 due consideration of his audience. With the following oft-cited and rather enlightened recognition of the experience of reading so much "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)

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theory to Gower's work was Charles Runacres in "Art and Ethics in the 'Exempla' of *Confessio Amantis*," in *Gower's "Confessio Amantis": Responses and Reassessments*, ed. Alastair Minnis (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 106–34.

16 *De Civitate Dei*, Corpvs Christianorvm: Series Latina, vols 47–8 (Tvrnholti, 1958–59), 20.3, p. 702.

17 See Olsson, "Rhetoric, John Gower, and the Late Medieval Exemplum," *Medievalia et Humanistica*, n.s. 8 (1977), pp. 185–200, for a relevant explanation of how *homeosis*, or "likeness," constitutes a basic premise of exemplarity. Judson B. Allen's concept of *assimilatio* is comparable but from my perspective problematic; see *The Ethical Poetic of the Later Middle Ages*, Chapter 4, "Assimilatio and the material of poetry."

The combination of earnest and game that constitutes the *via media* of course complicates the reading experience considerably, but it is noteworthy that Gower is the first "reader" of his own text to open it up 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. 84–5*), even if it should seem palpable to us which response "moral" Gower would prefer. Yet if the text is not quite, as A. J. Minnis puts it, "all things to all men,"[18] its author nevertheless provides explicit justification for a range of reader responses, critical and non-critical alike. If Gower's is finally not quite a full-blown latitudinarian hermeneutic, his approach does express a high tolerance for different interpretations. Gower's first version epilogue elaborates a crucial point about his kind of Horatian orientation 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). 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" (8.260–1). 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.[19] What I think Gower is indicating here, though, is that reading is inevitably occasional and thus dependent upon perception, on a way of seeing (a moral optics), something which varies among persons and, doubtless, within them also. Depending on how it is *looked* upon ("And for to looke in other weye . . ."), the *Confession* can evidently have vastly different effects. Entertainment and edification are as much functions of readers and times as of 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. Compare the more severe and commonplace stance of the anonymous author of the *Cursor Mundi*. Speaking of the popular taste for secular romances, that author observes

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18 *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, p. 186.
19 The historical record provides no clear evidence either way according to Pearsall, "The Gower Tradition," in *Gower's "Confessio Amantis": Responses and Reassessments*, pp. 179–97. In view of the last quotation and lines 84–5* of the first recension Prologue it is certainly the case that the poet recognizes the way in which responses correspond to dispositions. Amans himself prefers books which will "spede" his love (4.2672ff), and he becomes less attentive when Genius speaks of things not immediately pertinent (7.5408ff), but why should we expect it to be otherwise?

that "to rede and here Ilkon is prest, / Þe thynges þat þam likes best. / Þe wis-man wil o wisdom here, / Þe foul hym draghus to foly nere,"[20] employing an antithesis which quite deterministically associates the nature of the reading mat-ter with a variety of character. Or, as the anonymous poet of the *The Wars of Alexander* says about popular reading tastes, "For as þaire wittis ere within, so þaire will folowis."[21] The same principle of decorum informs Chaucer's attri-bution of fabliaux to the "cherles" on the road to Canterbury, in a move that fal-sifies the real origins of the comic tales, as is well known, by associating such story-telling with the lower classes. Granted, one may be so bold to say that the wise and foolish will tend to gravitate to complementary subject matter in any actual social world, but Gower's assumption is more complex: what one *does* with what one reads can still be 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, prom-ises to "speke of thing is noght so strange, / Which every kinde hath upon hond" (1.4–5, 10–11). The fact that *naturatus amor* is common to all means that all have some common stake in understanding it. Moverover, *amor* comprises subject mat-ter which universally delights as much as it instructs. The *principalis materia* of the work (as per the Colophon at the end of Book 8), the topic of romantic love governs the selection of tales and their applications. Genius himself says, "But of conclusion final / Conclude I wol in special / For love . . ." (1.249–51). Therefore in Book 6 when the sin of Gluttony is broken down into one of its constituent sub-species drunkenness, the vice is transposed "in loves kinde" into the topic of love-drunkenness. The same rhetorical 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 have a fairly barefaced imitation of the late medieval penitential adaptation of general precepts to particular persons.

Finally, Gower teaches practice by way of practice. The erstwhile lover makes an example of himself, anticipating Genius's claim that "every man is othres lore" (8.256) and putting to work the evidentiary resources of exemplary rhetoric in virtue of which ethics can best be communicated and remembered. The author, outfitted *in persona aliorum, 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), proceeds "to proven" (1.61) the power of love by recounting his own "wonder hap" (1.67). The Latin verses heading the subsequent section reinforce the point (at 1.ii), namely the way *experiencia* becomes a touchstone of persuasion

20 *Cursor Mundi: A Northumbrian Poem of the XIVth Century in Four Versions*, ed. Richard Morris, EETS o.s. 57 (London, 1874), lines 25–8.

21 *The Wars of Alexander*, ed. Hoyt N. Duggan and Thorlac Turville-Petre, EETS s.s. 10 (Oxford, 1989), line 14.

and practical ethics (and has some authority in the medieval world after all).[22] 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.

<center>*For Example . . .*</center>

That Gower's *Confessio Amantis* apparently lacks organic unity because of the great surfeit of exemplary materials it contains is not a sufficient argument against its utility. Broken language can yet convey a certain functional sense. Nevertheless, the inconsistencies, thematic or otherwise, that critics regularly ascribe to the rather unwieldy poem will pose a strong challenge to any reading that attempts to discover morality therein. In this section I bring forward a sample of the incongruities that exist among exemplary tales pertaining to the question of love, specifically erotic desire and courtship, the proper style and timing of which is a major preoccupation of the work. Other considerations *not* reducible to the erotic are in force, and throughout I will concede the problematic nature of the inconsistencies. Indeed, I will insist upon the difficulty of extracting a univocal or systematic morality from the *liber exemplorum*, because it is only in full view of the problem that the ethical solution I propose has its point.[23] The solution lies in the "casuistic" utility of incongruity in the application of a personal ethics as Gower understood it. Before explaining what that means to Amans and to readers of the *Confessio*, the question I will entertain in this section is whether "all that is written" is not simply incoherent or unmanageable.

The "ensample" of Pygmaleon and the Statue set forth in Book 4 can be taken as an especially striking if also representative point of potential ambiguity. The Ovidian tale, like all the other stories in the collection, is related to Amans by Genius, an equivocal but not illegitimate *praeceptor amoris*, whose practical advice proliferates and divagates over the course of the work. Genius is enlisted by Venus to teach, and Pygmaleon represents one aspect of his teaching regarding venereal matters that diverges drastically from others, as we shall see.[24]

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22 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"; *The Major Latin Works of John Gower: The Voice of One Crying and The Tripartite Chronicle*, trans. Eric W. Stockton (Seattle, 1962), p. 49. 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 Mary J. Carruthers, *Book of Memory*, p. 169.

23 That there are important incongruities between love and morality in the *Confessio* has been argued most recently and forcefully by James Simpson, *Sciences and the Self*. I will be insisting here upon some further ambiguities that exist *within* the teachings on erotic love, since love itself is not monologic in the poem.

24 The standard work to consult on the multifaceted *genius* is Jane Chance Nitzsche's *The Genius Figure in Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (New York, 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).

As befits his name, Genius is a genial confessor who tells a sequence of tales meant to delight at the same time they instruct. 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 could bear further emphasis. In the twelfth century John of Salisbury documented the fact that the Latin " '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.[25]

The noun therefore had two basic senses available, 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 exemplist 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 creative; and it is useful to bear this duality in mind, especially the related distinction between categorical moral precepts and contingent applications arising from them, to make sense of the fact that when Genius posits tales, he makes innovations on the tradition of the seven sins even as he implements them.[26] Many of the tales Genius tells are, unexpectedly, secular love tales told within the frame of a penitential dialogue, though it is perhaps equally correct to say that Genius tells penitential tales within the frame of a romance plot. In either case, it is Genius's particular innovation to generate talk of love out of the language of religion.[27]

Pygmaleon and the Statue in Book 4, to return to my first example, is a tale relating to love and love-talking placed under the penitential rubric of Pusillanimity:

25 John of Salisbury, *The Metalogicon*, 3.1, pp. 146–7.

26 Kurt Olsson too observes: "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 and the Structures of Conversion: A Reading of the* Confessio Amantis (Cambridge, 1992), p. 114.

27 The "religion of love" is of course not original with Gower. But Genius's explicit dual function, in his role as both a Christian confessor and priest of Venus, makes the merging of secular and religious matter most emphatic. It is not easy to tell these functions apart, nor has it always been clear to critics whether we *should* distinguish between Genius's allegiances to love and morality. 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, only heighten our sense of Genius as equivocal in his pedagogy. For a concise overview of Genius's literary background as it informs his equivocal moralizing role see Simpson, *Sciences and the Self*, pp. 153–4 and 180–4.

> 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)

Although pusillanimity comes under the heading of the vice of Sloth, in this context it is not strictly a spiritual problem; the precise problem for which Pygmaleon appears to be a solution is whether it is good to take chances in love: "Nothing ventured, nothing gained" is essentially Genius's teaching throughout the fourth book in fact. It is probably Gower's genuine concern, too, if we take the proverbial *Qui nichil attemptat, nichil expedit*, cited in the Latin verse heading, as authorial (see IV.ii).[28]

According to Genius at this juncture, then, 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 come to life. In this altogether affirmative version of the old fable, with its celebration of the virtues of *corage* and *continuance*, we are decidedly not in the last book of the *Roman de la Rose*, with its climactic drama of conflagrant lust, where Pygmaleon is recollected as attaining his beloved, crudely and ironically, despite a narcissistic capitulation to Venus. There is rather, according to Gower's Genius, a sensible order or method (*penance*) to the way Pygmaleon goes about his amorous business of courtship. 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.[29] Further, 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. 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. 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):

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28 The Latin would seem to lend authority to the sentiment, though even it is no guarantee of authorial imprimatur. In the fourth book, whatever the difficulties of determining authorial intention, the lesson is reinforced. 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 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.

29 Robertson finds 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 in *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton, 1962), p. 102. I should have thought this rather strong evidence that Genius (and Gower) departs from the model of the moralized Ovid as transmitted in the Latin commentaries.

> 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 rather surprising scenario (for who would have thought Pygmaleon's *word* would become the moral crux of the tale?), exemplary *corage* and *continuance* forms a rational cause with a predictable or ordered effect: Venus's benefaction. An assured symmetry appears to obtain between the pursuit and the realization of good fortune. This finally 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.   (4.365–9)

Ends are commensurate with means, output proportionate to human input. A corresponding confidence is expressed in individual self-determination and self-expression, particularly in the efficacy of human artifice to bring about a desired outcome. 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 theodicy (for bad fortune doesn't *really* exist) in the service of refined manners, or *gentil lore*.[30] In sum, Venus answers the lover's prayer.

Gower's famous remarks in the Prologue to the *Confessio Amantis*, which, like the bulk of Book 7 that comes much later and celebrates the virtue of individual self-governance, would seem to be borne out by this happy state of affairs. As Gower had stated, but in a very different context, *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 evidently genuine Boethian wisdom, the basic lesson being that one's happiness is entirely determined by one's choices. But by the time we reach

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30 Much of Genius's teaching is of the "scole . . . of gentil lore" (1.2665), concerning 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 *Confessio*, 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, but the general conception in any case is of the way courtly love, personal virtue, and public policy or common profit overlap. So if the poem is not just an *ars amandi*, neither is it entirely a *speculum regale*.

Book 4, the context has changed drastically. Perhaps it is not without humor that Genius is made to express a similar opinion in speaking about romantic love. And who, after reading the *Roman de la Rose*, can ignore the implicit warning against male egoism in the example of Pygmaleon, the sculptor who after all falls in love with a projection of his desires? However, in Gower the irony often seems to work just as well the other way, in favor of love and the courtship, indicating that the poet thinks erotic matters are not less important than philosophical ones. There is good reason to suppose that erotic love as an external and vulnerable fortune is something Gower, unlike Boethius, prizes as indispensable to human happiness. Genius at any rate draws a moral that appropriates the Boethian principle of self-determination, putting it to an *un*Boethian purpose. Gower appears the more pragmatic. 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 too, he would do well to go and do likewise. He should *speke*. Genius's teaching calls to mind the end of Gower's poem, where Amans does in fact petition the goddess for a love cure, as if to suggest Amans has taken the confessor's advice to heart. And he might as well have trusted Genius, who is the priest of Venus. At least, Amans's longing for requited love, despite his old age we eventually realize, is surely no more ridiculous than Pygmaleon's *penance*, for as one critic puts it: "Although loving a statue may seem to be particularly unpromising, in this case, the statue's transformation allows the relationship to end in marriage."[31]

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 a second example, the tale of Jupiter's Two Tuns emblematizes the outright caprice of love against all claims of efficient labour, just rewards, and predictable ends. In this case the vice under discussion is that of "lovedrunke," 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,

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31 Jenny Rebecca Rytting, "In Search of the Perfect Spouse: John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* as a Marriage Manual," *The Dalhousie Review* 81.1 (2001), pp. 113–26.

> 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 nowhere more clearly manifest than in this stark exemplum about Cupid's caprice:

> Lo, hou he can the hertes trouble,
> And makth men drunke al upon chaunce
> Withoute lawe of governance.   (6.362–4)

Now, against erstwhile confidence in self-governance and direct causality, Genius presents us with a distinctly pessimistic analysis – the rhyming words in the last two lines of the citation obviously accentuating 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 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 has the greater ascendancy. So much for the earlier sentiment: "For after that a man poursuieth / To love, so fortune suieth"! And yet, importantly, 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 thereby instructed to hope nonetheless – as though to afford fortune at least the opportunity to grace him arbitrarily if she so chooses! Other teachings in the *Confessio* are apparently as paradoxical: most notably, Genius teaches that reason cannot prevail in matters of romantic love, but advises right reason nonetheless. Many of his examples are from this perspective hyperbolical and inconsistent (arguably self-defeating). Rhetorically speaking, however, they are not or need not necessarily be uninstructive.[32]

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32 In the pragmatic analysis, in which it is assumed that character and conduct, rather than concepts only, constitute the end of exemplary rhetoric, we can see that a conceptual problem or paradox in a text is not necessarily a morally substantive one. Internal contradictions – where moral and story clash – elicit the contempt of critics who urge that complex narrative examples cannot be contained by a simple morality. I do not concede that incongruity renders moral tales defunct (or ironic), because the test is not whether the text is formally coherent or logical, but whether it can stimulate a practical ethical response. Recall Giles of Rome's description of ethical discourse and compare Aristotle, *Nicomachean*

Consider the contrasts between the two exempla considered so far. In Pygmaleon the lover saw how fortune is linked to human effort and desire. Other exempla in Gower's collection support that wishful morality: the tales of Ulysses and Penelope and of Iphis and Iante (Book 4) as well as of Bachus in the Desert (Book 6) similarly show that fortune helps those who help themselves. Alongside these cases, one finds more problematical portrayals that support the contrary ethos of Jupiter's Two Tuns – not least among these being the example that the *Confessio Amantis* taken as a whole must seem to set in the biography of the lover. Amans indeed fails to *spede*, a rather unpropitious end to a book about love![33] Other notable cases of erotic failure include the tragic tales of Canace and Machaire and of Piramus and Thisbe (Book 3), and that of Dido (Book 4). Here the will is shown to be severely restricted by the caprice of a higher – or lower – amatory power. Love's fortune is on this score an arbitrary grace, depending as it must for success upon the reciprocation of another, hence on the expectation of mutuality and good will which is never guaranteed. In short, love is something given or withheld rather than strictly achieved.

Now Gower's *exemplaria* is like other medieval compilations (existing in the form of books, pulpit oratory, popular drama, suffusing the ambient culture at large and, importantly, constituting the individual memory – on which more will be said in the next chapter), in that one would be hard pressed to discover a uniform moral theory governing the surfeit of known exemplary narratives. Grand historical claims aside, not even a stable generic description – e.g., the mirror for princes or the so-called Ovidian paradigm – accounts for all of the evidence in Gower's single collection. I am unable to say with A. J. Minnis that the *Confessio* teaches "a quite consistent morality,"[34] because, as I have barely begun to show, there are profound thematic discrepancies to reckon with in this massive stock of moral memorabilia. One is therefore tempted to ask, as I have, whether Gower has failed to achieve his intentions to compose a coherent argument. Yet the better question to start out with is whether the *Confessio Amantis* is any worse off as an ethical project for lacking the sought-for conceptual uniformity it fails to achieve.[35]

Ethics, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis, 1985), 1.3, 1095a5 (and 2.2, 1103b30 and 10.9, 1179b) where it is said that *action* rather than *knowledge* is the end of the study of ethics – in Grosseteste's rendering, *quia finis est non cognicio, set actus* (*Ethica Nicomachea* I.3, 95a5).

33 Amans will apply the Tale of the Two Tuns to himself at 8.2252ff. 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 transcending 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 *5.6395–403, 7161–3, 7.4242–4, and 8.2330–6 and 2775–9.

34 A. J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, p. 185.

35 Gower's *Confessio* is filled with exemplary teachings that demonstrate contrary things. Certain other 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 Phillis). 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

I don't think so, because 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 given. What is Amans most impressed by? Perseverant Pygmaleon, capricious Cupid, or neither? What I am after is the potentiality of reader response, a potential virtually present in Amans and actually present in Gower's audience in the way moral application *can* occur in the futurity of a decision made after the reading of examples. Here we get our first glimpse of the *practical* dilemma facing any recipient of the ethics of exemplary rhetoric. Amans is clearly suspended between practical possibilities. The ethos of neither tale is obviously illegitimate to his situation, even if they remain incompatible with one another. Amans's love story, for all he knows, could perchance go either way, and this is the point he must ponder – using the best judgement possible under the circumstances. As suggested, the audience is similarly suspended by the diegesis of the poem, even if we already know or have read about the eventual *remedium amoris* ending. At any given point in the poem we are like those legendary lovers who gather around Amans in the eighth book, "To se what ende schal betyde / Upon the cure of my sotie" (8.2758–9), and who perforce can only debate the outcome among ourselves – "on that, another this" (8.2762). Knowledge of the outcome does not prevent our feeling suspense. Moreover, to press a certain exemplary logic (implicit in many of the examples Genius gives, but inherent in the way examples are always partial) to its conclusion, the ending did not have to happen the way it did anyway. The cooling of the *senex* Amans's love does not tell the whole story, is quite literally not the whole of the *Confessio* – for it represents one case among others to be added to memory. Amans's rather mysterious end is one among a set of possibilities: it is in other words *exemplary* in its practical wisdom, being rhetorical rather than apodeictic, furnishing probable rather than necessary truth.

Why indeed should the poem have ended the way it did? Amans may himself fail to *spede* his love, in which case he has wasted time and energy, but other outcomes are imaginable even for the aged and infatuated lover.[36] As Gower himself implies at the end of the poem (echoing Genius), the pursuit of love is not

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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 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* good kingship, wisdom, or godliness. Aeneas, Alexander, Aristotle – not to mention Venus and Genius and Amans – are as equivocal.

36   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, is as conspicuous for its grace or good fortune as for any triumph of good will, right reason, or old age over cupidinous desire. Indeed it just seems to *happen* to be the case that Amans falls out of love, indicating something fundamental about the kind of example he sets. See Hugh White, *Nature, Sex, and Goodness*, pp. 203–7, and Theresa Tinkle, *Medieval Venuses and Cupids*, pp. 190ff.

wrong-headed when one can anticipate success – circular though such logic may seem:

> 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, 3083–5)

The circularity here – that it is good to possess what one already possesses, implying the corollary that you should only take a chance on love when there is no chance you will fail (see a later recension for a similarly tautological senti-ment at 8.2092–7 and headnote 8.iii) – is just the sound everyday logic of hav-ing to make prudent decisions in the process of time before outcomes are known. Insofar as Amans finds himself entrammeled in time, in the *meantime* of the poem, the question of what he is to do remains uncertain, a fact Amans himself will struggle with right up until the end (8.2041 and 2178–82). His love may be irrational and blind, but all important choices are made without the benefit of absolute control or foresight.[37] "To love a man mai wel beginne, / Bot whether he schal lese or winne, / That wot noman til ate laste" (5.4561–3). This may tem-per our judgement. Compelled to reflect on the fact that the moral outcome is inescapably contingent, readers are called to make an equitable judgement – per-haps after the fashion of Jane Austen's *Persuasion*: "It was, perhaps, one of those cases in which advice is good or bad only as the event decides."[38]

Anticipating my conclusion somewhat, I propose that in Gower we are thus invited to think of moral coherence less as a formal or a psychological matter than a tropological question yet-to-be-determined in personal deliberation. In the strongest terms, the audience stands – like Amans before the end – in the moral center of the work, where they are asked to decide on its significance for them in the "meantime" of everyday practice. The rhetoric of exemplarity is truly the consummate art of the mean and meantime, as Gower will show us in Book 5. Suffice it to say here that readers are invited to moderate the poem at different

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37 For a very different view that insists Amans should have seen the error of his ways from the begin-ning see Georgiana Donavin, *Incest Narratives and Structure of Gower's* Confessio Amantis (Victoria, 1993), 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. 21–5). On her (by no means eccen-tric) reading Amans represents sinful infatuation that has to be abandoned in favor of higher spiritual love. But why should human love not be permitted? On my account there is room for Amans to improve his love *qua* romantic love (cf. Simpson's *Sciences and the Self*, p. 159, and Rytting, "In Search of the Perfect Spouse"), something Genius allows up to the very end when he delivers the lover's final plea to Venus, so that for the duration of the poem it remains in doubt *whether* romantic love ought to be abandoned for something else. After all, chaste married love (*honeste* love) always remains a viable alternative ending to the story of the infatuated and as yet unrequited lover: "For if I hadde such a wif / As ye speke of, what sholde I more?" (6.692–3).

38 *The Novels of Jane Austen. Vol. 5, Northanger Abbey and Persuasion: the text based on collation of the early editions by R.W. Chapman*, 3rd ed. (London, 1933), p. 246.

junctures, to determine if the examples in the work (again, including Amans's) are persuasive and practical.

However useful all this may seem, I have yet to show how Gower himself puts moral casuistry forward as a model of practice for his readers. But as we can see already, Gower keeps in tension a dual perspective, showing an inclusiveness towards ethical problems, preserving rival answers to the question of whether love is worth risking. This is already a casuistic move. The text in its incongruity lends itself to practical reasoning precisely because of its hesitancy with respect to the tropological question: *What ought I to do?* Clearly, the text cannot decide the question in the absence of concrete circumstances, exterior to the text, against which to bring specific judgements to bear. Only Amans, for example, can judge whether he has a chance with *his* beloved lady, based on the perspicuous if also ambiguous impressions left by the examples given. And we are in turn invited to judge the example of Amans.

Exemplorum copia

Earlier I noted that the poem's *forma tractandi* is less clear than its *forma tractatus*, in other words that the structure and partitioning of Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, organized as it is around a penitential dialogue on the distinctions of the deadly sins, is more or less patent while the functions and effects or *utilitas* of the manifold content remain to be demonstrated. I insist on the point because, as I have already suggested, in the strongest sense the poem remains to be *invented* through reader response. This will go a long way towards explaining the incongruities in and among Gower's examples, for I think he is providing a classic moral taxonomy to deal with questions of love. The taxonomical aspect puts in focus the quality of the work that I call casuistic, for it keeps before us the way in which the *exemplaria* is constitutively indeterminate as to its utility. One last set of contrastive examples should take us further into the issue of how exemplary cases can be put to use.

The "olde ensample" (3.1683) of Phebus and Daphne, told against the vice of "Folhaste," is given in Book 3. Genius there tells how Phebus once became infatuated with Daphne, but she rejected his wooing. The God of Love, observing the foolish haste of Phebus in this matter, cruelly determined that "he scholde haste more, / And yit noght speden ate laste" (3.1698–9). Cupid forthwith lodged a flaming dart of gold into Phebus's already blazing heart to cause him to pursue Daphne with greater haste; he shot Daphne with a contrary dart of cold lead. 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.   (3.1721–8)

Practice may be the end of the rhetoric of example, just as action and not interminable speculation is the end of practical reasoning in the Aristotelian ethical scheme, yet how one actually practices this narrative text remains to be seen. I mean the last comment literally, first of all: the moral application has to be *perceived* by someone in particular, 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 the way in which the exemplum is *looked* upon in its particulars can make all the difference – for as Gower describes his *exemplaria*, "And for to looke in other weye, / It mai be wisdom to the wise" (8.3058–9*). It is through the perceptual agency of the reader that a decision can be made about what is salient in or impressive about the example vis-à-vis the moral. 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. This tale would seem to be less applicable than most, in fact. How one makes the cross-over from the particular tale of Phebus, with all its fabulous and remote peculiarities (e.g., sun-gods chasing women, Cupids shooting arrows, people turning into trees), and likewise how one achieves the transition from the *sentence*, with its lean abstract generality, to the singularity of one's ordinary existence – these are extremely vexed, but eminently practical, questions, about the exemplarity of narrative. Meanwhile, complicating things still further is the fact that in real life we rarely see our fortunes rising and falling in any way as equivalently synoptic as in Genius's example. Who has the benefit of seeing Cupid at work behind the scenes, as it were, outside the temporality of ordinary life? Is there not consequently a major obstacle in making such a moral imperative relevant to readers, themselves caught up in their own narrative moment, or even, like Amans, striving to realize their own amorous fortunes without the benefit of an extratemporal 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 response is an instructive one with respect to the issue of assimilating moral precepts and proverbs to the singularity and temporality of an individual

life, and it shows Gower posing the problem of application in anticipation of his solution:

> 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 a wooden emblem of his failure, Amans has yet to discover without the benefit of the story-teller's omniscience. To be sure, the case of Phebus is not unimpressive despite all that Amans or we as readers cannot actually know in advance about his love's demise, and insofar as it seems credible the tale may supply the omniscience that humans ordinarily lack – an important point about the exemplarity of any literary narrative: "narratives provided by literature serve to soften the sting of anguish in the face of the unknown, of nothingness, by giving it in imagination the shape of this or that death, exemplary in one way or another."[39] But meanwhile 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 means in the present. Metaphors aside, how and when would one know when the beloved had become unattainable?

Other exemplary instances contradict the Phebus morality, as they did opposite the tale of Pygmaleon, complicating the moral implications still further. 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 actually represent the reverse of that "Folhaste" Phebus was guilty of. 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 a striking counterpoint to the Phebus story. It is the story of Demephon and Phillis, better known for its place in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*. Briefly, in this narrative it transpires that Phillis is turned into a nut tree (recalling Daphne's metamorphosis into a laurel) after her male suitor, 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).

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39 Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago, 1992), p. 162.

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. We simply cannot be certain how the story applies in Amans's own case; the narrative information is not given us, though it may be equally difficult for the lover to figure out himself whether the standoffishness of his lady is a result of his trying too hard or not enough to gain her attention. But the strength of the exemplum, alongside contrary cases, is that it invites the lover to reflect on the moral issues involved without legislating a course of action independent of personal reflection and the contingencies of his own cases.

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, than we were in the Phebus exemplum in which blind Cupid ruled. A contrast similar 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* 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. Genius instructs Amans accordingly, effectively saying: Don't give up on love, because love does not respond to those who are idle, and besides you never know what might happen in the future if you wait long enough (4.712–13, 723–35).[40]

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 of the juxtaposition could be confusing, and the inexactitude of the moral stance the *Confessio* as a whole takes on these matters might thus seem more liable to perplex than profit moral wisdom. Isn't there some subversive irony to be discovered in the incongruities destabilizing Genius's morality? However ironic Gower may seem, I think there is a legitimate way in which the tales of Phebus *and* of Demephon can go to form a comprehensive (rather than presumptively coherent) moral wisdom.

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40 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; and cf. 5.7815ff).

In view of the homiletic tradition informing Gower's *Confessio*, indeed there is reason to think the poem's inclusiveness and heterogeneity is rhetorically useful. As befits proper pastoral practice, Genius teaches contrary things in the confessional because life demands more than a system of neat and tidy normative distinctions to deal with particular cases. Gregory the Great, the major early influence on later medieval conceptions of ministering the word, recommended that when exhorting parishioners it is necessary to modify one's message according to the person. In Gregory's *Pastoral Care* (which Gower alludes to in the Prologue, 284), wherein the various responsibilities of the spiritual ruler and the art of preaching is discussed, 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." Gregory goes on to say that the audience, like a many-stringed harp, must be diversely plucked by the spiritual ruler to produce harmony.[41] 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" (90–1).[42] 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 between the tales of Phebus and of Demephon (concerning haste and sloth, respectively) in the *Confessio Amantis*. Each vice requires a unique approach. 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.[43]

For Gregory, two types of character correspond to each type of vice. In Gower, the contrary exhortations are combined and targeted at a single person (and, secondarily, a mixed audience) over the course of a single poem. Perhaps Genius's

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41 An image that might recall the exemplary harpers and earthly rulers in the *Confessio Amantis*, Arion and Apollonius, whose impeccable sense of "measure" stands for a capacity to promote communal harmony. See Peck, *Kingship and Common Profit in Gower's "Confessio Amantis"* (Carbondale, 1978), pp. 22–3 and 170–1, on the important link between harping and the commonwealth. Robert Yeager's *John Gower's Poetic: The Search for a New Arion* (Cambridge, 1990) develops the idea at length in view of the vocation of the poet.

42 Gregory the Great, *Pastoral Care*, Ancient Christian Writers, trans. Henry Davis, S. J. (Maryland, 1950), pp. 89–91. James J. Murphy remarks that Gregory's list is intended "as a sample drawn from a potentially infinite set of human characters"; *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages: A History of Rhetorical Theory from Saint Augustine to the Renaissance* (Berkeley, 1974), p. 295. The same concern for the diversity of audience is shown in the *ad status* sermon collections directed at specific occupations and spiritual cases, on which see my discussion above in Chapter 2.

43 Gregory, *Pastoral Care*, p. 134.

teaching reflects later, post-Gregorian developments in homiletics insofar as they envisage one character divided within himself, as needing sometimes one exhortation and sometimes another. Indeed Amans seems to be constituted by opposing impulses (e.g., sloth and haste), each requiring contrary admonishment at different times. Perhaps Gower's teaching therefore evinces a more complex view of human subjectivity than that offered in Gregory's typology, even if Gower's nuance comes at the price of greater uncertainty. For how is one to know which teachings are salient at any given moment? If there are competing precepts in the same moral discourse, how is a moral agent to negotiate the differences? What is Amans to do?

Middle Weie

The answer can be found in Book 5 where Genius describes virtue as a proportional value, namely, an intermediate point between behavioral extremes:

> Betwen the tuo extremites
> Of vice stant the propretes
> Of vertu . . .   (5.7641–3)

It is an especially evocative idea because it elicits a comparison between the style and substance of Gower's ethical poetic, recalling that in the Prologue the poet famously promises to steer a course the "middle weie" (17) between earnest and game. Rhetorical style and substance are reciprocal qualities in the ethics of exemplarity I have been describing, not just because as rhetoric exemplary tales delight while they instruct, but also because one can only take the full measure of a moral dilemma against the backdrop of a taxonomy of cases. As for the determination of the correct measure, 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 appealing to Aristotle here 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.[44] In the context of Book 5, however, Genius is most concerned with a doctrine of ethical *practique* that concerns individuals – individual lovers, not kings per se. Classically, the Aristotelian doctrine 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

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44 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; *Sciences and the Self*, p. 220 *et passim*. Policy, however, which in Gower's view consists of the five "points" of truth, largesse, justice, pity, and chastity obviously has to do with the *morality* of politics.

with rational self-governance. One example from Aristotle's *Ethics* is that generosity is the medial point between the excess of prodigality and the deficiency of avarice.[45] Gower's Genius puts the 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; cf. 7.2014–18). Again the *via media* of virtue is a matter of "mesure" (5.7703) in view of the circumstances in which excess and deficiency obtain.

How exactly does the doctrine of the mean relate to the casuistic ethics I am associating with the phenomenon 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."[46] Genius effectively operates casuistically. 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. This is essentially the tropological moment of reading for the moral that makes, as much as it makes manifest, what one is supposed to accomplish. In the language of Genius, Amans must "avise" and "mesure" based on the exemplary "evidence" at hand. This kind of ethical invention may sometimes seem like a crude operation, but it has its own sophistication. Two qualities go to make up the conceptual complexity of casuistic ethics: the first is that exemplification is a kind of probable reasoning, and the second that this reasoning is contingent upon individual practice. The result is that any middle way between extreme cases is not predictable in advance of individual reception. The latitude I am describing will be clearer once we recognize that what is moral in any given circumstance could not have been anticipated by any moral theory alone. To be sure, it would be disingenuous to say that *anything goes*. It would be foolish to claim medieval ethics could tolerate moral relativism, and worse still to ignore Gower's partiality for the rule of right reason instantiated in "positive law." Amans is instructed to honor rational constraints on the pursuit of erotic desire, and I take it that the imperative to find the mean is itself a norm. Genius glosses the example of Sarra and Thobie, illustrating "honeste" married love, by recalling the divine dispensation of the law of reason given to man so that

> he nature schal
> Upon the causes modefie,
> That he schal do no lecherie,
> And yit he schal his lustes have.   (7.5376–81)

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45 See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2.7, 1107b; 3.12, 1119b20; 4.3, 1123b. *Medietas est virtus* in Grosseteste, *Ethica Nicomachea* II.6, 07a5.
46 Russell Peck, *Kingship and Common Profit*, p. 105.

Genius posits some higher arbitrating rule ("positive law"), over against the impulsive law of nature, which 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*. And yet, notwithstanding the fact that certain ideals in the *Confessio Amantis* are not negotiable, a limited relativism remains; the lover is regularly allowed, indeed obliged to assume, some latitude.

Let me be clear: I am finally claiming that ethical reception, or reading for the moral, requires an improvisatory decision about the applicability of one or more cases to lived experience. And I am linking moral application to the singularity of personal practice. In practice one can always even *deny* the applicability of a moral teaching, and indeed Amans's occasional dismissal of exempla underlines the casuistic ethics I am describing: when he rejects the relevance of some exemplary teaching to his case, Amans shows that he is actualizing, if only negatively, the relativity of exemplarity. But improvisation could mean *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 a number of possible cases or precepts (implying greater inexactitude as in Aristotle's discussion of the rhetorical induction, but only by way of ensuring a more exact fit between precedent cases and circumstances). In either event, an individual practitioner takes his or her bearings in view of an array of cases; and cases become relevant in view of individual circumstances.[47] Indeed, the exemplary array constitutes something like a horizon of possible outcomes, a taxonomy of cases, a repertoire useful for orienting the moral subject without predetermining final ethical positions in practice. Just so, the *exemplaria* introduces an aspect of the unpredictable into any ethical analysis, because casuistic morality is, as I put it at the start, improvisatory even as it is imitative. Again, not that invention is infinite. The invented possibilities are only as relative or open-ended as they are (or are held to be) normative for someone in particular for whom they have meaning. As Michel 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."[48] The comparison clarifies what is at stake. Like finite rules of grammar, too, which regulate the intelligibility of speech without determining the precise content of what is enunciated in given speech acts, the *exemplaria* serves to direct the formation of moral responses without predetermining its forms in advance.[49]

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47 A similar operation has been suggested with respect to a related demotic figure of speech in Paul D. Goodwin and Joseph W. Wenzel's "Proverbs and Practical Reasoning," in which the phenomenon of contradictory proverbs is discussed. It is observed that in "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'" (p. 143); in *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 65 (1979), pp. 289–302, reprinted in *The Wisdom of Many: Essays on the Proverb*, ed. Wolfgang Mieder and Alan Dundes (New York, 1981), pp. 140–60.

48 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley, 1984), p. 21.

49 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

The rhetoric of exemplarity consequently initiates a new decision rather than imposing a preformulated one, inspires choice rather than impedes it; it is not itself a categorical system. What evidence Amans finds useful and appropriate to his own case is for him to invent – not *ex nihilo*, but in the old rhetorical sense – out of myriad possibilities he has been given in the form of moral exempla on various topics. Exempla, as much as instantiating conventional morality, are therefore in a sense on a quest for practical precepts that practitioners have not yet formulated, or at the very least supply moral guidance which, as suggested, one can affirm, refine, or deny. Gower himself exemplifies the very practice of applying the rhetoric in surprising ways in his own composition, a point I will return to in the next chapter.

The technique has a strong theoretical basis in that there is no universal and invariable abstract form of the good according to which *every* moral act can be automatically judged apart from contingent circumstance. Moral cases, as Aquinas elaborates in his exposition of Aristotle's *Ethics*, tend to be "infinitely diversified."[50] It is therefore necessary to cultivate the discretion that enables one to judge the salient aspects of given cases. Readerly circumspection, rather than textual coherence, thus becomes imperative. Gower presupposes *our* circumspection in particular, because at last everything that is written in the *Confessio Amantis* remains to be made instructive, and that, if we so choose, is our job as much as Amans's. As John Trevisa in his late fourteenth-century translation of Higden's *Polychronicon* explains: "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."[51] Doctrine, not truth, justifies so much incongruous material. Which brings me to my original thesis, that Gower's long and exhaustive poem, however it may be fashioned on the manuscript page, exists ultimately in its plural and partial effects, in lived *practique*, among persons in the world.

(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 searches to find what he calls the "hidden" "rules of these circumstantial ways of making" he looks to games and tales and legends. The latter, he says, "offer their audience a repertory of tactics for future use" or "models of practices"; they function, in other words, because they are exemplary. See de Certeau, *Practice*, pp. 22–4.

50 Aquinas, *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, Library of Living Catholic Thought, vols 1–2, trans. C. I. Litzinger, O. P. (Chicago, 1964), 2.2.259.

51 *Polychronicon Ranulphi Higden, monachi cestrensis; together with the English translations of John Trevisa and of an unknown writer of the fifteenth century*. Ed. J. R. Lumby, Rolls Series 41 (London, 1865–86), i, 18.

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All That Is Written For Our Doctrine:
Proof, Remembrance, Conscience

Gower would seem to couch the *Confessio Amantis* in the academic terms of *compilatio*, a word which has taken on great weight in recent critical discussion of the poem and its exemplary import.[1] In a marginal gloss the author says that despite poor health he diligently compiled (*studiosissime compliauit*) the 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 philosophers] (Prol., at 34*).[2] Gower's long poem is thus an expressly inclusive collection, akin to a gathering of the best that has been known and thought in the Middle Ages, and not unlike an antique *florilegium* which is arguably the origin of later compilations.[3] The horticultural analogy, which I will return to later, is important to notice. But as a collection of narrative exempla, the *Confessio* also has great affinity with preachers' example-books, such as the *Alphabetum Narrationum* or the *Speculum Laicorum*, as well as with the penitential handbooks,

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1   On Gower in his role as *compilator* see A. J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, pp. 194–200; Rita Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation*, pp. 202–20; and Kurt Olsson, *John Gower and the Structures of Conversion*, pp. 1–15. On the putative origins of *compilatio* in thirteenth-century "academic and legal circles" see A. I. Doyle and Malcolm B. Parkes's influential essay, "The Production of Copies of the *Canterbury Tales* and the *Confessio Amantis* in the Early Fifteenth Century," in *Medieval Scribes, Manuscripts, and Libraries: Essays Presented to N. R. Ker*, ed. M. B. Parkes and Andrew Watson (London, 1978), pp. 163–210. A rejoinder to Parkes and an excellent corrective to modern usage can be found in Richard H. Rouse and Mary A. Rouse, "*Ordinatio* and *Compilatio* Revisited," in *Ad Litteram: Authoritative Texts and Their Medieval Readers*, ed. Mark D. Jordon and Kent Emery Jr. (Notre Dame, 1992), pp. 113–34. The Rouses argue that the late medieval compilations descend from late antiquity – "The archetypal compilation no doubt was the *florilegium*" (p. 120) – and not the thirteenth century as was previously believed. They also show that the term *compilatio* is attested very seldom in the thirteenth century, so that there is little basis "on which to erect a literary theory for the end of the Middle Ages" (p. 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, should be replaced by the ordinary English word, which I will do.
2   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 Russell Peck, *John Gower: Confessio Amantis: Volume 1*, Explanatory Notes, p. 286.
3   For definitions see Richard H. Rouse and Mary A. Rouse, *Preachers, Florilegia, and Sermons: Studies on the* Manipulus florum *of Thomas of Ireland* (Toronto, 1979), pp. 3, 36–7, 113–17. Cf. Olsson, *John Gower and the Structures of Conversion*, pp. 5–6.

like Robert Mannyng of Brunne's *Handlyng Synne*, among other various compil-
ations of moralized stories.

In the last chapter I argued that the reader might profitably approach Gower's
large compilation as though it contained "all that is written for our doctrine" –
an array of moral stories meant for our goodness, without presupposing them all
to be true. And I claimed that my ethical reading has the advantage of enabling
the audience to make sense of incongruity within or between exempla in the
compilatory array, so that the patent contradictions and copiousness of the work
need not necessarily be seen as a failure of moral rhetoric. Indeed, my assump-
tion is that inclusiveness and incongruity can be counted as virtues of the casu-
istic ethics I have described.[4] And yet there may be other reasons to doubt the
ethics of exemplarity. At the beginning of this chapter, I want to consider a range
of recent responses to the *Confessio* so as better to position my own account,
before exploring evidence of Gower's rather cautious regard for the rhetoric of
exemplarity. The poet's sense that reading for the moral can go wrong as well as
right should serve as a fitting and indeed exemplary adjunct to the preceding dis-
cussion, providing further evidence that his compilation, though it is not fail-safe
or fool-proof, is fundamentally inclusive and grounded in the reader-oriented
possibilities of ethics.

Gower's Ethical Poetic

Gower begins his *Confessio Amantis* with a sort of literary manifesto:

> 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 correspon-
ding translation and transformation in the present through the inventional proced-
ures of orderly arrangement and division of received material. The paradoxes of
the position he arrogates to himself as compiler are obvious. In preserving and
mediating the past, various measures are taken to renovate it; new matter is
established on the perpetual authority of the old. Rita Copeland has done much to

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4   I follow John Dagenais, *The Ethics of Reading in Manuscript Culture*, p. 15 and p. 222 n. 6, in crediting
    the power of "incoherence" and what he calls "functional uncertainty" in medieval literary experience.

document and describe such techniques of invention, appropriation, and displacement which Chaucer refers to very memorably in the homely 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, / Cometh al this newe science that men lere."[5] Much has already been written in this connection about the appropriative historiography of Gower, for whom the proliferative wisdom of the past also seems to have renewed itself in the *Confessio*.[6] Again the horticulture of books is invoked, as for these poets moral science is rooted not so much in any metaphysics of universal law but in the evidence and experience of old books, Copeland for her part argues that the compilation represents a systematic assertion of "canonical authority." Gower's Latinity betrays the vernacular he employs, reining in a refractory text with a comprehensive apparatus (verse prologues, prose glosses, speaker markers) of "auto-exegesis." Paired with "the interpretive ministrations of Genius," the scholarly machinery enables the modest author to mask even as he mimics his authority.[7] Larry Scanlon has put forward a diametrically opposed reading, suggesting that the vernacular interprets the Latin rather than the reverse.[8] For Copeland and Scanlon, whatever their differences, the inventional moment of textual transmission represents a solemn sociopolitical drama of control, co-optation, and containment in the intertextual field that is the *Confessio*. The compilation is the assertion of poetical authority.

For all that, we may still wonder what light may be shed on the authority of ethics in regard to the compilatory arrangement? From an ethical standpoint, transmission and invention surely need to be reconceptualized to include the potentialities of reader response. The sorting, sifting, and storing of old material goes a long way towards making the *Confessio Amantis* what it is; and yet invention need not – and never does – stop there. Strategies of invention (*after* writing) have an additive role to play in reconstituting the text to conform to the subjective and sometimes idiosyncratic intentions of individual practitioners. We would therefore do well to rethink the interaction between text and apparatus, which in Gower plays itself out in the relationship between vernacular poetry and Latin verses and prose commentary. In the improvisatory readerly context I have been invoking throughout this book, normative Latin "exegesis" quite simply does not pre-empt interpretation; and anyway the restrictive moral apparatus is itself a manifestation of just the sort of improvisational interpretation that needs explaining. Gower for one concedes that *other* meanings than the ones focused on at any given moment are viable: for instance, the Tale of Acis and Galatea is put "*at least* against those who, while in the cause of love being envious of the joys

5 *Parliament of Fowls*, lines 22–5.
6 Gower's difference from Chaucer in this regard has been discussed by Judith Davis Shaw in "*Lust* and *Lore* in Gower and Chaucer," *Chaucer Review* 19.2 (1984), pp. 110–22, where it is 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.
7 *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation*, pp. 202–5.
8 *Narrative, Authority, and Power*, p. 247.

of others, do not at all profit themselves by this" (*Hic ponit Confessor exemplum saltem contra istos qui in amoris causa aliorum gaudiis inuidentes nequaquam per hoc sibi impsis proficiunt*, at 2.101). More often the Latin simply has, "Here the Confessor puts an example against those who" (*Hic ponit Confessor exemplum contra illos qui . . .*), an uncomplicated but still conditional formula transparent as to the limited scope of its moral meaning. Gower does not say his exempla have no other application, nor that they have none for others besides "those who" are specified. Gower seems capable of acknowledging, then, that a moral is never identical to its tale, that it is simply a provisional application, a makeshift moral sentence selected from a story consisting of several others; his own readings are clearly *inventive*, applied to contingencies that have arisen. Such inventiveness is indispensable to the practice of reading for the moral. Moreover, in the *Confessio*, where Latin verses are so thoroughly elliptical and moral commentary frequently incongruous, there is little reason to conclude the apparatus sustains legislative authority throughout. The point is becoming increasingly important.[9] In practice, limited legibility and literacy will yield various reading experiences. A learned reader may find his way by using the apparatus, but who is so qualified? Several disjunctive reading experiences – or rather, several versions of the poem – conditional on different linguistic competencies are likely the result of actual reception. Given the social realities, "auto-exegesis" has to be proven rather than assumed. As Joyce Coleman has recently pointed out, we can hardly expect that a coterie of retainers or even the original royal patrons for whom the *Confessio* was written would have had the competency to understand the Latin. Gower may therefore have meant his poem to be expounded by a "trained clerk-prelector":

> Gower's complex text with its Latin apparatus would thus partake in the "emergent" character of aural texts; that is, performer and audience would effectively

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9   Scholars studying the Latin 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, in "With Carmen's Help: Latin Authorities in the *Confessio Amantis*," *Studies in Philology* 95 (1998), pp. 1–40, provides a salutary corrective to the view, represented in the work of Copeland among others, that Latin has 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'" (pp. 5–6). To the contrary, "far from invoking authority, Gower's Latin problematizes the question of authority in the *Confessio* by presenting the reader with several competing authoritative voices, Latin and vernacular, none of which seem capable of taming the text" (p. 7). From Echard's point of view there are multiple Latin voices working together with the English to destabilize any and all linguistic authority. It is further observed that the majority of extant manuscripts transcribe the Latin "marginal" commentary into the columns of the text proper, repositioning the Latin ideologically and so also, as Echard observes, disrupting rather than directing one's reading of the poem as a whole. See further Echard, "Glossing Gower: In Latin, in English, and *in absentia*: The Case of Bodleian Ashmole 35," in R. F. Yeager, *Re-Visioning Gower* (Asheville, 1998), pp. 237–56.

   For reference to others besides Copeland who emphasize the stabilizing function of the Latin see Richard K. Emmerson, "Reading Gower in a Manuscript Culture: Latin and English in Illustrated Manuscripts of the *Confessio Amantis*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 21 (1999), pp. 143–86, who provides a useful résumé of critical opinion.

negotiate a different text between them in each performance. Audience and prelector could construct a different experience each time they opened the book, balancing "lust" and "lore" of the *Confessio* as the tastes and occasions varied.[10]

Here one bumps up against the fact that it is not always possible to sustain modernist assumptions about literacy and the primacy of authorial intention in medieval literature.

As other critics have indeed recognized, literality and intentionality give way to reception and textual effects in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*. Kurt Olsson has offered a persuasive reading of the way the poem exists as a mélange of juxtaposed exemplary material generating nuanced ethical wisdom through cross-referencing of tales and interlocking argumentation. The irregular surface quality of the work – its effect rather than governing intention – positions Gower in the role of *tumultuator*, one who stirs up debate by means of the deliberate contradiction.[11] Thus the *Confessio* is no mere repository of exegetical norms, nor is it necessarily engrossed in a contest for its own canonicity (Copeland) or, for that matter, laicization (Scanlon). Olsson argues instead that the main effect of the poem is to attract readers indirectly to the virtue of *caritas*. Similarly, James Simpson emphasizes that the "deeply planted structural incongruities" of the work resolve themselves only gradually, for there is no instant congruence between teachings on sexual love and ethics and politics in the *Confessio*; Genius fluctuates widely in his instruction.[12] Yet Simpson argues, after all, that the poem works towards a single effect: the self-integration of Amans that is the result of a complex progression towards psychical resolution in the disclosure of "John Gower" in Book 8. All the same, what Coleman calls the "emergent" quality of the work must remain a real potential, given that any reader's actual experience of the *Confessio* is scarcely going to be one of coherence. And surely in so motley a book as the *Confessio Amantis* some tales are bound to repel as much as attract audiences to virtue. Too, there is good reason to urge against Simpson that Book 8 does not model a thematic or psychological resolution to the narrative preceding the eventual *remedium amoris*, since the lover falls out of love (as into it) quite by accident. As Hugh White contends, Gower seems "more impressed with the tendency of things to fall out of always precarious harmonies and balances than with their capacities to achieve these."[13] And so I say virtue or integration, whenever they are achieved, will occur outside the poem in the conscience of the reader. Simpson himself acknowledges that audiences must become *better* readers than Amans.[14]

Assuming Gower meant to reach beyond the *texte* to challenge readers and change their practices *hors-texte*, we are in a better position to appreciate the compilation of the *Confessio*. Specifically, we should not underestimate the

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10 "Lay Readers and Hard Latin: How Gower May have Intended the *Confessio Amantis* to Be Read," *SAC* 24 (2002), pp. 216–17, 227, 234–5.
11 *John Gower and the Structures of Conversion*, p. 13.
12 *Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry*, p. 138.
13 *Nature, Sex, and Goodness in a Medieval Literary Tradition* (Oxford, 2000), p. 203.
14 *Sciences and the Self*, pp. 254–68.

appearance of incongruity in the work, which scholars routinely acknowledge but attempt to explain away. Gower's is an art that provokes the audience to proceed without the promise of coherence. To adapt what has become a favorite medieval motto: Gower provokes us to doubt, so that by doubting we come to questioning, whereby we might arrive at answers. The moral meaning finally rests as much on what readers *do* as on what the text *means*.

Proof, Remembrance, Conscience

The burden of Gower's exemplary lust and lore plainly rests on the capacities of individual judgement. As we have seen and will observe again in what follows, the poet goes a long way towards analyzing and diagnosing the kind of practical rationality from which ethical judgements ultimately derive, exploring the rhetorical bases of reason, the evidential resources of rhetoric, and the arbitrating role of conscience in coming to virtue. For all that, it appears Gower is not always confident that good judgement will prevail.

Gower's ethical poetic is based on certain basic assumptions contained in his recurring terminology, his keywords, as expressed in the following epitome: the *proof* of an argument lies in the *evidence* and *experience* inscribed in *examples* useful for future *remembrance*, which is to be judged according to the *rule* of one's *conscience*. The language is all Gower's. To give one example in which some of the terms are brought together, Genius is said to inform the lover "Whereof thou myht take evidence / To reule with thi conscience" (1.247–8). Packed into this brief summary is the nuclear substance of the ethics of exemplarity as I understand it. Unpacking three main concepts – proof, remembrance, and conscience – will reveal specific permutations of the ethical as set forth in the *Confessio*. Gower's idiom is for the most part based on common late medieval Aristotelian understandings of the moral conscience and natural reason (*conscientia/synderesis*) associated with rational self-governance (*prudentia*), as well as the rhetorical and evidentiary function of individual instances (*evidencia*) brought to bear on everyday ethical dilemmas. Both the penitential and poetical contexts of Gower's work serve to enrich and alter such understandings, and they often put them to the test.

A most fundamental concept in the *Confessio* is signaled in "remembrance," a word occurring over fifty times in the poem and cropping up in Latin marginal glosses as *ad memoriam*. Memory is self-evidently related to confession.[15] "So schal I moche thing foryete: / Bot if thou wolt my schrifte oppose . . ." (1.224–5), worries Amans. But what exactly is the nature of the relation obtaining between memory and confession? Peck has described confessional practice as Gower would have understood it as "a kind of psychoanalysis,"[16] an exercise

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15 J. A. Pickles and J. L. Dawson, eds, *A Concordance to John Gower's* Confessio Amantis (Woodbridge, 1987).

16 *Kingship and Common Profit*, p. 30, and see Peck's Introduction to *John Gower: Confessio Amantis*, pp. 7–18.

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 notes, is to attend to the *circumstantiae* in the interrogation of the confessant (*C'est qui, quoy, u, qant et comment, / Ove qui, pour quoy darreinement, / Ce sont ly sept divisioun*),[17] and thus ensure that confession has been comprehensive and complete. The preacher's and poet's roles are related to that of the confessor in this important 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 and information.[18] However, I 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, never but momentarily or tentatively complete, a point Gower seems especially cognizant of in the *Confessio*.

Shrift depends on a proper analysis of the circumstances of each and every past act as it is remembered and assessed in the present, and such a thorough-going self-contextualization of one's personal history is always liable to error or evasion. As we have just seen, Amans admits that his memory is fading and so asks for a confession which will restore it to him. To combat such failures examinations of conscience must be carried out repeatedly, or annually according to Lateran IV, though there is no reason to think that profound self-examination would have been restricted or reduced to the institutional requirements – reading Gower, or hearing a sermon, will give a person similar opportunities. At any rate, the penitential activity of remembrance is based on the ongoing possibility of imminent reconfigurations of the past, retroactive changes in self-image, and thus never can it be said that confession is sufficiently completed in this life:

> Only by repeated acts of attention in different contexts can one begin to come to grips with the state of one's soul; and the process of coming to grips never comes to an end. We are always vulnerable to suddenly realizing that, despite our best efforts, we have been getting it all wrong; and all that we can do in the face of this danger is to keep trying to develop our ability to get it right.[19]

One therefore 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 (remembrance) was false, superficial, unexamined, or incomplete. The most memorable fourteenth-century English literary example of this process is *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In retrospect the titular hero has a different analysis of his having accepted the green girdle than he does immediately after having taken it; only when he sees

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17 *Mirour de l'Omme*, in *The Complete Works of John Gower*, vol. 1, ed. G. C. Macaulay (Oxford, 1899–1902), lines 14839–41.

18 On "information" as the dominant process of the *Confessio* see Simpson's *Sciences and the Self*, pp. 1–21 and 230–71.

19 Mark Miller, "Displaced Souls, Idle Talk, Spectacular Scenes: *Handlyng Synne* and the Perspective of Agency," *Speculum* 71 (1996), p. 616.

the full implications of his fault and the larger pattern of action to which it belongs does the knight become truly penitent. *Re*-figuring the self therefore brings new self-understanding, and in part this is what we witness Amans undertaking in the *Confessio*. Envisaged as a kind of slowly advancing hermeneutical circle, we can see the confessional testimony he is undertaking as processual and provisional in the way the meaning of a life – or "narrative identity,"[20] to adopt a useful term given currency in recent discussions of philosophical ethics – 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 readers actually read, to draw a comparison as Augustine famously did. It is the 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.[21] Our confessional understanding of ourselves is comparable to reading, excepting that, as Augustine knew, unlike a poem the real history of the world of which individual persons are a part is unfathomable as a whole.[22] Narrative identity, too, is subject to a partial and time-bound view of existence; life is ongoing and in fact more complex than any 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.[23] Augustine's description of historical understanding may be helpful in refining our sense of the way exemplary narrative may be read and reread in the continual therapeutic recollection of the self.[24]

Many exempla in the *Confessio Amantis* tell against the vice of forgetfulness and so engage a number of the foregoing concerns about living with and for memory. One example is the Tale of Capaneus 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" (1.2011–15). The moral is at once simple and complex in regard to the ethics of memory. Here the warning concerns excessive self-regard on one hand,

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20 See Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago, 1992), pp. 113–68, where he refines a term originally given currency by Alasdair 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.

21 *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (London, 1961), 11.28.

22 *Confessions*, 4.11.

23 *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London, 1972), 11.18.

24 See Eugene Vance's excellent article, "Saint Augustine, Language as Temporality," in *Mimesis: From Mirror to Method, Augustine to Descartes*, ed. J. D. Lyons and S. G. Nichols (Hanover, 1982), pp. 20–35. Peck also draws on elements of Augustine's famous comparison in his Introduction to *John Gower: Confessio Amantis*, p. 3. William Robins, in "Romance, Exemplum, and the Subject," pp. 165–7, invokes Aristotle's notion of *telos* to make similar points about the contingency and temporality of moral evaluations.

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 1.viii)[25] and so results in a fatal self-forgetting.

Vainglory poses similar threats to the integrity of narrative identity. In the Tale of Nebuchadnezzar's Punishment we learn that 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)

God, the king of kings, who peers omnisciently into the "privetes of mannes herte" (1.2806), duly humiliated King Nebuchadnezzar for his myopic misreading or misremembering of his own condition. One day when the king arrogantly "drowh into memoire" (1.2958) how great he had become, he was transformed into a beast of the field. It was ordained that for seven years Nebuchadnezzar would live in the wilderness, until he became sufficiently repentant. And so it passed. Set out to pasture, the conqueror 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.   (1.3035–9)

A complex interplay of forgetting and remembering is evident in this story, as in the last. For improper memories Nebuchadnezzar is damned to suffer, as when his focus is too much on his own achievements, but for proper remembrance the king is redeemed, for 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 again. *Forgetting* has the same range of ambiguity, for it is commended in the context of the last passage where vainglory is appropriately put behind the king, 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 his human form and given his "reign" back, which implies the reconstitution of the self and the

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25 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, which also occurs in William Langland's *Piers Plowman* B XI.3.

renewed ability to rule oneself. 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.[26]

Which brings me to the next question of evidentiary proof in the *Confessio*. Memory is linked to therapeutic self-evaluation, life history, and identity formation – a constellation of ethical concerns whose reach is broad and deep.[27] But memory also has very specific, pragmatic ends; it has a role in guiding action and conforming the human will to the "evidence" (the word occurs thirty-nine times and can be defined variously as factual proof, proverbial sayings or authority, sign or symbol, instructive example or model).[28] In medieval practical ethics, as Mary Carruthers has shown, the trained memory, which is what she rightly calls "a condition of prudence," cultivates "moral habit" through repeated exposure to the evidence of examples from the past. Such a cultivation of prudence by way of "ethical memories" is indispensable to "the formation of moral virtues."[29] Just so, Amans is taught by his confessor to hold exemplary tales close in remembrance and "to be war therby" (e.g., 1.2364–5; 1.534; 3.612; 3.2196–7; 3.2773; 5.7838). Signaling the importance of mnemotechnics to prudence, Amans is given multiple exempla *ad memoriam*. In order to become prudent, Amans requires evidence in the form of a taxonomy of cases or more broadly defined proverbial or philosophical lore in books, but at any rate the stuff of the cultural imagination – let us say, the mental furniture that goes to form a living *sensus communis* – constituting the individual's moral horizons. "I finde a gret experience," Genius notes in his preamble to the Tale of the Trojan Horse, "Wherof to take an evidence" (1.1073–4): the rhyming words point to the connection between the two concepts. One's moral prospects are simply delimited by the evidence stored in the memory (Latin *evidentia*, "things seen"), without which moral deliberation could not be carried out. Gower's ethical poetic is rather obviously earthbound in this way: his work, *ex floribus recollectum*, is compiled "from various chronicles, histories, and sayings of the poets and philosophers." A cultural heritage serves as moral proof; there is little that is metaphysical in Gower's conception. However, the questions of proof and the perception of proof are in practice not simple and

26 The classical humanist imperative to self-examination – the Delphic maxim *gnothi seauton* – 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 maxim crops in other interesting contexts of Gower's poem, as in the notorious Tale of Canace and Machaire in Book 3, in which Gower gives yet another perspective on the ethical dimensions of memory. The Delphic maxim 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* (New York, 1979), for early references – e.g., from Heraclitus to Horace to Ambrose to Augustine. Many later authors (Bernard of Silvester, Ralph of Longchamps, Hugh of Saint-Victor, and Peter Abelard) knew it.

27 See Katharine R. Chandler, "Memory and Unity in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*," *Philoligical Quarterly* 71 (1992), pp. 15–30, for a discussion of how memory is also central to the tale of Appolonius of Tyre in Book 8.

28 *MED*, "evidence," q. v. 1–5. To Aristotle was attributed the notion that "examples and fables resemble evidence" in the Pseudo-Aristotlean *Problems*, Loeb Classical Library, trans. W. S. Hett (Cambridge, 1965), 916b, pp. 25–34.

29 *The Book of Memory*, pp. 71, 182, 156.

straightforward, and indeed they can lead one astray. Evidence, experience, and imagination are all fraught with difficulties in fact, and they are worth investigating in some detail because of the light they cast on practical ethics.

The first few books of the *Confessio* seem especially 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 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 the worthy knight named Acteon who, having stolen a look at Diana bathing, is changed into a hart 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,[30] even through a seemingly 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 things heard. Thus Aspidis the Serpent shows 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,

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30 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 Winthrop Wetherbee, "Genius and Interpretation in the *Confessio Amantis*," in *Magister Regis: Studies in Honour of Robert Earl Kaske*, ed. Arthur Groos (New York, 1986), for fine examples of resistant readings that challenge the exemplary morality.

paradoxically counseling Amans to "yif no credence" to what he hears without sufficient "evidence" (1.533–4), as if he could do otherwise.

Part of the evidence Amans is supposed to store in his memory, then, speaks to the danger of putting too much trust in the evidence itself. Amans is explicitly 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.   (1.530–5)

Gower's full range of preoccupations with perceiving, remembering, and proving is brought together in this early passage, betraying the intimate links existing between exemplary rhetoric and the practice of confession and moral judgement. To the extent that Genius's teaching forms just another quantity of exemplary "evidence," the statement produces ironies that point to one of the central paradoxes of the *Confessio Amantis*. How much "credence" is one to give the confessor at any point in the confession? The difficulty intensifies as the poem progresses, when for instance we see Genius offering inconsistent or questionable advice. But the paradox itself adds credibility to Genius's point that one must use good judgement when weighing the evidence; the irony reinforces the advice Genius gives about the role of readerly circumspection. The upshot of the passage points to 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 judgement of conscience and, when appropriate, given credence.

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 own credentials by calling in question the conditions of the evidential and rhetorical. Examples of misplaced "credence" indeed fill the pages of the poem beyond Book 1 and raise the problem of proof in a variety of respects, again showing just how dependent human knowledge is on the vagaries of perception, experience, and circumstance. To start with, there are plenty of liars and imposters to reckon with in the *Confessio*. Mundus misleads Paulina with "blinde tales" (1.927), convincing 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.[31] A similar story is the one about Nectanabus, coming much later

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31 Fantastical imagination causes one to fall into love melancholy (3.125–7); 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

in the poem in Book 6, concerning the villainous sorcerer who uses a nearly identical god-trick in order to deceive Olimpias of Macedoine. It is noteworthy that the two hypocrites just mentioned take advantage of religious belief, another sort of credence, by fabricating bogus prophetic revelations to achieve their ends.[32] Similar artifice is employed by characters in the tales of Pope Boniface (Book 2) and Virgil's Mirror (Book 5), suggesting still other ways in which revealed religion may be exploited and exploiting. As the story of the Trojan Horse shows, false "evidence" (1.1160) of the religious kind may come in the form of a conciliatory sacred offering (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," 3.1073–4), though it remains true, as Genius teaches in Book 7, qualifying somewhat his cautious remarks in other parts, that genuine faith must place trust where no substantive evidence exists at all. Perceptual or empirical knowledge is perforce always in tension with a genuine Christian faith that emphatically believes in the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen.[33]

Further instances of the misappropriation or misapplication of evidence in Gower pile up. In Book 2 we learn all about False Semblant, though his type is already well-known because (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" (2.1899–901). Next we meet "Fa crere," extorter of goods and confidence man, who "makth believe, / So that fulofte he hath deceived, / Er that he mai ben aperceived" (2.2136–8). Figures of false seeming and false credence populate many of the tales of Book 2. For instance, the tale of Constance details incidents of forged letters and perjured words; the tale of the False Bachelor involves a ring, in token of royal inheritance, which is embezzled and employed to steal a kingdom. And most suggestively, in this book and the next Genius makes the point that mirrors are deceptive ("The Mirour scheweth in his kinde / As he hadde al the world withinne, / And is in soth nothing therinne," 3.1076–8; 2.1921–2), something which – recalling that the looking glass is everywhere a metaphor for didactic discourse in the period – implicates the very specular supposition of exemplary rhetoric.[34]

Simpson, *Sciences and the Self*, pp. 264–7, on the different potentialities of the imagination, a faculty that can lead to tyranny *or* mercy.

32 Something Scanlon discusses in *Narrative, Authority, and Power*, pp. 260–1 and 277–82.

33 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 . . ." (7.73–5). Evidence in this case is not *knowable*, for as John of Salisbury puts it in his *Metalogicon*, trans. Daniel D. McGarry (Berkeley, 1962), IV.13. p. 223, "Faith is a voluntary servitude." Whence the vulnerability of those taken in by false prophecy in the above-mentioned tales. Again, we see Genius teaching according to a tacit principle of contraries whereby contrastive wisdom is juxtaposed with one another.

34 See Herbert Grabes, *The Mutable Glass: Mirror-Imagery in the Titles and Texts of the Middle Ages and English Renaissance*, trans. Gordon Collier (Cambridge, 1982). 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 good clerics as "The Mirour of ensamplerie" (Prol. 496) and

Skepticism towards the evidence of rhetoric is borne out in still other places. Bad fame, or "worst speche" (3.2121), is said to prevail in the latter day in which Gower lives. In respect of romantic love, speech too often proves false "enchantement" (4.765), as the Tale of Demephon and Phillis among others illustrate. The middle portion of Book 5, a virtual Legend of Good Women (i.e., consisting of so many bad men), likewise treats false witness and perjured love as problems of speech. Such sins of the tongue, which crop up in nearly every book of the *Confessio Amantis*, include argumentativeness and a lack of restraint in Book 3, backbiting in Book 4, and gossip in Book 7. "Mi Sone," instructs Genius at one place where his words seem to resonate with those of the Maniciple's practical dame in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, "be thou non of tho, / To jangle and telle tales so, / And namely that thou ne chyde" (3.831–3). Genius's teachings are often deeply pessimistic regarding the substance of verbal signs – for as the confessor puts it in one of his more uninhibited remarks, "word is wynd" (3.2768) – and yet in the context of the confessional it perhaps makes good sense that he should be so skeptical.

As Genius explains, only that which lies behind or beyond speech really counts as the measure of penitential morality. But rhetoric or verbal proof is nevertheless an efficient instrument, indeed the principal instrument available to the confessor, and Genius can be seen defending true and creative speech in terms, not surprisingly, that 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 offers a unique perspective on Gower's rhetorical art. The tale is worth lingering over.[35] 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 he proceeds to teach them a very memorable object-lesson on the self-destructive nature of

Amans's beloved lady as 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 a crucial moment at the end of the poem when Venus has Amans look at his own reflection, by means of which he recognizes his decrepitude.

35 Another rendering of the exemplum ("Avarice and Envy") can be found in *The Exempla or Illustrative Stories from the Sermones Vulgares of Jacques de Vitry*, ed. Thomas Fredrick Crane (London, 1890), pp. 81–2. Mary Schenck, "Narrative Structure in the Exemplum, Fabliau, and the Nouvelle," *Romanic Review* 72.4 (1981), pp. 370–1, presents a brief comparison of de Vitry's version with a French fabliau analogue.

their respective vices. Now whatever else it may indicate, the passage cited appears to give a conspicuous and concise description of a confessor's rhetorical handling of penitential interrogation, "opposing" and "examining" the spiritual condition of his parishioners through the agency of "tales."[36] The situation clearly recalls the manner in which Genius tests Amans using so many pointed tales in a mock-confessional (the speaker markers *Opponit Confessor* and *Respondet Amans* loitering in the margins of the poem serve to remind readers of the pastoral situation). The angel's verbal technique ("Now lowed wordes and now softe, / That mad hem to desputen ofte") is further suggestive of penitential confession; his way of speaking parallels Gower's method of provoking debate by means of sometimes controversial juxtapositions of contrastive evidence.[37]

Rhetoric, as Gower obviously recognizes, is a powerful verbal science. We learn elsewhere in the *Confessio Amantis* that creative or eloquent speech is necessary to the most important human affairs, "For specheles may no man spede" (1.1293). Jests, riddles, questions or "demandes" in particular represent efficient ways of testing one's mettle (Three Questions; Tale of Florent: Book 1), correcting misperceptions and pride (Trump of Death: Book 1), and consoling the broken-hearted (Apollonius of Tyre: Book 8). In the multiplication of 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" (7.1557–8). 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). The optimism can be found elsewhere in the poem (e.g., 3.602–7). It should come as little surprise, then, that the art of eloquence, consisting in the correct placement of words according to established canons of decorum, "is, men sein, gret prudence" (4.2652), as Genius puts it. Eloquence is not mere style; it is the substance of an ethics based on the

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36 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.

37 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)? On the ideal combination of "gentleness and severity" in pastoral practice see further Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Classes and the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge, 1973), pp. 60–1, and Beverly M. Kienzle, "Medieval Sermons and Their Performance," esp. pp. 99–101, in Carolyn Muessig, ed., *Preacher, Sermon, and Audience in the Middle Ages* (Leiden, 2002). The same 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 or penitential poetic in any case seems warranted by the language used in the description of "opposing" and "examining."

powers of rhetoric. The political relevance of rhetoric is well illustrated in the Tale of Athemas and Demephon, which argues strongly for diplomacy instead of force and surely expresses Gower's own conviction: "Betre is to winne be faire speche" (3.1833). By contrast, a person who ignores wise speech and "wol noght loke his evidence" is called Negligent in the tales of Phaeton and Icarus of Book 4. So it is with considerable appropriateness that Venus should at the very end instruct Amans to "go ther vertu moral duelleth," directing him to his "bokes" (8.2925–6).

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. There remains one last piece of the puzzle to fit together with the rest, and that is the place of conscience in the medieval moral imagination as Gower envisages its contents. As has been suggested earlier, exempla are only as useful as their readers or hearers make them; examples are in a real sense only 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 this-elf the betre avise" (2.3529–30), a commonplace association between rhetoric and rational self-governance in the Aristotelian tradition is invoked. 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" (1.247–8; recurring at 3.2249–50 and 5.2919–20).[38] Amans is thus made "war" 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 con-science. 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" (2.1926–7), to reflect on his character and testify to his condition in an effort to restore order and serenity to the soul through self-examination. Advising oneself is central to the moral life, but as Chaucer's *Tale of Melibee* 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 while working within the restrictions set down by the *sensus communis*. Genius describes the moral self-in-community in terms of political economy:

> every man for his partie
> A kingdom hath to justefie,
> That is to sein his oghne dom.   (8.2111–13)

Microcosmic instances of a larger political macrocosm, human reason ("dom") is envisaged as the ethical cornerstone of self and society. To be a moral being

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38 The pair of rhyming words (*conscience : evidence*) occur in no less than eight places in the poem; see Pickles and Dawson, *A Concordance*, Appendix III.

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, but these only serve to mark out what is central to his own conception of ethics. Conscience is described as providing a "reule" (1.1236), yet as a prior quotation seems to indicate (". . . take evidence / To reule with thi conscience," 1.248) it must also in a sense *be* ruled. Here is an important feature of Gower's ethical poetic: in his conception morality is not beholden to metaphysics, but is transmitted through stories conserved in old books. Conscience does not presume to have *a priori* access to some set of categorical imperatives; the moral faculty does not transcend culture and history in this way, but is instead historical, conditional, intersubjective. Conscience is an interior adjudicating power subject to the exteriority of *a posteriori* "evidence." The ambiguity may at first sight seem to be explained by the dual or split nature of the faculty, a notion that had wide currency in medieval scholastic philosophy. We may recall that *conscientia* is a fallible moral faculty whose role is to apply the natural law precepts of *synderesis*.[39] *Conscientia*, not intrinsically perfect like its counterpart *synderesis*, is thus susceptible to error. Could it be this distinction which explains the case of a certain pope who "ful of innocence / Conceiveth in his conscience" (2.2901–2) a mistaken notion (or "diverse fantasies," 2.2898) that it is God's will he resign his post? Here a supplanting cardinal planted the suggestion, subliminally, by means of an ear-trumpet employed during the pope's slumber! Yet there is apparently no alternative *synderesis* to which the pope might have appealed, only the evidence of experience. A metaphysics of morals is thus not misapprehended, it is wholly absent. Many of Gower's stories similarly reveal the unstable basis of morality and shift the burden of moral judgement onto the self in social situations. Recall the misleading and sometimes tragic effects of false prophesy, illusory visions, and hypocrisy – the evidential matter that conscience must nevertheless employ to rule itself.[40] 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" (4.3053–6). One is always liable to misrule or, as Gower says in another place, "misuse" conscience and thereby be misruled by it when not properly "avised" (Prol. 520–1) by examples. Here Gower would seem to second Aquinas's view that conscience is "like a rule which is itself rule-governed, so

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39 On the important distinction see Timothy C. Potts, *Conscience in Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1980), and Denis J. M. Bradley, *Aquinas on the Twofold Human Good*.

40 On the tragic potential of Thomistic *conscientia* vis-à-vis *synderesis* particularly see Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Whose Rationality?* (Notre Dame, 1988), pp. 183–208. Mention of tragedy in ethics calls to mind recent thinking (represented, for example, in the work of Martha Nussbaum, Bernard Williams, and Paul Ricoeur) about conflicts arising in a moral system as a result of its contact with a contingent world. Many such thinkers turn to Greek tragedy to illustrate their point, but as I hope is clear medieval literature can be seen as exploring some of the same difficulties.

there is nothing surprising if error can occur in it."[41] Even with access to the first principles of morality, ethics remains an inexact science: "The teaching on matters of morals," Aquinas says, "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."[42] But whereas Aquinas insists on the metaphysical intuition of natural law precepts, Gower is preoccupied with the pragmatic application of exemplary cases. What amounts to a kind of ethical empiricism in Gower forms a radical departure from the metaphysics of morals found in the commentators. In the poet's more authentic Aristotelian moral psychology, conscience does not have the benefit of anything quite so reliable or rigid as *synderesis*, though the faculty does not on that account cease to be useful.[43] Conscience is rooted in the rich loam of old fields, as is illustrated in Gower's own work *ex floribus recollectum*. The vegetable analogy and the implied horticultural activity suggest an alternative conception of "natural" reason.[44]

41 *Debated Questions on Truth* 17.2.7, as translated in Potts, *Conscience in Medieval Philosophy*, p. 133.
42 *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. C. I. Litzinger, O. P. (Chicago, 1964), 2.2.259.
43 Gower's ethical poetic indeed seems to have more in common with Aristotelian *endoxa* (opinion which is generally admitted or probable) than with Aquinian *lex eterna*. Gower is the more deeply Aristotelian than the scholastic expositors of Aristotle because of his pragmatic, conditional, and empirical bias. On *endoxa* see Aristotle's *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, trans. George A. Kennedy (New York, 1991), 1355a.
44 The anti-metaphysical reading I am proposing here fits well with what has been said by others about the diffuse and refractory nature of nature in the *Confessio Amantis*. Gower does not follow Alan of Lille, Jean de Meun, or Chaucer by constructing a personified Nature. What is more, nature is often opposed to or juxtaposed with reason, and the instinctual or passionate rule of natural love seems amoral in the poem.

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Moral Chaucer: Ethics of Exemplarity in the *Canterbury Tales*

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 accomplishments. As Derek Brewer reminds us, Chaucer's early reception was as a poet who wrote "serious and nourishing subject-matter."[1] During Chaucer's own lifetime Eustache Deschamps eulogized him as *Seneque en meurs*, and observed that drinking from Chaucer's font had quenched *ma soif ethique*.[2] Thomas Usk extolled Chaucer as "the noble philosophical poete / in Englissh,"[3] and Henry Scogan took Chaucer to be a moral philosopher of "vertuous noblesse."[4] In the early fifteenth century, soon after Chaucer's passing, John Lydgate lauded the poet for "keping in substance / The sentence hool,"[5] and Thomas Hoccleve considered him equal to "Tullius" [Cicero] and an "hier in philosophie / To Aristotle."[6] Later still Chaucer was acclaimed "ful of plesaunce / Clere in sentence,"[7] and Caxton would also attribute to the poet "hye and quycke sentence,"[8] 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,"[9] but such high praise is characteristically premised on the assumption that Chaucer is morally serious. What emerges from even a glance at the first recorded responses, then, is that early readers would have had some difficulty recognizing the "genial Chaucer" of our modern age, if what is meant by that appellation differs too much from "moral Gower."[10] Gower and Chaucer,

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1 *Chaucer: The Critical Heritage*, vol. I, 1385–1837 (London, 1978), p. 6.
2 Ibid., p. 40.
3 Ibid., p. 43.
4 Ibid., p. 60.
5 Ibid., p. 50.
6 Ibid., p. 60.
7 Ibid., p. 72.
8 Ibid., p. 75.
9 *Introduction to the Man of Law's Tale*, II. 53.
10 See John Fisher, *John Gower: Moral Philosopher and Friend of Gower* (New York, 1964), pp. 1–36, for a survey of the poets' interlocking critical reputations. "Genial" became a common epithet in the nineteenth century; before then Coleridge and Arnold spoke of "kindly" Chaucer. Rosemary Woolf's persuasive "Moral Chaucer and Kindly Gower," in *J. R. R. Tolkien, Scholar and Storyteller: Essays In*

it could instead be said at one still very distant point in literary history, were equally "Superlatiue as poetis laureate / In moralitee and eloquence ornate."[11]

However jejune or partial the early attempts to characterize Chaucer inevitably must seem, they do modern readers the service of stimulating important questions about the possible salience of exemplary morality where we may have come least to expect to find it, for we moderns have a tendency to treat Chaucer as though his celebrated eloquence were unrelated to his ethics.[12] Particularly those approving comparisons to the great moral philosophers – Aristotle, Seneca, Cicero – should reawaken us to critical reflection about the ethical dimensions of Chaucer's rhetorical art that are often neglected. 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.[13] 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 applauds Chaucer for excluding "abhomynacions" from his "sermons" (II. 87–8), specifically for having eschewed the cursed incest stories of Canacee and Apollonius which, perhaps not incidentally, Gower recounts in the *Confessio Amantis* (though it would have been difficult to mention any story Gower had not written, which is ironic given II. 45–50). Certain critics, displacing the moral questions implied by Chaucer's self-characterization in this passage, have insisted upon the apparent irony of the Man of Law's resemblance to Gower.[14] What appeals to the critics is the way the prosecutor turns out to be "more moral than moral Gower,"[15] a comic situation, we are to suppose, on the assumption that earnest didacticism is sufficient to render anyone ridiculous. A modern prejudice against didacticism surely asserts itself in this ironizing reading, even if it is based in sound evidence of the fictional lawyer's poor taste. Yet the fact remains that the Man of Law commends Chaucer for morality while seeming to censure Gower, so that Chaucer comes off as the more moral of the two; and 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

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Memoriam, ed. Mary Salu and Robert T. Farrell (Ithaca, 1979), pp. 221–45, suggests that if anything the usual epithets should be applied in the reverse. In the analysis of Stephanie Trigg's *Congenial Souls: Reading Chaucer from Medieval to Postmodern* (Minneapolis, 2002), there are other (feminist historical) reasons to be suspicious of feelings of Chaucerian congeniality.

11 James I of Scotland, *The Kingis Quair*, ed. John Norton-Smith (Oxford, 1971), lines 1376–7.

12 Recall *Confessio Amantis*, 4.2651–2, on the marriage of wisdom and eloquence, an alliance presupposed in so many fifteenth-century appraisals of the virtues of Chaucer.

13 It is worth observing with R. F. Yeager that at the time the dedication was written Chaucer would only have known Gower's early work: the *Vox Clamantis* and *Mirour de l'Omme*. These early poems are decidedly "reformist, argumentative, and personal," quite unlike the bulk of the *Confessio Amantis* (completed some time *after* Chaucer's *Troilus*); see further Yeager's "'O Moral Gower': Chaucer's Dedication of *Troilus and Criseyde*," *Chaucer Review* 19.2 (1984), pp. 87–99.

14 Notwithstanding the fact that the lawyer expressly condemns the incest stories Gower tells. See Alfred David, *The Strumpet Muse: Art and Morals in Chaucer's Poetry* (Bloomington, 1976), p. 125, who cites as evidence their comparable "legal training, the sententious manner, and, most important, the didactic aesthetic"; and Fisher, *John Gower*, pp. 286–7 and 290.

15 David, *The Strumpet Muse*, p. 125.

thought of being favorably received by poetasters and philistines, it shows he could envisage his own moral authority in ways that have become difficult for modern readers even to acknowledge as an interpretive possibility.

Many critics nowadays are indeed in the business of disclaiming the moral authority of Chaucer, by which they usually mean the moral values they do not share, while appropriating the poetry to comfortable critical orthodoxies and nearer ethical pieties. A popular late twentieth-century reading (exegetical criticism notwithstanding) had it that Chaucer's poetry evinces a struggle between the artist and the moralist in which the former always prevails; narrative, from this standpoint, trumps normative morality.[16] Recent scholarship discredits the ethics of exemplarity now on political, rather than aesthetic, grounds. In one representative example, it has been argued that Chaucer's "dialogic mode" subverts prescriptive speech and structural closure, such as is evidenced in the routine moralizing of the period, conclusive morals being just so many miserable monologisms waiting to be overthrown.[17] Granted, modern criticism has gone a long way to show how Chaucer does not lack a kind of "high seriousness," 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 has remained 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. What we might call the cultural materialist fetishism of power politics has indeed nearly dominated discussions of Chaucer. Larry Scanlon diagnoses much the same problem in his study, *Narrative, Authority, and Power: The Medieval Exemplum and the Chaucerian Tradition*, and yet he too resorts to an analysis that reduces the rhetoric to the largely ideological co-ordinates of his book's title. His is the curious position of attempting to rescue the exemplum from the disparagements of its critics, for whom the rhetoric is synonymous with mystifying cultural authority, by dignifying it as an enactment of incipient lay authority; and so he doesn't elude the terms of current debate, according to which moral rhetoric is one way or another an ulterior political stratagem. What remains to be described are the moral dimensions of Chaucer's art, even if what has already been said of his anti-exemplarity constitutes a main theme.[18]

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16 See ibid., p. 6. David is the chief proponent of this aestheticized Chaucer, but see Derek Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales* (London, 1985), p. 48. That narratives and norms are inimical to one another is an article of faith rarely questioned ever since the interdiction of the "heresy of paraphrase." A representative view of the "mutual resistance of story and sentence" in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* can be found in Andrew Walsh, "Story and Wisdom in Chaucer: *The Physician's Tale* and *The Manciple's Tale*," in *Manuscript, Narrative, Lexicon: Essays on Literary and Cultural Transmission in Honor of Whitney F. Bolton*, ed. Robert Boenig and Kathleen Davis (Lewisburg, 2000), p. 89.

17 Michaela Grudin, *Chaucer and the Politics of Discourse* (Columbia, 1996), p. 19.

18 Murray Krieger observes in "In the Wake of Morality: The Thematic Underside of Recent Theory," *New Literary History* 15.1 (1983), p. 135, that "to thematize is to moralize, even if negatively." Recent proponents of ethical criticism remind us (à la Leavis) that ethics and aesthetics are in this way inseparable. In *Morals and Stories* (New York, 1992), p. 34, Tobin Siebers takes up the point and insists that we cannot in any case "understand a story without engaging in such paraphrasing or moralizing

Problems and Paradoxes

It has been my supposition that to understand the ethics 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 from the *uses* of 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?"[19] Another way of putting the distinction is to say that the question "What does it do?" is coterminous with "What does it mean?" Looking at Chaucer's writing from this vantage, addressing the occasions and activities in virtue of which the exemplum has its existence, the issue of what the rhetoric *does* in the *Canterbury Tales* can hardly be ignored. It is a truism by now that "Chaucer was uniquely oriented to imagined situations of telling and listening throughout his art,"[20] and in this respect the *Tales* goes further, given its fuller realization of the communicative situation, than Chaucer's earlier works.

Perceiving the complexity, J. A. Burrow has argued that "the exemplary mode is present everywhere in the *Canterbury Tales*, but everywhere subverted," an attractive epitome which could stand in for many more recent critical appraisals.[21] As I will argue, though, what we actually get in the *Tales* is evidence of exemplary morality repeatedly going unheeded, and we need not on that account think exemplary rhetoric is faulty.[22] All the same, the messy communicative situation in the *Tales* is commonly thought to subvert exemplary morality, due to the extreme diversity and conflict among the fictional voices. There is no single authoritative voice in the tale collection, and this seems to many readers sufficient to subvert them all. Lisa Kiser has spoken thus of Chaucer's "radical perspectivism,"[23] arguing that, because he enlists so many different perspectives, none has any privileged authority. The critic claims that the poet's lasting legacy has been to show that human communication is inherently distorting, self-referential, and ideological.

While Kiser is not always wrong in her assessment of the "truth" of the *Tales*, neither is she right about its practical or exemplary import, which has less to do with epistemology than ethics ("goodness"); roughly the same could be said in response to the notion that exemplification is "everywhere subverted." Kiser for

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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." Thus the question has always been not *whether* critics or artists moralize, but *how*.

19 Here I adapt Nelson Goodman's way of putting a distinction originally applied to the question of defining any kind of art, "When is art?"; see *Ways of Worldmaking*, pp. 66–7.

20 Paul Strohm, "Chaucer's Audience(s): Fictional, Implied, Intended, Actual," *The Chaucer Review* 18.2 (1983), p. 138.

21 *Ricardian Poetry*, p. 90.

22 Burrow seems to acknowledge the same distinction in his more recent *Medieval Writers and Their Work*, pp. 82–4 and 107–18, where he observes that what is wrong with exempla is that interpreters fail to take the moral; on *that* account the rhetoric fails in Chaucer.

23 *Truth and Textuality in Chaucer's* Poetry (Hanover, 1991), p. 1.

one cannot hold her view and also permit the validity of *any* other perspective on Chaucer, unless she is willing to relinquish her radical claims, a maneuver which does not describe the cogency of her readings or her scholarly investments. Similarly, there must be some examples to give in support of the view that exemplification is subverted in Chaucer. Here the problem is an ethical one – less tolerable than a logical paradox – precisely because it focuses questions squarely on the justification and exemplification of a reading practice. As Wittgenstein says, "What people accept as justification – is shewn by how they think and live."[24] We are free to inquire whether a scholar's theory squares with her practice. A critic may be right about the truth of Chaucer's own blanket skepticism or subversions, but this begs the question unless it can be shown how he or she knows this to be the case. And so the decisive questions to be asked always remain: What is Chaucer's skepticism *for*? What does it *exemplify*? And can the claim be supported with *examples*?

To come to terms with Chaucerian exemplarity it may be useful to bear in mind Karlheinz Stierle's distinction between case and example: "There is a fundamental difference between the case that is offered for judgment and the example that is meant directly or indirectly to inspire imitation. As speech actions they appeal to two quite different modes of thought." *Imitation* describes a pragmatic attitude on a continuum of receptive behaviour; on the other side is the attitude of *judgement*. Now the case – or better, the "problematic exemplum" – summons judgement that is at a remove from the pragmatic and paradigmatic instance, or "the paradigmatic center-point."[25] Such cases well describe Chaucerian exemplarity because it frequently imposes a kind of decision about the very workings of exemplification qua moral rhetoric: here exemplary narrative becomes a theme in its own right. But if Chaucerian exemplarity is problematic, it is not on that account *un*exemplary. One of the main emphases of this study of Chaucer will be that problematic exempla are not the same as failed or subverted exemplary narratives, because failures and subversions are themselves capable of provoking judgement.

But Chaucer does not invariably problematize. It is a marked modern tendency to emphasize the mischief rather than the morality in his work, and so we would do well to begin with the obvious: Chaucer composed and translated several works that are morally serious, including devotional and philosophical short poems nowise subversive.[26] The *Second Nun's Tale* is a fine example of the kind of gravity Chaucer is capable of sustaining in exemplary narrative, and judging by the surviving arrangement Chaucer was content not to send up or deflate the work. It has been suggested that the saint's life belongs to an earlier stage in Chaucer's career, yet the fact that this tale was not retracted at the *end* of Chaucer's life may indicate

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24 *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 106.
25 "Story as Exemplum: Exemplum as Story," in *New Perspectives in German Literary Criticism*, pp. 28–30.
26 See further Paul G. Ruggiers, "Serious Chaucer: The *Tale of Melibeus* and the Parson's Tale," *Chaucerian Problems and Perspectives: Essays Presented to Paul E. Beichner, C. S. C.*, ed. Edward Vasta and Zacharias P. Thundy (Notre Dame, 1979), pp. 83–94.

the longevity of his devotion rather than anything about its immaturity. Alongside the *Tale of Melibee* and the *Parson's Tale*, the legend of Cecile is one of Chaucer's least equivocal exemplary pieces: like those other serious works, notable for the frequency with which they are found separately in miscellanies, there is evidence that the *Second Nun's Tale* circulated independently of the comic frame of the *Canterbury Tales*.[27] Within the *Tales*, moreover, no one cuts the Second Nun off in midstream, as happens to the Monk or (perhaps) the Squire; nor does Harry Bailey interject at the end to disparage the expression of piety or, as is more typical, embarrass the morality by applying it eccentrically. And if the tale that follows serves to "quite" the Second Nun it is not by way of satirical riposte, in the manner of the tales of the Reeve or the Nun's Priest: whatever else may be said about it, the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* succeeds in highlighting the righteousness of Cecile's fruitful work in comparison with the vain and sweaty labour of alchemists. To the degree that this legend and others like it (so-called "tales of pathos") call forth a deeply affective response, even in the most incredulous readers, detached ironical skepticism seems improbable if not inappropriate.

Lay Exemplarity

And yet in the *Canterbury Tales*, the problematic cases prove most interesting to readers without a prior commitment to Christian morality. Before proceeding to my main exemplars it will be useful to consider the multiplicity of instances in which exemplary rhetoric is put to use in Chaucer's *Tales*, and whether they have much in common at all.

Ecclesiastical figures are not the only ones 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. Lay figures use the rhetoric as though they were preachers themselves. So 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. The Clerk, who may one day become a preacher if he can stand to give up being a student, produces a serious homiletic exemplum despite having been told expressly to avoid sermonizing (IV. 12–14). Comparable instances include Oswald the Reeve who, besides having a likeness of a preaching friar (I. 590, 621), sounds disconcertingly like one in his preamble (I. 3899) and renders a tale, with closing morality and benediction (I. 4319–24), in the sermonic mode. 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, and I mention some of them briefly. Lay pilgrims enlist sets or series of exempla in the service of various

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27 See *Riverside Chaucer*, Textual Notes, pp. 1118–19, showing that the *Second Nun's Tale* is found along with the *Prioress's Tale* in Harley 2382.

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. 4328–9) 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 imprudent to seek out God's secrets, only to reveal that the carpenter is in no danger of acquiring such special knowledge. The Wife of Bath's fifth husband had a fondness for a certain manuscript miscellany 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" (I. 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. 1364–1458) for guidance in the *Franklin's Tale*. And in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* Chauntecleer rolls out the heavy machinery of classical precedent to persuade his wife that dreams signify (VII. 2970–3156), only to ignore his own exemplary advice – a proverbial cock most mighty on his dunghill indeed.

One could multiply the examples, but suffice it to say that the *Canterbury Tales* is crowded with evidence of the rhetoric of exemplarity and associated practices. 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, generalizations will have only limited value. Yet I think we can observe two general points about Chaucer's treatment. First, 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: exploring exemplification *as a*

practice, Chaucer exemplifies it *in* practice. But we can go further. Another marked feature of the rhetoric is its disposition towards extreme cases, which become highly problematic in Chaucer's hands as we will see in the examples of the hypocritical clerics in Chapter 6. A related characteristic is the frequent incongruity of narrative exempla and their concluding expository morals, a phenomenon which would seem to put pressure on any positive analysis of exemplarity, and I will be going on to investigate this sometimes galling aspect at length when I come to the *Clerk's Tale* in Chapter 7.

Finally, as I will discuss in the remaining part of this chapter, it is remarkable that Chaucer's exempla nearly everywhere appear in contexts where the masculinity or femininity of the speaker, the audience, or the subject of the rhetoric is indispensable to the communicative situation. Male speakers clearly 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 topics of moral exempla. 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 roster of the female animals in the *Manciple's Tale*. When gender is not the express subject, there is a relentless propensity among Chaucerian characters to make it so.

Turning Examples: Whoso That First to Mille Comth, First Grynt

Conspicuously gendered exempla appear in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, where grievous doubts arise regarding whether exemplarity is good for anything at all. The rampant antifeminism of the exempla arrayed against the Wife of Bath in her husband's "book of wikked wyves" (III. 685) stands as an emphatic challenge to the ethics of exemplarity I have been describing. The Wife recounts many of the exempla contained therein – certainly *mo than ten* instances, extending all the way back to Eve (III. 715–85) – showing how very familiar with and sensitized to such wickedness she has eventually become, thanks to Jankyn's nightly recitations. Marshall Leicester has suggested that in the Wife's rehearsal of the contents of the book certain individual exempla seem to hold in reserve meanings ("experience") which are not compatible with the moral ("authority") appended to them, such that readers are invited to unravel their meanings; her telling thus uncovers a veritable "rhizomatics of intertextuality that can lead in any number of directions."[28] However that may be, she also seems to point up the fact that these exempla are just what they appear to be: leading obstinately in one direction towards a single conclusion. She is indeed probably less interested in plumbing the depths by means of intertextual source study than in showing how, superficial though it may be, meaning is a matter of use. Meaning comes to rest

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28 *The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley, 1990), p. 122.

somewhere in practice, and the Wife's description of the *prima facie* authority of exempla is a lucid recognition of that fact. What matters to her surely is that reading for the moral stops *here*, on the bedrock where misogyny exists in reality, rather than going on indeterminately in theory.

Jankyn's book represents the rhetoric at its most manipulative and monological, embodying a pedagogy of intimidation reduced to assertions of exemplary "authority" over against female "experience." 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."[29] Such exempla-books were not restricted to the realm of fiction but remained a potent force in the world in which Chaucer was writing.[30] Fiction and the historical record therefore remain as serious challenges to the ethics of exemplarity, in light of which the Wife of Bath would seem to have to adapt exempla just to survive their monological onslaught rather than to adopt their moral wisdom. Surprisingly, however, she adapts the rhetoric *exemplarily*, for if meaning is truly a matter of use, then she can find alternative uses for exempla.

Drawing on her vast connubial experience as well as her knowledge of clerical tradition – much of which she acquires from Jankyn's book of exempla – Alison of Bath advocates an unashamed carnal and carnivalesque doctrine of female sexuality and marriage. Accordingly, she can seem very cool and calculating as she goes about her private business, pursuing a husband's "hous and lond" (III. 814), even if despite her sexual entrepreneurialism she betrays warm attachments to the men she exploits.[31] Her achievement is precisely the capacity to negotiate conflicting desires and competing claims on her sex – and the same goes for the rhetoric of exemplarity. In whatever she espouses (and particularly men), the Wife indeed exhibits something of the cunning of a craftswoman who has through long experience learned to trade on her only assets, and her engagement with exemplary rhetoric is one of her most lucrative exchanges.

The *Wife of Bath's Prologue* is replete with clerkish proverbs and proof-texts and exempla, and her subsequent tale is itself a kind of "a supporting *exemplum*."[32]

29 Ralph Hanna III, "*Compilatio* and the Wife of Bath: Latin Backgrounds, Ricardian Texts," in *Latin and Vernacular: Studies in Late Medieval Texts and Manuscripts*, ed. A. J. Minnis (Cambridge, 1989), p. 5.

30 See both Jacques Berlioz, "Exempla: A Discussion and a Case Study," pp. 37–50, and Marie Anne Polo de Beaulieu, "*Mulier* and *Femina*: The Representation of Women in the *Scala celi* of Jean Gobi," pp. 50–65, in *Medieval Women and the Sources of Medieval History*, ed. J. T. Rosenthal (Athens, 1990). There are many images of ideal women but Berlioz 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" (p. 44). So much depends on what we are prepared to admit as a "positive image" that I suspect such an analysis to be very difficult to undertake and controversial; looking at how women make use of exempla may be just as profitable.

31 Leicester, *The Disenchanted Self*, pp. 65–160, discusses the Wife's ambivalent relationship to Jankyn in this respect. On the Wife's calculated deployment of such mercantile principles as debt load, investment capital, commodity exchange, and supply and demand see Sheila Delany, "Sexual Economics, Chaucer's Wife of Bath and *The Book of Margery Kempe*," reprinted in *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature*, ed. Ruth Evans (London, 1994), pp. 72–85; and Mary J. Carruthers's classic article, "The Wife of Bath and the Painting of Lions," *PMLA* 94 (1979), pp. 209–22, which addresses women's economic dependence on the institution of marriage in the period.

32 Robert P. Miller, "*The Wife of Bath's Tale* and Mediaeval Exempla," *ELH* 32 (1965), p. 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; she is a would-be exemplist.[33] Although she declares her "entente nys but for to 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. Eventually she burns Jankyn's offensive book of wicked wives, an appropriate fate for such a blatant heresy against her sex, but more drastic and effective (as it has been put many times before) is the way she takes a page from it. Alison contests the limiting stereotypes of antifeminist rhetoric, through a kind of guerrilla exegesis, using the same tools men employ, and in so doing she returns us rather unexpectedly but effectively to the *literalism* of the ethics of the exemplarity.

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 is lawful to wed only once. The biblical "ensample" (III. 12) is glossed to fit a narrow and impractical pro-celibate dogma, all the more dismaying because it is actually corroborated outside Chaucer's fiction in Saint Jerome's *Epistola adversus Jovinianum*, which so enthusiastically praises virginity that it practically condemns marriage.[34] A copy of Jerome's epistle was contained in the Wife's fifth husband's beloved book (III. 673–5), and it profoundly shapes her own disquisition on the topic of the "wo that is in mariage" (III. 3), or what Jerome following St Paul would call "tribulation in the flesh."[35] Perhaps because

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33 On the Wife's sermonic style see Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison, 1991), pp. 304–12, who describes her prologue as a parodic sermon on the theme of the woe that is in marriage; and Andrew Galloway, "Marriage Sermons, Polemical Sermons, and *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*: A Generic Excursus," *SAC* 14 (1992), pp. 3–30, 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: Clerical Images of Medieval Wives," *Speculum* 61 (1986), pp. 517–43. That the Wife comes to personify the rhetorical arts is cogently argued by John A. Alford, "The Wife of Bath Versus the Clerk of Oxford: What Their Rivalry Means," *Chaucer Review* 21.2 (1986), pp. 108–32. That her rhetorical activities in particular represent those of a *compilator* is developed by Ralph Hanna III, "*Compilatio* and the Wife of Bath," pp. 1–11. Lawrence Besserman, in *Chaucer's Biblical Poetics* (Norman, 1988), pp. 149–55, accounts for the Wife's rejection of *glosing*, suggesting her literalism reflects Chaucer's preferred hermeneutics.

34 Excerpted in W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster's *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* (New York, 1958), pp. 208–13, and translated in part in Robert P. Miller's *Chaucer: Sources and Backgrounds* (New York, 1977), pp. 415–36. While Jerome concedes the sanctity of marriage and even permits the legality of remarriage, 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, and matrimony is called "the lesser of two evils" and is by implication not good in itself. Warren S. Smith observes in his useful "The Wife of Bath Debates Jerome," *Chaucer Review* 32.2 (1997), p. 143, that the epistle is a satirical diatribe which takes a "scatter-shot" approach to its subject, and that the Wife of Bath exploits Jerome's hyperbolical style by remaining "calm, reasoned, and stick[ing] to the evidence," and puts forward a moderate Augustinian position on the plain truth of scripture. Smith persuasively rebuts the view that her literalist exegesis is reckless or incoherent as was argued by a previous generation of scholars.

35 *Epistola adversus Jovinianum*, 1.13; Miller, *Chaucer: Sources*, p. 423.

the exegesis is uncommon,[36] or because it is simply too outrageous to be digni-
fied by comment, the Wife lets it stand as though it were an antique curiosity.

The Wife next cites the biblical example of Christ's rebuke of the Samaritan
woman (John 4:5–19), this time openly querying its hermeneutical validity as a
precedent case 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 much as it did other interpreters:

> 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. 20–5)

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 mar-
riages. The Wife of Bath effectively casts herself in the role of the Samaritan
woman and thus inserts her own personal experience into the authoritative text,
becoming one more case of the way individuals read themselves into exempla for
self-authorizing purposes.[37] But the Wife's very pertinent question "How many
myghte she have?" also demonstrates a sufficient understanding of the import of
the biblical account, even as mediated through the evasions and distortions of
exegetical tradition, enough to contest the arithmetical approach to marriage. So
it is not just that, as Ralph Hanna argues, the Wife's confession of ignorance
thwarts closed readings and "restores the openness of the biblical account."[38]
More decisively, the Wife indicates that although she does not understand exactly
what Jesus meant, she knows very well what he did *not* say. Hers is a sort of
anti-glossatory gloss, all in order to show a preference for a literalist hermeneutic
(III. 26–34).[39]

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36 Besserman, *Chaucer's Biblical Poetics*, p. 150. Galloway finds no preachers who followed Jerome, so
the Wife may not have had to plead her case very strongly.

37 Cf. Robertson, *A Preface to Chaucer*, pp. 318ff. The parallels between the women 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: Nuns, Wives, and Amazons*
(Iowa City, 1990), pp. 210–15.

38 "*Compilatio* and the Wife of Bath," p. 9. Even Jerome grudgingly admits its openness: "The number
of wives which a man may take is not defined"; *Epistola adversus Jovinianum*, 1.15; Miller, *Chaucer:
Sources*, p. 425.

39 In the passage she effectively refutes 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

In the face of the foregoing offending examples she does not repudiate exemplarity; she cites her own biblical counter-examples. First she invokes Solomon who had "wyves mo than oon" (III. 36), then glances at the "shrewed" Lamech (III. 54), an unsavory bigamist whom Jerome also mentions, opposing him with Abraham and Jacob, each of whom "hadde wyves mo than two" as did "many another holy man also" (III. 57–8). These counter-examples refer to concurrent polygamous marriages of course, and this is 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 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 Paul's exhortation to virginity as optative, a discretionary issue of individual choice.[40] The Wife of Bath does not disparage virginity, and in fact lauds its virtues, but in her case she remains content to yield such perfection to others: "Lat hem be breed of pured whete-seed, / And lat us wyves hoten barly-breed" (III. 143–4). To support her choice she alludes to the Feeding of the Multitude (John 6:9) to illustrate her point: "And yet with barly-breed, Mark telle kan, / Oure Lord Jhesu refresshed many a man" (III. 145–6). The comparison is as far-fetched as that which informs earlier exempla perfunctorily arrayed against her, but it is not her idiosyncratic and sophistical invention: the distinction between virgins as wheaten-bread and wives as barley she inherits from Jerome.[41] The Wife's contribution is the way in which by free association and with characteristic bawdiness, exemplifying her usual abreaction, she enlarges the comparison by linking Jesus's restoration of the masses with sexual liberality. Arrogating to herself the clerical prerogative, the Wife proves she can play promiscuously on the letter too. 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 or rather still remains 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. Thus Lisa Kiser remarks, "the Wife plays the game of 'glosyng up and doun' as well as any exegete, but unlike the

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even a penitent whoremonger"; *Epistola adversus Jovinianum*, 1.15; Miller, *Chaucer: Sources*, p. 425. Jerome resorts to bombast because his argument is weak given what St Paul says about the permissibility of remarriage (1 Corinthians 7:39). The Wife turns the letter against his hyperbole and, staying well within the bounds of orthodoxy, justifies herself.

40 Something Jerome has to admit in *Epistola adversus Jovinianum*, 1.12; Miller, *Chaucer: Sources*, p. 421. Compare the *Letters of St Jerome*, ed. Charles C. Mierow and Thomas C. Lawler (London, 1965), p. 150.

41 *Epistola adversus Jovinianum*, 1.7; Miller, *Chaucer: Sources*, p. 418. It is an invidious comparison which also appears in Jerome's notorious letter 21 to Pammachius; Katharina Wilson, "Chaucer and St. Jerome: The Use of 'Barley' in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*," *Chaucer Review* 19.3 (1985), pp. 245–51.

exegete she is willing to expose the fact that her discourse is interested."[42] Actually, very much like a traditional exemplist and exegete (for Jerome freely admits to "spoiling" pagan texts) the Wife asserts her prerogative, ironically taking back the spirit on behalf of the letter.[43]

The 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 of the biblical text, she repositions herself as one who, as it were, "literalizes" exempla by imitation beyond or outside the letter of the text. In other words, she moves from an apotropaic stance, warding off the evil of foreign bodies, to an assimilative one, in which she herself embodies the opposition in order to make it (her own) matter.

If the Wife of Bath contests authority, she now shows she can co-opt it too. 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 in effect apes and appropriates the exemplary wicked wives contained in her latest husband's book, retrospectively structuring her exemplary autobiography through the teachings contained therein.[44] She resorts, in other words, to highly conventional behavioral codes; but her appeal to conventionality has its end in articulating and even authenticating her genuine experience. Thus she can be said to shape her life *into* an exemplum, turning practical experience into authoritative discourse which she then employs to teach cunning to "wise wyves," at the same time that she shapes her life *after* the matter of exempla, applying authoritative discourse in her practice – an emphatically vicious circle she revels in, and which forms the crux that has become the vocation of so many critics to understand.

As everyone knows, the Wife of Bath is in peril of casting herself as a flatly negative exemplum. 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.[45] 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 as another negative instance: "Adam and Eve, Samson and Delilah, Agamemnon and Clytemnestra – all lead up to Jankyn and Alisoun acting out the same old comedy."[46] Is not the "authority" of antifeminism reinforced

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42 *Truth and Textuality*, p. 139.
43 "Taking the Gold Out of Egypt: The Art of Reading as a Woman," in *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts*, ed. Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocinio P. Schweickart (Baltimore, 1986), p. 88.
44 Ralph Hanna, "*Compilatio* and the Wife of Bath," pp. 1–2.
45 Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, p. 313; Marshall H. Leicester's *The Disenchanted Self*, pp. 73–6; Delany, "Strategies of Silence," pp. 120–1; Kiser, *Truth and Textuality*, p. 140; and Barbara Gottfried, "Conflict and Relationship, Sovereignty and Survival: Parables of Power in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*," *Chaucer Review* 19.3 (1985), p. 205.
46 *Strumpet Muse*, p. 151.

by her "experience"? Only by appreciating what she has been able to achieve despite the restrictions set upon her can we be in a position to judge the experience of the Wife of Bath. And recall that her reasons for taking on the role of negative exemplum are genuinely poignant: "I koude pleyne, and yit was in the gilt, / Or elles often tyme hadde I been spilt" (III. 388). Alison employs antifeminist devices, as it were, as a counter-weight just to maintain her balance. Deceit, weeping, and spinning accordingly stand for "the only tactics available to women in a patriarchal society,"[47] indicating something of the double-bind in which she finds herself *as* exemplary.

Nevertheless, the Wife of Bath maintains allegiances to a hermeneutic that is literalist rather than anti-exemplary. She flourishes by means of what I have described as a literalization through imitation of antifeminist exempla. Alison's autobiographical voice is a composite of the negative figures she rebels against, and while such evident syncretism confuses her status as an profeminist figure, it is also important to notice that it complicates the status of the rhetorical figures she uses. Chaucer manages things so that the Wife can be heard articulating credible and subversive views about the stereotypes she herself embodies (III. 688–92). So 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. She is instead a hybrid, deliberately literalizing and literary figure who attracts a different kind of interest due to her inconsistencies. Several discrepancies and ambiguities 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) indicate that a manifold moral typology is in play. 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.

But what I have called her incorporation of exemplary figures is not just strategic, for she thrives on exemplarity in a manner that is not only thematic for us but positively existential and personal for her. She incorporates foreign bodies so as to constitute (as much as immunize) herself. How can this be anything but self-destructive? 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 achievement, observes Susan Schibanoff, is the way she has learned to survive and indeed flourish 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." "The Wife survives . . . not because she burns books, but because she rereads old texts in new ways."[48] I would only add that her victory is achieved in the way she uses old texts in very personal ways, for otherwise what is the appropriation

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47 Gottfried, "Conflict and Relationship," p. 215.
48 "Taking the Gold Out of Egypt," pp. 87–8.

for? And who are we to criticize her choices anyway? Instead of ascribing to the Wife some kind of false consciousness that is the causal result of so much propaganda (a more or less tenable sociopolitical argument, but one that deprives Alison of what autonomy she has courageously secured for herself in already straitened circumstances where female autonomy is afflicted), we must acknowledge her *reasons* for her choices and conduct. The Wife thinks she possesses agency and acts accordingly; if she is mistaken, her self-evaluations nevertheless remain integral to the ethical analysis as seen from the "inside," from the perspective of the subject. 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. Exemplarity is not only an ironical means of self-advancement, but a source of self-affirmation as well. Her conduct is therefore an intimation of that mysterious power of voluntary submission which Chaucer explores, from a very different vantage as we shall see, in the *Clerk's Tale*.

By trading on the inherent flexibility of the rhetoric the Wife of Bath effectively reminds us that exempla are amenable to diverse applications. An applied ethics, exemplary morality exists to be reinvented in practice. 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 to be turned into something consumable. She is an active producer of meaning – one who "clappeth as a mille" (IV. 1200), to recoup the Clerk's derisive phrase – rather than a passive consumer. In many respects she approaches exemplary texts, in the terms of de Certeau's theory of everyday practice, as a kind of "making-do," an improvisatory approach to life that is notably analogous to

> 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.[49]

The invocation of medieval poetics is apt. In my analysis the inventional practice de Certeau theorizes is well represented in the medieval ethics of exemplarity, which the Wife's incorporating and literalizing performance itself exemplifies, albeit as an extreme and problematic case on a continuum with less resistant forms of reception. Alison's largely makeshift procedure finally suggests that she internalizes the ethos (e.g., lateral thinking, literalism, copiousness) of the exemplary rhetoric she otherwise serves to impugn.

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49 Michael de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley, 1984), pp. 174–5.

6

Pointing the Moral: The Friar, Summoner, and Pardoner's Satire

In his monumental study of preaching in the later Middle Ages, G. R. Owst argued that vernacular literary tradition effectively contracted the "germs" of literary realism, satire, and social consciousness from the pulpit. In a later chapter of his *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England*, entitled "Fiction and Instruction in the Sermon *Exempla*," Owst was able to show that English poetry and drama were profoundly shaped by the pulpit rhetoric: travelogue, classical pagan tales, animal fables, ribald and satirical matter (anticlerical, antimatrimonial, antifeminist) all have precedents in sermon exempla.[1] Historians since have gone on to corroborate and refine his thesis, and 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 establishes Chaucer's indebtedness to a popular thirteenth-century mendicant preaching manual attributed to the Franciscan John of Wales.[2] And in several studies Siegfried Wenzel has drawn attention to the origins of Chaucer's story plots, imagery, and lexicon in contemporary preaching.[3]

So the genuinely "popular" exemplary matter of homiletic discourse is discoverable in Chaucer's poetry, and as always the question to ask is to what purposes the poet has assimilated it to his fiction. It is commonly thought that exempla exist in Chaucer for the purpose of satire. Granted, but we need to ask to what end satire is applied, for satire is not Chaucer's original contribution; anticlerical satire, for instance, is found in sermons themselves. So it is important to inquire whether he is embracing the same matter, refining it, or turning his wits against it somehow. I will explore the issue in this section by considering the communicative situation

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1 *Literature and the Pulpit in Medieval England: A Neglected Chapter in the History of English Letters & of the English People* (Oxford, 1933). 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.

2 "Chaucer and the Hand That Fed Him," *Speculum* 41.4 (October 1966), pp. 619–42.

3 In Wenzel's "Chaucer and the Language of Contemporary Preaching," *Studies in Philology* 73 (1976), pp. 138–61, homiletic analogues for the *Friar's Tale* and *Prioress's Tale* are brought forward, and commonplace ideas and technical terms used by Chaucer are traced to sermons. In "The Joyous Art of Preaching; or, the Preacher and the Fabliau," *Anglia* 97 (1979), pp. 304–25, Wenzel surveys common topoi (e.g., the guiler beguiled) and discovers further analogues of contemporary fabliaux. Wenzel's book, *Preachers, Poets, and the Early English Lyric* (Princeton, 1986), explores the influence of preaching on secular poetry more generally.

of three homiletic instances in Chaucer's *Tales*, the *Friar's Tale*, *Summoner's Tale*, and *Pardoner's Tale*, as they open up important issues related to exemplarity and its relevance to Chaucer. 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."[4] Indeed the poet constructs homiletic or quasi-homiletic communicative situations in order to advance a larger narrative – forming a kind of meta-homiletics – about the applications of exemplarity, and so in Chaucer we come to see not only what an exemplum *is* but what it *does*.

Entissyng of wikked ensample

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). Retaliating, the Summoner observes that a friar will invariably get himself mixed up in every kind of matter, chiding this one particularly 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. 842–3), and the wounded Summoner on his behalf 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."[5] Originally, the exemplum is told about a bailiff. Chaucer altered it, transforming the bailiff into a serio-comic façade for an impious and incorrigible summoner (hilariously embarrassed by his true identity [III.1392–4]), to fit the theme of professional rivalry. We can just as easily imagine that the pilgrim Friar made the necessary changes.

Despite the fact that the Friar calls his tale a "game" (III. 1279) his speech is, like 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 first count, the summoner has no "conscience" (III. 1441) and is worse

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4   Susan Gallick, "A Look At Chaucer and His Preachers," *Speculum* 50 (1975), p. 458.
5   "Chaucer and the Language of Contemporary Preaching," p. 143. For three other versions see *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*, vol. I, ed. Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel, (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 94–9. On Robert of Ripon see Owst's *Literature and Pulpit*, pp. 162–3.

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 will) this points up a certain incompetence. We can't be sure which charge the pilgrim Summoner would 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.[6] But he is attacked on other fronts too. 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 simply on what is said. Hence the scene with the frustrated carter who, stuck in the mud, swears innoculously, "The devel have al, bothe hors and cart and hey!" (III. 1547), shows that meaning has its origin not in words alone. The fiend accordingly interprets, "The carl spak oo thing, but he thoghte another" (III. 1568), in reply to the summoner's naive assumption that in merely swearing the oath the carter had consigned his goods. From one vantage, to be sure, his failure of moral imagination might not seem very surprising, since in the summoner's trade what is material is the act of paying up rather than genuine penance. But this may only point up the original problem of what we could call the summoner's materialism. What should be sought is penance, which is in fact the mandate of the ecclesiastical courts for which summoners work; perceiving *entente* is essential to his trade.

So the summoner adds to wickedness and ineptitude and rapacity a certain intellectual 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."[7]

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6   The pilgrim Summoner may be flattered by the Friar's depiction of the summoner's genuine-seeming curiosity and camaraderie, elements Pearsall indeed singles out to suggest that moral satire gives way to a more charitable sort of humor; see *The Canterbury Tales* (London, 1985), pp. 221–2. On the other hand, the Friar does not intend to flatter.
7   "The *Canterbury Tales* IV: Exemplum and fable," in *The Cambridge Chaucer Companion*, ed. Piero Boitani and Jill Mann (Cambridge, 1986), p. 162.

It would not be the first place in the *Canterbury Tales* where moral doesn't appear to suit story, and consequently where the resulting incongruence calls for a shift of critical attention away from the morality and towards the mechanics of moralization; such readings are often pertinent, and yet we should not jump to conclusions whenever incongruity arises. In this tale, the Friar Hubert is superbly ironic throughout, and we may doubt that his moral is so obviously flawed. In fact, the moralization is of a piece with the barbed tale: "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 subtlety of the alternative moral interpretation: "A felle [clever] man seeth yuel, and hidith hem silf; and the innocent passede [goes on], and is tormentid with harm."[8] Putting an even finer biblical edge on the tale where it touches the summoner's foolish literalism is the idea that "Þe Jnnocent leueþ vche woord [believes every word] and in þaat he is a foole, seiþ Salomon."[9] So the summoner *is* like an innocent stalked by the devil because he lacks practical intelligence.

The pilgrim Summoner likewise deploys the rhetoric of exemplarity for the purpose of satire, both in a warm-up exemplum in his prologue and in the main exemplary tale. Although there is no known analogue to the *Summoner's Tale*, most of the fictional friar's lecture on anger is developed from homiletic material found in John of Wales's *Communiloquium*, a preachers' manual dating to the second half of the thirteenth century.[10] It is just the sort of manual the Summoner's sycophantic Friar John would have liked to own, 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), leaving us with the distinct impression that Chaucer has certain misgivings about friars who use the arts of preaching for profit; Chaucer's antifraternalism is of course well established, made notorious in the report – possibly an invention of a sixteenth-century biographer – of a fine once levied against him for beating a friar in Fleet Street. In any event, Chaucer's satire is highly conventional when he points up the usual vices of the itinerant preachers (pseudo-apostalic begging,

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8   *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments, with the Apocryphal Books, in the Earliest English Versions, Made from the Latin Vulgate by John Wycliffe and His Followers*, 4 vols, ed. J. Forshall and F. Madden (Oxford, 1850).

9   *The Recluse, A Fourteenth Century Version of the Ancren Riwle*, ed., Joel Pahlsson (Lund, 1991), 77/4.

10 John of Wales's very popular handbook is "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"; see Pratt, "Chaucer and the Hand That Fed Him," pp. 619–20.

false prophecy, flattering speech, general pharasaical duplicity).[11] For all that, it becomes clear that the poet distances himself from any critique of exemplary morality as such – his sights are fixed on a different target.

On the other hand, Chaucer's Summoner makes no such fine distinctions; like so many modern critics he disparages the preacher's art of exemplification along with his other bad behaviour. His fictional friar, *as* an exemplist, is a fraud and a spectacular failure. At first we are led to believe 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) – and on the friar's own account he is able to excite a congregation and wheedle parishioners "with nyfles and with fables" (III. 1760). The preceding tale has already revealed something of the mendicants' notorious competence as regards fabular rhetoric: Friar Hubert is, oratorically speaking, a virtuoso preacher. Near the beginning of 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.[12] Given the polysemy, we can infer that the friar's subsequent remark, "Glosynge is a glorious thyng, certeyn, / For lettre sleeth, so as we clerkes seyn" (III. 1793–4), 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). And it cannot be taken to signify a charitable accommodation of the biblical text to the understandings of his listeners, neither in the way the Bible was sometimes thought to modify itself mystically to suit the particular needs and proficiencies of readers, nor in the accepted manner of preaching *ad status et ad populum* (of which the friar's *glosing* is plainly a travesty; his idea of preaching *ad status* – to the estates – consists in treating the rich with self-serving blandishments, on which more below).[13]

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11 See Penn R. Szittya, *The Antifraternal Tradition in Medieval Literature* (Princeton, 1986), pp. 231–46.

12 *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 Lawrence Besserman, *Chaucer's Biblical Poetics*, Chapter 5, "Biblical 'Glossing' and Poetic Meaning," pp. 138–59, where the critic discusses the resonances of Chaucer's satire in the context of Wycliffite teaching: "These be the arms of Antichrist's disciplines against true men: *And the letter slayeth*" (p. 141). This aversion to the orthodox *glosing* friars did not stop the Wycliffites from employing glossing.

13 On glossary activity as a wider cultural phenomenon of modifying texts for specific audiences see especially Carolyn Muessig, "Audience and Preacher: *Ad Status* Sermons and Social Classification," pp. 254–76, and my brief discussion in Chapter 2.

One facet of the friar's *glosing* is his deployment of monitory exempla such as those found in his energetic but ineffective harangue against wrath, a sin the friar likens to a serpent that "so slily crepeth" and "styngeth subtilly" (III. 1994–5); indeed it proves more subtle than the friar knows. 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 to ensure that the friars pray for healing. He already must have entertained doubts about the efficacy of their prayers when he lost his 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 vice of wrath (and the virtues of mendicancy), a prolix speech punctuated by three short exempla taken from the fraternal *Communiloquium* which in their new Chaucerian context have ethical ramifications that go well beyond their success or failure in the friar's hands. For, in the friar's speech, what is supposed to be conciliatory turns out to be more than a little incendiary.

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 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. The almost farcical, Three Stooges-like scenario makes for a memorable illustration of the way wrath engenders homicide and is contemptible in men of high standing. The second exemplum adds further dimensions to our understanding of wrath. Cambises, king of Persia, is said to be angry and drunk and shrewish. He is counseled by "a lord of his meynee / That loved vertuous moralitee" (III. 2045–6) 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 forthwith 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 exemplum is more involved than the friar's first, and it is tempting to pursue implied meanings instead of the one stated, especially as the friar puts such a tendentious gloss on the exemplum. He betrays his usual policy of self-interest when he says it is no good to criticize the powerful (III. 2074–8) – something that could not be better designed to raise the hackles of the present beneficiary of the friar's flattery and rapacity. The moralization, which is not moral but in the worst sense prudential, is doubtless also a device used by the Summoner to expose Friar Hubert's policy of avoiding the "poraille" and serving the "riche" (*General Prologue* I. 247–8).

   There are indeed a number of things going on in this second exemplum. May it not also be construed as a way for the friar – as a purveyon of morality – to cast himself in a sacrificial light? All exempla mean more than they say. We note that Cambises proves 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, at least sufficiently so as to strike a sitting target. He explodes the fallacy of exemplary morality. Yet the chosen means of proof ultimately validates it: for wine causes the man to lose his mind. A medieval audience might also think he uses his limbs badly, insofar as all such talk of body parts – eye, ear, hand, foot, head – calls to mind the familiar metaphor of the social body as elucidated, for example, in Book 5 of John of Salisbury's *Policraticus*. Cambises's refutation is based on an over-literal understanding whereby he mistakes what the counsellor calls "lymes" for the members of his physical or natural body, when in fact their true reference should have been the members of his household and, by extension, the body politic dependent upon his headship ("many an eye and many an ere / Awaiting on a lord").[14] The irony runs deep, for unwittingly Cambises seems to have enlarged the compass of what is meant by the body by adding hand and foot to eye and ear. By calling attention to additional members, the king has been betrayed by his own language; and that betrayal is made manifest when he slays one of his own members.[15]

   I say it is tempting to explore ulterior meanings, but what Chaucer appears to suggest in the *Summoner's Tale* is that sometimes the explicit morals are most relevant. The third and last exemplum makes it clear that explicit meanings can have their own subtlety. Cirus the Persian king is said to have destroyed the river

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14 See *MED*, "lim" (*n*.) q. v. 4. (b): "a social dependent, a liegeman."

15 Cambises is not unlike another exemplary "proud man" who, according to an early fifteenth-century treatise, "seeþ hise pore lymes seek & febled, þat is, poore folk, & ȝit wil not helpe hem in her nede"; *The Orcherd of Syon*, ed. Phyllis Hodgson and Gabriel M. Liegey, EETS o.s. 258 (London, 1966), 363/12.

Gysen after 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. 2086–8)

The friar derives his moral from the same principle of expedience which had informed his advice about singing *Placebo* to powerful men, but the present proverb has a biblical basis (Proverbs 22:24–5). Future events in the tale reveal the wisdom of this exemplum (as of the earlier two), if in ways the friar could never have anticipated because he is so preoccupied with his own ulterior motives. It's as if Chaucer is demonstrating the danger of neglecting stated meanings, and as if the sin the friar defines as subtlety itself is to blame for such negligence (III. 1993–5).

   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. 2123–4), on the condition "That thou departe it so . . . / That every frere have also muche as oother" (III. 2133–4). 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. 2152–5)

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 having managed to shut him up by effectively repaying him in kind, *glosing* him with a fart, as it were the thermodynamic equivalent of the friar's own 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. 2233–5)

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."[16] (We may also recall Gower in the *Confessio Amantis* saying that "word is wynd"!) In the *Summoner's Tale*, of course, *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 has attacked the Friar with an irreverent introductory exemplum about how "a frere ravysshed was to helle / In spirit ones by a visioun" (III. 1676–7), in which vision it is revealed that the eternal dwelling-place of the friars is the "develes ers" (III. 1691, 1694).[17]

Now it hardly need be said that the preacher *as* exemplist becomes an example of the very sin he preaches against, as his preachment is an example of his sin. All this the Summoner holds up in ridicule of the pilgrim Friar. But what seems to have been neglected is the way the *Summoner's Tale* itself gets misapplied *exemplarily*, which is just the way Chaucer resists the Summoner's (and so many modern readers') negative assessment of exemplary morality.

We can begin to elucidate the gravity of the situation, first of all, by way of the degrees of the sins of wrath. The *Parson's Tale* defines the sin as "wikked wil to been avenged by word or by dede" (X. 535), something both Thomas and Friar John clearly manifest. Now following the Parson's subtle analysis of the "two maneres" (X. 538) of Ire, Thomas would seem to exemplify good Ire, "wrooth withouten bitternesse; nat wrooth agayns the man, but wrooth with the mysdede of the man" (X. 539), because he is justly angered by the iniquity of a false friar. But Thomas does not 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. Wicked Ire is itself subdivided into "two maneres" (X. 541), the first being "sodeyn Ire or hastif Ire, withouten avisement and consentynge of resoun" (X. 541–2). This venial species of wrath Friar John comes closest to exemplifying when, instinctively, 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" (X. 543). The old man and the incensed friar alike thus fall prey to mortal sin in their anger when after some deliberation they freely 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 not. No observable extenuating circumstance or precipitant exists which would allow us to see the Summoner's premeditated behaviour as anything less than, from the Parson's perspective,

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16 *House of Fame*, lines 762 and 765.
17 On the theology of the fart here see Robert W. Hanning, "Roasting a Friar, Mis-taking a Wife, and Other Acts of Textual Harassment in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*," *SAC* 7 (1985), p. 14.

ful wikked. The Summoner, who "Upon this Frere his herte was so wood / That lyk an aspen leef he quook for ire" (III. 1666–7), 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 (though why *should* we think Chaucer would forgive such a Summoner?) 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 his tale-telling too is motivated by anger – a *wikked wil to been avenged by word or by dede*. Both pilgrims use monitory rhetoric as a weapon in a conflict of personal and professional rivalry. From one perspective, the tales represent what Harry Bailey in the *Friar's Prologue* had called a "debaat" (III. 1288), a kind of verbal exchange based on mutual bad feeling which the Host seems to want to rule out of the game.[18] From his less-than-sacramental perspective (i.e., in contrast to the sacramental one provided by the Parson) we appreciate that the tales might not show the best sportsmanship. But their transgression is profounder than this. Robert Hanning locates the nature of their hostilities when he describes the recurring competitive aspect of the *Canterbury Tales* in terms of "textual harassment." In his superb analysis, Chaucer dramatizes the ways characters "misquote, quote out of context, misinterpret, vulgarize, and generally abuse textual 'auctoritee.'" What is more, in abusing textual authority the characters abuse one another: Chaucer is showing that "we can, by our adroit handling of received wisdom, not only control, manipulate, vilify, 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."[19] Just so, the pilgrim Friar and Summoner leverage rhetoric in an *ad hominem* fashion against one another, in an effort to ridicule and reduce the other to an invidious caricature. So *glosing* their tales, these pilgrims mistreat one another by means of what the Parson calls "wikked word" and describes, precisely, as "entissyng of wikked ensample" (X. 517, 520).

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 words rather than morality; theirs is not a moral tropology. Moreover, if they abuse textual authority, they also misrepresent its ethical potential. The Summoner would disparage the fraternal rhetoric of exemplarity as ineffective and ideologically suspect, which should not distract us from the real point and purpose of the exempla put in his mouth.

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18 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 in the *Canterbury Tales* at III. 1334–7 and III. 1762–3.

19 "Roasting a Friar," pp. 3 and 5.

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, for besides subjecting the sacerdotal trappings of pilgrimage to scrutiny in the activities of this pilgrim, Chaucer draws our attention to the shady underside of the rhetorical "bisynesse" (VI. 399) of itinerant preaching throughout the *Pardoner's Prologue* and *Tale*.[20] The Pardoner's tale is requested by the Host as a distraction from the grim *sentence* ending the prior "pitous tale" (VI. 302). 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)

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. 324–6)

The Pardoner is just as amenable to this request 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. 327–8)

He evidently reasons that it is best to satisfy the greater part of his audience – only after his thirst, of course, which he finds the need to quench at a tavern by the way. 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. 457–8). 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 status et ad populum*, the Pardoner thus employs his speech in the service of the majority, not morality. It is simply more lucrative.

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20 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, in "Chaucer and the Hand That Fed Him," 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. For a selection of sources and analogues of the main tale see Correale and Hamel, *Sources and Analogues*, vol. I, pp. 282–313.

> 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. 435–8)

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 an impressive 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 – Christian 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. 333–4). 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. 401–2). 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. 427–8). 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 noted is derived from contemporary pulpit literature but which takes on a special impertinence in a speech delivered from a wayside watering hole. Here, just as the tale gets underway the speaker veers off into a digressive if not drunken 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, by performative contradition, a demonstration of his usual vice. The simplicity and copia of the figures – *ensamples many oon* – he uses are conventional elements of pulpit oratory, put to use, as it were, in a kind of pub oratory. The main exemplary tale is a fine specimen of this preacher's art. In it three dissolute souls are themselves drinking in a tavern 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 *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). 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 narrative departs from the usual stipulations of the arts of preaching that instruct sermonizers to keep exempla simple and clear. He has been taken variously to be the wandering Jew, Paul's "old man," the emissary of Death, Death itself, and most recently as the Pardoner's subaltern ego, instantiating a sophisticated kind of despair expressive of the Pardoner's complex psychic condition, functioning to challenge the otherwise simple moral psychology of the tale.[21] But he may quite simply embody wishful thinking, standing for the Pardoner's desire never to die and face up to his sins even as he reproaches others for theirs. However equivocal or complex he may be, the Old Man is able to point the three men (unambiguously) in the direction of the place under an oak tree where he last met with Death. There at 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. The remainder of the tale gives a neat account of the way the three rioters, when mutual distrust is heaped on avarice, destroy one another for gold and discover death despite themselves. Interestingly, knowledge of death seems to make the Old Man immune

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21 See *Riverside Chaucer*, Explanatory Notes, p. 905. Marhsall H. Leicester, *The Disenchanted Self*, pp. 48ff, and Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, pp. 402ff, both 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*, who argues persuasively that the Pardoner has "no capacity for change or self-awareness, and no insight into himself" and so essentially has no "within" (p. 99). Spearing, in "Exemplum and fable," claims 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" (p. 166). I am persuaded by all such 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 *ambiguously*. An interpretive crux is not the same thing as a practical impediment. Ambiguity can signify in a determinate way, just as the Old Man proves decisive in giving direction to the three rioters in the tale.

to it, while the three rioters eventually succumb because of their ignorance and their lust for gold. All to support, of course, the capsule moral: *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. 907–8), pointing the pilgrims to the genuine spiritual pardon of Jesus Christ, "For that is best; I wol yow nat deceive" (VI. 918). 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.[22] 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 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." 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."[23] Yet, when the Pardoner tries to address the pilgrim audience as earnest congregants, his speech is taken not as pastoral concern but as a 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. 941–5)

sounds to the Host like an affront to his masculinity. Belligerently swearing he will cut off the Pardoner's "coillons" (VI. 952), Harry Bailey expresses his familiar opinion, now with greater force, that *debaat* springing from wrath has no place in the tale-telling game (VI. 958–9).

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 figures in order to discredit it as a vehicle for moral deliberation and

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22 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 modern critics, as noted. 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. 92–5.

23 "A Look At Chaucer and His Preachers," pp. 468–9.

persuasion? In short, does the ethics of exemplarity survive Chaucer's ferocious irony?

The foregoing three tales implicate the exemplum 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: Chaucer may have wanted to say that, under the auspices of the Church, clerics are exploiting pulpit oratory by turning the rhetoric of exemplarity into so much "hooly bulle" in a second, now more familiar sense.[24] One might conclude from this that exemplification is just one more powerful sedative with which the Church attempts to opiate the masses. Such readings are not far to seek given the widespread sense that the paradigmatic Chaucerian stance is one of protest or dissent rather than avowal; that the poet nothing affirms especially when it comes to Christian morals. As Linda Georgianna observes, moderns have for a long time been enamored of the critical construct "Protestant Chaucer" whose default mode is one of suspicion and unbelief in the face of the prevailing moral-religious values.[25] Granted, Chaucer has a lot to say about clerical abuse and the asymmetries of power inherent in institutions under clerical control. Again, the complicity of the exemplum in the sociopolitical context seems plain enough. Larry Scanlon defines the rhetoric thus as "one of the Church's chief vehicles for the reproduction of authority," only conceding that the exemplum is a contested site where a power struggle between the laity and clergy played itself out. Thus the exemplum is transformed from a moral and affective rhetoric into an iconoclastic stratagem, a tactic permitting people to appropriate or "laicize" the authority of the Church ("the ideological apparatus of the medieval ruling class").[26] In such an analysis the rhetoric becomes instrumental to a greater social cause: no one accedes to the exemplum's moral signification anymore because presumably everyone is busy usurping power by means of it.

Yet anticlericalism did not originate with Chaucer and is indeed found in clerical sources he would have consulted, and consequently his social critique only reveals his belatedness in this regard. I propose that Chaucer's critique is also as exemplary as it is ethical. It is not just that Chaucer's anticlerical satire aims to correct clerical abuse without repudiating the Church (i.e., confirming the integrity of the corporation and the high calling of its members by rebuking bad personnel). So much is true; the poet affirms the legitimacy of exemplification by condemning occasions of its misuse; but he also condemns its abuse. In other words, Chaucer undertakes to problematize exemplary rhetoric *and* to make fools of those who think exemplary rhetoric is *only* problematic and ineffectual. On this

24 *MED*, "boule, bul(e)," q. v. 1: "falsehood, trickery" derived from OF *boul* "deceit." In the language of the *Cursor Mundi* such figures are full of "wickednes, tresun, and bull" (line 26371).
25 "The Protestant Chaucer," *Chaucer's Religious Tales*, ed. C. David Benson and Elizabeth Robertson (Woodbridge, 1990), pp. 55–69.
26 *Narrative, Authority, and Power*, pp. 25 and 58.

account, the particular "meta-homiletic" narrative Chaucer tells about the mal-practice of preachers demonstrates the exemplum's sphere of legitimacy, rather than subverting it, by compounding exemplary meanings through irony. In the antifraternal *Summoner's Tale*, the most dramatic example of this phenomenon, exemplary morality is elaborated on multiple levels. First, Friar John is duly ridiculed by his failure to apply his own exempla. He is disgraced, 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 hypocrisy; his last exemplum, explicitly warning against the dangers of counseling and befriending an *irous* man, should have taught the friar some caution. On yet another level, and equally without knowing it, Chaucer's Summoner intensifies the exemplary morality and justifies its stated *and* unstated meanings. This pilgrim ends up squandering a most germane set of exempla about anger and about misapplication in the figure of the friar; the pil-grim is doubly advised and so twice as incautious as his fictively incautious friar. Hilarious, undoubtedly; but in the end the thrust of Chaucer's satire is still ethical and exemplary. We are not able to conclude, as the Summoner would have us accept as true, that exemplary rhetoric is per se unethical, because of course his own failure lies in not taking the ethics of exemplarity seriously enough. Ultimately, the tale tells against the Summoner's moral skepticism, and it pre-empts ours thereby. His tale is thus made a *tour de force* of literary exemplarity deriving a powerful narrative-based ethics from mutually reinforcing but escalat-ing levels of signification, as figures accrue meaning through successively widen-ing ironic frames of reference. If the tale and the situation of its telling come to resemble something like a fun-house mirror, then it is a highly self-reflective medium in which the figures do not by reduplicating themselves dissolve to a vanishing point (as in a *mise en abyme*) but fold into one another and so intensify thematic and moral consistency through significant redundancy.

Considering the tales of the Friar and the Pardoner in the same light yields similar results. Again, an exemplary tale is misapplied by a pilgrim in such a way that it is applied all the more justly by Chaucer to condemn him 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 the poet's ironical intent – besides some very basic articles of faith – which we accept whenever we find it amusing that the pilgrim fails to observe the morality of his own tale. The satire therefore does not discredit the moral; it rather hammers it home. For instance, the Pardoner's deceptive rhetoric serves the more efficiently to comment on and condemn his self-deception, no matter how honest he has been about his motives. And the Pardoner's cavalier attitude towards the ethics of exemplary narrative (what I referred to as *abuse* in contrast to *misuse*) is just as heinous. It has been sug-gested here 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 ser-mon 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."[27] The Pardoner's is a "disenchanted consciousness," in Leicester's view, discrediting exemplification. However, this analysis can be cogent only if the audience is as literal-minded as the three rioters *and* is pre-pared to dismiss as mere enchantment the threat of eternal damnation. What the argument also neglects is the Pardoner's own uncomprehending response to the tale he tells, which the audience can see through: as Lee Patterson observes, "His own understanding of the spiritual life is as obstinately literal as that of the riot-ers."[28] Like them, this pilgrim misses the central import of the *memento mori* and does not heed his own moral theme, however psychologically sophisticated his obstinacy might otherwise be; his faulty psychology is perhaps the main point. Revealing more than he knows, ultimately the Pardoner would appear cunning but is merely careless. He is his own best worst example: he is an exemplary fool *because* he is a masterful preacher.[29]

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. 180–1), we may thus 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. Chaucer's exemplary tales have several legs on which to stand. And however ideologically complex they may be, the dramatic irony of the tales operates on the assumption that the exemplified sins (e.g., wrath or 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 take from these tales is not moral instruction but a healthy dose of skepticism towards religious or moral authority, in which case exempla are still used to expose sociopolitical functions. This analysis is defective, however, because it is incomplete. Granted, the *Canterbury Tales* has much to teach us about the corruption of social institutions, and thus it offers us problematic cases in the interrogative mode, as is well established. But the *de facto* complicity of the rhetoric does not exhaust its moral meaning in Chaucer. When the rhetoric functions to serve self-interest and social expediency, this is for Chaucer a practi-cal ethical problem. Analyzed as an ethical problem, the motivations and effects in question are exposed as *immoral* and not just in some larger sociopolitical

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27 *The Disenchanted Self*, p. 47.
28 *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, p. 405.
29 J. A. Burrow, in *Medieval Writers and Their Work*, p. 111, 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." The latter instead of the former conclusion is certainly right, since the mode is so expertly expanded by Chaucer himself.

sense *functional*.[30] Indeed, as we have seen in at least three cases, Chaucer reveals a commitment to strong and serious moral valuation in his exempla, in which exemplists are not presented as interesting social facts but as blameworthy characters.

If Gold Ruste, What Shal Iren Do?

Chaucer creates figures who become, as I have inelegantly 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 good examples after all?

Chaucer's selfless Parson embodies a positive exemplary ideal which serves as an instructive contrast to the selfish pilgrims discussed so far. The emphasis of his portrait is laid upon the priest's exemplary way of living rather than upon his way of speaking, or eloquence. No "shiten shepherde" (I. 504), the Parson is a good man 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, / Ʒef thow be of euyle lyuynge."[31] Gallick cites another contemporary instance in Humbert of Romans' thirteenth-century *Treatise on Preaching*, where it is argued that the person of the preacher "ought to be irreproachable; for how can he reproach others with what he himself is guilty of?"[32] Such teaching, widely represented in the arts of preaching, represents an ancient rhetorical ideal.[33] Quintilian, for instance, held that the public orator must possess good character, or *ethos*.[34] It has been argued that this classical pagan idea revived and flourished in the late medieval humanism with which Chaucer was affiliated, though it would seem that in any case biblical ethics, epitomised in teachings about the blind leading the blind in Matthew 15:4 or about the ideal faultlessness of spiritual leaders in 1 Timothy 3:2–4, has as much if not more enduring relevance.[35] The priest should not just be a good orator, but a type of Christ.

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30 If so presented, as a sociologist or even a literary critic might, Chaucer certainly would have taken the edge off his critique, for then he would have not have composed value-laden satire but some kind of putatively value-neutral, social-scientific description.

31 *Instruction for Parish Priests*, EETS o.s. 31 (London, 1868), p. 1.

32 Cited in "A Look At Chaucer and His Preachers," p. 459.

33 Claire M. Waters, "Holy Duplicity: The Preacher's Two Faces," *SAC* 24 (2002), pp. 75–113, cites contemporary authorities, Humbert of Romans among them, who urge that the preacher should match the virtues of his message. For instance, Thomas of Chobham taught, "Every preacher should give a good example (*bonum exemplum*) in his works, and good doctrine in his words"; and another writer says, "It is essential that life and teaching should coincide in [the preacher], lest what he builds up with one hand, he destroy with the other" (pp. 89 and 95).

34 *Institutio Oratoria*, trans. H. E. Butler (Cambridge, 1959), II.xiv, XII.intro, VI.ii.

35 See further Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire*, p. 63.

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.' "[36] 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 feeste and make an ende" (X. 47) he is as abstemious, 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. 43–6; emphasis added)

What he tells is not the kind of *myrie tale* any Harry Bailey might desire. The Parson prefers the pure "whete" of a prose treatise on the sacrament of penance to the "draf" (X. 35–6) of poetical fables with their rhetorical ornamentation and frivolous falsehoods. His criticism of the fabular 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 that his is the "only tale with no narrative element,"[37] since the Parson makes sparing use of exemplary narrative (e.g., X. 323–36, the narrative of Adam and Eve's fall; X. 363–4, the two causes of "drenchynge"; X. 670–3, the philosopher who beats his disciple), he does seem to abjure it.

We might well suspect Chaucer of being slightly disingenuous in the Parson's portrait, given the rhetorical basis of his own poetry. The idealization of this pilgrim seems to be achieved at the expense of the life 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.[38] The evasions or dislocations of the Parson's performance probably registers an important ambivalence on Chaucer's part, inasmuch as the pilgrim's asceticism does not comprehend the vitality and subtlety of literary narrative within the *Canterbury Tales*. So if the tales of the Friar, Summoner, and Pardoner call attention to certain failings of preaching by example, the Parson may do the same for penitential prose; contemplating the Parson's good example we seem to be left with questions about the good of his example. And yet Chaucer composed the *Parson's Tale* after all, investing such time and energy in the rendering of that didactic treatise as we

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36 Besserman, *Chaucer's Biblical Poetics*, p. 100.
37 Spearing, "Exemplum and fable," p. 175.
38 The *Parson's Tale*, like the equally sober *Tale of Melibee*, was a popular choice for inclusion in manuscript miscellanies; the former work survives along with the latter in Pepys 2006 and then by itself in Longleat 29. See *Riverside Chaucer*, Textual Notes, p. 1119.

may well find extremely difficult to sustain in simply reading it. A wholesale dismissal of this pilgrim's "vertuous sentence" (X. 63) would only be achieved at the expense of Chaucer's evident interest in penitential morality, of which we are given a further indication in the *Retraction* which follows on the tale of the Parson.

Withal, it is very difficult to know what to do with Chaucer's extreme positive example. Only somewhat less certain is the nature of his extreme negative examples: those embodied by the Friar, Summoner, and Pardoner. If it is true that the good preacher must be a good man, what are we to make of these eminently pharisaical tale-tellers and the efficacy of their tales? Is any good to be derived from them? The truly *shiten* condition of the Pardoner, 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?"

There are at least two literary-critical 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 lead me to believe that Chaucer exploits his negative examples for the good. 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)

Lisa Kiser suggests "he may be lying to us even about the success of his lies before others,"[39] and indeed perhaps he indulges in some wishful-thinking or deception in putting himself forward as a lady's man or even a successful businessman. But, looked at one way, such disbelief only begs the question, the real issue being that the Pardoner's rhetoric is profitable notwithstanding his lies and "yvel entencioun" (VI. 408). It should not be difficult to accept that he speaks truth through his lies, and so does good despite his evil. He may be like those devils of hell who, according to the *Friar's Tale*, occasionally become the proximate cause of a soul's salvation, "Al be it that it was nat oure entente" (III. 1499). Theirs is not a good *entente*, yet it has good effects. This asymmetry of intention and effect has obvious relevance to the issue of the legitimacy of the negative example, and it has a solid biblical basis in 1 Philippians 1:15–18:

> 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.

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39 *Truth and Textuality*, p. 142.

In this perspective – existing alongside the imperative that preachers *ideally* should practice what they preach (e.g., 1 Timothy 3:2–4) – the validity of the message is not identified with the messenger or compromised by his *entente*.[40] The gospel is thought to have an autonomy secure against the motives of preachers who abuse it. Just so, the Pardoner's exemplum – including himself *as* moral exemplum – has value independent of his "entente . . . nat but for to wynne." We may go further than this, arguing that in fact the Pardoner's preaching is *better* than the Parson's, irrespective of motivation. "At one pole, we have the bad man whose superlative skills not only work but produce good results; at the other, the good man whose unwillingness to falsify himself by any art vitiates his good intentions. The illusion succeeds better than the reality."[41] The Parson's discourse may really improve few people as a result of its rhetorical austerity, while the Pardoner's improves many more with hypocritical words that may only hurt himself. 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.

What this means for readers of the *Canterbury Tales*, from the point of view of the fiction of the drama, 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 entails that when words do not comport with deeds, "mere" words are to be abandoned to their immorality in favor of moral deeds. 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). It is for this reason that I have not pursued a nominalist account of moral rhetoric.[42] Nor should we identify Chaucer's ethics with the 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.[43] A tale is by no means unethical for

40 Cf. Alan of Lille, *The Art of Preaching*, trans. Gillian R. Evans (Kalamazoo, 1981), p. 19.

41 Robert O. Payne, "Rhetoric in Chaucer: Chaucer's Realization of Himself as Rhetor," in *Medieval Eloquence: Studies in the Theory and Practice of Medieval Rhetoric*, ed. James J. Murphy (Berkeley, 1978), p. 276.

42 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 is philosophically nominalist, adduced to make the case for Chaucer's skepticism of didactic rhetoric in particular. In this regard he is thought to have been chiefly concerned with demystifying the pretension to harmonize word and deed, universal and singular, sign and signified – or, moral and story. Since, as Chaucer says elsewhere, "wordes moote be cosyn to the dede" (*General Prologue* 742 and *Manciple's Tale* IX. 208), then moral exempla which are incongruous might be said to underscore the way incongruity itself is an inherent flaw of moralizing. However, on closer reading the division between word and deed in "Lak of Stedfastnesse" is an ethical failing rather than an epistemological one; see Stephen Penn's astute comments in "Literary Nominalism and Medieval Sign Theory: Problems and Perspectives," in *Nominalism and Literary Discourse: New Perspectives*, ed. Christoph Bode et al. (Amsterdam, 1997), pp. 181–2. The problem is not that the "word" is reductive or implausible or mystifying or monological; it is that the "word" has been neglected in "deed." The same sort of practical concern is attended to throughout in my analysis of ironies of exemplarity within the *Canterbury Tales*.

43 Chaucer is to be acquitted of the charge of prudishness with which the Man of Law would embarrass the poet by claiming "certeinly no word ne writeth he" of wicked examples. Chaucer does depict

having, *pace* the Man of Law, failed to represent goodness. However blame-worthy the fictional pilgrims, then, the poet does not share their guilt by simply having presented them in his fiction: he is not thereby misapplying his exempla by showing how others misapply theirs. 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*.

Nor need we conclude that the poet thrust himself beyond the conventions of good and evil altogether – in some precocious, proto-Nietzschean manner – to assert the autonomy of the aesthetic in the teeth of conventional morality. If any-thing, 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 interrogates its foundations. Negating certain aspects of exemplification so far proves indispensable to the exemplary moral analysis Chaucer carries out.

In his *Policraticus*, John of Salisbury perceives the utility of negative examples, speaking about the way poets "display philosophical subjects by demonstrating vices, not by teaching them. . . . 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."[44] 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 prover-bial 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.' "[45] 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 audi-ence 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 its 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 – something which deserves to be called exemplary. The result is that Chaucer interprets moral problems at a remove from pragmatic instruction even as he presents interpretation itself in paradigmatic and pointed terms as having ethical urgency.

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utmost wickedness. It is the lawyer's legalism about where the morality of literature lies that consti-tutes the butt of the joke. See further Anne Middleton, "The *Physician's Tale* and Love's Martyrs: 'Ensamples Mo Than Ten' As a Method in the *Canterbury Tales*," *Chaucer Review* 8.1 (1973), p. 28.

44 A loose translation of *Policraticus* VII.ix in Peter Von Moos, "The Use of *Exempla* in the *Policraticus* of John of Salisbury," in *The World of John of Salisbury*, pp. 218–19.

45 Ibid., p. 219.

7

Griselda and the Question of
Ethical Monstrosity

From the standpoint of exemplary morality the *Clerk's Tale* can easily offend ordinary "prudence."[1] The tale is emphatically a problem exemplum in which the most pressing practical question – for medievalists *and* medievals – is what to do with Griselda's voluntary submission to the inhuman demands of Walter. What is it *good to do* with her example? Does Griselda epitomize wifely perfection in acting as she does; does she 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, ultimately, are readers to take the example? The question is just as well put in terms of whether to take the letter or spirit of the tale, but in any event it is difficult to tell whether Chaucer hasn't positively impeached the Clerk's morality, whatever register it occupies, making a mockery of exemplary morality.

Such are the questions which constellate around the tale as if they were subject to simultaneous attraction and repulsion. The Clerk, however, would attempt to provide a center of gravity by referring his audience to a general 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 spirit of the tale is encapsulated in the exhortation that follows: "Lat us thanne

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1   Cf. IV.1183 of the *Clerk's Tale*. John Burrow's caveat in "The Third Eye of Prudence," in *Medieval Futures: Attitudes to the Future in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 2000), pp. 45–6, is worth repeating here: "The modern word 'prudence' is a chilly term for a much shrunken concept . . . but for Chaucer and his age such words represented a still rich and living complex of moral ideas."

lyve in vertuous suffraunce" (IV. 1162). But does the Clerk thereby solve the moral problem by appealing to his source and legislating a correct meaning? Doubts settle in immediately. For one thing, why should the Clerk have to correct his readers, if the tale were obviously directed at "every wight"? Moreover, because the Clerk keeps his audience alert to the fact that he is translating here, the belated spiritualization can seem a little disingenuous, whatever its inherent sense or precedence.[2] Finally, how invested he is in the literal rather than the spiritual plane is put in question soon after, in the envoy's ironic nod in the direction of the Wife of Bath and her "secte." The implications of the envoy are not so different from those which emerge every time the Clerk insists on the perfection of Griselda *as* a wife – a *donnée* he never explictly questions. She is, we might think, not just *any* representative Christian soul after all.

Academic discussion of the moral meaning of the tale has not settled the issue either, though critics routinely focus skeptically on elements such as the envoy to show that the tale is monstrous rather than moral – a telling dichotomy I explore in this chapter. The larger critical history of the tale is instructive: an offensive monstrosity to some, an alluring and subtle fable to others, and to others still an artistic failure or deliberate caricature, the *Clerk's Tale* remains a moral conundrum. Judith Bronfman concludes her book-length survey of its history of reception by reflecting, "What does the story mean? There is no correct answer. And in this, I think, lies its fascination."[3]

And yet if there is no correct answer, it should be said straightaway that this is because (as Bronfman's study demonstrates) there are several salient answers rather than one or none. The narrative is fascinating because it is polyvalent in its moral exemplarity, not pointless; because it runs a surplus of meaning rather than 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 more or less explicit valuations built-in, the Clerk's running commentary on Walter's cruelty being one instance that we can sort out. Meaning is not so much irreducible or indeterminate, then, as it is polarized between deeply felt antithetical possibilities; the problem is how to choose. This is the case in part because, as Elizabeth Salter argued long ago, the audience is obliged to negotiate the threshold between the higher religious register of the narrative and its lower register of "pathetic realism,"[4] the former supporting an other-worldly

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2 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. 1147–8). The reference to Chaucer's source here recalls the Clerk's reference to Petrarch's "impertinent" (IV. 54) proem, burdened as it is by Latin high style. Could there be the slightest hint that the moral epilogue is another such irrelevancy, a thing just as impertinent to the body of the text? Probably the Clerk means what Petrarch says at the end, but in other respects the Clerk's telling may lead one to suspect that the moralization is not "the whole story." All the evidence Chaucer would have needed to have found fault with Petrarch is laid out in David Wallace's *Chaucerian Polity: Absolutist Lineages and Associational Forms in England and Italy* (Stanford, 1999), pp. 261–93.

3 *Chaucer's Clerk's Tale: The Griselda Story Received, Rewritten, Illustrated*, Garland Studies in Medieval Literature (New York, 1994), p. 128.

4 *Chaucer: The Knight's Tale and the Clerk's Tale* (London, 1962), p. 50.

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*."[5] Critics have over the years elaborated on the incongruity in various ways, some holding that it results in an aesthetic breakdown, others allowing that it enriches the tale.[6] Bearing Salter's original characterization of the problem in mind, I want to reflect further on the process of moral deliberation by thinking through the exemplary irresolution – the "inability to decide upon and abide" – audiences can and regularly do experience. Irresolution is in this narrative as much a pragmatic ethical problem as an aesthetic one, a distinction that should permit us to move beyond the old binaries.

Parable or Parody?

As other critics have urged, the *Clerk's Tale* appears to better purpose when it is considered as a parable, a species of exemplum.[7] 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 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."[8] The success of paradigms typically depends on their simplicity – brevity, clarity, and plausibility. The parable, by contrast, differs in that it compares things whose likeness is "far less obvious."[9] An enigmatic figure, the parable is more provocative than directly persuasive because it 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 a trope with which we are familiar from the Gospels. For Jesus, a near contemporary of Quintilian, parables have a so-called "restrictive

5   Ibid., p. 61.
6   Those besides Salter who take the first view include Robert M. Jordan who argues that the tale is "broken backed" in *Chaucer and the Shape of Creation: The Aesthetic Possibilities of Inorganic Structure* (Cambridge, 1967), p. 198; R. P. Miller, "Allegory in the *Canterbury Tales*," *Companion to Chaucer Studies*, ed. Beryl Rowland (New York, 1979); Alfred David, *The Strumpet Muse*, pp. 159–69; and Hi Kyung Moon, "Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*: A Disrupted Exemplum," *English Language and Literature* 40.4 (1994), pp. 643–55. For the opposite view see Dolores W. Frese, "*Chaucer's Clerk's Tale*: The Monsters and the Critics Reconsidered," *Chaucer Review* 8.2 (1973), pp. 133–46, who thinks the "bifurcated" quality of the tale is constructive; Denise N. Baker, "Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale* and the Monstrous Critics," *Postscript* (1986), pp. 61–8, who claims the duality is a deliberate "trap"; and most recently Linda Georgianna, "*The Clerk's Tale* and the Grammar of Assent," *Speculum* 70 (1995), pp. 793–821, who argues that the reader is provoked to "wonder" at a disjunction between letter and spirit. Surveys of the criticism can be found in Bronfman's *Chaucer's Clerk's Tale* and in Charlotte C. Morse's "Critical Approaches to the *Clerk's Tale*," *Chaucer's Religious Tales*, ed. C. David Benson and Elizabeth Robertson (Cambridge, 1990), 71–83.
7   See Salter, *Chaucer*, 38; A. C. Spearing, *Criticism and Medieval Poetry*, 2nd ed. (London, 1972), 101–3; and Baker, "Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*," p. 64.
8   *Institutio Oratoria*, Loeb Classical Library, vols 1–4, trans. H. E. Butler (Cambridge, 1959), 5.11.5–8.
9   Ibid., 5.11.22.

and defensive" quality, their sense having been purposely obscured by figurative language.[10] In the Gospel of Mark, following hard 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."[11] Accordingly, parables hold out the promise of revelation only for a self-selecting few, those who are, somewhat mysteriously, ready to hear.[12] The unlearned fail to comprehend too, adds Quintilian who, like Aristotle, assumes paradigms are more intelligible and are therefore good for general purpose.

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,"[13] and on any such definition we see that the Clerk's learned tale bears important hallmarks of the parable (i.e., dissimilitude, displacement, and secrecy), as if it too were intended to rouse a select group of listeners to moral and theological reflection on a higher level than, say, the exempla Friar John tells in the *Summoner's Tale*. The Clerk's is simply less paradigmatic or pragmatic than other exemplary narratives in the *Canterbury Tales*, and indeed than most exempla. However, given its obvious situatedness in the tale-telling game, the *Clerk's Tale* has additional generic dimensions: for we can distinguish the narrative as it exists for its fictional audience and as it exists for any actual audience. To the fictional pilgrims it may or may not be restrictive, opaque, and learned: parabolic. But for those who approach it as one among other tales of Canterbury, the *Clerk's Tale* is evidently something more and less meaningful. It is more straightforward on one hand, because the dramatic context fixes meaning according to use: the Clerk's rejoinder to the Wife of Bath, and the Host's and Merchant's responses, respectively stabalize meaning according to ulterior motives and ideological imperatives. On the other hand, the tale is much more obscure, because its intentions

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10 The phrase "restrictive and defensive" is Jean Starobinski's, as cited in Suleiman, *Authoritarian Fictions*, pp. 33–4. For a fuller discussion see John Drury's article on the Gospel of Luke in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 427–39, and the entry on "Parable" in *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition*, ed. David L. Jeffrey (Grand Rapids, 1992).

11 Mark 4:12. 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). Jesus will reveal what was once concealed, making the meaning of the past accessible to the present; so parables are not utterly secretive. However, even in the more optimistic Matthean context, the sentiment is qualified by the Parable of the Sower (a paradigmatic parable about the efficiency of parables). Seeds falling on good ground are like parables yielding understanding in the regenerate heart; those falling on the stony ground lie moribund. The audience for whom enlightenment comes is always a select one; parables are *not* reassuringly egalitarian: "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).

12 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 parabolic indirection: having heard the Parable of the Vineyard the chief priests, scribes, and elders "realized that he had told this parable against them" and schemed to arrest him (Mark 12:12). Of course, they do not really understand the parable because they fail to take the spiritual point. See Frank Kermode, Chapter II, "Why Are Narratives Obscure?," of *Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge, 1979), on how parables polarize the knowing and the unknowing.

13 *The Psalter. Or Psalms of David and Certain Canticles with a Translation and Exposition by Richard Rolle of Hampole*, ed. H. R. Bramley (Oxford, 1884), 48.4.

are mediated by further layers of indirection than those intrinsic to the tale: the comic envoy and dramatic links just mentioned serve to lessen our hold on which motives and imperatives are ultimately determinative. The point is simply that the parable is not unaffected by the communicative context in which we find it.

On this score the *Clerk's Tale* may feel more like parody than parable, and indeed I would suggest the tale has about it the sort of rhetorical excess characteristic of both the ridiculous and the sublime. However, this is perhaps only to confess that the *Clerk's Tale* is more parabolic than parables usually are, *for the very reason* that the outlandish responses of the envoy and tale links serve to keep Chaucer's readers alert to the risks of responding as the tale demands. For this and other reasons we are faced with an exemplary narrative of unparalleled complexity in the *Clerk's Tale*. Chaucer's audience is 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 itself.

So the *Clerk's Tale* can profitably be viewed as parabolic insofar as the term can withstand the shock of any additional problems and paradoxes. The term still denotes an exemplary narrative that obliges its audience to think through the terms of comparison it employs. In addressing the morality of story, I am specifically interested in the way Chaucer makes the problem of ethical deliberation – of reading for the moral – a cornerstone of his tale. Griselda's practical dilemma is in fact exemplary of dilemmatic thinking. In what follows I pursue the issue circuitously, as one must, asking first on what level of generality or specificity we can possibly take the tale of Griselda. Once the major options have been surveyed, I return to consider the stakes involved for those like ourselves who must, inescapably, read for the moral.

Be Constant in Adversitee

The Clerk expressly 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 or in spite of a complex narrative which makes a variety of applications possible. Griselda is finally made to stand, or rather stand aside, for an abstract virtue, one clearly spelled out in the end as *vertuous suffraunce* (IV. 1162). She is as one critic has observed, "narrowed to relevance."[14] At the opening of the chapter I wondered if the Clerk has thereby already solved the moral dilemma for us, but I now want to suggest that in practice the explicit morality does not entail a predictable narrowing on the side of reader response – for not only words "punctuate" this story, readers do.

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

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14 J. V. Cunningham, "Ideal Fiction: *The Clerk's Tale*," *Collected Essays of J. V. Cunningham* (Chicago, 1976), p. 280.

could be turned in various ways. The moral, in other words, awaits some completion as to a determination of its lived content through what I have earlier called a process of pragmatic reduction, the end of reading for the moral. Reading tropologically, we must supply something personal – say, the recognition of some accident or any other difficulty one has in securing one's 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). How I see fit to express *vertuous suffraunce* in respect of those sharp scourges can only be something I discover in view of the particulars of my personal life experience. Just as I interpret the moral in view of my past, so I interpret it in view of my present and possible (unknown) futures. Accordingly, patience cannot be the same everywhere and for everyone. The point should suffice to indicate that even with what would seem to be an inflexible moral generality, the ethical response to exemplarity can enjoy considerable latitude, as a result of the unpredictable contact between a text and the life plans ("narrative identity") of an individual moral agent. In this sense even abstractions give rise to narrative ethics, originating *outside* a text.

Consequently, moral generalities such as the Clerk's can be said to encourage a certain kind of moral relativity, by which I do not mean the Clerk's morality is in a modern sense relativistic or even free of moral absolutes.[15] On the contrary, since the virtue in question will have to attach itself to the details of contingent circumstance, such relativity as there is enables greater specification, and with specification comes a greater sense of responsibility for the circumstances that are one's own. The moral will become an absolute imperative for persons when it seems to apply to them.

But this analysis remains preliminary to an appreciation of the exemplarity of the tale. The moral about patience is not without some prior exemplary content, though that content remains elusive; exemplary Griselda, who embodies *vertuous suffraunce*, is the main figuration of the moral abstraction. The virtue in question, we are made to understand, looks just like Griselda's virtue. If Griselda is narrowed to relevance by the morality, so is the moral narrowed to relevance in view of its instantiation in the narrative of Griselda. Of course, she is herself something of a normative abstraction. Attending to the typological and iconographic details associated with Griselda, the reader discovers that patience is subtended by secondary abstractions. We are made to understand that her virtue is similar to that of Job (IV. 871–2; 932ff), Mary (IV. 294 recalls the Annunciation), and Christ (IV. 880 echoes the Via Dolorosa).[16] Such figures remain abstract,

15 Thomas Nagel's point that generalities do not contain their application is relevant to note: "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*, p. 152.

16 For more on the iconographical elements forming a consistent religious focus in the narrative see Frese, "Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*." Interestingly, the religious imagery is not all on the side of Griselda. Walter exhibits something of God's character according to the theology of bridal mysticism and nominalism. Frese notes, "the Clerk draws here on the solidly traditional view of Christ as a perverse, wife-testing husband" (p. 137) as exemplified in a well-known section of the *Ancrene Wisse*. Salter remarked on the parallel years before in *Chaucer*, pp. 38–9. For the nominalist background see Robert Stepsis, "Potentia Absoluta and the *Clerk's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 10 (1975), pp. 129–46. God as

yet such substitute figural abstractions are clearly to be distinguished from abstract statements: for the audience is now given examples to fill out the meaning of the virtue of patience, alongside a summary morality. Such slender examples, not yet existing as anything like fully embodied exemplary narratives, serve again to relativize – even as they concretize – the moral of the story, now from *within*. Now how one takes the moral depends on a lateral reckoning of examples, plus whatever life plans are brought to bear on them. Here we take a first step towards narrative ethics *in* the text.

But the Clerk's morality of patience gets fleshed out in more obvious directions when we begin to consider the larger narrative context which is the tale. Other more or less explicit moral imperatives, themselves subject to different applications, 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 spiritual valences of the tale touched on so far, and because they may not be best described with reference to conventional morality, least of all *vertuous suffraunce*. The most important competing demands are those issuing from feminist or antifeminist perspectives on and within the narrative of the *Clerk's Tale*, since they tend to treat the text literally rather than spiritually.

A Womman Was so Pacient

Griselda, from one well established perspective, seems to have been enlisted in the service of a marriage debate, that fourteenth-century fictional and not-so-fictional *querelle des femmes* with which Chaucer seems often to have been preoccupied. Never mind how the Clerk tries to finesse things 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 the 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. 1223–5), inscribing a fuller response to the tale *as* a marital exemplum in the long discussion of marriage that prefaces

persecutor or *flagellum divinum*, providing "the Christian with the opportunity to exhibit his patience," may also be relevant here; for background see Ralph Hanna III, "Some Commonplaces," pp. 65–87.

the *Merchant's Tale*. Chaucer, by building in to his collection the moral responses of others, is highlighting a potentiality readers cannot ignore when they attempt to assess the morality of the *Clerk's Tale*.

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 behave as Griselda? 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 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.[17] For, he could allow that it is practically impossible to imitate Griselda, because women nowadays are not as strong as they once were (IV. 1164–9), so that a spiritual moral is the most germane – indeed he could be allowing 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 seem to suggest as much (IV. 1163–9). On this not improbable account, 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. (The alternative reading of *inportable* is, again, that Griselda's humility is not just inimitable but morally unjustifiable, 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 to the tale. Before Chaucer got around to translating Griselda, there circulated various versions in French, one of which Chaucer used as a source, expressly directed at the improvement of women. Boccaccio's original story too, which Petrarch had translated and tried to dignify, 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 to do – for many

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17 While Chaucer's rendering of *vix imitabilis* as *inportable* may distance Petrarch's misogynist implications, the translation does not disqualify them. Chaucer's English does not fix the meaning either way, since that which is unendurable is ambiguous. See *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*, vol. 1, ed. Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel, pp. 101–67, for transcriptions and facing-page translations of Chaucer's sources, namely Petrarch's Latin and the French *Livre Griseldis*.

modern readers, as for Harry and the Merchant and perhaps the Clerk himself –
is to take it spiritually.[18]

Now if the Clerk's summary morality can barely contain itself, other parts of
the narrative are still more revealing. The competing 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, 935–7). After crediting Griselda with such
embodied virtue, how are we to take the belated disclaimer, "This storie is seyd
nat for that wyves sholde / Folwen Grisilde *as in humylitee*"? Why would we
interpret Griselda any other way, that is, than as a literal figure of a good woman
rather than as some neuter soul? The problem comes up again with respect to
Griselda's embodiment of spousal virtue in particular, never explicitly put in
doubt. Midway through her ordeal 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 really the point (or is vaguely *inportable*).

There are additional incitements to literalism one could explore,[19] and yet
tracking them all would not necessarily lead us to the conclusion that Griselda

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18 Bronfman's first chapter of *Chaucer's Clerk's Tale*, "The Story Before Chaucer," is a complete
account of all extant late medieval versions of the Griselda legend. As she notes, the prose tale,
Le Livre Griseldis, a French translation of Petrarch that Chaucer consulted, leaves out the spiritual
moralization and appends a "preface which declares that the story is an example for all women, espe-
cially married ones [a l'exemplaire des femmes mariees et toutes autres]." Moreover, 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]" (p. 17). Denise N. Baker in "Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*," pp. 61–4,
reviews the literalism of modern critics such as Bernard Huppé and Michael Cherniss, against whom
she sets what she takes to be the Clerk's unproblematic spiritualization. Feminist readings tend to
literalism, just as Harry Bailey's and the Merchant's antifeminist responses do.

19 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 have
observed since Severs' *The Literary Relationships of Chaucer's Clerkes Tale* (New York, 1942), p. 247,
Chaucer heightened the pathos of the tale in translation by augmenting its realism; with greater pathos
may come a fixation on the letter that would distract us from its spirit (though I grant that it could just
as plausibly heighten our sense of spiritual import, as others have urged). 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*, p. 50. In addition, there is the issue of the Clerk's own engagement with
the specific difficulties of his story. 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*," p. 63. Encouraged as we are, Salter concludes, "to believe in his

is a *good* example. It may be possible to establish the literal exemplarity of Griselda, but the question remains whether she sets a negative or positive example of married love.

Griselda's example may be construed diversely, even if we concede that the *Clerk's Tale* is primarily a marital exemplum. For instance, Chaucer may have conceded that from the clerkly perspective Griselda "shewed wel," and yet have gone on to subvert the clerkly perspective. Going further, we could pursue the idea that Chaucer is critiquing medieval 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 truly 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*, 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 which I will discuss below). 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. 622–3). From this vantage the tale hardly counts as an epithalamium.

Yielding up one's children to be slaughtered in order to uphold any human institution might constitute a condemnation of it. Griselda's responsibility in the matter is perhaps mitigated by the restrictions set upon her: she may feel beholden to Walter for taking her to wed despite her low birth and poverty (as he thrice reminds her at IV. 466–78), and she is told the people demand the sacrifice of her (IV. 481–90). She seems to have no real choice given the exigencies of the political situation – her apparent influence in the sphere of civic politics notwithstanding (e.g., IV. 430–41). However, perhaps Chaucer is scrutinizing *this* marriage rather than marriage as such, showing that Griselda is herself not very good or responsible. The point is easily made with reference to Walter, who is regularly called immoral: the Clerk garlands the man 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).

Griselda's goodness is explicitly put in doubt in the envoy of course, but her moral responsibility in the matter of the "assay" is put forward as a problem earlier, when she agrees to the terms of Walter's prenuptial demand, which runs 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?

heartlessness rather than in his inscrutability," we may have trouble crediting Walter's purely symbolic or functional significance; *Chaucer*, p. 59. In this view the narrator's preoccupation with particulars forces the audience to turn their attention upon social and psychological matters, and their affective dimensions, which may not be strictly relevant to the morality of the story.

> 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. 351–7)

Griselda, in response to Walter, makes a most significant refinement on the already severe restrictions laid down in what Spearing has called a "monstrous marriage-agreement."[20] She vows, "And heere I swere that nevere willyngly, / In werk ne thoght, I nyl yow disobeye" (IV. 362–3), 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: "Man sholde bere hym to his wyf in feith, in trouthe, and in love" (X. 929).[21] That Walter, in manipulating Griselda, fails to love his wife as he should is of course contemptible. But that Griselda voluntarily submits to her husband's excessive demands may not be a credit to her character either, insofar as she voluntarily and indeed eagerly submits to an extent he does not actually require.

Here we enter the most controversial and fascinating moral terrain of the tale. All critics concede – implicitly if not explicitly – that Griselda's willful submission is *prima facie* difficult to accept, and doubtless this is because her submission leads to extreme humiliation and also potential infanticide.[22] Moreover, by way of such indiscriminate obedience Griselda does little to correct (and if anything "acts" too late against) her husband's excesses and is in fact quite complicit with them.[23] And she comes up short again by the standards

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20 *Criticism and Medieval Poetry*, p. 93.
21 In a still familiar but common medieval 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; see *Sarum Missal* in R. P. Miller, *Chaucer: Sources and Backgrounds*, p. 375. Griselda seems willing to take the "forsaking" clause extremely seriously, but she is actually keeping an extraordinary prenuptial pledge (what Petrarch calls a *miraculo*, no less).
22 On the condemnation of infanticide in the later Middle Ages, and, perhaps not incidentally, the evident increase in ties of affection to children, see David Herlihy, "Medieval Children," *Essays on Medieval Civilization: The Walter Prescott Webb Memorial Lectures*, ed. B. K. Lackner and R. K. Philips (Austen, 1978), pp. 109–41.
23 Griselda does not heed the advice of penitential manuals and sermons that urged pious wives to use persuasion (as does, for example, the prudent wife of Melibee) and even deception to influence their husbands for good, though she does apply herself to reforming Walter for his *next* wife (see IV. 1037–43). For the history of such advice to women see Sharon Farmer, "Persuasive Voices: Clerical Images of Medieval Wives," pp. 517–43. Farmer cites Thomas of Chobham who, like other proponents of wifely persuasion, taught his congregants: "the sin of a man is often imputed to his wife if, through her negligence, he is not corrected."

of medieval discussions of the virtues of patience and obedience.[24] At best, she may be said to illustrate something of the *form* of such virtues, bereft of the right *substance*; the problem is that if patient obedience is all Griselda exemplifies, then it could be exhibited just as well by the vicious sergeant who carries out Walter's orders.[25] On all these grounds, then, when Griselda chooses to keep her prenuptial promise at the expense of the lives of her children and her own well-being, she may appear hard-hearted rather than long-suffering. 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 improbable – a reading supported by at least one source and analogue, probably not incidentally – and now we can see why this might be so.[26] Her willful surrender to Walter can seem to make her utterly irresponsible – indeed irreligious, since her "readiness to die if it is her lord's will is, in a literal sense, a blasphemy."[27] 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 be obeisaunt in alle rightwisnesse" (X. 675–6).[28] Far from conducting herself with all righteousness she 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

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24 See Ralph Hanna III, "Some Commonplaces," p. 70, on the received theological wisdom that the virtue of patience is never an unqualified good: "[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'). Augustine produces 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." On the limits of obedience, see Denise Baker's "Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*," p. 66, and also her "Chaucer and Moral Philosophy: The Virtuous Women of the *Canterbury Tales*," *Medium Aevum* 60.2 (1991), pp. 241–56. Taking up the question as to whether one is bound to obey a superior in all things, Aquinas argued *sed contra* as follows in his *Summa Theologiae: Latin Text and English Translation*, Dominican Editors, vols 1–60 (New York, 1964), 2–2.104.5: "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." This unexceptionable piece of doctrine covers all sorts of hierarchical relationships, and by its lights (excluding an allegorical reading of Walter *as* God) we are bound to find against Griselda.

25 James Simpson, *The Oxford English Literary History, Volume 2. 1350–1547: Reform and Cultural Revolution* (Oxford, 2002), p. 320.

26 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*, indicates that Griselda's example is hardly worthy, *estimable*, rather than hard to imitate, *ensuivable*; on the important distinction see the article by Amy W. Goodwin, "The Griselda Story in France," in *Sources and Analogues*, vol. I, ed. Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel, p. 138. I am developing an interpretation which shows how Chaucer puts the alternative senses in play with his equivocal *inportable*.

27 Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales* (London: 1985), p. 271.

28 Cf. *Summa Theologica* 2–2.104.5. I do not invoke such heavy-duty theological authorities to foreclose interpretation but rather to multiply its bases.

"verray worldly suffisance" (IV. 759). In addition, the evident *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). Could Chaucer be counting on his audience to recognize as much? At the end when the Clerk declares "Grisilde is deed" and he hopes no husband will test his wife "in trust to fynde / Grisildis, for in certein he shal faille" (IV. 1177, 1181–2), the joke may actually be that Chaucer thinks women *better* than that nowadays, because prudent wives would not consent to idolatry or homicide!

To invoke terms that are now familiar from a series of modern discussions, Griselda may seem too much the monster and not enough the critic when she assents to Walter,[29] and this brings us rather dramatically face to face with the problem that arises in attempting a moral application. How is one to take Griselda? The dilemma is whether to take Griselda *at all* as an example of moral character or conduct.

Exemplum Terrible

According to the best accounts, Chaucer's audience can find itself torn between incongruous valuations (as medieval versions of the story attest), each of which has a certain salience in different interpretive contexts, at least one of which leads readers to sense that the tale is monstrous. I have surveyed some

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29 Modern reaction to "monstrous Griselda" can be dated to Thomas Lounsbury's *Studies in Chaucer: His Life and Writings*, vol. III (New York, 1892), 3.340–1, where she is called "weak-spirited, and even despicable" because she "does not even exhibit the degree of sensibility which exists in the females of brute creation." George L. Kittredge in "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage," *Modern Philology* 9 (1912), pp. 453–67, evidently entertained similar misgivings but concluded that such negative reactions are beside the point when it comes to the moral discourse of 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" (p. 307). But even early source study yielded negative judgements: in *The Literary Relationships of Chaucer's Clerkes Tale*, J. Burke Severs encouraged the notion that Chaucer had intensified the tale's irrationality, a change which Nevill Coghill would characterize by saying it had become "monstrous"; *The Poet Chaucer*, 2nd ed. (London, 1967), p. 140. James Sledd's "*The Clerk's Tale*: The Monsters and the Critics," *Modern Philology* 51.2 (November 1953), pp. 73–82, acknowledged prior critics' doubts but argued that if there is a problem with the morality of the tale it is ours, not Chaucer's. According to Sledd's circular logic, "the judgement that [Griselda] is good is an essential preliminary" (p. 79). Dolores Frese in "Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*: The Monsters and the Critics Reconsidered," attempted to refocus the controversy by insisting that the tale (not Griselda) is deliberately grotesque – she speaks of the Clerk's "two-headed creation" (p. 138) – in the way it sets up a "rhythmic tension" (p. 135) between the "intellectual-religious and the emotional-human" (p. 140). Denise Baker alludes to the terms of past discussions in "Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale* and the Monstrous Critics," arguing like Kittredge and Sledd before her that the real monsters are the critics who fall into the "trap" of reading 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" (p. 67). Griselda's monstrosity is still worth talking about because it remains one of the best characterizations of the problem of reading for the moral that we have. However ambivalent or protective past critics have been, we should take away from the debate something of what it is like to *experience* the narrative, even if that initial experience (rather than the assumption that Griselda is good) is preliminary to a deeper understanding.

obvious options, but the analysis could be extended; all that needs to be established is that the radical interpretability of the tale constitutes its parabolic dimension. Granted, a certain latitude of interpretation is intrinsic to practical reason of the sort exemplarity by nature allows. But in the *Clerk's Tale*, where there is reason to doubt whether it is a *moral* tale at all, the profound degree of latitude calls into question the morality of the story itself. The tale is thus what I should call a parable *of* exemplarity.

It is with an eye on the so-called monstrosity of the tale that I want to pursue the idea of moral application one step further, beyond the usual dichotomies and their irresolution. Bearing in mind the Latin noun *monstrum*, "omen, portent, marvel," akin to the verb *monstrare*, "to show,"[30] what does Chaucer's problematic exemplum reveal? The *Clerk's Tale* is undoubtedly the more suggestive because of its deformity, abnormality, and hybridity. But what ultimately does it "show forth"?

So far the tendency has been to see the tale as monstrous *or* moral. A more persuasive reading would be one that perceives something recursive and paradoxical in Chaucer's recourse to the monstrous. Can it not therefore be said that it is something like the monstrosity *of* morality that the tale exposes? Such a reading would not resolve the tale in the standard either/or way; it rather serves to adumbrate the dilemma more clearly. The tale, I think, is in fact *about* the moral dilemma. The revelation of "swich mervaille" (IV. 1186) that is the *Clerk's Tale* has to do with the ordinary paradox of ethical responsibility: the instant of decision which, in the punctual moment of reading for the moral, excludes several alternatives in selecting just one. The tale draws its audience towards a pointed recognition of what is at stake, in the face of the dilemma, every time moral application is sought in the futurity of decision. By returning to what Salter calls the "inability to decide upon and abide by one single set of moral standards," by appreciating just how the tale generates so much anxiety about the kind of deliberation it urges upon us, the moral of the story conceived as a story of morality should thus begin to reveal itself.

Another way to speak about the effect of the *Clerk's Tale* is to say it forms a dynamic force field that resists all static positions, including ironical or skeptical ones. It is the perpetual energy of the force field (rather than the quandary of whether any "correct answer" exists, to recall Bronfman) that is truly instructive, even *morally* instructive, for even when a decision appears so elusive – as so many readers attest – magnetism remains. The tale attracts as much as it repulses. The energy of Chaucer's parable of exemplarity resides precisely in the way it summons the audience to judgement in order to account for the *undecidable*, which is not to say indeterminate, tale of Griselda. The distinction is vital.

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30 David Williams, *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Mediaeval Thought and Literature* (Montreal, 1996), p. 10, argues that monstrosity in medieval art and literature "points to utterances that lie beyond logic." I do not claim quite the same mystical or metaphysical effects for Chaucer's literary marvel that is the *Clerk's Tale*, since I am interested in practical reasoning, but even from an ethical vantage, as I will explain further, the exemplary narrative achieves a certain sublimity.

Derrida, who contrary to popular opinion is no advocate of indeterminacy, defines undecidability 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.[31]

Oscillation between determinate possibilities might characterize any attentive reader's reaction to Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*, in which competing lines of force, as if emanating simultaneously from both positive and negative polar charges, mark out while failing to fix the moral. And these contrary forces ensure that audiences almost inevitably come to feel something closer to responsibility than indifference for the example.

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, as I suggested at the outset. 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 moral complacency. If it also hardly enables us to interpret and settle comfortably upon some glib generalization ("This tale is about such and such"), the *Clerk's Tale* does not at the same time preclude an ethical response; it rather prompts one.[32] Hence undecidability is a call to responsibility rather than a cause for apathy or indifference, insofar as any ambiguity that audiences experience can be an inducement instead of an obstacle to ethical deliberation.[33] Ambiguity

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31 "Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion," trans. Samuel Weber, *Limited Inc*. (Evanston, 1988), p. 148. The interest in possible pragmatic meanings or acts 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)."

32 For the ethical response is *in* the reader, not the text. For instance: in this limit case, where moral meaning is so elusive, articulating the elusiveness may be enough to have finally discovered its morality. My whole 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 lack structure or sense without failing to structure the experience of a reader.

33 That we find a decision difficult does not preclude the experience of feeling as though a decision were required. Two critics who have emphasized the tale's moral claims are Charlotte Morse and Linda Georgianna. Morse, observing that we are used to sympathizing with literary characters rather than imitating them, thinks moderns hardly have the faith anymore to take the tale as it is intended to be taken; nonetheless she stresses that the *Clerk's Tale* belongs to a class of medieval "literary texts that mean to effect a moral or spiritual change in us"; "The Exemplary Griselda," *SAC* 7 (1985), p. 54. Georgianna 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*," p. 818. Both critics thus 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 of responding constitutes another response.

is in any case necessary for genuine decision, in which case the *Clerk's Tale* is not unusual 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.[34]

The trial by way of the undecidable thus constitutes the possibility of responsibility, one of the very conditions of ethics, an incalculable future contingency all live with and every exemplary case presumes.[35] Ethics, envisaged as a negative capability here, thus resides in ambiguities and uncertainty by its very nature. The *Clerk's Tale*, on all accounts, simply makes the incalculability of decision-making hard to miss.

There may be something unsatisfactory and possibly tragic about any decision we finally settle upon because of its inherent reductiveness, and this too is part of the story of morality Chaucer's tale wants to tell. One may find an ethical use for the text, but only at the expense of others: thus the call to responsibility entails sacrifice. Griselda herself seems to be responding to the most rigorous of biblical injunctions to sacrifice – though without an obvious guarantee of divine sanction, making her case so eminently undecidable – embodied in the Crucifixion. In a way, too, she behaves as though she were responding to Jesus' call for the suspension and indeed denial of family allegiance: "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."[36] *That* chilling desideratum is a moral grotesquerie with all the force of biblical authority behind it, and it speaks to the heart of the problem of exemplary morality.

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 difficult tale of unconditional assent and exemplary sacrifice. Derrida calls the story of Abraham and Isaac "monstrous yet banal": *monstrous* because of the logic of sacrifice educed to represent ethical responsibility, *banal* because of the ordinariness of the sacrifice.[37] It is the same scandalous interface that has interested

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34 Derrida, "Afterword," p. 116.

35 Compare Wittgenstein's on how *in practice* when one reads one must at every stage decide how to "go on." Reading is a matter of learning to apply rules "in the particular case without guidance"; *Philosophical Investigations*, pp. 75 & 100. Also see Timothy C. Potts's *Conscience in Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1980), p. 18, for relevant remarks about rule-following in the moral sphere: "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."

36 Luke 14:26; cf. 1 Corinthians 7:29–31.

37 *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago, 1992), p. 75. "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?" (pp. 67–8; cf. p. 85).

readers of the *Clerk's Tale*, in which (as in Genesis 22) a criminal or at least pathological act ostensibly exemplifies a spiritual obligation.[38] How 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 what Derrida calls an "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."[39] God's "secrecy" about his intention to release Abraham of his obligation ensures the father's "absolute solitude" in a poignant way, as it requires him to make a decision without the benefit of considerations of outcome or calculable future 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 accounting for the instant of his decision in rational or prudential terms. The 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."[40] 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, foregoing the law of exchange – causality, calculability, reciprocity – for the higher law of sacrifice: the "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

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38 "Like Griselda," 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 and Medieval Poetry*, pp. 98–9. Spearing describes such stories under the rubric of promise-and-release, a popular type 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." *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the *Franklin's Tale* are other examples, but the tale of Griselda remains especially "monstrous" according to Spearing (the term is invoked on pp. 93, 97, 98, and 101). In *A Reading of Sir Gawain* (London, 1965), p. 160, J. A. Burrow lists Abraham and Isaac and the *Clerk's Tale* among what he calls test-stories that stage a contest between opposing virtues. Richard F. Green's recent *A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England* (Philadelphia, 1999), p. 332, gives further examples of the oath-testing story, of which the "archetypal example" is "the story of Abraham and Isaac." Lounsbury, *Studies in Chaucer*, 3.342, seems to have been the first to remark the comparison between Abraham and Griselda. Thomas J. Farrell, "The Chronotopes of Monology in Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*," in *Bakhtin and Medieval Voices*, ed. Thomas J. Farrell (Gainesville, 1995), p. 153, observes apropos of the comparison: "Authors in the Middle Ages seem to have recognized the (at least) potential monstrosity in the sacrifice Abraham is willing to make, as their delight in accentuating the pitiful plight of the boy by careful extrapolation of his character in the mystery cycles attests." Farrell claims that "Griselda demonstrates virtue in a monstrous situation, but her virtue is not for Chaucer monstrous" – as if virtue was not also a monstrosity.

39 *The Gift of Death*, p. 60.

40 Ibid., p. 77.

a genuine offering. The biblical story is an extreme case, to be sure, illustrating in a particularly vertiginous manner all that 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 Other he also loves – thus clearly surrendering that which it is not easy to give up – is finally representative of the ordinary dilemma of the ethical intention. It is a common enough "gift of death."

Something of the same dilemma is movingly expressed in those pathetic moments when Griselda hands her children over to the monstrous sergeant of Saluces, in an effort to obey her husband whom she loves at the same time as she surrenders her beloved children. Yet Griselda's is perhaps the more profound and extraordinary example of the deadly gift-exchange for several reasons. First, her dilemma is literally more mundane than that of Abraham, who at least has the advantage of a theophany to orient himself ethically, making his choice clear because it is God who demands sacrifice. Derrida is taking liberties, then, when he describes the patriarch as utterly alone. Griselda has only her vow to obey another human being. Moreover, Griselda must follow through on her vow. Slavoj Žižek observes that "if Abraham were a modern hero, no angel would appear at the last moment; he would actually have slaughtered his son."[41] If that is so, isn't Griselda the more austerely "modern hero" for having for all she knows undertaken Walter's commands? Like Abraham's, hers is an ordeal of temporary obedience, but more pertinent after all is the unique comparison (not in Petrarch) the Clerk makes to Job, *who actually lost everything*. Even this comparison underestimates Griselda, who can actually be said to exhibit the proverbial "patience of Job" that Job lacks. Chaucer has in effect trumped both biblical examples with an account of far more radical and exemplary responsibility – what Žižek calls a response to the "fragile absolute." The Clerk thinks a woman can model the ethical response better than men:

> Ther kan no man in humblesse hym acquite
> As womman kan, ne kan been half so trewe
> As wommen been . . .   (IV. 936–8)

And Žižek concurs that the most exemplary acts represent a heroic feminine "*ethical* monstrosity"[42] – witness *Medea*, *Sophie's Choice*, and *Beloved* – for the truly "modern" (yet how medieval) ethical act is figured most monstrously in a woman's exemplary cutting of ties that run to the heart of her identity: that is, her maternity.

Returning to the story vis-à-vis Derrida's original analysis of the monstrous, we can see that it is precisely by sacrificing a vital element of her feminine identity that Griselda figures a radical rejection of calculating means and ends according to the law of exchange. Hers is the ordinary condition of moral

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41 *The Fragile Absolute – or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London, 2000), p. 150.
42 Ibid., p. 153.

responsibility men *and* women experience in a complex moral universe, what-ever else we might say about how exactly her situation is gendered.[43] 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 that deprives Griselda of freedom of choice. We are instead directed to the disposition and decisiveness of her free responsibility as a moral agent. 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." If her decision is thereby not coerced, neither is it apparently caused by some pathological defect. 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 perverse. Potentially perverse it will remain until we find an explicable cause (patriarchal ideology? sickness? self-interest? domestic abuse?). But none completely 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 prenuptial promise, pushes hard against our capacity to account for her response and response-ability.

Her decision, to sacrifice one for the other, may thus be the more exemplary *because* of its "monstrosity" in the sense Derrida and Žižek give the term. Hers is the problem *par excellence* of how to respond responsibly, and what her behaviour 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. Her freedom to be good is bought at a high price.[44]

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 built right into the logic of the tale). Recurring to prudential as opposed to moral 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 isn't it to a fault? The extravagance of her decision is made all the more problematic in light of her previously equitable administration of the commons: "whan that the cas required it, / The commune profit koude she redresse"

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43 Though what Derrida's laments as the "absence of women" in the Abraham and Isaac story might be said to have been rectified in the medieval legend of Griselda.

44 The "ethical monstrosity" does not quite fit the Kierkegaardian "suspension of the ethical," because the suspension of the law of exchange grounding ethics is the foundation rather than the breach of the ethical. Again, the paradox of Abraham and Griselda is that to be morally responsible to one another is to be irresponsible to other others. 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 alone, there is evidence of a certain exceptionalism. The phrase "save one thing" and similar expressions of reservation 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? It is perhaps a latent recognition of manifest content.

(IV. 430–1). She had given "juggementz of so greet equitee" (IV. 439) at that time, exhibiting an even hand in public affairs. What happened to make her behave so irrationally and for the sake of such apparently "singular profit"? By later freely transgressing prudential calculation with a final and inscrutable decision,[45] Griselda responds to the singular demands of Walter with a conviction we can hardly muster. And yet we may do so all the time, insofar as conviction rather than calculation is necessary for decisions of any importance. Griselda's unconditional obedience 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, even for the scholarly expositor aspiring to a detached historical view of the matter. Any audience's dilemma remains how to take responsibility for the tale, realizing full well what the cost might be (e.g., our conviction that the tale is really immoral? our commitment to the narrative complexity of the tale? our sense that Griselda has been hard done by?) in responding responsibly. Whatever decision we make, we may find ourselves trying to account for an application in the public sphere or classroom where no explanation is totally 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 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 interpretation. What we sacrifice in either case is perhaps the real secret of the parable of exemplarity – and the future of the tale. In this way Griselda is the monster that haunts our reception of the narrative of her life, remaining the "mervaille" for which current students and teachers of Chaucer can hardly begin to account at the same moment that it holds us accountable to respond.

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*, the *Clerk's Tale* invites us to think about moral deliberation and decision-making.[46] A failure to come to grips

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45 Georgianna, "*The Clerk's Tale* and the Grammar of Assent," p. 805: "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." For Georgianna, Griselda's love is something holy or numinous; in my analysis it is earthly and pragmatic but no less mysterious for that reason. For a very different reading of Griselda's unintelligibility, see E. T. Hansen's *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley, 1992), p. 194, where it is construed as a calculated 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" (p. 194). My argument is closer to Georgianna's in supposing that Griselda's "inhuman" act adumbrates something of the cruel nature of moral responsibility, particularly its gratuity (rather than proto-feminist aggression).

46 I borrow the awkward polyglot term, first used by G. R. Owst, from Joan Young Gregg's *Devils, Women, and Jews: Reflections of the Other in Medieval Sermon Stories*, where it is used to describe tales of horror and intimidation.

with a unifying moral principle governing the tale is finally no objection to it, though it does make reading for the moral immeasurably more difficult and demanding. For inasmuch as a moral decision seems required, we are called to account for our response – if only for our unaccountable irresolution (do you dare?). 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 am 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 not an agreeable conclusion, it may be because – in the words of that most austere contemporary of Chaucer – "Pacience is a point, þaȝ hit displese ofte."[47] The Clerk, reaching the end of his narrative, seems to have grown altogether impatient when, turning to "noble wyves, ful of heigh prudence" (IV. 1183), he remarks how improvident Griselda's example really is. The Clerk seems to have abandoned his parable in favor of a reactionary feminism or antifeminism (we can't be sure which). What happened to *vertuous suffraunce*? His comic turn away from "earnestful matere" (IV. 1175) can of course seem to undercut the tale's morality: the ending can appear to parody its parabolic pretensions so that the attempted spiritualization comes off as so much clerkly camouflage. And yet, as a final paradox, it is no argument against the tale's morality if it tends to "displese" its audience, because displeasure and difficulty constitutes a reason for patience.

Measuring the Case

If Griselda is in a certain manner imprudent, the example she sets does not rule out the prudential model of moral reasoning I have put forth in other parts of this book. The *Clerk's Tale* is in my reckoning about the instant of decision that is not, or rather *can no longer be*, prudent because of its inevitable secrecy, sacrifice, and futurity. First, Griselda's conduct is characterized by a certain

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47   *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron (Exeter, 1996), p. 185. My allusion is occasioned by Burrow's claim in *Medieval Writers and Their Work*, p. 116, that *Patience* "does not . . . bring with it any of the doubts and ironies which disturb the simple functioning of the exemplary mode in the *Clerk's Tale*." *Patience* allegedly gives no grounds for subversion: "if we fail to see this, it can only be from a profound failure of interest in general moral concepts. *We do not want to learn about patience*" (p. 116; emphasis mine). Wittgenstein could have been describing the same phenomenon when he observed of philosophy: "What has to be overcome is a difficulty having to do with the will, rather than with the intellect"; *Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch (Chicago, 1980), p. 17. Similar claims have been made about the *Clerk's Tale*, in fact. 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"; "The Exemplary Griselda," p. 52. It is indeed important to insist upon the role of the *will* in reading. However, while Morse excludes ironizers and allegorizers *tout court*, I have aimed to include their insights by suggesting the way mutually exclusive meanings work against one another and demand judgement even when judgement remains impossible.

secrecy because it is inexplicable outside the context of her own free will and conscience; second, her conduct is sacrificial in the way she has had to select one from among an array of possibilities, excluding others on behalf of the singular other, and is no longer confined to the safe (but inert) realm of reflection; finally, her behaviour puts us in mind of the radical contingency of ethical action yielding to an unknown future time. Obliged to choose between determinate possibilities, Griselda thus survives the ordeal of undecidability not by tolerating or settling for some sort of indeterminacy (a contradiction in terms) but by acting on her convictions and surrendering the temporary comfort of never having to decide. In this way, she exemplifies the ordinary, "monstrous yet banal" moment of decision after which prudential calculation has taken place and been exhausted, and in the face of which no prior calculation can account, but without which ethical responsibility could not be said to have a real future. She invites us thereby to share in the secret, monstrous moral knowledge that "A future that would not be monstrous would not be a future; it would already be a predictable, calculable, and programmable tomorrow."[48]

At the same time, the ethical intention she exhibits and subsequently elicits from readers in this deeply problematic case would not be ethical were it not for some prior or eventual administering of judgement, measurement, or calculation – in a word, justice. Even in the *Clerk's Tale* the notion of *assent* exists in tension with *avysement*.[49] It is to the aspect of responsibility Chaucer describes as *avysement* that we must finally turn, in recognition of the "other" demand for prudence and justice.

The importance of ethical considerations besides moral decisiveness and obedience to the singular demand of the other is well illustrated by Emmanuel Levinas's reading of the story of Abraham and Isaac. For Levinas, the angel's appearance and proscription is of most consequence to the ethics of the story:

> Abraham's attentiveness to the voice that led him back to the ethical order, in forbidding him to perform a human sacrifice, is the highest point in the drama. That he obeyed the first voice is astonishing: that he had sufficient distance with respect to that obedience to hear the second voice – that is essential.[50]

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48 Derrida, "Passages–from Traumatism to Promise," trans. Peggy Kamuf, in *Points . . . Interviews, 1974–94*, ed. Elisabeth Weber (Stanford, 2002), pp. 386–7.

49 Here I differ from Georgianna who finds prudence and reasoning of any sort to be trivialized. See her valuable discussion of the terms and their synonyms. Griselda, she observes, represents the kind of *assent* that Walter can only attempt to *avyse* before yielding to wonderment. Just so, Griselda's grammar of *assent* disturbs "our frame of reference and the terms of our judgement, our *avysement*" (p. 801). On this reading 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" (p. 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" (p. 817), I suggest the dilemma we are faced with involves something more fundamental: having to choose between *assent* and *avysement*. Reading against the grain and exercising critical judgement remains a viable alternative.

50 *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith (London, 1996), p. 77.

Ethics is the response to more than one voice; ethics completes its essence by limiting itself. So ethical monstrosity, while it may describe an ineluctable sacrificial moment in coming to act morally, and while it can help us account for Chaucer's strategy in the *Clerk's Tale* to represent what is most irrecuperable about ethical responsibility, nevertheless does not tell the whole story of morality. Levinas describes responsibility as a monstrous response to a singular other too, but his conception of sacrifice – one which informs Derrida and i ek – insists on the "corrective" imperative of justice arising out of consideration for the third party: "the simplicity of this primary obedience [to the other] is upset by the third person emerging next to the other; the third person is himself also a neighbor, and the responsibility of the ego also devolves onto him. Here, starting from this third person, is the proximity of a human plurality. Who, in this plurality, comes first?"[51] In virtue of such considerations of human plurality Levinas speaks of "all the others than the other" whose existence demands "measure and knowing."[52] Ethics, monstrous as it may be, is thus to be moderated by reason and conscience; ethics becomes the passage to politics. Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*, however, does not seem to take us far beyond the scandalous moment of imprudence, self-sacrifice, and singular obedience. There Chaucer brings us to the edge, the threshold before which conscience emerges as, in Levinas's terms, "the limit of responsibility and the birth of the question: What do I have to do with justice?"[53] For the reaffirmation of prudential reason and the call to justice, one must look ahead in the Canterbury collection to the *Tale of Melibee*.

Actually, Chaucer explores practical intelligence of the calculating kind all throughout the *Canterbury Tales*, and it will be good to end here by recalling that there is more to be said for prudence (*avysement*) than Griselda's example alone might lead one to conclude. Our understanding of ethics in Chaucer would be lopsided if we took away only the idea that decision is mysterious and unaccountable – as if *non disputandum est* were the last word in ethics. Ethical practice also requires caution, counsel, and circumspection. Circumspection is in Chaucer frequently elaborated in the context of morality, as J. D. Burnley's still very helpful *Chaucer's Language and the Philosopher's Tradition* established some time ago. Burnley, delineating what he saw as a medieval "secular ethics" derived from a Senecan tradition of moral philosophy, noted in Chaucer the recurrence of a lexical set that includes such terms as *avyse*, *conseil*, *forncast*, and *prudence*, indicating that prudent preconsideration remains central to the poet's thinking. For example, Prudence, as an allegorical personification in *Melibee*, teaches Melibeus to use "conseil" and to "avyse" himself rather than react hastily to his adversaries. The *Manciple's Tale* is among other things an

51 *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, 1987), p. 106.
52 *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague, 1981), p. 158.
53 Ibid., p. 157. On the derivation of politics from ethics see also *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, 1969), p. 300. For a full discussion of the implications see the last chapter of Simon Critchley's *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 188–247.

exemplum showing the destructive results of haste or recklessness, and we could add that the tales of the Monk and Physician are further examples of what happens when prudence is lacking. Such instances need to be contrasted with the worldly prudence of the Man of Law, or as exemplified in the tales of the Reeve and Shipman. The word had antithetical senses then as it has now, the one suggesting good sense and the other self-interest.

What characterizes prudence in Chaucer, as in Gower, is a regard for the virtue of the mean: *mesure*, *attemprance*, *sobrenesse*.[54] As I have suggested in relation to the *Confessio Amantis*, in which extreme cases are laid out for Amans to decide among, discovering the mean between extremes can require some diligence. Chaucer's *Melibee* is an extended meditation on the problem of due diligence and good judgement and puts forth the idea that its exercise involves both consultation and circumspection.[55] Good judgement takes counsel of oneself and from others. And then it entails careful 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 indeed pervades Chaucer's text at its most basic level of moral instruction, in accordance with which Prudence lays down the following emphatically pragmatic principle on the sound casuistic assumption that circumstances alter cases:

> 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 that advice that will not adjust itself according to time and circumstance, that is not circumspect and heeded with proper prayerful concern. In this precept we can already sense the monstrosity of the moment of decision, as it were, deforming the "general reule" and "every conseil" in the event. The ardent pragmatism and flexibility of her ethical precepts and proverbs mark Prudence as an especially exemplary proponent of the case-based reasoning which has repaid close analysis in both Gower's *Confessio* and Chaucer's *Tales*, and it holds the key to good judgement.

Of course if nothing else the *Canterbury Tales* consists of numerous instances of good and bad judgement. John the Carpenter, Chauntecleer and Daun Russell, Apius, Phoebus, and 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.

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54 Burnley, *Chaucer's Language*, pp. 116–27. The doctrine of the mean is explicitly mentioned in the *Legend of Good Women* F 165–6, *Troilus and Criseyde* 1.687–9, and *Boece* IV pr. 7, 100.

55 James Flynn's outline in "The Art of Telling and the Prudence of Interpreting the *Tale of Melibee* and its Contexts," *Medieval Perspectives* 7 (1992), pp. 53–63, is helpful for setting out the "sequential protocol" recommended by Prudence. He offers a corrective to those readings which attempt to reduce the tale to parody.

Not all the examples are equal (an important qualification that ought to be extended to cover my own 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. There is of course a whole cluster of marginal or problematic cases (e.g., Virginius, Arveragus, and Griselda herself) to make the urgency of judgement felt. And so perhaps at last what is most 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, even if – perhaps especially because – the line dividing prudence from imprudence is sometimes very faint.

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 culture. Imaginative literature in particular becomes indispensable for testing and expanding our moral intuitions; 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. Ethical criticism and theory has in the last two decades been preoccupied with the nuances of literary expression in just this regard, urging that it provides the "thick description" that is so vital to moral education.[1] Studying exemplary rhetoric can 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 refining the moral sensibility. 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 literary theory, preoccupied as it still is with the disinterested free play of the mind rather than with decision and action. Sidney should have been the first to remind us that, classically, poetry has its end in "well-doing and not . . . well-knowing only," an eminently medieval distinction – what Gower describes as *practique* in contrast to *theorique*. This brings out the other dimension of the rhetoric that I have insisted upon in the context of the tale collections of Chaucer and Gower, referred to here as the reductive stage in reading for the moral: for besides subtilizing ideals and enlarging moral perceptions, exemplarity can be called upon to 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 modernists prefer over the nuances of a literary text. Reading for the moral is not always going to be scrupulous, comprehensive,

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1 Bernard Williams in his *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1985) develops the notion in his discussion of "thick ethical concepts." Alisdair MacIntyre asserts a now common view about 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"; *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 183. In the same vein 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"; *The Company We Keep*, p. 257. Charles Taylor similarly argues that to replace the "proceduralist" ethics of Enlightenment reason what is needed now are "qualitative distinctions" and "strong evaluations" as embodied in "story" and "history," which would allow moral agents to envisage and affirm the goods they are instructed to strive for; *Sources of the Self*, p. 97.

or speculative; tropology is not necessarily the same thing as close reading and may appear naive to scholars.

But like proverbs and other demotic forms of verbal expression, exemplary rhetoric can serve to give a much needed incentive to action. Looking back we can draw out three broad aspects of the ethics of exemplarity that go to form the basis of ethical action. 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, dependent upon narrative cases as much as normative categories. If the rhetoric desublimates abstract morality in this way, it also multiplies the grounds for moral deliberation: it is *taxonomical*. The ethics of exemplarity is in this second aspect a copious means of persuasion, for a practitioner is expected to read from cases incrementally and laterally, making inferences and drawing analogies from an array of cases in moral deliberation. Each exemplary narrative is one among others. The important role of the reader in drawing conclusions directs us to the last 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. I am conscious of the disfavor into which these key terms – rhetoric, taxonomy, reductive – have fallen as of late in literary criticism. But I hope our having become sensitized to the methods and aims of the ethics of exemplarity will help us recognize what we neglect by refusing to admit the terms and practices they stand for to change our understandings.

Looking back, if I have gone some way to subtilize "moral Gower," I have also attempted as it were to coarsen our usual impressions of "genial Chaucer." Emphasizing the reductive moment of reading and the rhetorical force of exemplary narrative, I have insisted that moral rhetoric is as indispensable to Chaucer as it is to Gower. Even Chaucerian irony is on my account not set against the use of the rhetoric so much as against those who use it badly – for instance, *entissyng of wikked ensample*. Granted, Chaucer may additionally discredit those exemplary instances and practices inherently disposed to "textuall harassment." As emphasized throughout this book, both Gower and Chaucer betray deep anxieties about moral rhetoric and its practitioners. And space permitting I might have gone on to explore the apparent irrelevance and dullness of exemplary morality in such cases as the *Nun's Priest's Tale* and *Monk's Tale*. At times reading for the moral is a kind of folly – a good point, but one too many critics have tended to belabour. Not all examples signify equally, nor are all equally significant. We sense this most strongly in the poets' engrossing problematic cases, but the very fact that these poets freely employ the *problematic* at all (e.g., rather than straightforward declarative discourse) surely suggests that they have more faith in their audience than we usually suppose. They assume a great degree of responsibility in readers that it has been the point of this book to explain. At last, Chaucer and Gower do not simply apply monitory rhetoric to tell us directly what it is good to do. Both employ the rhetoric at a higher meta-ethical register inquiring into what it is good to do with exemplary narratives, as if the critical problem were getting people to learn to use the rhetoric *better*.

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