# A READER'S RESPONSE TO THE *MAN OF LAW'S TALE*

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## PREFACE

I was first introduced to the works of Geoffrey Chaucer in an undergraduate literature class at OSU and was immediately struck by the vivid contemporaneity of his _Canterbury Tales_. The one I was assigned to discuss in class has stayed with me throughout the past two years as a prime example of Chaucer's innovative technique and continuing hold on modern readers.

Some students, however, find this tale to be boring and simplistic. They are distanced from it by flat characterization, burdensome didacticism, and an unfamiliar, classically high style. Therefore, I chose to write about the _Man of Law's Tale_ in an attempt to "save" it from anonymity among medieval literature students.

At the same time, I became aware of a fairly recent critical method that emphasizes the role of the reader in creating meaning in literary texts. Reader-response criticism and the _Man of Law's Tale_ seemed perfectly suited for each other--one with its reliance on reader as "creator" and the other with its need for the creation of a stable, acceptable meaning.

The comments of my committee indicate that my efforts were not intirely satisfactory. Nevertheless, I feel justified in my own mind that I have accomplished a

meaningful task.

In this endeavor, I would like to acknowledge Professors Randi Eldevik and Derek Pearsall, with whom I've had the good fortune to be briefly associated. Also, with the indignation proper to my character, I begrudgingly thank Ralph Buckshot, Zeke, and Jimmy for their often unwanted participation.

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# CHAPTER I

# INTRODUCTION

## The Ambiguous Nature of the *Man of Law's Tale*

Surely one of the first things almost any reader of *The Canterbury Tales* notices is the remarkable diversity of the twenty-two narratives, since many subjects and many types of characters are represented in a number of different ways. Among the stories, the *Man of Law's Tale* (*MLT*) is as conspicuous as any. In fact, in the form in which editors generally present it, the *MLT* is accentuated in a startling way, being situated in the second fragment between two of the bawdiest tales in the group and one of the most acutely comic. However, although the placement of the tale is worthy of attention, the subject matter and mode of presentation strike me as being unique. Not only my first reading, but every one since has confirmed the special characteristics of the *MLT* that mark it as one of the more intriguing tales in the collection. In this elaborately detailed account of the hapless wanderings of Constance, there exists, I think, a great deal more complexity than is generally acknowledged. Two elements in particular create this compelling story: the interaction of the reader and the narrative persona through the use of rhetorical devices

and the repetition of Constance's journeys at sea. The combination of these elements results in a peculiarly unsettling experience for the audience--one that emphasizes not only the saintliness of this woman but also her humanness, two impressions that are enhanced by certain contradictory details of the story.

She is constantly persecuted as we see her subjected to perfidy, slandered and maligned at every turn. But always a deep and almost burdensome faith keeps her, quite literally, afloat. An element of humanity, hidden by Constance's near perfection, seems unlikely under these circumstances. It is simply too difficult for us to believe a woman capable of so much devotion could convincingly represent reality. However, there are unexpected quirks in the tale that counteract this view. First, two very misleading prologues introduce a bizarre story, told in an urgent manner. The tone demands that the reader take notice of what is happening, as we are never able to escape a constant intellectual and emotional prodding by the narrator, who encourages us to view his material from differing perspectives. Second, certain details in the tale portray Constance to be as human and secular as she is saint-like. She protests her father's ordinance of her betrothal to the Sultan, welcomes her marriage bed, and chides what she believes to be Alla's hardheartedness toward herself and their child. These incidents are set against a continually moving sea that carries Constance and the reader from episode to episode. Just as we begin to pause and assess the

significance of an event, a new one develops, curiously resembling the preceding occurrence but marked by subtle twists and differences. Finally, Constance is left with only a momentary happiness and is then returned to a life much like the one she occupied at the beginning of the tale.

What the MLT offers is not, I think, a standard example of hagiography. The sea journeys, indigenous to the original story, are altered by the voice of the persona to elicit a "new" reaction, new perhaps for the medieval reader, [1] but also for the modern audience, who is able to locate significance in the tale not despite but because of the ambiguity created by the mode of presentation and the incidents of the narrative. Instead of emphasizing only the moral aspects of the story or viewing its inconsistencies as an ironic transformation of conventional religiosity, the interaction between reader and narrator allows the apparent confusion of the prologues and repetition in plot to exist harmoniously and be incorporated into a meaningful experience for the reader. Consequently, I intend to address the ambiguities of the tale as they are reflected in and synthesized by the reader's response.

## Contradictions in Criticism of the Tale

When reviewing criticism of the tale to support this idea, it becomes evident that, although scholars have recognized both Constance's saintliness and her humanity, not many believe the two exist simultaneously. There are a number of essays dealing either with the unmitigated

sententiousness of the tale or its preponderance of irony (which translates as the structural and narrative incongruities and the secular elements). Since the contradictory nature of these two camps of scholarship provides no real guidance as to how the tale should be interpreted, what is one to believe, particularly when equally convincing evidence is presented by both sides?

For example, John Yunck asserts that the story is a "homily on the virtues of complete submission to divine providence" (250). He bases this idea on Chaucer's additions to the tale as found in Nicholas Trivet's Chronicles. Yunck sees the inclusion of such details as God's control of the elements for those who trust in Him, the power of the Virgin, and specific references to Christ and Satan as supporting a primarily didactic purpose. Similarly, Paul Ruggiers views Constance as "a vessel of purity amidst the wickedness and oppressions of the world" (174). She is a literary type, made to uphold the burden of theme in the tales as a whole, which Ruggiers sees as a commentary on the alternatives available to man. In this case, the choice is to demonstrate a total faith in God. Both Michael Paull and Catherine Dunn see the story as a way of incorporating the traditional values of the medieval saint's legend into Chaucer's artistic view of the world. Dunn interprets Constance as an "early Christian saint type" (374), whom Chaucer uses to preserve the classical, non-representative artistry of the Middle Ages. Paull finds that by employing conventional hagiographic devices, the

tale illustrates, typologically, a God-ordered Christian universe. Several other critics find specific biblical parallels designed to support the religious emphasis. Anne Lancashire notes a resemblance between Constance's relationship with her son and Abraham's willingness to obey God's command. Similarly, S.L. Clark and Julian Wasserman compare elements in the tale to the themes of suffering and penitence in the stories of Job and Jonah. Thus, a substantial amount of opinion upholds the theory that Constance personifies an almost saint-like faith. For the most part, these ideas are convincing. The use of additions to Trivet or the manipulation of the saint's tale genre provide sound evidence that Chaucer's aim was to reinforce familiar religious values. However, this kind of moralizing is often a bane to modern readers who prefer the psychologically more complex tales. And, as Helen Cooper suggests, one might find that a polarity of good and evil renders Constance merely a flat character, displaying a patent lack of the humanizing characteristics we more readily identify with in the other tales (210).

So for those readers who refuse to accept a literal and simplistic interpretation, another is available, one that sees the ironic, the comic, and even the political overshadowing a religious emphasis. Shelia Delaney points out that Constance's willingness to endure hardship suggests a kind of masochism, engendered by a patristic order. Constance may be a Christian woman in a Christian setting, but her world is purposely undercut by a decidedly

irreligious attitude. Both Chauncey Wood and Alfred David also see a pernicious element, but theirs is located in the character of the Man of Law. Wood believes the tale is a deliberate satirization of the Lawyer, who is unable to grasp the significance of the heroine's misfortune. The reference to merchants in the poverty prologue, for example, emphasizes the Man of Law's materialism and error when he interprets the "attack on poverty as though it implied praise of wealth" (158). Likewise, David perceives the narrator as insensitive to the artistic and moral nature of his story; he is "misinformed, pedantic, and dogmatic" (219). Thus, the Sergeant of Law is portrayed as the "type of the wealthy bourgeois who condescends to dictate his taste to the artist" (221). As the title indicates, Morton Bloomfield's "The *Man of Law's Tale*: A Tragedy of Victimization and a Christian Comedy" suggests another line of thought. Bloomfield posits that the Lawyer's rhetorical pathos erects a barrier between the teller and the tale, relieving the tension created by Constance's continually unhappy circumstances and leaving the effect of a joyful ending. Although the Christian message of the tale is addressed here, it is handled in an unconventional way, since the presence of the comic is Bloomfield's emphasis. Three other scholars, basing their ideas on historical evidence, assert that Chaucer's intentions were far removed from preserving Christian tradition. John Gardner surmises that the Man of Law was given the tale of Constance as a reproof to Richard II. Its theme of submission relects a

"tactful criticism of some of . . . Richard's most cherished opinions" (288). To support this theory, Gardner fabricates details that have Chaucer "talking with friends during his visits to London . . . observing with increasing disappointment the growth of the king's Absolutist theory" (287). Using a similar tactic, Nevill Coghill and Christopher Tolkien, in the exhaustive introduction to their edition of the tale, insist that Chaucer included _The Seintes Legend of Cupide_ in the _MLT_'s head link, followed by the story of an admirable queen, only to appease Anne, Richard's consort. They assert she "had felt her sex insulted by _Troilus and Creseyde_ and had commanded from her Court Poet a retraction" (16). Certainly irony is evident in the idea that Chaucer might choose to pacify or criticize his patronage by means of an overtly moral tale.

After reviewing criticism that either places the _MLT_ firmly on religious ground or invests it with an ironic quality, the audience is presented with a choice. Should we read the tale strictly as a moral lesson? If so, the result might be that the story is divested of any characteristics the modern audience can readily identify with, written off as one of Chaucer's lesser works. Or should we recognize an attitude that is perhaps created only by our own twentieth-century mentality? As Derek Pearsall observes, "appropriation through irony tends to substitute one kind of simplicity for another" (246). We ironize works to extract from them the significance we think should exist. Consequently, viewing the tale as ironic is not necessarily

more satisfactory than seeing it as the literal account of a quasi-saint. Because of this lack of consensus, and my own convictions about the reader's experience of the tale, I believe the MLT is certainly open to new types of interpretation, particularly those that emphasize the relationship between the audience and the text and allow one to admit the coexistence of the contradictory elements so frequently an object of criticism in the tale.

## CHAPTER II

## A JUSTIFICATION FOR THE USE OF READER-RESPONSE

One fairly recent method of analysis has not yet been employed in the scholarship of the _Man of Law's Tale_. It is reader-response criticism, and I turn to it now as a particularly valuable tool for understanding meaning in this tale. A primary reason for my choosing reader-response is that it lends itself particularly well to the kind of scholarly creativity the _MLT_ encourages. The one relies on audience as creator and the other, with its apparent diversity of meaning, waits to be created.

Indeed, Chaucer's works and perhaps all medieval literature appear to be ripe for the application of new kinds of criticism as demonstrated by Donald Rose's recent collection of articles, _New Perspectives in Chaucer Criticism_. The impetus for this text is based on the fact that the complexity and ambiguity of much of Chaucer's poetry are far from being resolved in the minds of most readers. His work has not lost its appeal despite the increasingly large barriers of time, language, and even subject matter. In fact, H.R. Jauss in his often-cited "The Alterity and Modernity of Medieval Literature" addresses the issue of the "otherness" created by these barriers and

explains how our position as modern readers, rather than being a detriment, affords us the possibility of meaningful interpretation.

A second reason for using reader-response is that it allows ambiguity exist as a meaningful part of the reading experience. Stanley Fish, in his influential "Interpreting the Variorum," examines the problem of the contradictory nature of a text, in this case Milton's twentieth sonnet. Here, two scholars using precisely the same evidence have drawn vastly dissimilar conclusions. Fish's point is that the kind of criticism which extracts meaning only from the formal features of a work demands that the reader choose sides, agreeing with the person who has constructed the most logical or complete argument, but not necessarily the most appropriate one. What one can do to solve this dilemma is focus on the "structure" of his experience rather than on a description of any element in the work. That is, the responsibility of determining meaning is placed upon the reader's encounter with in the text, not simply upon the text itself. This same idea is true, I think, of the Man of Law's Tale. The combination of the secular and the religious appears to force the audience to select one interpretation or the other because the formal features of the narrative voice and repetition of the sea journeys do not easily let the two be reconciled. However, if one can absolve these features of the sole responsibility for meaning and examine instead how they collaborate with the reader's experience of them, one can perhaps gain a new

perspective on the tale that reasonably accounts for its apparent incongruity.

Before continuing with an analysis of the MLT, I think it important to discuss current ideas on the interaction between the reader and the text. A brief review illustrates that reader-response is contradictory to New Criticism, and to understand the practice of reader-oriented analysis a sort of "portrait" of the modern reader is in order--one that explains how it is the audience can base interpretation on the structure of experience rather than on the formal elements of the text. Although it is perhaps erroneous to imply that any such "ideal reader" exists, at the same time, one should be aware of the techniques characterizing the reader-text relationship.

Wolfgang Iser's phenomenological brand of criticism describes the reading act as an intermingling of present, past, and future. Surprise at what is presently before us, frustration in light of what we have previously digested, and expectation of what will happen later in the text (tempered both by what we are reading and what we have read) arouse something that is absent in the work itself "which consists just of sentences, statements, information, etc." (278). This process is described as a sort of closing up of the space created between and among the words on the page as they form events in the mind of the reader. In this way, Iser claims, the "gestalt" of the text is created. And as this new configuration of meaning meaning develops, so does some aspect of the reader. We are allowed the "possibility

that we may formulate ourselves and so discover what had previously seemed to elude our consciousness" (294). That is, we locate significance in a coequal intermingling with the work, creating both it and ourselves, entities that cannot be identified without the participation of the other. This theory has particular relevance to my method of interpreting the Man of Law's Tale, especially when considering the sea journeys. The repetition of that event is clearly open to Iser's theory of surprise, expectation, and frustration, as I will demonstrate.

A second type of response criticism is equally crucial to analyzing the MLT. Here, I return to Stanley Fish in another context as he defines more explicitly the principles that underlie his reaction to Milton's sonnet. When the position of words combines with our experience of them in time, an occurrence results. The text is "no longer an object, a thing-in-itself, but an event, something that happens to, and with the participation of the reader" ("Affective" 26). This technique is convincingly demonstrated in Suprised by Sin when Fish recreates the learning process the reader experiences in Paradise Lost. A pattern of temptation-recognition of sin-correction is set up and the audience imitates this movement as they grasp the significance of the text. Indeed, the movement itself, taking place during the act of reading, determines significance. Fish bases this conclusion on the specific arrangement of words. For example, a scene describing the size of Satan's spear yields two contradictory lengths:

overwhelmingly large ('equal to the tallest pine') or 'but a wand'. The three lines in which the description of the staff appears are devoted mostly to describing an immense object; however, the last phrase, whose verb completes the subject stated three lines earlier, finally tells us the staff is not large at all. Fish asserts that the narrator has encouraged the reader to believe first one thing and then, at the final moment, has contradicted that belief. Such a pattern informs the reader's experience as well as the meaning of the poem. If the syntax were different, and the verb completed the subject immediately, the experience, and thus the meaning itself, would be altered.

This theory has affinities with the classical rhetorical device which exercises the ability "to persuade through the emotions aroused by figures and images" (Payne 45). As Aristotle conceives it, rhetoric aims to create that persuasion through a premeditated pattern of words, one that is designed to achieve a specific effect while the reader perceives it. Hence, Fish's analysis of word arrangement in Paradise Lost, though not based strictly on catalogued rhetorical devices, amounts, in principle, to the same thing as the classical notion that polysyndeton conveys flow and continuity of experience because the words are arranged to facilitate that response in the reader. Fish's equation of effect and meaning allows the use of rhetorical device in the MLT to play an important role in determining the meaning of the tale. The apostrophe, for example, is not simply an auxiliary or superficial technique designed to

illustrate the personality of the Lawyer because his profession implies familiarity with rhetoric. Instead, it is employed to effect the reader in a certain way. Thus, although rhetorical devices can be defined as concrete, observable features, I hope to show they are also an intrinsic part of the reader's linear experience of the tale.

However, it is important to note that Fish's final position on response criticism actually overturns the notion of the significance of word arrangement. As he states "a bad (because spatial) model [i.e., formalism] had supressed what was really happening, but by my own declared principles, the notion 'really happening' is just one more interpretation" ("Interpreting" 450). Fish concludes that a true response analysis does not deal with line endings or syntactical arrangement. Those things exist only as marks and symbols in the text, and we view them as we do simply because of previous associations with what they represent. Our interpretation is not the final word, but we are an interpretation ourselves, based on the system of values to which we subscribe and from which we cannot escape--our "interpretive community," as Fish calls it. We would like to make ourselves arbiters of truth and believe an epic simile, for example, exists somewhere as a Platonic form, but the evaluative strategies readers are composed of, not some pre-ordained truth, tell them what reality is.

Obviously, the issue of uncertain meaning surfaces here, a problem I think every response critic must address

before attempting a reading. There are several solutions, however, that offer varying degrees of satisfaction,[2] and I will discuss one designed especially as a counterclaim to Fish's indeterminacy, while at the same time justifying the use of reader-response. Kathleen McCormick's "Psychological Realism" accounts for the possibility of the reader's creation of valid meaning by turning to a theory of general cognition. She posits that the vocabulary of James Gibson's hypothesis on perceptual ability, influenced by pragmatism and phenomenology, translates over to the study of literature. Three key terms are used here: invariants--objects that remain the same (i.e., texts); affordances--the meaning an invariable holds for an individual in a given context; and attunement--the ability of a perceiver "through education of attention" (45) to grasp affordances. These principles determine the structure of a response in everyday situations by virtue of their position in a given context. For example, one encounters water (an invariant), which for human beings affords washing and drinking. For fish (no pun intended), however, water affords respiration, but not for humans because we are not so "attuned." The relationship of these principles to literary analysis is fairly clear. The text remains the same, only it affords different meanings for different readers, according to their attunement. Thus both similarity and disparity of response are accounted for. Consequently, a particular linguistic expression creates a structure McCormick calls "intersubjectively verifiable," which does not mean that readers will agree on the meaning

of this structure, only that they will agree on its existence. While Fish believes that criticism goes on as before, but without a text, McCormick asserts that reader-response continues as a valid process of locating meaning in an identifiable object. The importance of McCormick's conclusion is obvious. The reader/critic now has a more tangible means of supporting a claim and without that assurance it is difficult to continue, no matter how convincing an argument might be.

# CHAPTER III

## THE NARRATOR AND HIS NARRATIVE

I have mentioned several times the important part the narrative persona plays in the MLT. I base that idea not only on my own experience of the tale, but also on the fact that desciptions of the narrator's interaction with the audience figure into some of the earliest response-oriented criticism. The main objective of these ideas is to establish an undeniable relationship between the persona and the audience for the purpose of arriving at the meaning of a text. In this process, several labels have been attached to readers: Walker Gibson's "mock reader," Gerald Prince's "narratee," and Wayne Booth's "implied reader." All three of these are constructs whose identity comes from the role they have been asked to play by the persona. Certain features of a work mold that identity. Gibson, for example, notes a "skillful control of tone" that establishes the narrator's stance and invites the reader to be taken into confidence. Prince asserts that the reader/narratee receives an identity from qualities assigned to him by the narrator. One assumes a playful, or sympathetic, or angry attitude, perhaps even a combination of the three, if the narrator cues the reader into these characteristics. Booth suggests that, according to the rhetoric of a given work,

the audience relies on the persona to create their identity. The reader must agree to "subordinate . . . mind and heart to the book" (Rhetoric of Fiction 38) in order to acquire the sensibility that will insure a successful reading.

At this point, the emphasis is on the narrator, and the reader appears to be a creature subject to the persona's whims. However, all three critics do acknowledge the reciprocality of the relationship. The reader is free at any time to reject the stance offered to him, because of a lack of "skillful tone" or perhaps because the identity the persona offers is, in Booth's words, "infinitely unstable" (Rhetoric of Irony 240) and the reader is unable to locate his role. Whatever the reason, rejection obviously means the task of the narrator cannot be completed. Thus, the reader is manipulator as well as manipulated. The relevance of these theories to the MLT is apparent in the sense that we must develop an awareness for the position the teller of the tale is subtly urging us to assume. In so doing, we are better able to calculate how, and if, the structure of the work approximates our experience of it.

A useful way of approaching the narrator-reader relationship in the MLT is through a precept of classical rhetoric. As Aristotle remarks, rhetorical persuasion or demonstration depends first "on the personal character of the speaker" and second "on putting the audience in a certain frame of mind" (1356a). Thus, one of the first tactics available to the reader is an assessment of the narrator's "personality" and how it affects the audience. By

gathering details, a sort of resume evolves that helps one recognize the image of the persona and, by extension, the image of himself. The initial act of reading creates this construct; therefore, a synoptic type of analysis examining the narrator's characteristics as the reader encounters them in the tale is in order.

The prologue of the MLT begins ostensibly with "the words of the Hoost to the Compaingnye," but literally with a careful calculation of the time of day, which is a prelude to the Host's attempt to rouse the company's ambitions by ominously warning them of the pitfalls of "ydelnesse." The Man of Law is then addressed directly as the Host extracts from him his promise to tell a tale. The prologue concludes with the Lawyer's answer, a rather lengthy discourse on the predicaments of finding a suitable topic and not being outdone by a poet named Chaucer, and, finally, the reader is left with the notion that the story to follow will be in prose about a virtuous woman. However, a second prologue appears, taken from Pope Innocent III's De Contemptu Mundi and written in rhyme royal. Initially, the speaker is not explicitly identified, since the prologue begins with a resounding apostrophe, "O hateful harm, condicion of poverte / With thurst, with coold, with hunger so confounded!" (l. 98-99). But when the verses conclude with another apostrophe to "riche merchauntz," who not only quite admirably escape indigence but also provide the speaker with the material for his story, it is apparent the Man of Law is talking. Then begins the tale proper, written also in rhyme

royal. At this point, the reader has been confused in three ways. First, the long list of Chaucer's previous works and the banter in reference to tales of incest (supposed by some to be a gibe at the moral John Gower) set a slightly insolent tone. Second, the last words of the Lawyer indicate that he will "speke in prose" and the following lines, "with that word he, with a sobre cheere/ Bigan his tale," imply that the story will immediately commence. Third, the interceding poverty prologue, which is obviously not the tale and is not in prose, subverts the apparent meaning of the De Contemptu Mundi by suggesting that poverty is indeed hateful and to be rich is much superior.

How should the reader respond to these discrepancies? Before the tale has even begun the narrator seems to have discredited himself. Part of the problem here is common to many medieval works whose manuscripts exist in fragments. As a solution, Charles Owen asserts that the Tale of Melibee was originally intended for the Man of Law since the Melibee is written in prose and specifically involves the "philosophie" and "terms queinte of lawe" mentioned in the MLT's epilogue. Also, Owen suggests that the tale was at one time meant to be first in the collection. His reasoning is based on the fact that the first prologue includes an intricate calculation of the date, a catalogue of the author's work, and the Man of Law's difficulty in finding a tale to tell (26-27).

These ideas account in part for the inconsistencies the reader finds, but no other placement of the tale has been

found in any manuscript (Cooper 121). Thus, many scholars believe that the two prologues do have a direct bearing on the story of Constance and on the character of the Lawyer. One group concludes that the Man of Law is indeed a likely candidate for the tale. His use of rhetorical devices, legal terms, trial, and judgment support this idea.[3] Others also claim the tale is well-suited to the Lawyer, but only because Chaucer intended to satirize him according to the portrait in the General Prologue, as well as the dialogue that takes place in the head link and the mangling of the poverty theme.[4] Derek Pearsall, however, has the last and most convincing word when he asserts that, except under the most foolproof circumstances, one cannot make assumptions about the suitability of the teller to the tale. In this case, particularly, the fragment appears too "imperfectly revised" (259) to pin such a great weight as the intentions of the author on the two prologues. Yet, one cannot deny, whatever the author's original meaning might have been (an idea that may be unfathomable under any circumstances), that the contradictory nature of the two prologues creates frustration and unease. The teller may or may not be fit for this story, but the introductory material indicates that he is seemingly very unreliable, since our expectations have been frustrated several times already, and it is not hard to imagine they will be again. Accordingly, the role created by the persona thus far is one that prepares the reader for varying possibilities.

Entering the tale itself, the first thing we encounter

is a story that has been filtered down from the merchant of the second prologue to the Man of Law and from him to the Canterbury pilgrims. As with any tale told and retold, one automatically expects emendations, and in light of the reader's experience of the prologues, these additions or deletions could easily take the form of contradictory details. The persona assures us, however, that he will repeat as he heard it the observation of the Syrian merchants, who occupy the beginning of the tale. He grants them credence by emphasizing their familiarity with Rome and with the reputation of Constance, which he relates not in his own words but in a chorus-like rendition of "the commune voys of every man" (l.155). We are then reassured that "this voys was sooth," as much, in fact, "as God is trewe" (l.169). The narrator seems to be establishing here both a sound basis for his tale and, in the process, his own credibility. Throughout the story he intervenes to remind the reader he is not embellishing or misconstruing the facts as they were presented to him. For example, concerning these "chapmen," he tells us, "I can sey yow namoore" (l.175), implying that he is unaware of their fate and unwilling to improvise since the details are not germane to his story. Soon thereafter he states that men should take notice of their destiny according to the stars. But this idea is not his own: "it is writen" for "whoso koude it rede" (l.195), and he supports himself by listing famous men who should have observed this advice. Thus, the burden of proof is not laid upon the narrator, but is there for all to

see. This objectivity continues in the remainder of the tale. When the Sultan and Constance's father set their bargain, money changes hands, but "certein gold, I noot what quantitee" (1.242). The narrator is not privy to the amount and doesn't attempt to fool us by guessing or even estimating. Again, when Constance lands in Northumberland, it is at a castle the persona admits he cannot name. The justification for these brief but realistic observations is summed up in lines 701-2:

> Ne list nat of the chaf, ne of the stree,
> Maken so long a tale as of the corn.

This narrator, apparently aware of the limitations of his memory and abilities, refuses to distort or add superfluous detail.

However, we also hear the persona's voice much of the time in apostrophe, which creates an effect entirely different from the objective interjections: For example, "O firste moevying, cruel firmament" (1.259); "O sowdenesse, roote of iniquitee" (1.358); "O sodeyn wo, that evere art successor/ to worldly blisse" (1.421-422); "O queenes, lyvynge in prosperitee . . . haveth som routhe on hire adversitee!" (1.652, 654) are only a few of the many apostrophes used. All these lines either plead or denounce, and they indicate the narrator is as bound up in his story as he is removed from it. In these passages, he seems to have something at stake and this kind of move indicates a magnified focus on Constance that transfers deliberately from narrator to reader by means of the use of apostrophe.

Thus, at the same time he denies knowing the full details of a given circumstance, certainly a means of distancing himself, he also appears to be fully caught up in the destiny of Constance, almost as if his fate is tied to that of his heroine. The urgency of this voice demands our attention and is equally as obvious as the previously mentioned lack of specific knowledge.

Two diverse attitudes are created here--one that separates the narrator from his material, objectifying his stance, and one that pulls him into the story, showing he is deeply involved. These differences in tone establish a pattern for the reader, a tugging back and forth between intellectual distancing and emotional involvement.

If we return to the theory of narrator/reader interaction, the question here is whether the audience is able to accept this role. I think the answer to that question depends upon how willing one is to recognize that a pattern exists and that it is responsible for structuring the reader's response. As I mentioned earlier, many critics see only the religious or pathetic elements of the tale; others see only the ironic, and there is very little room for a reconciliation of the two. But reading to discover what occurs between audience and teller, rather than to locate objective elements in the tale, results in an ability to make ambiguity permissable. Weaving together the threads of objectivity and deep involvement, the narrator allows the audience to participate in a unique way. We are not given the security of hearing a predictable and dependable

narrative voice, but are constantly being motivating us create a balance between for the continual exchange between a magnified and a distanced focus. By virtue of this kind of goading, the experience of the tale becomes as immediate and real to us as it apparently is to the persona, who approaches the narrative with these diverse storytelling tactics.

One way to emphasize the uniqueness of the process the reader undergoes in the MLT is by comparing it to another, quite similar tale. I choose the Clerk's Tale here because of all the members of the virtuous women group (according to Pearsall, the MLT, Clerk's Tale, and Physician's Tale 244), it has several obvious affinities with the MLT. Both are concerned with religious women who rely on a power outside themselves, and both women are wrongly persecuted for reasons beyond their control. Also the two tales are written in rhyme royal. [5] Consider, then, the opening descriptions of Constance and Griselda, designed to give the audience their first impression of the protagonists:

> 'In hire is heigh beautee withoute pride,
> yowthe withoute grenehede or folye;
> To alle hire werkes vertu is hir gyde;
> Humblesse hath slayn in hire al tirannye;
> she is mirour of alle curteisye;
> Hir herte is verray chambre of hoolynesse;
> Hir hande, ministre of fredam for almesse.'
> MLT (1.162-68)

> But for to speke of vertuous beautee,
> Thanne was she oon the faireste under sonne.
> For poureliche yfostred up was she,
> No likerous lust was thurgh hire herte yronne.
> Well ofter of the welle than of the tonne
> She drank, and for she wolde vertu plese

She knew well labour but noon ydel ese.
Clerk's Tale (1.211-17)

Both describe the heroines of the stories, yet the reader is able to see the characters quite differently despite similarities in their unconditional goodness and long-suffering natures. In the MLT, the nouns describing Constance's goodness come first, followed by their virtual opposites and rendered in the stately isocolon--"heigh beautee without pride," " yowthe without grenehede." Hyperbole emphasizes her desirable traits, and its repetition creates a fitting description of this daughter of a Roman emperor. But Griselda, "pourelich yfostred up was she," "no likerous lust was thurgh hire herte yronne," and "she knew well labour but noon ydel ese." Here the opposite reaction is achieved when the words denoting hardship appear first. A more somber picture is created to describe this peasant girl, simply because of the initial placement of "poureliche," "likerous lust," and "labour." The two women resemble each other closely, and the narrator has chosen to express their characters with similar comparisons, but arranged in different ways that are compatible with their stations in life. There is a method at work that serves an identifiable purpose. In this case, a decorum is created that fits the respective situations of these characters and at the same time sets a tone defining how the narrator views his subject and, thus, how the reader should respond.

There are other elements at work in the two tales that point out their differences in attitude. For example,

compare the endings, where husbands and wives are reunited and each narrator's perception of the resolution of his tale is evident:

> Who kan the pitous joye tellen al
> betwixe hem thre, syn they been thus ymette?
> But of my tale make an ende I shal;
> The day goth faste, I wol no lenger lette.
> This glade folk to dyner they hem sette;
> In joye and blisse at mete I lete hem dwelle
> A thousand foold wel moore than I kan telle.
> MLT (1.1114-20)

> Thus hath this pitous day a blisful ende,
> For every man and womman dooth his myght
> This day in murthe and revel to dispende
> Til on the welkne shoon the sterres lyght.
> For moore solempne in every mannes syght
> This feste was, and gretter of costage,
> Than was the revel of hire mariage.
> Clerk's Tale (1.1121-27)

Here, the question is not so much one of how these lines fit the characters or the subject matter. Instead, the difference lies in the involvement of the teller and how he presents his material. In the MLT we experience that familiar rhetorical question, pulling the reader in and forcing him to participate. Immediately, then, we meet with *occupatio*, the most visible sign of the presence of the persona, which lets us know who is in control. In the Clerk's Tale, almost identical action takes place, but it is conveyed in the noncommittal third person and there is no arrangement of words that startles the reader or calls attention to itself. By the end of the MLT the narrator is still involved in his story in the same paradoxical way--drawing himself in with the rhetorical question and then

removing himself in the remainder of the stanza. But the teller of the Clerk's Tale preserves throughout the same grave and staid tone, indicating a very different sort of participation with his tale and reader than the narrator of the MLT. These two tales could very easily have been treated identically because of their inherent similarities, but the genre apparently allows for such diversity and enables the two narrators to approach their subjects in rhetorical ways that indicate what the reader's experience will be.

Assuming, then, that the MLT does have a uniqueness of approach and that it serves the purpose of establishing the structure of the reader's experience, I would like to examine two passages that convincingly illustrate the pattern the audience is urged to imitate. One scene in particular demonstrates this pattern. Constance has been wrongfully convicted of the murder of Hermengyld and is being led to her death. The narrator speaks to the audience directly:

> Have ye nat seyn somtyme a pale face
> Among a prees, of him that hath be lad
> Toward his deeth, wher as hym gat no grace,
> And swich a colour in his face hath had,
> Men myghte knowe his face that was bistad
> Amonges alle the faces in that route?
> So stant Custance, and looketh hire aboute.
> (1.645-51)

Here the use of second person rivets one to the scene at hand and, in addition, the rhetorical question encourages intimacy between speaker and audience. Consequently, the

reader is urged to participate in the narrator's sympathy for Constance. But at the same time as the audience is reminded of her innocence, that haunting "pale face" affirms one's own sin of condemnation by participation. We are both led into the scene, by actively sympathizing, and removed from it as a distanced observer. This jarring effect is what the narrator encourages as we at once condemn (idly watching "hym that hath be lad toward his deeth") and are condemned ("so stant Custance" as the reader is involved in her situation).

Although it can be argued that the selection of such features as the rhetorical question constitutes a formalist reading, I think it is plausible to assert that the issue here is not so much that a given strategy has an effect on the reader. Instead, these devices become a part of the audience's experience, enabling them to identify the speaker and thus establish a relationship that helps define the mutual dependance of the reading act. The arrangement of words (rhetorical question or apostrophe) facilitates that linear experience suggested by Fish and reaffirms the theories of Gibson, Prince and Booth: our movement in time through a text allows as to imitate the patterns that establish meaning, and we are willing to do so because the narrator has encouraged us in a way unique to that particular work.

Another scene that demonstrates this technique takes place when Constance addresses her child and begs for mercy for him.

> 'O litel child, alas, what is thy gilt,
> That nevere wroghtest synne as yet, pardee?
> Why wil thyn harde fader han thee spilt?
> O mercy, deere constable,' quod she,
> 'As lat my litel child dwelle heer with thee;
> And if thou darst nat saven hym, for blame,
> Yet kys hym ones in his fadres name.'
> (1.855-61)

In this instance, the reader is already aware that Constance is wrongfully persecuted, though she herself is not. But more than dramatic irony is at work when we are so forcefully pulled into this pitiful situation. One is left not only with the superior knowledge of the true circumstances of her banishment, but also with the empathy that has been continually fostered by the teller of the tale (as demonstrated in the preceding scene, for example). When these elements coincide, the reader finds himself, so to speak, in two places at once. Again we are defined first as an observer, an eavesdropper on Constance's plea, and our previous knowledge of the incident--the fact that we are aware of the details of her betrayal by Donegild--affords us a point of view removed from Constance's. At the same time, however, we are made to feel as helpless as she not only because of the inherent wrongfulness of what is taking place, but also because we have built up an empathy with her based on the narrator's method of presentation--his selection of humanizing, personal details such as lulling the child and covering its eyes, which precedes the quoted scene. Something has been given the reader--a priveleged vantage point outside the precarious world of Constance--and then has been taken away as we find ourselves as much a part

of that world as the protagonist, helplessly lamenting the fate of an innocent child. So again we detect that same paradoxical advance and retreat, not only as it is displayed in the persona's method of storytelling, but also as we perceive it in our experience of certain incidents in the tale.

## CHAPTER IV

## THE MOVEMENT OF THE SEA JOURNEYS

Perhaps the most powerful indication of the movement from objectivity to involvement is found in the motif of the sea journeys. Five times Constance is set out to sea: when she goes to meet the Sultan; when she is cast out by the Sultan's wicked mother and arrives in Northumbria; when she is condemned by Donegild, lights briefly in another heathen land, and then continues on to her home; and when she returns with Alla to England and at last goes back to Rome again after his death. One obvious question here is whether these voyages are used so frequently because they symbolize some inherent order or meaning of life. In one sense, they reflect the pilgrimage that ties all the stories together, but that trip is, of course, by land, not sea. Another possibility is suggested by Margaret Schlauch, who explores the use of folkloric motifs in the tale, where exile appears as an important theme, but the sea journeys are not recognized as a part of this tradition. However, Catherine Dunn, examining the relationship of the story to the saint's tale genre, does express what I think the journeys exemplify: "the interior life of the soul is projected into a pattern of external symbols that is a metaphorical counterpart of the abstract reality under

study." (368-69). Although Dunn's words are in reference to hagiography in general, they succinctly identify what I take to be the significance of the journeys as the reader is able to respond to them. The sea passages become outward representations of Constance's internal struggle and the audience follows her drifting movement, punctuated by her running aground. However, only through the interaction of the reader and the narrator can this movement be perceived. In the continual pull between objectivity and involvement, we apprehend the literal maneuvers between land and sea. As we urge ourselves to assign meaning to this unsettling activity, we find that through the narrator's direction and our acceptance and involvement with that direction the imitation of the literal experience becomes the meaning of the text. Thus, Constance's plight takes on a significance that is characterized by complexity and ambiguity (not simply Christian values or ironic transformation). In this unarticulated (but experienced) complexity lies our understanding of the protagonist's condition. Examining the circumstances of the journeys helps define the motion she undergoes and establishes the pattern of the reader's experience. The visual image reflects our experience; we see (read), as well as feel (experience).

The first, fourth, and fifth voyages construct a frame for the tale. In the first, Constance embarks on a journey that has a purpose, not in the rudderless ship she occupies later. Through foreshadowing, the reader is aware this trip will result in disaster--"the day is comen of hir

departynge / I seye the woful day fatal is come" (260-61). But the narrator focuses also on the intent of the voyage: Constance's leaving home, her impending marriage to the Sultan, and his conversion to Christianity. Thus, we know this passage marks a beginning of great consequence. The last two journeys which, for practical purposes, can be considered as one, leave Constance where she began, husbandless and under the protection of her father once again. Except for the emotional and spiritual distress of the intervening trips, her life is altered very little. Altogether, these three mark a logically constructed beginning and conclusion.

It is the two remaining journeys then that make up the heart of the story, and here the reader affects the movement of the narrative. Before continuing, it is helpful to return to Iser's and Fish's theories of expectation tempered by frustration in an attempt to explain how the audience perceives the repetition if this event. Discussing "anticipation and retrospection," Iser claims that as reading occurs the mind is at work, "filling in gaps," reconstructing details that the text suggests but doesn't explicitly state. As this activity takes place, the imagination forms a set of expectations, and they are carried over into the next portion of the text (part, stanza, chapter, etc.), at which point these expectations are either fulfilled or frustrated. Fish's idea is similar except his process is more deliberate, based on movement from line to line or even word to word, and he gives credit

not so much to the imagination as to a reader's literary or (ultimately) social context. One important aspect of both these concepts is that frustration is as desirable as fulfillment. Since one is not necessarily more satisfactory than the other, discovering frustration in the repetition of the sea journeys does not hinder the the reader's experience of the tale.[6]

Beginning with the events leading up to Constance's departure from Syria, the reader is not totally prepared for the outcome of the second voyage. First, we are aware the Sultaness has planned a treacherous wedding feast and assume Constance will be punished with the rest: "For though his wyf be cristned never so white / She shal have nede to wasshe awey the rede" (1.355-56). When she is spared, it seems contrary to the Sultaness's motives since the narrator has established her as a foul and wicked woman, "roote of iniquitee /. . . o serpent under femynynytee" (1.358, 360). Also somewhat confusing is the aftermath of the bloody spectacle, when "oonly dame Custance allone" (1.431) remains. She was the cause of the massacre, but she has been saved, merely put in a "ship al steereless" (1.439) to find her way back to Rome. And, oddly enough, the boat is filled with an abundance of food, clothing, and even "a certain tresor" (1.442). On the surface, these details appear contradictory to what one would expect of the Sultaness. Her punishment of Constance seems slight in comparison to the fate she assigned her son. However, the narrator, in a moving passage, confirms the aloneness and

forsaken quality of this voyage:

> Yeres and dayes fleet this creature . . .
> On many a sory meel now may she bayte;
> After her deeth ful often she wayte,
> Er that the wilde wawes wol her dryve
> Unto the place there she shall arryve.
> (1.463-69)

First, one is confounded by the expectation that Constance will be punished with the rest (not deservedly, but because it fits the situation). But now something of the horror of her experience is conveyed, emphasized by the connotations of "creature" and "wilde wawes." [7] One begins to recognize that it is perhaps a fate worse than death to be cast out, desolate, alone, and rudderless, sacrificed to an oblivious, uncaring Nature. Somewhat abruptly, then, the tone has changed, and with it the reader's attitude, as we are literally no longer on the firm ground of knowing what to expect next.

At that point, the narrator enters into a series of biblical comparisons, likening Constance's circumstances to Daniel, Jonah, St. Maria Egyptiaca, and the story from Matthew of Christ's provision of the loaves and fishes. These allusions, contained in four stanzas, each beginning aggressively with a rhetorical question, seem to serve the purpose of solacing the reader, assuaging the feeling of doubt created earlier and reassuring us that Constance will prevail. Immediately thereafter, her ship is washed ashore, "in the sond . . . sticked so faste / That thennes wold it nought of al a tyde; / The wyl of Crist was that she shold

abyde" (1.509-11). Consequently, the reader is relieved to find that this fitful journey is ended.

Now a new sequence of events begins that has some affinities with Constance's mission in Syria, except many rich particulars have been added to engage the reader more deeply and thus pave the way for the movement of the third passage. For example, Northumbria is still a heathen land, so Constance again acts as an agent of Christ as she did in Syria. But in this episode when she is taken in by the constable, the details of his and Hermengyld's conversion and their relationship with Constance effectively provide a way for the reader to become more immersed in the story. A soothing intimacy is encouraged as we are seduced by the lilting language in "bright was the sonne as in that someres day" (1.554) when "Custance han ytake the righte wey / Toward the see a furlong wey or two / To pleyen and to romen to and fro" (556-58). A lapse into this carefree, harmless attitude momentarily diverts the audience's attention away from the preceding harassment and allows warmth and familiarity to take its place. Similarly, the healing of the blind man and the constable's acceptance of Christianity that follow this stanza allow the reader to see Constance in her rightful domain, and a sense of security prevails, without the influence of malevolent detail that obviously existed in the encounter with the Sultan.

Other outward correspondences to the mission in Syria are the betrothal of Constance to another king and her betrayal by a second evil mother-in-law. However, these

incidents are vastly altered, as well. Again, the narrative supports the reader's increased involvement by adding details about the compassion of Alla for Constance's plight, his conversion to Christianity, their wedding feast, and the consummation of their marriage. Also, a more detailed account of Donegild's subterfuge is revealed. Thus, a sort of incremental repetition takes place. The same basic story line is used, but additions have been made that alter the reader's perspective by introducing new material, which fully chracterizes the participants.

At the same time, however, one cannot ignore the implausibility of certain other incidents taking place this interlude between the second and third journeys. The sight restored to the blind man and the treachery and subsequent punishment of the young knight are two examples that strike many modern readers as patently absurd. It is true, I think, that superficially these passages yield an unsatisfactory response, but examining the narrator's method of presentation affords them another context. Both are designed to show the special qualities of Constance, and they do so not in the fretful manner of the rhetorical question, but in a strangely calm and controlled voice. At this point, the persona could easily exploit his story, but he has chosen to withhold comment as well as to express himself in an unemphatic way. There are no interruptions by the narrator, and the language is almost bland (in reference to the blind man "Custance made hire boold, and bad hire wirche / The wyl of Crist" [1.566-67]) in comparison with

the surrounding material (Constance's prayers for intervention, "If I be giltlees of this felonye, / My sucour be, for ellis I shal dye!" [1.643-44], or the murder of Hermengyld, for example, "this constable . . . / saugh his wyf despitously yslayn, / For which ful oft he weep and wroong his hand. / And in the bed the blody knyf he fond" [1.603, 605-6] ). Both these scenes are faithful to Trivet's work, but the mode of presentation here is fitting to this narrator's purpose of downplaying his involvement and letting the reader judge these actions for himself. Thus, a kind of parallelism of rise and fall is created between these and the more expressive and intimate scenes in this section of the tale.

Finally, we arrive at the third journey. Constance has been ousted and once more put out to sea, "in the same ship as he hire fond/ Hire and hir yonge sone, and al hir geere" (1.799-800). "Vitailled was the ship . . . / Habundantly for hire ful longe space, and othere necessaries that sholde nede / She hadde ynogh" (1.869-71); "Fyve yeer and moore, as liked Cristes sonde/ Er that hir ship approched unto the lande" (1.902-3). An immediate reaction is to throw up one's hands in despair at the recognition of the similarities between this situation and the previous journey, not taking into consideration that a new context has been developed here. Acknowledging only the formal elements of plot, one can say that his expectations have been fulfilled in the sense that this scenario is a familiar one. But we end by being frustrated since this repetition,

rather than gratifiying our artistic expectations of originality, incurs monotony.

However, this frustration exists as a part of the experience of the reading act. We are indeed baffled by the repetition of this unwarranted punishment, particularly in light of the new context of intimacy that has evolved in the interim passages. Accordingly, this reiteration of the sea journey takes on a more serious meaning. The similarity between the two voyages is, at first, frightening rather than familiar. Constance's son accompanies her this time and, as I demonstrated earlier, the narrator has evoked a strong sympathy for their situation, which reinforces the sense of disappointment and despair at this second, undeserved trial of Constance's faith. These emotions are undergirded by the speech and actions the persona assigns to Constance: her eloquent prayer to the Virgin

> Now lady bright, to whom alle woful cryen,
> Thow glorie of wommanhede, thou faire may,
> Thow haven of refut, brighte sterre of day,
> Rewe on my child, that of thy gentillesse,
> Rewest on every reweful in distress.
> (1.850-54)

and her proud and graceful descent to the ship

> "Farewell, housbonde routhelees!"
> And up she rist, and walketh doun the stronde
> Toward the ship--hir folweth al the prees
> And evere she preyeth hir childe to hold his pees;
> And taketh hir leve, and with an hooly entente
> She blissed hire, and into ship she wente.
> (1.863-68)

But in keeping with the movement from objectivity to

involvement, the narrator turns next to Alla's reaction when he discovers the treachery of his jealous mother. At this point, Donegild's execution provides a break in the third journey and allays somewhat the uncertainty of Constance's present situation.

Thus when, in the next passage, she overcomes the lustful steward, a sense of relief prevails. Constance's prayers to the Virgin have been answered and again the narrator affirms her strength by alluding to the biblical victories of David over Goliath and Judith over Holofernes. As the providence of God rescues Constance, so the persona uses these details to preserve our experience of dependence on an outside force; Constance has been saved along with the reader's sense of security. Though this third journey is much like the second one, we are allowed to see it in a new way, not as just a reconstruction of similar details that lead nowhere and add no depth. Instead we can view it as a more magnified focus on the vicissitudes of life that carry Constance (and the reader) from one event to another. The familiarity of the plot reinforces, rather than hinders, the reader's perception of the sameness of experience. So, in a sense, frustration is created, but it serves the purpose not of distracting the audience or undermining the text of its authority, but of encouraging, as Iser states, the creativity that is necessary for satisfaction.

In the next three stanzas justice is served again when we find that Constance's father has sought retribution in Syria for the Sultaness's misdeeds. On the way back, the

emperor's envoy discovers Constance and Maurice and takes them to Rome. In the remaining two-hundred lines of the tale when Constance is reunited with Alla through a series of coincidences, the reader is convinced that the tale will end happily. However, here we are presented with the final frustration of expectation that creates discontent and underscores the significance of the tale.

First, Constance refuses to tell the senator (who is also her uncle) of her true identity. Second, Alla's arrival in Rome, his recognition of Maurice and discovery of Constance, although these are traditional narrative motifs, seem somewhat contrived. However, it is not so much these improbabilities of plot (which the narrator could justify if he so desired) as the persona's interjections at several points, distancing him from the events taking place, that cause the conclusion of the tale to seem forced. For example, he appears to want to cut the story short when he includes lines like "if I shortly tellen shal and playn" (1.990), "I may not tellen every circumstance/ Be as be may, there was he at the leeste" (1.1011-12), "I pray yow alle my labour to relesse/ I may nat tellen hir wo until tomorwe/ I am so wery for to speke of sorwe" (1.1069-71). The context of these lines should, at last, grant Constance peace and happiness, but the narrator's attitude implies a certain lack of conviction and commitment, undercutting the joy of the conclusion, and thus causing the reader to waver between satisfaction and frustration.

Accordingly, when Alla dies and Constance returns to

her father's house to live out her life "in vertu and in hooly almus-dede" (l.1156), we find that, in a sense, all her trial and struggle have been for nothing. She exists much as she did at the beginning of the tale, unable to gain even the worldly happiness she deserves and that a modern sensibility desires for her. This fact the narrator is willing to affirm when he tells us "Joye of this world, for tyme wil nat abyde / Fro day to nyght it changeth as the tyde" (l.1133-34), and again in the next stanza, "I ne seye but for this ende this sentence / That litel while in joye or in plesance / lasteth the blisse of Alla with Custance" (l.1139-41).

Here, the whole experience of the tale's pull between objective, intellectual observation and emotional involvement is mirrored. Just as we are not guaranteed the ability to stand outside the events of the tale, neither are we allowed always to be sympathetic believers. Similarly, Constance is at once saved by God and yet denied the worldly happiness that her previous tragedy and unfailing faith indicate she deserves. The redemption of her character, and of the tale in the mind of the reader, rests on the idea that her final position displays the synthesis of this experience: a recognizable (though somewhat uneasy) balance between the secular, human will and the religious belief in divine providence.

## CHAPTER V

## CONCLUSION

The result of this reading, then, is the discovery that the ambiguities of the tale can be incorporated into its meaning. We are not bound to see a preponderance of either the religious or the ironic because the formal features of the text are no longer required to dictate those interpretations. Other possibilities exist and, in the case of the *Man of Law's Tale*, the narrator's method of presentation as well as the incidents of the narrative itself allow the modern reader to discover an important aspect of the tale. As the dialectic between distance and involvement is constructed, one is able to use this thesis and antithesis to reach a higher level of meaning.

I repeat Catherine Dunn's idea that "external symbols" are a "metaphorical counterpart to abstract reality," as a way of describing the significance of what takes place on the page and in the reader's mind. We see Constance, finally, as caught between this world and another and are even able to cognitively experience that situation through the voice of the persona and the arrangement of events, as a sort of reification of her story occurs.

Obviously, I have been concerned with this tale as a separate entity from the rest of *The Canterbury Tales*; I

agree with Pearsall, who is particularly adamant about the autonomy of the tales as individual works of poetry. To me, the fascination of the stories, and particulary the Man of Law's Tale, lies in their ability to create a new context, one not requiring support from the frame or from the other tales. However, I do believe the MLT contributes to the overall merit of The Canterbury Tales and is not the secondary work some consider it to be. William Johnson, in fact, sees its purpose as "dramatizing the implicit . . . but widening conflict between unquestioning belief and existential doubt" (205). This idea gives credence to the MLT's ability to add significance to the whole collection and, at the same time, reflects somewhat my own experience of the tale's pull between intellect and emotion. In light of this, as far as the MLT's contribution to the religious group is concerned, surely Constance can be seen as an expansion of the character of the virtuous woman, revealing another dimension of her experience in and with the world.

The success of my interpretation depends, however, on response criticism and a recognition of the interaction between reader and text. Surely one cannot deny the power of his own reading experience, a phenomenon that has often been discredited by other kinds of analysis. Indeed, "power" is the key to reader-response. As Jane Tompkins remarks, the heart of this kind of criticism lies in its belief in the "perception of language as a form of power" (226). Its influence is one we can justifiably use to bring "sentence and solas" to the act of reading.

# NOTES

1 As Edmund Reiss in "Chaucer and Medieval Irony" remarks, the audience contemporary to the MLT was probably as put off by the illogicalities and contradictions of the tale as we are. However, he believes the medieval reader was being urged to witness "a demonstration of wit taking place" (72).

2 Walter Benn Michaels, Iser, and Robert Crosman offer important opinions about the indeterminacy inherent in reader-response theory. Each one represents a varying degree of how accurately similarity of meaning can be calculated. Crosman, for example, altogether eschews agreement among readers and authors, except perhaps by coincidence. Meaning is based solely on individuality--"our own mental contexts . . . . This being so, it follows that a poem really means whatever any reader seriously believes it to mean" (154). Iser takes a middle ground, claiming that "one text is potentially capable of several different realizations . . . for each reader will fill in gaps in his own way" (279). However, the audience is guided by the structure and linguistic possibilities of a work. Not just any signification is acceptable. Michaels occupies a more radical position. He believes that objectivity does not exist, but neither is the reader free to make subjective

interpretations because he proves, by overturning the Neo-Cartesian idea of the separteness of the self and reality, that the individual is himself an interpretation which cannot be escaped.

3 These studies are, for the most part, early and are concerned primarily with historical evidence about medieval lawyers: Edgar Knowlton's "Chaucer's Man of Law," Bernard Duffey's "The Intention and Art of the MLT," Marie Hamilton's "The Dramatic Suitability of the MLT," and R.M. Lumiansky's "Of Sundry Folk: The Dramatic Principle in The Canterbury Tales."

4 One of the first of these is Wood, who claims the Man of Law's view is primarily a legal one and he is oblivious to the moral and religious aspects of the story. David notes the Lawyer is a deficient literary who does not properly see the artistic value of his tale. Robert Lewis ("Chaucer's Artistic Use of Pope Innocent III's De Miseria Humane Conditions in the Man of Law's Prologue and Tale") detects several flaws in the details of the story that bring into question the crediblity of the Man of Law.

5 Both Cooper and Ruggiers notice the similarities of the two tales. Their main emphasis lies on the restraint of the Clerk's Tale as opposed to the emotionalism of the MLT.

6 Iser addresses this issue indirectly, "A literary text must . . . be conceived in such a way that it will engage the reader's imagination in working things out for himself, for reading is only a pleasure when it is active and creative" (280), implying that a challenging experience (i.e.,

frustration) is a rewarding one. Fish's approach in Suprised by Sin is more direct when he asserts that frustration does not hamper the reader, but encourages him to become more involved.

7 According to the OED, during the fourteenth-century "creature" referred to "anything created; a product of creative action, often as distinct from man" (1158). "Wilde" denoted "a place or region uncultivated or uninhabited; hence. waste, desert, desolate" (121).

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