

SIMPLE SIGNS
FROM EVERYDAY LIFE
IN CHAUCER

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Perhaps it would be helpful at the outset if I explained my title or "theme," somewhat in the fashion of a good medieval preacher, although I have never, in spite of my reputation, sought to rival a good preacher. The title, "Simple Signs from Everyday Life in Chaucer," falls into three parts: "Signs," "Everyday Life," and "Chaucer," which I shall discuss in that order, including under "Chaucer" some brief observations about the poet, his audience, and his work. I regret that I do not have time for more *exempla*, since these, as any good preacher knows, are more entertaining than anything else. But to begin with the word *sign*, I should like to say at the outset that I do not care much for disputes about terminology, which strike me as being pedantic. However, I think that Chaucerians should use as much medieval terminology as possible, recognizing the fact that medieval authors except for scholastic theologians tended to use terms rather loosely. But modern terms tend to carry with them connotations in a universe of discourse alien to that of the Middle Ages. The term *sign* has the advantage of being current in the Middle Ages and being very loose at the same time, allowing me considerable freedom, since a *sign* is simply something that signifies something else. *Signs*, as Saint Augustine tells us,¹ may be either words or things, or even actions, some of which are literal and some of which are figurative. The word *iconography*, borrowed from art history, implies the identification of objects represented, or the study of literal signs, whereas *iconology*, borrowed from the same discipline, is concerned with meanings.² Many persons, myself included, use *iconography* to mean both, a simple and convenient stratagem. The word *symbol* has the disadvantage of bearing connotations in modern art and literature consistent with an expressionistic style, so that it can sometimes be misleading when used in connection with styles different from expressionism, and I think that C. S. Lewis was wrong in adducing such symbols in the Middle Ages.³ Finally,

although medieval writers used the terms *types* and *antitypes*, the word *typology* is late and not generally current in the Middle Ages. As I have sought to show elsewhere,⁴ the juxtaposition of types and antitypes in accordance with what was called *allegoria* in scriptural exposition usually implied a moral or "tropological" meaning, so that the mere juxtaposition of Old and New Testament events or even fictional or current events with scriptural events carried out for its own sake, without further implication, was not a common medieval practice, in spite of some observations in a recent book.⁵ Altogether the word *sign* thus has distinct advantages, although I have no wish to be pedantic about this, nor to condemn anyone for using the other terms mentioned, especially since I have used all of them myself.

A sign, like a word, may mean one thing to one individual and something else to another, for no two of us have exactly the same experience. But members of a given culture often employ figurative signs that mean roughly the same things to many other individuals in that culture, although a sign may have a more profound or more emotionally charged meaning to some than to others, depending on differences in experience, education, and intelligence; and there may be some who fail to perceive some figurative signs, or who take them literally.⁶ "Meanings" do not exist in words, events, or things, but in the individuals who perceive them, where they have a certain regularity because of custom. Since people are constantly changing, both within generations and from one generation to the next, "meanings" change constantly. It is also true that the meaning of a sign may be very different from that of its referent. For example, the printed word *tiger*, even burning brightly in the forests of the night, does not alarm me, but an actual untethered tiger in my vicinity would suggest immediate evasive action. Similarly, a broiled lobster on a plate before me might produce one kind of meaning if I were hungry and quite another meaning if I had just eaten three of them. To put this in another way, the universe of discourse is made up of arbitrary signs, and these are not identical with the universe itself. Both shift with time and circumstance. The study of signs is thus difficult and poses many problems.

In recent years many scholars have become occupied with the study of figurative signs. Not all of them, incidentally, are "Robertsonians," since such studies, especially in the visual arts,⁷ long antedate my own efforts, and students of Renaissance literature, some of whom have never heard of me, now sometimes pursue the subject with avidity. Signs from scriptural texts and their commentaries, from classical texts and their commentaries, or from mythographic writers, from astrology, from music, from early medieval texts, like the *Psychomachia* of Prudentius, from texts widely used in schools, like the *De nuptiis* of Martianus Capella, or the *De planctu Naturae* of Alanus, from popular vernacular texts like the *Roman de*

la Rose, and from representational conventions in the visual arts, including the drama, have all been studied, and their presence traced in Chaucer's poetry. There is still a great deal of this sort of thing to be done. In many instances we do not understand earlier texts very well, and in others we lack readily available primary sources since many commentaries both on the Scriptures and on the classics remain unpublished, and others, especially from the late Middle Ages, have been lost. Moreover, much evidence from the visual arts has been destroyed by religious or rationalist zeal, or simply by the ravages of time. We are thus often forced to adduce traditions rather than sources, but in any event it is necessary to exercise extreme care to become familiar with available primary sources and to avoid speculation as much as possible. Rosalie Green of the Index of Christian Art has recently issued a very stern warning concerning undisciplined iconological studies,⁸ and it would not be difficult to compile a long list of highly dubious interpretations of figurative signs in Chaucer studies, some of them ostensibly relying on primary materials.

Turning now to my second topic, "Everyday Life," I should like to assert first of all that this was Chaucer's primary concern and that he hoped that his work would be beneficial in a practical way. But this hope was probably tempered somewhat by a realization that passionate zeal is not productive and involves an undesirable submission to Fortune. That is, for the most part he seems to have taken his own advice in "Truth":

Tempest thee noght al croked to redresse,
In trust of hir that turteth as a bal.

He did not usually employ figurative signs and other forms of indirect language for merely decorative or what we might call "literary" purposes, but to comment, frequently in a humorous way, on the mores of his own time. Throughout the Middle Ages, but especially after the middle of the twelfth century, figurative devices of all kinds, combined with other devices like specious argument and irony,⁹ were often used for humorous moral comment. Since we cannot hear Chaucer reading, we probably miss a great deal of his humor, especially various kinds of ironic intonation. However, we can probably rely on the advice of Bon-compagno of Signa quoted by John F. Benton: "Irony is the unadorned and gentle use of words to convey disdain and ridicule. If he who expresses irony may be seen, the intention of the speaker may be understood through his gestures. In the absence of the speaker, manifest evil and impure belief indict the subject. . . . It is nothing but vituperation to commend the evil deeds of someone through their opposite, or to relate them wittily."¹⁰ To the modern mind a basic moral stance and humor, like Ovid's majesty and love, do not readily go together; but in the Middle Ages even scriptural materials could be used humorously since

they afforded a background of rationality or "pure belief" that could be used to comment on ludicrous speech or behavior,¹¹ a fact that has misled certain staid and serious readers of more recent times to invent such things as "the religion of courtly love," or to find "pagan values" (whatever they are) in medieval texts presented before reasonably orthodox audiences. Where Chaucer is concerned, the monitory raised finger and the prayer beads in the Hoccleve portrait, combined with his early reputation as a "philosopher," are probably sufficient indications of the basic attitude we should expect from him.

Chaucer's moral comment, although based on certain Christian principles that are not difficult to recover, even though literary scholars are sometimes reluctant to pursue their implications, was directed toward specific fourteenth-century English problems, and I think that it is time we paid more attention to these problems. Chaucer did not write "for all humanity," or "for all time," but for a specific audience that had immediate everyday concerns. The indirection he employed lent his comments a certain incisiveness, making them more entertaining and hence more effective than the more direct criticisms of his friend Gower. The evidence of the visual arts, music, and literature itself, not to mention overt statements by writers like Boccaccio and Petrarch, suggest strongly that sophisticated medieval audiences were not, like modern audiences, passive, awaiting technical operations on their feelings and vicarious thrills, but active and alert, perceiving the activities of the poet before them (who was often beneath them in rank) with a certain detachment, and demanding that he supply substantial food for thought in a diverting manner. I think that we often fail to realize the rather curious effects of mass culture in modern times and to discount those effects when we study earlier literature. The earlier attitude is well described by Erasmus, who wrote in a letter to a friend, "Horace thought that advice given jocularly had no less effect than that given seriously. 'What forbids,' he exclaims, 'that anyone speak the truth with a smile?' This fact has not been overlooked by the wisest men of antiquity who have preferred to express the most salutary principles of conduct in the form of laughable and childish fables, because the truth, a little austere in itself, adorned with the attraction of pleasure penetrates more easily into the minds of mortals." Erasmus goes on to cite Saint Augustine's *De doctrina Christiana* for the appearance of similar principles in the Scriptures.¹² Chaucer was thus fulfilling an ancient tradition when he read his *Tales* with a certain subtle indirection. But he also had in mind the immediate interests of his audience.

Much of Chaucer's figurative language was readily available, however, in "everyday" sources and was not in itself very obscure. The visual arts offer some fairly simple examples. Thus the significance of the Marriage at Cana, the implications of which are so blatantly disregarded by the

Wife of Bath, were explained in part in an inscription on a stained glass window at Canterbury,¹³ a "gat-tothed" wife appears in an illustration for the *Roman de la Rose*,¹⁴ cloistered monks leaving their cloisters to signify inconstancy appear in Gothic statuary,¹⁵ wrestlers were used in marginalia to signify discord,¹⁶ and so on. Since Chaucer was once appointed Clerk of the King's Works, an office that involved the maintenance of royal buildings and their decorations as well as the arrangement of pageantry, we can assume that he was familiar with a wide variety of representations in the visual arts. But it is also possible to find figurative signs in everyday sources that are neither "literary," exegetical, nor visually representative. For example, the pilgrimage of the spirit, now often adduced in connection with the larger thematic structure of *The Canterbury Tales*, appears vividly represented in an early fourteenth-century legal document, a charter written for the foundation of a chapel, which begins as follows: "How many and how great are the tempests of the inner man, the foes of peace, wherein the exile of this world abounds, experience, the effective revealer of doubts, daily makes manifest. I, therefore, Roger de Martivallis, archdeacon of Leycestre, and lord of Nouesle, wishing, with the Lord's consent, to make ready for myself in the desert of this world, a straight path, whereby under the guidance of divine grace, amid the powers of darkness, I may more easily be able to come to that place where I may deserve after toil to receive the wages of true recompense . . ." and so on concerning the chapel first planned by Roger's father, Sir Anketin de Martivallis, knight.¹⁷

Here are the storms of the inner man that Chaucer urges us to calm in "Truth" by avoiding trust in Fortune, the "exile" of Boethius at the beginning of the *Consolation*, the desert or "wilderness" of this world in Chaucer's *House of Fame*, elaborately and competently explained by B. G. Koonce,¹⁸ and reflected in other ways as the realm of the Fox in the Nun's Priest's Tale or as the "wilderness" that is no home in "Truth," the straight path that is the alternative of the "croked wey" recommended by the Old Man in the Pardoner's Tale, and, finally, the movement toward the Celestial Jerusalem that the Parson urges us to follow through penance at the close of *The Canterbury Tales*. I call attention to these things simply to indicate that a great deal of material we so laboriously seek out in learned and literary sources is actually a part of the everyday language of the time, at least among the literate. Chaucer was not always obscure to his contemporaries when he is obscure to us. Meanwhile, I think we should also notice that the archdeacon refers to experience as the revealer of those tempests that disturb the inner man and destroy his peace. Within the terms of their own means of describing human nature medieval people were very practical, and we do them a disservice when we substitute our own "psychological" terminology for theirs. Not only is

the practicality of that terminology rather dubious, but it is out of context in their very different society.¹⁹

Turning now to the third division of my theme I should like to discuss Chaucer, his audience, and his work, and, finally, to illustrate the importance of simple signs from everyday life to our understanding of what he wrote. First of all, it is now clear that Chaucer was a gentleman and, as the positions he held reveal, something of a clerk, and not, as is frequently said, a "bourgeois," except in the sense that he lived for a long period in London, which might be called a "bourg."²⁰ He was also a "court man" who served the king and certain members of the royal family in a variety of ways. He was a royal squire and not a knight, probably because he was insufficiently wealthy or unwilling, for many persons sought to avoid knighthood and its obligations. He was thought sufficiently distinguished to be named on peace commissions, but this fact does not indicate that he ever actually sat as a Justice, and there is no record that he ever received any pay for that office, although it is true that Justices of the Peace often served without payment. He served once in Parliament, although this was not a great distinction, and frequently on government commissions, often for the Chamber, with which he seems to have been closely associated. He was Controller of the Customs in London, an office that brought him in close contact with the Exchequer, and he held the important office of Clerk of the King's Works for a reasonable period. His son, Thomas, also a squire, received numerous grants from John of Gaunt and the king, and in the year of his father's death became sheriff of Oxfordshire and Berkshire. He married the daughter of a knight, and his daughter, Alice, was married in succession to two earls.

Chaucer's audience, as Derek Pearsall has recently suggested, probably consisted of "household knights and officials, career diplomats and civil servants," men like "Clifford, Clanvowe, Scogan, Hoccleve, Usk, Gower, Strode."²¹ This rather miscellaneous list could easily be expanded to include chamber knights like William Neville, who was Clanvowe's close friend, Peter Courtenay, Richard Stury, Philip la Vache, William Beauchamp, and John Montagu, who became Earl of Salisbury in 1397. We know something about some of these men, and since, as I suggested earlier, meanings exist in people rather than in words, it should be helpful to Chaucerians to learn all they can about them. For Chaucer was a successful poet whose skills as an entertainer probably account for the respect paid him by both supporters of Richard II and supporters of Henry IV. It would be absurd to attribute attitudes to Chaucer that would have been either offensive or incomprehensible to his audience. In the first place, a number of these men were lords of manors, thoroughly familiar both with problems of manorial administration and with the rapid changes in manorial economy and society in

many areas after the first outbreak of the Black Death. They had considerable experience with yeomen, reeves, millers, plowmen, dairy maids, franklins, and poor cottagers like the widow in the *Friar's Tale* or *Griselda* before her marriage. They knew knights and merchants in variety, sergeants at law, both royal and ordinary, physicians, clothiers like the *Wife of Bath*, clerks, and a wide variety of ecclesiastics. Some had seen extensive military service, and a number had obvious literary or cultural interests. Gower was a successful poet in three languages; *Clanvowe* was the author of a graceful Chaucerian poem and of a stern moral treatise; *Usk*, secretary to London's controversial reforming mayor, *John of Northampton*, wrote a Boethian treatise on love; and *Montagu* was praised for his verse (which does not survive) by *Christine de Pisan*. *Strode* was not only a distinguished Oxford logician but probably also the author of a poem, now lost. He undoubtedly appreciated keenly the amusingly specious arguments advanced by some of Chaucer's characters. *Stury* owned a copy of the *Roman de la Rose*; *Beauchamp* had a university education; and there were probably a number of well-educated clerks and ecclesiastics in the audience.

Some of these men were keenly interested in social and ecclesiastical reform, and, in fact, have been accused, falsely I think, except for a temporary lapse on the part of *Usk*, of being Lollards.²² Let me consider some examples.²³ *Sir Lewis Clifford*, after an early military career, was made squire of the Black Prince in 1364 with an annuity of £40, increased to a hundred marks in 1368 and to £100 when he was knighted. I might observe in passing that the Black Prince was on the whole an efficient and charitable administrator of his landed estates.²⁴ *Clifford* fought in Spain in 1367, in France in 1377, and in Brittany in 1378. *John of Gaunt*, who led this last unsuccessful venture, made him one of his executors. Between 1370 and 1372 he married *Eleanor*, daughter of *John, Lord Mowbray of Axholme* and *Joan of Lancaster*. Their daughter later married *Philip la Vache*. *Clifford* was made Knight of the Garter in 1377 and became a royal knight in 1381. *Joan of Kent* granted him custody of *Cardigan Castle* in 1378. He served her faithfully until her death and was made one of her executors. In about 1385 or a little later he joined the Order of the Passion founded by *Philippe de Mézières*, who had been chancellor to the famous crusading leader *Peter of Lusignan* and who, in his later years, dedicated himself to the moral reform of European chivalry and the establishment of peace between France and England, preferably through a royal marriage, for which *Sir Lewis* conducted negotiations between 1391 and 1396, after 1392 as a member of the Royal Council. Literary scholars will remember *Philippe* as the author of the liturgical drama, "Figurative Representation of the Presentation of the Virgin Mary in the Temple."²⁵ *Clifford* befriended *Eustache Deschamps* during a mission to France in 1385 and 1386, and brought

back with him that author's little poem in praise of Chaucer. He and Stury were among the executors of the Duchess of York, who left him, in 1392, her book of Vices and Virtues. This has been a very brief sketch, but enough to show that Clifford was among the most trusted and reliable members of the court, a distinguished knight in the field in his youth and a wise and discreet counsellor in his maturity, sufficiently pious to be deeply interested in the Order of the Passion and rigorous enough in his views to be branded with the unsavory epithet "Lollard."

Among his friends were Sir John Clanvowe and Sir William Neville. Clanvowe had begun his career as a knight bachelor serving under Humphrey de Bohun V of Hereford between 1363 and the earl's death in 1373. During this period he fought under Sir John Chandos, who was one of the great exemplars of English chivalry, wise as well as worthy. Together with Neville, Stury, and Philip la Vache he commanded a group of 120 men during Gaunt's Breton campaign of 1378. The king made him a knight of the Chamber in 1382. Like Clifford, he was one of the executors of Joan of Kent, who seems to have gathered around her a group of men interested in reform. When England seemed certain to be invaded by the French in 1386, he and Neville went to Essex and Sussex to prepare defenses. In his later years he served on the Council. On 17 October 1391 he died near Constantinople. He and Neville had participated in a crusade in Tunisia during the previous year. Neville, who was with him in his last days, died of grief two days later.

Neville was a Chamber knight after 1381, and served on the Council. His later reputation for "Lollardry" stems from the fact that he sought the custody of the heretic Nicholas Hereford at his castle of Nottingham "because of the honesty of his person." Others apparently agreed with this estimate, however, for Nicholas recanted and became, during 1395-96, Chancellor of St. Paul's Cathedral. We may remember that Cecily Champain's release of Chaucer for all claims of rape or other actions against him filed before Bishop Sudbury in the Chancery was witnessed not only by William Beauchamp, the royal Chamberlain, but by Clanvowe and Neville as well. Considering the character of these witnesses, we can be fairly sure that Cecily had no real claims.²⁶

The most distinguished members of Chaucer's audience were probably men like these. Perhaps we should occasionally ask ourselves rather simple questions like the following: What would Clanvowe have thought of Neville if, while arranging the defenses of the southern coast in 1386, he had become infatuated with a widow simply by looking at her, had shown immediate suicidal tendencies, had forgotten his obligations to the kingdom, and had feared nothing except the possible reluctance of the lady? Those who think that Troilus is an admirable character should recall that Englishmen regarded themselves as inhabitants of New Troy²⁷ and that their realm was in serious danger of foreign invasion at

the time Chaucer completed his poem. French incursions on the south coast had caused unrest for many years and had given rise to serious doubts about English chivalry, concerning which Peter de la Mare complained bitterly in Parliament in 1377, alleging that chivalry and other virtues were being neglected in favor of vice. It has even been suggested that a failure to defend the coast properly was one of the causes of the revolt of 1381.²⁸ The idea that Chaucer's audience could have regarded Troilus with any real sympathy borders on the absurd; it is most probable that the character was intended as an exemplary warning to the men of New Troy. Certainly, no one in Chaucer's audience would have sought to excuse Troilus on the ground that he was a "courtly lover." There is absolutely no evidence to show that either Chaucer or any member of his audience had ever heard of "courtly love"; and we might say exactly the same thing about "psychological realism." The figurative signs in the poem, insofar as we can identify them, its classical mythography, its scriptural and doctrinal echoes, and its reflections of Boethian philosophy all suggest that Troilus is an example to be avoided. And the historical circumstances under which the poem was written strongly reinforce this impression. Chaucer's good reputation both as a man and as a literary craftsman was probably not achieved by sentimental or "sophisticated" endorsements of human weakness. Rather, he could be counted upon to ridicule foolishness with good-natured philosophical detachment wherever it might appear in his society, although, except for Harry Bailey and perhaps Hodge of Ware,²⁹ he generally refrained from attacking individuals.

And this observation brings me to *The Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer's technique of portraiture in the General Prologue reflects a medieval tendency to identify individuals in terms of attributes. That is, for example, we identify Saint Peter as he stands among other saints in sculpture or illumination by the fact that he carries keys; we can recognize Saint Paul as a miller grinding the grain of the Old Law to produce the flour of the New; John the Baptist is dressed in the garments of the wilderness; and so on. Similar techniques had been used by both Ovid and Prudentius, and by their imitators. We can observe a similar tendency in everyday life. Thus a bailiff attending a manorial court might be fined for not carrying his rod, the attribute of his office, or a hayward for not carrying his horn.³⁰ Trespassers placed in the stocks were often adorned with objects to show the nature of their crimes, a whetstone being placed around the neck of a slanderer or a liar, for example, to show that he was like the deceitful "sharp razor" of Psalm 51.³¹ Or a trespasser might be paraded through the streets, like the false physician, who, it is said, in 1382 rode backward through London carrying not only a whetstone but two urinals, fore and aft.³² There is a strong element of humor in these punishments, for trespassers were thought to find the ridicule of the

community discouraging. A number of the characters in the Prologue and the subsequent Tales are, legally speaking, trespassers; others are guilty of extremely dubious practices. Are their portraits literal and "realistic," or does Chaucer gather together his little collections of attributes to create figures very like grotesques? Are the characters actually "typical"? The same questions apply to many of the figures in the Tales, especially since the Tales often elaborate the significance of the attributes mentioned in the Prologue, serving, in effect, as additional attributes of the speakers.

There is only one way in which we can reasonably answer these questions, and that is by a careful study of everyday life in the later fourteenth century. Before illustrating this point, however, I should like to discuss briefly Chaucer's technique. At the beginning of the Prologue to the Tales he says that he will tell us who his characters were, indicate their "degree" in society, and describe their "array," a subject that includes their horses and their trappings. In practice, he includes direct observations about virtues or vices, significant attributes of complexion or physiognomy, significant actions, like the Miller's wrestling, and observations about what the various figures love. The "ideal" characters—the Knight, the Clerk, the Parson, and the Plowman—love intangibles, whereas the others love more tangible goods, ranging from little dogs and fancy dress to lands, robes, expensive foods, jolly wenches, and money. Chaucer is especially hard on figures who pretend to higher station or greater wisdom than they actually have. Thus his Sergeant of the Law, who seems wise, apparently knows all the cases since the Conquest and all the statutes by heart, a manifest impossibility, which means that he pompously refers to nonexistent authorities. Similarly, the list of authorities known to the Physician probably indicates simply that he overawed his patients with what sounded like authoritative citations in connection with his ministrations. Henry Fielding was by no means the first author to discover that vanity and hypocrisy are excellent sources of the ridiculous. It is true that Chaucer assumes a good-natured and self-effacing attitude, and does not hesitate to make fun of himself as he does, for example, in the Prologue to *Sir Thopas* or in his dream visions, a fact that has, I think, misled some readers into sentimentalizing or "humanizing" his characters and to oversimplifying the idea that he presents himself as a naive persona. The group for which Chaucer probably wrote was a tightly knit community in which everyone knew everyone else, and in which, as we have seen, many were above Chaucer in degree. They were thoroughly familiar with the poet's actual attitudes, so that remarks like the mild comment on the Monk's desire to abandon his cloister, "I seyde his opinion was good," are actually examples of antiphrasis, or explicit irony, reinforced in this instance by the subsequent comments, including, "How shal the world be served?" But

this is more than antiphrasis, or saying the opposite of what is meant; it probably provoked laughter from Chaucer's friends. If instead Chaucer had made a directly pejorative comment he would have sounded much more like his friend moral Gower, and his audience might well have been bored rather than amused. The criticism of inconstant monks was still there, and Chaucer's humor does not either temper it or diminish it in any way; if anything, it makes it more incisive. Our bold lover of fat swans, as well as of other kinds of flesh, riding on an ostentatiously decorated horse, represents an increasingly common kind of monastic weakness in the later fourteenth century. One historian has observed that after 1350 the relaxation of the Benedictine Rule in matters of occupation and diet had become common, so that many monks liked luxurious dress, kept greyhounds, and were frequently outside the cloister.³³ But this situation represents a considerable decline from conditions earlier in the century,³⁴ largely due to economic factors that resulted in a reduction in monastic population,³⁵ and a general decline in mores. But some monks were poorly fed, not all monks were degenerate, and it would be unfair to say that Chaucer's monk is "typical." He is, rather, an exaggerated picture indicating a trend that was evident during Chaucer's lifetime and that eventually led to monastic dissolution. Here, as elsewhere, Chaucer was deeply interested in and genuinely concerned about developments that were taking place in his own society.

One other feature of Chaucer's technique is, I think, sometimes neglected. Most of the Tales, the exceptions being the Clerk's Tale, the Second Nun's Tale, the Parson's Tale, and, possibly, the Knight's Tale,³⁶ are adorned with learned allusions like those in the Wife's Prologue, reflections of doctrine, and various kinds of eloquence that would have been completely beyond actual persons in the degrees of the fictional speakers. In other words, the Tales represent Chaucer still talking to his audience about his fictional narrators, and this is also true of his more worthy characters, whom he treats with approval. I do not think that anyone in the audience would have missed this point as Chaucer stood before them, taking advantage of opportunities to imitate local dialects, as in the Reeve's Tale, or to render speeches or descriptions with humorous emphasis. The fact that both he and his audience had first-hand knowledge of the groups represented by the various characters, as well as of the pressing issues of the day, probably lent his oral delivery an effectiveness we cannot now recover. The audience knew, for example, with reference to the Miller, how dangerous contentiousness could be in local communities, and something about the steps taken to control it.³⁷ A more detailed knowledge of daily life should not only help us to understand what Chaucer was saying but also afford us some helpful clues about how he probably said it.

I should like to use one pilgrim as an example—the Wife of Bath—

who has frequently been seen as a champion of women and their rights, although it is doubtful that Chaucer's audience would have seen her in this way. Rather, like the Monk, she represents a new and distinctive feature of fourteenth-century life, again treated with humorous exaggeration. Chaucer tells us that she was a clothier or cloth-maker:

Of clooth-makyng she hadde swich an haunt,
She passed hem of Ypres and of Gaunt.

This business, in which the English had indeed begun to surpass the Low Countries, has made her very wealthy. In church, we are told with humorous exaggeration, she wears almost ten pounds of expensive coverchiefs. Kerchiefs were among a woman's most prized possessions, as we learn from their careful distribution in wills.³⁸ Her hose were made of the most expensive of all woolens, scarlet, dyed with kermes.³⁹ Pilgrimages to Jerusalem were extremely expensive, available only to the wealthy,⁴⁰ but the Wife has been three times, as well as to Boulogne, which was not very far, Cologne, St. James of Compostella, and Rome. Her "wandering by the way" confirms our suspicion that these journeys, like the present one to Canterbury, have not been undertaken with much penitential fervor. Pilgrimage was sometimes enjoined as penance for adultery,⁴¹ a fact that lends a certain irony to the Wife's peregrinations.

To return to the cloth industry,⁴² the manufacturer of woolens, as distinct from linens, worsteds, or local coarse cloth, began to flourish in the north of England in the late thirteenth century, and by the fourteenth century fulling mills and dyeing vats became common features of manors in the area. Dyeing, which required considerable skill in the mixing of dyes and the application of mordants, as well as a tolerance for strong odors, which sometimes moved communities to restrict dyers to isolated spots, was usually undertaken by men. The wool was sorted, beaten, and washed. It was then carded and spun. After spinning, warp threads were sized and wound to make them about thirty yards long, and the wool was spooled on a bobbin. After it was woven, the cloth was fullled, either by being trodden in a tub with fuller's earth by three strong men (known variously as fullers, walkers, or tuckers), or by being treated in a fulling mill operated by water power. The cloth was then tentered, or stretched to exact size on a frame to which it was attached by tenterhooks. Once dried, it was teaseled, or brushed with the dried heads of *dipsacus fullonum*, which have hooked barbs, to raise the knap. It was then sheared, a delicate process, with long flat shears before being brushed, folded, and tacked for shipment. Except for dyeing, fulling, and shearing, this work was ordinarily done by women. In the course of time, many women became masters of the trade, supervising the work of others. We should imagine the Wife of Bath as the master of a shop,

becoming wealthy through the labors of other women, employed either in the shop itself or in the countryside, dealing effectively at the same time with dyers, fullers, or shearers to whom her products were sent for processing. She was hardly a liberator of women, although some women eagerly sought higher income in industrial employment, even though it meant long hours of hard work. The prosperity of female masters, the quality of whose products was sometimes said to be questionable, caused some uneasiness among male masters of the trade, who sought to restrain their activities by guild regulations at the close of the century.

After the Black Death various industries were attracting workers from agricultural manors, bringing about a demand for hired agricultural labor that in turn created a demand for higher wages by the day.⁴³ Workers wanted not only better pay but better food, and were naturally not much interested in the closely knit organizations of the manorial communities in which they worked or in the customary laws by which they were governed. A new spirit of enterprise was abroad in the realm, a fact that has led one historian to characterize the later fourteenth century as an "age of ambition."⁴⁴ Among the growing industries the cloth industry was especially spectacular. After an interruption brought about by the Black Death it recovered in about 1353, so that between that time and 1369 exports of woolen cloths rose from less than 2,000 cloths a year to 16,000. There was a lull in the industry between 1369 and 1379, reflecting a general depression in English trade, but after that, except for another lull during the period of widespread panic and confusion resulting from threats of invasion between 1385 and 1388, the industry expanded rapidly. By the early nineties England was exporting 40,000 cloths, or half as much wool in the form of cloth as in the form of raw wool. Prosperity encouraged shady practices, however, and in 1390 clothiers from the west country, which had become the new center of the industry, became notorious for selling poorly dyed and sheared cloths, folded and tacked so that their defects were not visible. English merchants who sold them abroad were sometimes subjected to violent treatment.⁴⁵ Bristol became the chief port for the export of cloth. The Wife thus represents a new kind of wealth in a new area whose prosperity was accompanied, incidentally, by a spread of heresy.

It is not surprising that Chaucer, who admired those who loved "common profit" and who remembered the relatively tranquil, closely knit communities of his youth, should have devoted considerable attention to a clothier, and, to make his point more trenchant, chosen a female clothier for illustration. No one in the audience would have failed to recognize the Wife as a greedy exploiter of female labor who could be expected to enjoy a sense of mastery over men as well as over women. If Chaucer had been a modern realist he might well have given us a detailed picture of the cloth industry, but he was instead a medieval

moralist who could reasonably expect his audience to know a great deal about that subject. Instead, therefore, he developed the implications of the activities of the Wife and those like her, using for his purpose the theme of marriage suggested in the General Prologue and the parallel between the Wife's five husbands and the five false husbands of the unconverted Samaritan woman, who were understood to represent the senses.⁴⁶

However, as a general framework he employed a variation of another late medieval development, a practice M. M. Postan is said to have described as "the marriage fugue,"⁴⁷ which was becoming fairly common in the countryside. That is, landless young men eagerly sought out relatively wealthy widows to marry. After marriage the young men naturally awaited the demise of their wives so that they could obtain younger ones, "fressh abedde." But they often had to wait until they were themselves advanced in age before their unsatisfactory spouses died, so that when they did marry the position was reversed, and it was the women's turn to seek wealthy husbands. Women are said to have sometimes run through two or three husbands in this manner, and this is exactly what the Wife has done. In effect, like the wife in the Cook's Tale, she "swyved for her sustenance" in youth, albeit under the cover of marriage. Thus she wore out three "good" old wealthy husbands before succumbing to a young man who presented difficulties because he was unfaithful. But he too passed when she was old. Even then, she overcame her fifth wise husband, a clerk who should have known better,⁴⁸ in an amusing echo of the Fall of Man. Marriages of this kind were naturally not conducive either to domestic tranquility or to genuine sexual satisfaction, which was considered especially desirable among women (who had not yet learned any curious nineteenth-century attitudes toward the subject),⁴⁹ although, as Henry of Lancaster tells us, women of lower station were more desirable in this respect than others, being less restrained.⁵⁰ It is not surprising that the Wife displays sexual uneasiness and a keen appetite indicative of frustration.

In a general way, the Wife represents a humorous caricature of the pursuit of worldly satisfaction in defiance of traditional values that was growing in fourteenth-century society. To make the point as vividly as possible, Chaucer creates what might be called a "Babylonian" situation. To illustrate this point I might quote a passage from the most influential late medieval commentary on the *Aeneid*, describing Carthage: "In this city [Aeneas] found women ruling and Penos serving, for in the world there is such confusion that libido reigns and virtues, which we understand by Penos, strong and stern men, are suppressed; and thus the man serves and the woman rules. Thus in the divine books the world is called 'Babylon,' that is, confusion."⁵¹ The Wife, deaf to spiritual understanding, becomes a fairly obvious figure of the flesh rampant, with overtones

recalling the unconverted Samaritan, the Old Whore in the *Roman de la Rose*, Ovid's Dipsas, and the Synagogue. She neglects the sacramental implications of the Marriage at Cana, glosses the New Law with the Old, turns Saint Paul upside down by reading him "carnally," turns so-called antifeminist clichés, actually attacks directed against venereal inclinations in men, against her old husbands, and in her tale promises that those who allow the flesh, or the wife, to rule will find satisfaction for their "worldly appetite" in an essentially illusory earthly paradise.⁵² Her tale is followed by two vivid illustrations in which those "children of wrath"⁵³ the Friar and the Summoner humorously illustrate the corruption of spiritual offices for money. As we learn from the Clerk, a great many persons, failing to follow Griselda in obedience to the operation of Providence, belong to the Wife's "sect,"⁵⁴ and it is to them that we owe the confusion or "Babylon" of the world.

The basic moral ideas are, of course, not new with Chaucer. But the scriptural and doctrinal materials in the portrait of the Wife add considerably to its humor and sharpen its satiric point. She is neither a "personality," a "realistic portrait," nor a "typical example" of the female clothier. She typifies instead a new spirit of self-aggrandizement and a new kind of wealth that were disrupting traditional values cherished by Chaucer and by most of his audience, and, at the same time, destroying traditional communities based on a concern for the "common profit." Conditions in the cloth industry afforded an especially vivid illustration, but the same sort of thing was evident elsewhere, if on a smaller scale.⁵⁵ I suggest that it was this situation, not the literary portrait for its own sake, that was the focus of Chaucer's attention and the principal interest of his audience. Further, I think that unless we learn to understand the immediate relevance of Chaucer's work to the everyday life of his times, we shall run the risk not only of formulating undisciplined interpretations, but also of failing to appreciate his real craftsmanship in making what he has to say vivid and entertaining. If it is objected that everyday life is not the true subject of literary study, which should concern itself with aesthetics, I can only reply that in the humanities there may be some virtue in the study of humanity itself.