

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 4 (1988)

Artikel: Chaucer's Faire Cheyne of Love : the first model of mediation in the Canterbury Tales
Autor: Taylor, Paul Beekman
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-99868>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. [Siehe Rechtliche Hinweise.](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. [Voir Informations légales.](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. [See Legal notice.](#)

Download PDF: 05.05.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Chaucer's *Faire Cheyne of Love*: The First Model of Mediation in the Canterbury Tales

Paul Beekman Taylor

The *Canterbury Tales* begins with an account of a night in Southwark and ends with the author's leave-taking of his book. While the opening and the closure of a book are determined, the middle appears all flux, a commutative jumble of references to the road, the time, and to tales which have preceded or followed any given performance. This "triadic" structure of two poles with a commutative mean between them is conceptualized by the Knight in the first tale when he has Theseus ponder the unpredictability of the course of human events:

'The first Moevere of the cause above,
Whan he first made the faire cheyne of love
Greet was th'effect, and heigh was his entente.
Wel wiste he why, and what therof he mente;
For with that faire cheyne of love he bond
The fyr, the eyr, the water, and the lond
In certeyn boundes, that they may nat flee.
That same Prince and that Moevere,' quod he,
'Hath stablissed in this wrecched world adoun
Certeyne dayes and duracioun
To al that is engendred in this place,
Over the whiche day they may nat pace,
Al mowe they yet tho dayes wel abregge.
Ther nedeth noght noon auctoritee t' allegge,
For it is preeved by experience,
But that me list declaren my sentence.
Thanne may men by this ordre wel discernen
That thilke Moevere stable is and eterne.
Wel may men knowe, but it be a fool,
That every part dirryveth from his hool;

For nature hath nat taken his bigynnyng
 Of no partie or cantel of a thyng,
 But of a thyng that parfit is and stable,
 Descendynge so til it be corrumpable,
 And therfore, of his wise purveiaunce,
 He hath so wel beset his ordinaunce,
 That species of thynges and progressiouns
 Shullen enduren by successiouns,
 And nat eterne, withouten any lye.
 This maystow understande and seen at ye.¹

This is a pretty piece of hybrid authority — a Platonic idea in a Homeric figure, containing a Medieval Christian humanistic conception of God — which serves one immediate purpose for the duke, but quite another for the tales which follow his. I will look at a few of the salient features of this speech and their effect on the tales of the Miller, Reeve and Cook.

The universe Theseus describes here has both spatial and temporal (cosmological as well as cosmogonic) features. It is a three-fold order consisting of an eternal and unmovable God at its top, a temporal and corruptible earth at the bottom, with a *tertium quid*, usually thought of as nature, as mediant. The image of a chain which figures the verticality of this scheme has old authority behind it. Chaucer had met it in Dante, Jean de Meung, Alanus de Insulis, Bernardus Silvestris, Boethius, Macrobius, Claudian, Chalcidius, Statius and Ovid. He knew that earlier authorities cited by these authors include both Plato and Homer.²

¹ I, 2987-3016. Quotations from Chaucer follow the second edition of F.N. Robinson (London: Oxford University Press, 1974). In the Franklin's tale, Dorigen parodies Theseus's pronouncement in an accusation of disorder in God's *purveiaunce* (V, 865-92 and 981-82).

² Dante, *Inferno* XI, 55-56; *Roman de la Rose*, 16786; Alanus de Insulis, *De Planctu Naturae*, prose IV; Bernardus, *Cosmographia*, i.2.18-19, ii.10.17-18, 52-54; Boethius, *De Consolatio* II, m. 8 and III, m. 9; Macrobius, *Somnium Scipio Africanus*, I, 14, 15; Claudian, *De raptu Proserpinae* I.90-91; Chalcidius, Commentary on Plato's *Timaeus* 32c; Statius, *Thebaid* IV, 516; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* XII, 39-40; Homer, *Iliad* VIII, 19. Chaucer employs the image of the cosmic bond elsewhere, particularly in *Troilus and Criseyde* III, 1261 and 1766. For the image in English literature, see Emil Wolff, *Die Goldene Kette: Die Aurea Catena Homeri in der englischen Literatur von Chaucer bis Wordsworth* (Hamburg: Hansischer Gildenverlag, 1947) and Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966). For the medieval emanations of the figure, see Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Williard Trask (New York: Pantheon, 1953) 101-127; and C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge University Press, 1964) 53-59.

The Church of Chaucer's day had appropriated this triadic scheme to figure Heaven joined to Hell by a middle nature, later including Purgatory.³ The cosmic chain of love figures the so-called principle of plenitude, the proposition that all parts of the universe are inhabited and that each thing in the universe has its proper place, its "golden mean."⁴ Lower positions on the chain are less stable and more likely to stray from their proper place than those higher. Further, as Boethius explains in *Consolatio* II, prose 10, things descend from the One and Absolute down toward emptiness, diversity and sterility — from unity to plurality, from determinate to indeterminate order.

Theseus's design contains a temporal, or horizontal feature as well — "certeyne dayes and duracioun/To al that is engendred in this place." Triadic temporality in the Platonic tradition comprises Eternals such as God, Idea and elemental matter, all of which have neither beginning nor end; perpetual material — nature — which has a beginning but no end; and temporal works of nature — products of generation — which have both beginning and end. The philosophic source for this temporality is Aristotle's *Physics*, 2.1, but there are many diverse forms of the idea in the writings of the scholastics. The general Christian time scheme includes a "pre-creation" and a "post-judgement," joined by the history of man, often "fallen" man in particular.⁵ Man is, as Gregory put it in his *Moralia*, vi, 16, a little world in himself, with his own orders of sense and appetite. His spiritual history consists of a natural state, followed by his condition under the Old Law, and finally a present state under the New Law, or Love.

³ So, among others, William of Auvergne, *De Universo* (ca. 1240). See also Jacques Le Goff, *La naissance du purgatoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981).

⁴ Fredegisus (d. 834) had argued that *nothing* and *darkness* are something rather than the absence of something. Plato, *Timaeus* 58a-b, argues that the revolution in cosmos of the All suffers no void place to be left. Milton's God, in *Paradise Lost*, VII, 168-9, announces that "I am who fill/Infinitude, nor vacuous the space." Chaucer, in his *House of Fame* II, 753-5, has the eagle explain: ". . . every thing, by thys reson,/Hath his propre mansyon,/To which hit seketh to repaire." Gower, in the Prologue to *Confessio Amantis*, 933-66, exposes the full disposition of Nature.

⁵ The three-fold temporal divisions were best known in Chaucer's day through the *Periphyseon* of John Scotus Eriugena and the *Didascalicon* of Hugh of Saint Victor. The orthodox Church view is best summed up in Thomas's *Summa*, I, Q46 Art. 3, where Thomas points out that time is brought into being by the Creation. Milton, *Paradise Lost* V, 580-2 has eternity divisible into past, present and future.

Both vertical and horizontal orders in Theseus's design figure channels of Grace — movements toward a reconciliation with God. The vertical aspect is a bond of piety between man and his Creator. The horizontal is the history of man's progress or regression of spirit. Regression is implicit in both the classical idea of the "golden Age" and the Patristic reading of Daniel 2:19-45 — the statue whose head is gold, chest silver, abdomen brass, legs steel and feet earthen, read by Daniel as a figure of man's moral descent through successive generations. Theseus's "faire cheyne of love" figures both the cosmological hierarchy and the order of human history. It is mean, mediant, and mediator of God's creative design, his "purveiaunce."

Theseus's figure of the chain conceptualizes a design already exposed in Chaucer's own phenomenological description of spring in the opening lines of the General Prologue (I, 1-18):

Whan Aprille with his shoures soote
 The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
 And bathed every veyne in swich licour
 Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
 Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
 Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
 The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
 Hath in the Ram his halve cours yronne,
 And smale foweles maken melodye,
 That slepen al the nyght with open ye
 (So priketh hem in hir corages);
 Thanne longe folk to goon on pilgrimages,
 And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,
 To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;
 And specially from every shires ende
 Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende,
 The hooly blisful martir for to seke,
 That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke.

The only justification I have for putting such a familiar piece of poetry before my readers' eyes is to hope to make it apparent that this passage details both the vertical and the horizontal features of Theseus's chain of love. The visual descent is from rain to sunshine and then to inspiring winds, which represents a movement from water, fire and air downward

to the heaviest element earth.⁶ The four elements collaborate here in a vernal recreation of God's shaping of the world. They, therefore, incarnate his Love. The imagery of flowers, crops, birds and man follows a line of sight back upward along the ladder of being. The song of the birds — the only detail of sound in this invocation to spring — recalls the harmony of the "music of the spheres," one of the many Platonic manifestations of the divine bond.⁷ The horizontal line of sight in the passage moves from a universal "everywhere" and "alltime" to England, and then to Canterbury, at one time. The shift in verb markers in the last three lines of the passage link that one time with an unspecified number of past achievements. Since pilgrimage is a channel of grace by its office in the penitential process, it is also an emanation of the chain of love. Once Chaucer mentions the shrine of Becket at the end of pilgrimage, the moment of re-creation in the spring evocation merges with a moment of purgation in the martyr allusion, for the final couplet rime links sickness of the body with supplication for cure of the soul. When, after this passage closes, Chaucer continues with

Bifil that in that seson on a day,
In Southwerk at the Tabard as I lay
Redy to wenden on my pilgrimage. . . .

the line of sight comes to rest on one man in one place on one particular day. The opening lines of the General Prologue comprise a model for physical and spiritual renewal.

The portraits of the pilgrims which Chaucer inserts before he continues with the history of that day in Southwark fill out details of plenitude comparable to the details of spring growths, aptly expressed by

⁶ The descent of Nature is a medieval topos. Chaucer had an example close at hand in Alanus's *De Planctu* II, when the dreamer has a vision of Natura's descent from the heavens in the form of the cosmos, with crown of stars, dress of birds, shoes of flowers, undergarments of herbs and trees. Curtius, *European Literature*, 98ff., scans the topos of woman's body as universe.

⁷ For the medieval view of the seasons and of love as music, see David S. Chamberlain, "Philosophy of Music in the *Consolatio* of Boethius," *Speculum* 45 (1970), 80-97. Music is an emanation of the golden chain, a bond between the One and the Many. Henryson, in *Orpheus and Erudices* (223-5) says:

Quhilk armony, throu all this mappamound,
Quhill moving cesse, vnyt perpetuall —
Quhilk of this world, Plato, the saul can call.

Dryden as "God's plenty."⁸ One of these portraits includes a chain of love, carried by the Prioress:

Of smal coral aboute hire arm she bar
 A peire of bedes, gauded al with grene,
 And theron heng a brooch of gold ful sheene,
 On which ther was first write a crowned A
 And after *Amor vincit omnia*.

(I, 158-62)

Beads are prayers, and prayers are bonds of communication between man and God. The capital A, a mystical graph, is *Alpha* which signifies creation in Christian symbolic schemata.⁹ The inscription which follows "reads" the A as *amor*, and whether we prefer to read the word as human or as Divine love, it is the matter of the universal bond. Green and gold are colours of fecundity together in the chromatic scale of Christian iconography. The brooch as a whole, in this fictional context, worn by the head of a religious house, figures Holy Church, the bride of Christ, as well as the Virgin Mary who, as love, is a means, or vehicle of salvation. Her brooch is an emblem of pilgrimage, comparable to the vial of Thomas's blood which validates pilgrimage to Canterbury. The pendant brooch, however, carries a cluster of significant ideas which Chaucer's audience might have been expected to be sensitive to. The inscription is from Virgil's tenth *Eclogue*, whose whole line reads: *Omnia vincit Amor; et nos cedamus Amori* ("Love conquers all, and let us give ourselves to Love"). The word *Amor* with the order of its letters reversed renders *Roma*, a commonplace understanding in the Church as a linking of the Holy See with Christ's earthly mission.¹⁰ Chaucer's altering of the word order of Virgil's line points to a more recondite possibility. The three-term phrase has an initial-letter sequence AVO, an alpha to omega span whose middle term V (or U in Latin convention is a standard abbreviation for *urbs* (or *vir*?). The reverse order of the initials, Virgil's order, is OVA. Whether or not this is but a happy

⁸ *Fables Ancient and Modern*, Introduction (1700).

⁹ See E. Randolph Daniel, "The Double Procession of the Holy Spirit in Joachim of Fiore's Understanding of History," *Speculum* 55 (1980), p. 477. Joachim's three-fold hierarchy of Father, Son and Holy Ghost is figured by the hierarchy of married man, the clergy and the monks.

¹⁰ Compare the later description of the Pardoner as hot from Rome, singing "Come hider, love, to me!" (I, 671-2).

coincidence, it points to another universal structural design, the "world-egg" of neo-Platonic tradition.¹¹ Read small or large, then, the Prioress's brooch is a microcosm of the fair chain of love.¹²

The Miller's tale which follows the Knight's in all the manuscripts seizes upon Theseus's fair chain of love as a model for a number of designs. This is in keeping with the Miller's overt intent to parody or ridicule the Knight, and to do so in the Knight's own terms. For an example, when the Miller insists on taking the Monk's place in the sequence of performances, he proclaims "I kan a noble tale for the nones/With which I wol now quite the Knyghtes tale" (I, 3126-27). The adjective *noble* normally designates that which is an ideal or perfection of its kind; it is a term the Knight uses consistently to qualify Theseus (lines 873, 998, 2569, 2715 and 2975), but which is not exactly appropriate for the Miller's scatology. In his own tale, the Miller describes the heroine Alison as "ful brighter . . . than . . . the noble yforged new" (I, 3255-56). The noun *noble* is here a coin, a quaint term for a woman worn smooth by so many hands. This sort of subversive appropriation of the Knight's diction is matched by the equally subversive appropriation of the Knight's fair chain of love image. One manifestation of it is the song Nicholas is wont to sing about the carpenter's house, *Angelus ad Virginem* (I, 3216). This song of the Annunciation represents a heaven-to-earth bond depicted most often in medieval iconography by a dove descending a beam of light that links Heaven to Mary's bedroom chamber. Nicholas's song is a small part of his courtship manners, though his intents are hardly divine, and the object of his love hardly virginal, though as many readers are quick to notice, like Mary's Joseph Alison's husband is older than she is and he is a carpenter by trade. What is more obvious and more comic in its parody of the chain of love is the working model of the Knight's idea Nicholas designs and has the gullible carpenter construct so that the clerk can enjoy the sexual charms of the young wife (though his more direct approach is successful). He has the carpenter suspend three large tubs from the rafters of his roof in order to supply himself, John and the wife with both provisions and vehicles of salvation from the imminent great flood he has convinced his host of. He warns John

¹¹ For Medieval uses of the image of the World Egg, see Peter Dronke, *Fabula: Explorations into the Uses of Myth in Medieval Platonism* (Leiden: Brill, 1974) 79ff.

¹² The Monk's gold love-knot is a comparable token. Other portraits emphasize gold as a mediating substance, e.g. the Physician's preference for gold as a physic and the Canon's gold-paved road to Canterbury.

to work "that no man of oure purveiaunce spye" (I,3566), echoing the Knight's purveyance which was God's design and provision for man. Nicholas's intent is fornication, not salvation, and his working model of the Platonic figure of speech consists of a triple bond connecting the not-too-high sky of John's roof with a three-fold world of carnal love just slightly above ground level.¹³ During the portentous night, two of the tubs are voided for the greater comfort of a mundane bed, while the carpenter sleeps fast in suspension. Later, when Nicholas cries out "water!", having been burned in his *towte*, thinking the flood has arrived, John cuts his cord and plummets earthward to fall with an arm-breaking thud on the floor. Fire, water, air and earth have collaborated once more, but this time in a comic subversion of the harmony of the elements in the creative process.

The parody of the chain image does not end here. Nicholas is scalded in his arse by a rival lover, sad Absolon, who had visited Alison earlier in the evening, petitioning at the casement window for a kiss. His pleading borrows the diction of the Canticles, an annunciation of a different sort. The Canticles were read in Chaucer's day as the invitation of Christ to Holy Church into the garden of salvific embrace. Absolon's petition, however, is met by Alison's offer, in the dark, of her "nether eye" (I, 3852). The doctrinal concept of the kiss of harmony is subverted by a mistaking of target.¹⁴ The Miller's scatological comedy achieves a diabolic conclusion when Absolon, after realizing truth with a sweep of his hand across his mouth, returns, armed with a red-hot coulter (a common image for the preacher's chastising tongue). Nicholas takes Alison's place at the window, answers the second request for a kiss with a fart, receives instead the hot coulter, and cries out "water!" The fart is a counter-image of the inspiring breath of God;¹⁵ in this context it is a denial of the biblical annunciation. Channels of grace have been transformed by the Miller into a culvert of imperfect digestion.

¹³ Cf. Boethius, *De Consolatio* III, m. 9: "*Tu triplicus medium Naturae concta moventem*," which Dronke translates as "you connect the triple-natured to the centre of the universe."

¹⁴ See Nicholas J. Perella, *The Kiss Sacred and Profane* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969). Plato discusses the concept of the soul kiss in *Symposium*.

¹⁵ This constitutes a parody of the pentecostal gift of tongues, made more explicit in the Summoner's tale of the friar who tries to solve the riddle of how a fart may be divided into twelve parts.

If the chain of love in the Knight's tale serves its context as a public and universal figure of Divine purveyance, its counterpart in the Miller's tale serves a private and very local intent for personal pleasure. The Miller's "quiting" of the Knight is, in effect, an insistence on the experience that belies the standard of authority. The Reeve's tale which follows the Miller's takes as its target the horizontal implications of the Knight's vertical order. The Reeve's image of the chain idea consists of the genealogical bloodline of Holy Church, a Scriptural image expounded by Saint Paul in his reading of the passage in Genesis which justifies marriage as a replenishing of the Church (Ephesians 5:32): "Trew effect of mariage clenseth fornicacioun and replenyseth hooly chirche of good lynage" as the Parson puts it (X, 920). The miller in the Reeve's tale is married to the daughter of a parson who had intended to marry his daughter off well, since she descends from Holy Church; that is, himself!

For hooly chirches good moot been despended
On hooly chirches blood, that is descended.

(I, 3983-84)

The genealogical strain emanating from marriage is a temporal, or linear, bond of order. This particular parson's daughter, however, does not only *not* manifest the virtues of her blood, but her daughter, whose marriage-value is zealously attended by her miller-father, is reft of her virginity by a clerk whose motive is neither natural lust nor service to the common good by engendering Christians; it is vengeance for having been robbed of his flour (her flower of maidenhood for his flour of grain). When the father realizes what has happened, he cries out to the clerk Aleyn,

"Thow shalt be deed, by Goddes dignitee!
Who dorste be so boold to disparage
My doghter, that is come of swich lynage?"

(I, 4270-72)

The genealogical descent from parson to his grand-daughter (and we may hope that she is made pregnant by the seduction) is a real manifestation of Theseus's exposition of natural value "descendynge so til it be corrupable." So while the Miller's scatology plays out the verticality of the Knight's ideal design for the universe, the Reeve's comedy of disparage confirms the horizontal.

The Cook's fifty-eight line fragmentary tale which concludes the first fragment of the *Canterbury Tales* does not appear to address the image of the fair chain of love directly, but its final couplet alludes to both vertical and horizontal implications of Theseus's exposition. The tale breaks off just as the hero of the story moves into the lodgings of a friend who

. . . hadde a wyf that heeld for contenance
A shoppe, and swyved for hir sustenance.
(I, 4421-22)

"Contenance" is the outward appearance of things, the Divine scheme which Theseus asserts is clear to the eye. It is public truth, while "sustenance" is God's *foyson*, that which he provides for man's needs and desires in the act of creation. In the context of the Cook's tale, *sustenance* is the ill-gained profits of an occupation practised in private. Like Alison's nocturnal kiss, it is not meant to be a visible activity. It is a counter to creation. The Cook's tale, then, is one further assault on the Knight's idealism, an insistence that the *real* experience of man belies order and design. The shift of contexts from tale to tale of the image of the fair chain of love challenges the authenticity and validity of the neo-Platonic bond.

My argument is not, however, that a bourgeois attack on a noble conception constitutes Chaucer's stance, or that Chaucer is, by implication, on the side of the Knight in committing himself to a belief in a philosophical idea. I would not claim that the chain of love image is a structuring model for the *Canterbury tales*, though I would welcome the occasion to argue that its triadic features describe the overall shape of his book better than binary schemes do.¹⁶ What I do feel necessary to add here is a brief scan of how Chaucer uses the chain of love as a stylistic feature of the first fragment rather than as an ideological stance. The manner in which Miller, Reeve and Cook disorder and fracture Theseus's design seems to me to reflect something of what Chaucer achieves in the "over-order" of the fragment as a whole.

The General Prologue celebration of vernal renewal of life reflects a literary topos rather than either a Scriptural or Platonic sequence. Life-

¹⁶ I take seriously the caveat of John Norton-Smith in his review of Traugott Lawler's *The One and the Many* in *SAC* 4 (1982) 176. "Any literary critic who lifts philosophical phraseology out of context does so at his own peril. . . . It is a peg to hang interpretation upon."

giving rains mentioned before sun or wind is a convention followed as well by, for examples, Lydgate's *Siege of Thebes*, lines 1-17, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, lines 505-20. The portraits of the pilgrims, however, break with the authority of convention as well as with principles of order. As for the order of the portraits, medieval estates satire would have descriptions of clerical orders before those of lay orders. Patristic exegesis would place moral values before social virtues. Civic structures would give priority to occupations of common utility above values of personal sanctity, and so forth.¹⁷ Individual portraits describe riding habits, speech and song, clothing and general appearance, and details of personal history, but with no consistency of scan. Chaucer's fictional perspective runs counter to received authorities for description. That perspective, like the perspectives of the fictional tale-tellers which follow the Knight, makes comic disjunction of its treatment of models of authority.

It could be that Chaucer's disjoining and fracturing of received hierarchies of value constitute a criticism of man's imperfections in ordering his experience according to an ideal. Theseus's speech on the Divine model is a call to reconcile human affairs with the Divine design. There may be, however, cause to view this call as a comic disjunction of that design. First of all, the punctual reason for Theseus's speech is to justify a political marriage. His invitation to Palamon and Emily to knit "the bond that highte matrimoine or mariage" is, in this context, a machiavellian ploy to gain Theban compliance with Athenian alliances. The "vertu of necessitee" (I, 3042) that this marriage constitutes echoes the *vertu* which engenders life in the General Prologue, but it rings sterile here. Theseus speaks his *wille* in his address, but argues that those who would not agree with it are willful, as if disbelief in the design were a turning away from God. What makes me most suspect Theseus's speciousness, however, is his appeal to visual experience to prove the

¹⁷ Jill Mann, *Medieval Estates Satire* (Cambridge University Press, 1973) 6-7, assumes that Chaucer, though he uses the convention of estates satire, plays social order against genre. D.W. Robertson, Jr., "Some disputed Chaucerian Terminology," *Speculum* 52 (1977) 580, argues that Chaucer "judged his characters on the basis of their moral qualities and on their abilities to contribute to the coherence of community life with self-restraint and industry." Donald Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976) 150-58, sees a three-fold order of ideals headed, respectively, by the Knight, the Clerk and the Parson.

existence of his fair chain, understood and seen by eye – a curious *hysteron proteron* that suggests that one understands before seeing, rather than understands *by* seeing. We are at the edge of the comic here, and perhaps the attribution to Jupiter the king (I, 3035) of the universal order pushes his speech over into comic irony. Certainly Jupiter is an orderer in the image of Theseus himself, but the tale has already made it quite clear that it is Saturn – or time – who arbitrates human affairs in the progression of experience. Theseus seems to be employing the figure of the fair chain of love as a fulcrum for his political designs rather than as a figure of his hard-earned wisdom.¹⁸ The concerns of Theseus, and of the Knight, may not be as public as they pronounce themselves to be.

The Miller, on the other hand, makes no pretences about his concerns. Whether or not he has willfully misread the parabolic fiction of the Knight, he is intent on the present moment. His "quiting" of the Knight takes form in a localizing and trivializing of the noble ideas of the Knight by placing these ideas in the demeaning context of lower bourgeois fourteenth-century England. The Miller emphasizes sensible phenomena. Whereas the Knight vaunts public and universal values, the Miller makes comedy out of the private purposes of God and wives (I, 3163-66). Where Theseus argues for a design apparent to the naked eye, Nicholas in the Miller's tale argues for a mini-universe of three made to function in the dark. Absolon's "Platonic" kiss misses its mark because he cannot see his target or understand Alison's intent. Returning with a hot coulter of vengeance, he asks her to "spek, sweete bryd, I noot nat where thou art" (I, 3805). The response is articulated in a fart. In place of the apprehensible design is confusion in the dark. The chain of love in the Miller's tale is but an assignation for adultery, the descent of elemental elements does not create but causes a broken arm, and the creative *Logos* finds voice in flatulence.

The Reeve, whatever his intent, lowers the terms in his own phenomenological assault on the Knight's idealist propaganda for ultimate authority. The miller of his tale challenges the untested learning of two clerks with his own pragmatic knowledge. In the darkness of his

¹⁸ There is considerable comic incongruity in the Knight having Theseus, some years *before* the war at Troy, use an Homeric image, and to have that image figure a philosophical idea of Plato, who is still some hundreds of years in the future. It is questionable, however, if such anachronisms were to be noticed, or even mattered. I should like to think that they did matter to Chaucer's art.

sleeping chamber, all senses are confounded by the comic disorder of the clerk's sexual assault on the wife and her daughter. The wife stumbles into the wrong bed, not seeing but misfeeling her way. She delights in the sexual advances of the clerk John, not seeing but misreading the author of the touches she feels. The two clerks are alert to the possibilities of their assault because they cannot sleep in the midst of the snoring, snorting and farting of the other three in the room (I, 4162). The idealism of the Knight has been given the lie by both Miller and Reeve. The Divine chain of love is not apprehensible. It is a class, or status, image of authority impertinent to real and common experience.

Conclusion

Chaucer the reporter of pilgrimage celebrates the annual rehearsal of creation; the Knight's opening tale in the procession towards renewable grace conceptualizes the design of the universe; the Miller mocks that concept in parody; and, the Reeve reveals its temporal implications as disordered and violent. The fair chain of love figure is not prominent again in the *Canterbury Tales*. It need not be, for it is but a forerunner of images of mediation which cluster in interlocking fashion throughout the tales. These images can be classified with reference to the figure of the chain. They include voice, breath, and song (the tales of the Prioress, Manciple, Canon's Yeoman, etc.); gold, coin and negotiable goods (tales of the Shipman, Pardoner, Canon's Yeoman, etc.); love, lust and greed (tales of the Knight, Wife of Bath, Pardoner, Physician, etc.); and, the senses of eye and ear (tales of the Franklin, Second Nun, etc.). No tale, it seems to me, is without some *tertium quid* feature which mediates values.

Comedies of mediation, of course, question man's role in nature and in the structural chain of the universe. They question as well the conventions of order in art, literary genres, style and structure. In the context of Chaucer's whole book, pilgrimage is the informing structure of mediation. It performs that role humanly as a channel of grace, a processional order bound by love. The wandering of tale-tellers across the landscape of fourteenth-century south-eastern England is a rehearsal of, and microcosmic image of, the soul's terminal passage from this world to the next. Pilgrimage performs artistically as mediation by containing and ordering both the portraits of the pilgrims and the tales they tell

along the way. Those tales fill out the landscape and the time of travel just as God's created beings fill out the spaces of the universe. The order of the tales, however, is as indeterminate as the order and the content of the portraits. The Miller challenges order by taking the place of the Monk, the Manciple substitutes for the Cook, rime royal takes the place of the Man of Law's announced prose, the Shipman speaks out of a woman's mouth, the Second Nun out of a man's, the Canon's Yeoman joins the group to tell a tale without knowing the stipulated design and reward, and so forth. The order of performance, like the order of details of geography along the route and the order of description of the pilgrims, is commutative. It is interchangeable, indeterminate and context-sensitive. Chaucer's own design for his book appears to be a deliberate fracturing of design. Even the indeterminate order of the fragments throughout the extant manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales* seems at times deliberate.¹⁹ Perhaps Chaucer's own "leave-taking" of his book, with its "retracciouns," is a final indication of the indeterminacy of order and value, for Chaucer *retraces* "the tales of Caunterbury, thilke that sownen unto synne," but he leaves the question of which tales are intended to the reader's own choice.

¹⁹ Larry Sklute, *Virtue of Necessity: Inconclusiveness and Narrative Form in Chaucer's Poetry* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1984) 113-120, argues for Chaucer's fragments as a unit of composition, and for his inconclusive form as a purposeful design.