

II

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The *Canterbury Tales* III: pathos

The narratives we may call ‘tales of pathos’ – the tales of the Man of Law, Second Nun, Clerk, Physician, Prioress, and Monk – make greater demands on a modern reader’s historical sense and imaginative sympathies than probably any other grouping in the *Canterbury Tales*. An understanding reading can be rewarding, however, in several ways. They introduce us to modes of thinking and feeling central to fourteenth-century experience, illuminating aspects of Chaucer’s world he otherwise left unexplored. They also testify to his passionate interest in the many forms of story flooding the late medieval world. Not of least importance, several of his greatest achievements are found here.

‘Tales of pathos’, however, are not a genre. No two narratives are the same: they include a saint’s life, a miracle of the Virgin, a series of *de casibus* stories, a religious romance, an expanded exemplum, and a folktale. These tales vary, too, in the degree of pathos aimed for and achieved. The *Second Nun’s Tale* and the *Monk’s Tale* – with one striking exception – are only marginally pathetic, whereas the *Clerk’s Tale*, the *Prioress’s Tale*, the *Physician’s Tale*, and the *Man of Law’s Tale* are intensely so. Nevertheless, they may be properly considered together. They share a narrative mode and a method of treatment, they possess several features in common, and they make essentially the same demand on a modern reader, and are best understood and appreciated by reference to certain characteristics of fourteenth-century experience and mentality.

Unlike so many of Chaucer’s narratives, they are in no way comic. Chaucerian irony is also absent. There is little or no complexity. Characters are generally one- or two-dimensional, motivated by a single virtue: constancy, patience, simple piety. The treatment of scene tends to be abstract. The action is played on a bare stage, so to speak. The narratives concentrate on crucial incident, moments of extreme threat, pain, distress, anguish. Or, if there is a happy ending, tearful bliss.

Chaucer's principal artistic concern (with the *Monk's Tale*, again, possibly an exception) is to produce a strong emotional effect. The situations – death of a child, separation of loved ones, being set adrift at sea, martyrdom – in themselves arouse feeling. Special attention is given to the emotional reaction of the central character, and, often, of witnesses and of the narrator as well. Additional devices to heighten feeling and involvement may be used: apostrophes, *exclamatio*, allusions charged with religious significance and emotional associations. Such non-narrative, rhetorical passages often alternate with dramatic scenes. The aim is to involve the audience and persuade them to an empathetic posture.

This, of course, is the essential nature of the pathetic. It is a mode of artistic representation that seeks to evoke pity and compassion in the beholder and to elicit tears of sympathy. Pathos, however, is out of fashion today. Except, perhaps, for the literature of brutality and violence, and for pornography, our age resents having its feelings worked upon, particularly its sense of pity. Appeals for food for starving children and funds for victims of disaster may make some use of pathos, but art may not. Receptivity to pathos is very much a matter of the taste of an age. Nineteenth-century British readers, Leigh Hunt, Wordsworth, Matthew Arnold, among others, responded with special enthusiasm to the tales considered here.

We will accept the tragic in art, but not the pathetic. The distinction between the two is helpful for a sharper understanding of this mode. The difference lies primarily in the nature of the central characters and of their relation to the action. In pathos, they must be victims, that is, they must be passive, not active agents who struggle in some fashion, however futile, against opposing forces and even contribute to their own destruction, as in tragedy. In pathos the central character is a suffering figure, and this suffering arouses our sympathy. If the suffering is totally undeserved, even stronger feeling is evoked, and so innocence is a characteristic of the pathetic victim. So also is weakness, an inability to struggle. The powerlessness of the victim is yet more dramatic if the hostile force acting on him or her is by contrast strong, brutal, evil, and immune to the claims of weakness and innocence.

Pathos, we have said, is dependent on the taste of the times, and Chaucer's age was unusually receptive to it, especially though not exclusively in the area of religion. In fourteenth- and fifteenth-century literature and art, religious pathos was powerful and pervasive. Three of our tales are religious in genre and subject, and there are references to 'icons' of religious pathos in two others. The account of Ugolino in the *Monk's Tale* is without overt religious allusion, but its language and imagery are rich in religious and biblical resonances.¹

This deep vein of religious pathos has several sources. In a variety of ways religion in this period fed and aroused strong feelings of pity, joy, terror, hope. The Church did not depend on the teaching of formal doctrine alone. It also reached layfolk by appeals to feeling. The horrors of hell were graphically drawn in sermons and confessional manuals, in illuminations in Books of Hours, and in paintings on interior church walls. Sermons, lyrics, the mystery cycles, and art vividly recreated the sufferings of Christ and the anguish of the Virgin in the several stages of the Passion, the tender joy of the Nativity, the fearful flight into Egypt.

Behind much of this lay a phenomenon known as the humanization of Christ, well established by Chaucer's time. The human nature of Christ had become as significant for worshippers as the divine. Representations of the Crucifixion in the ninth and tenth centuries show a remote, austere God commanding awe and reverence. The thirteenth and fourteenth centuries present a suffering, dying man petitioning the beholder's compassion and tears, as do the swooning Virgin and the weeping Magdalene. Pictorial representations of this suffering, mortal God, loved and mourned by a mother and dear companions, call for a human, empathetic response. Lyrics report the Passion in lurid detail or express the sorrow of one meditating on the scene: in some, Christ speaks directly from the cross to the reader, bidding him see how He suffers. Many portray Mary's grief, often uttered directly by her.

A powerful agent in this humanization of Christ was the religious form called the meditation. Originally a monastic exercise, it was later adopted by lay persons. The meditant concentrated his or her thoughts on scenes or subjects that would bring home forcefully the crises of the human condition: death, the pains of hell, the bliss of heaven, one's sinfulness, God's goodness, the urgency of repentance. Scenes from the life of Christ, and of the Virgin, proved especially effective. Written meditations served as guides. One of the most popular was a thirteenth-century work, the *Meditations on the Life of Christ*. Anonymous through most of its history, or ascribed mistakenly to St Bonaventura, it is generally accepted today as the work of an Italian Franciscan, John of Caulibus, a native of San Gimignano. We know of over two hundred manuscripts of the work, and there are many translations of the Latin into the vernacular, including Middle English.²

Two facts about the *Meditations* are relevant here. First, it added freely to the Gospel accounts of Christ's life, drawing on apocryphal writings, the *Golden Legend*, and the author's fertile imagination. A complete 'domestic' history was created, in which the bond between the Virgin and Christ was stressed insistently. We learn how the infant cried in pain at the circumcision, and how Mary wept to hear him cry. We are told that during the years in Egypt the Virgin sewed and spun to earn money, and the five-year-old child

Jesus went about in search of work for his mother. The Gospels' silence on the years between Christ's twelfth and thirtieth years is filled by an account of his life with his family, sometimes helping his foster-father Joseph, sometimes assisting his mother by setting the table, making the beds, and doing other household chores. A Christ is created with whom the humblest can identify.

Secondly, the reader of the *Meditations* (and of other meditations) is constantly urged to participate in the action and to respond empathetically to the scene presented. The language is now vivid and detailed, now charged and emotive, and from time to time the reader is told to step into the scene. At the Nativity, the meditant is urged to 'kiss the feet of the child Jesus lying in the manger, and ask our Lady to hand him to you and even allow you to hold him. Take him and hold him fast in your arms; gaze at his face, kiss him with loving reverence and delight confidently in him' (p. 28). After visiting the Holy Family in Egypt, 'ask permission to leave; and after kneeling to receive a blessing first from the child Jesus, with compassionate tears bid them farewell. They were like exiles banished without just cause from their native land' (p. 48). On the road to Gethsemane, the meditant is urged to 'focus' his attention on Jesus 'closely as he makes his way, bent beneath the cross and gasping for breath. As much as you can, suffer with him, as he is placed in the midst of so much agony and renewed ridicule' (p. 250).

The influence of the *Meditations* was enormous. So also was the cult of the Virgin. She won adoring partisans as the most merciful resource in the pantheon. She became the mother not just of God but of all mankind. She could be turned to in desperation as one willing to intercede for a poor sinner when all else had failed. Her humility and her obedience made her a model for all; her compassion also invited imitation. As a human mother she shared the basic experience of womankind; as a mother who had witnessed her son's death at the hands of remorseless men she knew the bitterest agony of a parent. In her miracles she is seen to be especially alert to the tragedies of commonplace domestic life. She became an icon of pathos and a model of compassion.

The spirit of Franciscan piety also infuses this vein of late medieval spirituality. St Francis's devotion to the wounds and suffering of Christ and to the Virgin, his tears at the thought of their pain, his encompassing humanity and compassion, embracing the humblest and most despised – indeed, his love and tears for all created things, whether a leper, a cricket, or a stone – make him the patron saint of pathos. In reading these narratives, one should not forget his influence in these centuries. He might well have been Chaucer's ideal audience.

Finally, what can we deduce concerning Chaucer's own religious attitude? His primary image as a comic artist and an ironist may be difficult to reconcile

with his role as an artist of the pathetic. (Charles Dickens, however, is not too remote a parallel.) But there is no reason to doubt that he shared the religious faith of his time. Such evidence as we have suggests that he was directly, devoutly religious, with a special love for the Virgin Mary. The faith and the fondness are demonstrated by his translation, probably early in his career, from the French, of 'An ABC to the Virgin'. The 'Retraction' attached to the conclusion of the *Canterbury Tales*, near the end of his life, is an explicit statement of faith and repentance. His fondness for the Virgin seems confirmed when the Prioress praises her reverently in her *Prologue* and then recounts one of her miracles. His translation of the life of St Cecilia, which eventually became the *Second Nun's Tale*, with its fervent, carefully fashioned invocation to the Virgin, suggests no wavering in his middle years. Let us turn to it first.

We know from the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* (F 426) that the translation of St Cecilia's life preceded the Canterbury project by several years. We should see it, therefore, as an act of personal devotion. Saints' lives were a popular form all through the medieval period, and the numerous translations into Old English and Middle English served an increasingly literate lay public for whom Latin was a closed book. In the second half of the thirteenth century Jacobus de Voragine had made an encyclopedic collection of saints' lives, the *Golden Legend* (*Legenda Aurea*) organized around the church calendar. This in some form was Chaucer's source for roughly the first two-thirds of his narrative, after which he switched to another version of the legend, the *Passio S. Caeciliae*.

Whatever his personal reasons, it was a good choice as a narrative. It is unified in theme: from beginning to end, St Cecilia is devoted to the work of conversion. It is climactic in its action, moving from the personal scene of her wedding night, when her vow of chastity leads to her husband's acceptance of her faith, through an ever widening circle of conversions and accompanying martyrdoms, to the dramatic confrontation with the Roman prefect Almachius and St Cecilia's martyrdom by fire and sword (beheading).

We know that Chaucer used basically 'two different Latin abridgements' of the legend of St Cecilia. The first half (lines 85-348) used the popular *Legenda Aurea* of the Dominican friar Jacobus de Voragine. The source for the second half (lines 349-558), only recently identified, was 'a liturgical version, ordinarily copied and circulated specifically for use in the liturgy at Matins on St Cecilia's feast day'; its author is unknown.³ Chaucer's beautiful translation is a remarkable example of the translator's art, faithful to its original but with no evidence of strain or awkwardness. The language moves with the naturalness and ease of an original creation. This is especially evident

in the handling of the verse form, the rhyme-royal stanza of his middle period (seven decasyllabic lines rhyming ababbcc). It is the stanza of the *Parliament of Fowls* and *Troilus and Criseyde*. He used it also for three other narratives in the present grouping, the tales of the Man of Law, Prioress, and Clerk. These are also translations essentially, though treated more freely. Whatever other reason Chaucer may have had for employing the stanza, it served him well as a translator.

Though St Cecilia's story ends in martyrdom, it qualifies only marginally as a tale of pathos. True, she is innocent, and she is helpless against Roman power and is, finally, a victim. Nevertheless, she is too strong a figure to evoke our pity in any insistent fashion. Valerian's affection for his brother is touching, as are Tiburce's simple, direct acceptance of his new faith and St Cecilia's chaste kiss of welcome on his breast. These human moments soften the tone. People weep at dramatic scenes. But St Cecilia's vigorous, contemptuous challenging of the Roman Almachius has a touch of the heroic. (Some readers think it unduly arrogant, but this is the standard posture of martyrs before their pagan accusers.) Her heroic stance continues through her martyrdom to the end. There may be some pathos in her isolation, but it is not stressed. The challenge to the reader of this tale is to search out and respond to the spirit of reverence which pervades the narrative and its language.

Like all saints' lives, its message is the special grace of God revealed in the saint's power of conversion, unshakeable faith, and the willing, even joyful, acceptance of the torments of martyrdom in witness of that faith's truth and power. The narrative pits simple faith against literal-mindedness and disbelief, and demonstrates the penetrating power of faith's vision as against the blindness of false or inadequate belief. This is done first engagingly, and in a low key, through St Cecilia's husband, Valerian, and his brother, Tiburce, and then, more dramatically, through the menacing, frustrated Roman prefect, Almachius. The simplicity of Valerian and Tiburce, both before and after conversion, is charming. They penetrate the illusion of the literal and see truth. Almachius never does. His power against St Cecilia can be exercised only with divine permission. She triumphs over him in her life and in her death.

Lucifer, Adam, Samson, Hercules, Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, Zenobia; the 'Modern Instances': Pedro of Spain, Peter of Cyprus, Bernabò, Ugolino; Nero, Holofernes, Antiochus, Alexander, Caesar, Croesus.

The seventeen brief narratives that constitute the *Monk's Tale* are *de casibus* tragedies, telling of 'falls' (*casus*) from greatness. Boccaccio had compiled a great number of such narratives in his *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium*

(1363). Chaucer borrowed some of his information for the *Monk's Tale* from this work, and it may have inspired his much less extensive collection. Or perhaps it was the *Roman de la Rose* of the preceding century, which also had a brief *de casibus* passage. In the next generation after Chaucer, John Lydgate produced the lengthy *Fall of Princes*, working from a French translation of Boccaccio's work. The form continued to be popular into the sixteenth century, where the collection known as *A Mirror for Magistrates* went through many editions.

Chaucer collected his material from a variety of sources – the Bible, Boethius, Dante, the *Roman de la Rose*, as well as Boccaccio. For three of the four 'modern instances' he probably drew on the knowledge of contemporaries. It was a diligent and responsible selection, not a casual gathering. The individual narratives are, for the most part, interesting as stories. (They are best read one at a time, not all in one sitting.) Their greater appeal was as history in a popular, accessible form at a time when books were hard to come by. And they are presented here as history (VII, 1973–4), to which the *de casibus* genre gave a pattern.

More important, it presented history in the form most acceptable, as a moral guide. History's chief value was exemplary, to give men and women examples from the past by which they might be warned and advised. The moral taught is to beware of Fortune. The narratives tell of persons who stood in 'heigh degree' but fell from their position of power, wealth, or fame and lost all, including, finally, their lives. They are often responsible for their own destruction by their folly or their pride, but the active agent in their fall is Fortune.

Fortune and her wheel, on which kings and heroes rose and fell, were a medieval cliché, but a powerful image nonetheless. Life was terrifyingly uncertain in the fourteenth century. More to the point, Fortune had support in philosophy and had a role in the divine plan, spelled out for all to see in Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*. This was one of the most influential books of the Middle Ages and one Chaucer had translated and knew well; its importance to *Troilus* and the *Knight's Tale* has already been discussed in this volume by Jill Mann. Boethius defined the nature and role of Fortune. Ever changeable, Fortune rules over the mutable, impermanent, secondary 'goods' of this world, such as fame, riches, and power, as opposed to the immutable, eternal, primary good, the love and pursuit of goodness itself. No man can be secure until he has, in fact, been forsaken by Fortune (II pr. 1). But who can avoid giving some hostages to Fortune?

The leading figure in these narratives is neither helpless nor innocent and so hardly qualifies as an ideal subject for pathos. It is possible, however, that the 'fall' in itself produced a more emotional reaction than it does

today. In a culture so hierarchical, the spectacle of loss of power or fame or riches may have been radically threatening and distressing. Some of the illustrations in a manuscript of the French translation of Boccaccio's *De Casibus* verge on the pathetic and the sentimental. The Monk begins by saying, 'I wol biwaille . . .'. And the Knight stops the Monk, not because the stories are dull – Chaucer did not work in order to bore his audience – but because he found their 'hevynesse', that is, their sadness, disturbing. (The interruption is an ingenious way to bring a collection of brief stories to a dramatic conclusion.) The stories may then have been received with some intensity of feeling, even a sense of pathos.

This possibility is reinforced by the inclusion, without apology, of one of the most pathetic tales Chaucer ever told. He took it from a scene in the ninth circle of Dante's *Inferno* and, dropping the gruesome context, heightened the inherent pathos. It tells of the imprisonment and death by starvation of Count Ugolino of Pisa and his three children, the oldest only five. The youngest (aged three) voices his hunger (the last speech in Dante), cries from day to day, and dies. Seeing their father gnaw at his arms in his grief, the other two children misunderstand it as hunger and offer him their flesh. Chaucer, correctly, makes this the last speech we hear: 'And after that, withinne a day or two, / They leyde hem in his lappe adoun and deyde' (2453–4). Though the father's grief is not ignored, the focus is on the innocent children: 'Allas, Fortune, it was greet crueltee / Swiche briddes for to putte in swich a cage!' (2413–14). It is a beautifully carved cameo of the pathetic art. All the elements are there in perfect balance: extremity of situation, helplessness, innocence, powerful familial and emotional ties, sensitive language, and restraint.

The narrative assigned to the Man of Law had a long and complex history but came to Chaucer from a source close at hand, the Anglo-Norman *Chronicle* of Nicholas Trivet (c.1335). There are many versions in many languages. It recounts the adventures of a beautiful woman falsely accused, who in consequence suffers many trials but is ultimately exonerated and restored to happiness. Chaucer's fellow poet, John Gower, also using Trivet, told the story in his *Confessio Amantis* (II, 587–1598). In the next generation, Thomas Hoccleve told a variant version. *Emaré* and *Le Bone Florence of Rome* are two Middle English romances using the theme. The story obviously had strong contemporary appeal.

Trivet, including it in his *Chronicle*, presented it as an incident in the history of early England. The story is a romance; Trivet gave it a strong hagiographical colouring, making it a kind of secular saint's life. Chaucer disengaged the story from its chronicle setting but preserved and even intensified the religious elements.

The story is set in a distant time, before Christianity had come to England; and in exotic places – early Rome, pagan Syria, pagan Northumbria. The heroine, Custance, an emperor's daughter, is twice set adrift alone in the open sea. There are treacherous plots, providential rescues, separations of child from parent (Custance from her father), husband from wife and child (King Alla from Custance and his infant son), and tearful reunions.

The extraordinary adventures and reunions of romance do not require divine intervention, but they can be easily accommodated to it. The same situations can be found in a number of saints' lives, some of which have been labelled 'hagiographical romances'. The legend of St Eustace, for example, recounts the separation, first of wife from her husband and two sons, then of the sons from their father and from each other, with all parties finally united by a series of coincidences. There are dramatic adventures and rescues. In the life of Mary Magdalene, a king is forced to abandon his wife (believed dead) and newborn child on an alien shore; returning two years later, he finds both alive. The saints' lives merely emphasize the hand of God in these wondrous experiences. The marvellous becomes the miraculous.

The extreme situations of romance lead naturally to moments of pathos, heightened by the religious elements. There was also a scattered rhetoric of pathos, which Chaucer drew on, especially in this narrative.⁴ To give added dignity and import to his heroine's misadventures, he supplies allusions to classical figures and events (190–203, 288–94, 400–3). The astounding survivals are placed in a dignifying pattern of divine protection by allusions to similar miraculous events in sacred history and hagiography (470–504, 639, 932–45). Rhetorical apostrophes further heighten emotional tension (at least fifteen: for example, 267–71, 295–315, 358–64, 631–7).

All these devices focus ultimately on Custance and her trials. She is a classically pathetic heroine, beautiful, saintly, innocent, helpless, victimized. Epithets applied to her – fair, innocent, humble, meek, wretched, weak, woe-ful (see 316, 682, 719, 918, 932, 978) – constantly remind us of her virtues and her pathetic circumstances. Chaucer gives her four dramatic scenes: her departure from Rome for Syria, her being set adrift there, the accusation of murder, and being set adrift again. Of these, the first and fourth are most fully developed. The first, building on a single sentence in *Trivet*, is elaborately worked up, especially by the use of rhetorical devices. It is a nicely calculated addition. It establishes her at once as a pathetic figure, giving her an emotional aura which never fades. The last, her departure from Northumbria, is her climactic scene. The method here is primarily dramatic. The compassion of the Virgin at the Crucifixion is invoked to equate, obliquely, with Custance's overwhelming fear for the safety of her infant son. There are pathetic tableaux: Custance lulling the weeping child and spreading her

headscarf over its little eyes ('little' is a key adjective in Chaucer's vocabulary of pathos); her final walk across the sand quieting her child; her last words – 'Farewel, housbonde routhlees!' – not a speech of defiance but a final cry of pain that crystallizes the pathos of her plight. The scene is mounted with consummate skill, arousing and condensing feelings of pity and pain. The spectators' tears confirm the pathetic moment and they are also, in fact, a kind of stage direction to the reader.

The image of Custance that emerges is powerfully evocative, and its greatest power is inherent in the essence of her situation which Chaucer has perceived. His imagination was seized by the fact of her *aloneness*. In each scene we see how alone, how isolated, she is. The rhetoric and epithets merely reinforce a moving truth. 'Allas! Custance, thou hast no champioun' (631) the narrator is made to exclaim when she is falsely accused of murder, and Chaucer goes on to write one of his starkest, most moving passages:

Have ye nat seyn somtyme a pale face,
Among a prees, of hym 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. (645–51)

Even after her return to Rome she lives unknown to her parents for twelve years until King Alla's coming releases her from her spiritual isolation.

Custance embodies Chaucer's perception of the isolation of women in his day – or of upper-class women, at least – and his sense of its poignancy. Saying farewell to her parents as she departs for her marriage of conversion as well as convenience, she exclaims, 'Wommen are born to thraldom and penance, / And to been under mannes governance' (286–7). Used as counters in the games of power politics and economic manoeuvre, separated, possibly forever, from friends and family to marry, often, men they had never seen in countries totally alien, queens, duchesses, and ladies, whom the narrator appeals to for understanding of Custance's isolation, very probably would have understood all too well. And Chaucer here, and in the *Clerk's Tale*, seems to have understood too. It may even explain the rather awkward stanza about Custance's wedding night. The imaginative embodiment of isolation in the character of Custance is the narrative's real achievement.

Chaucer used a different technique of rhetorical elaboration to give weight to the *Physician's Tale*, an incident from Livy's *History of Rome*. He probably first found it in the *Roman de la Rose*, where it is used as an exemplum.

He attempts to turn it into a self-sufficient narrative; knowing it comes from Livy, he tells it as a true story (155–7). But in Livy, the father's desperate action, killing his daughter to save her from a tyrant's lust, dramatized the desperation of a political situation. As a purely human drama, however, it raises questions at a human level: Is the father's action justified? Is it responsible or merely cruel? The setting in pagan Rome rules out any appeal to Christian doctrine.

In consequence, the issue becomes abstract: the responsibilities of parental power and governance in relation to the priceless quality of youthful beauty and goodness, innocence and chastity. A long introductory passage poses the issue, using the rhetorical *descriptio* of so much courtly poetry, with its twofold division: here the *effictio*, describing the young daughter Virginia's beauty, though laudatory, is abstract (rose and white complexion, golden tresses); the *notatio* or moral description is more elaborate, endowing Virginia with manifold virtues: chastity, humility, abstinence, temperance, patience, eloquence, modesty, industry. Just as her name cannot help but suggest the Virgin, so also her virtues (and her beauty) are those invariably ascribed to Mary, making Virginia infinitely precious.

A long *digressio* establishes the theme of parental responsibility by addressing governesses and parents. It urges the latter not to slacken in teaching virtue, warning them that the worst treason is the betrayal of innocence. Setting a bad example or being negligent in chastising them may cause their children's destruction.

The narrative proper then begins and proceeds briskly. Chaucer summarizes the enthrallment of the governor Apius by Virginia's beauty and his plot to possess her by the trumped-up charge that she is a stolen slave. Two 'courtroom' scenes follow. In one, Apius, sitting in his consistory, pronounces his false judgement (his 'sentence': 177, 190). In the other, Virginius, sitting in his 'halle' (207), pronounces *his* 'sentence' (224). The parallel scenes contrast false, corrupt judgement with responsible though unbearably painful true judgement.

This scene is the moment of pathos: parent and child, an impending cruel separation, expressions of strong feeling (218, 221, 223, 231, 235–6), Virginius's face pale as ashes, his aching heart (209, 211), Virginia's tears and swoons, and her final, touching plea to her father that 'with his swerd he wolde smyte softe' (252). There are no bystanders to heighten feeling. Father and daughter are alone. There is one biblical reference, to the parallel dilemma of Jephthah and his daughter. The Abraham–Isaac story would probably also have come to his audience's mind.

Chaucer's purpose seems to have been to tell a striking story in the pathetic mode. The long introduction is unwieldy, however, and the reader totally

unsympathetic to pathos will find little to please. But Boccaccio told the same story in *De Claris Mulieribus* and Gower in the *Confessio Amantis* (VII, 5131–306). The very extremism that troubles a modern reader was no doubt part of its appeal and provides a further insight into the taste of the age.

The Prioress tells a miracle of the Virgin, a popular devotional form that often revealed a striking predilection for the weak and innocent and for the virtue of simplicity. In one miracle Mary saves from dismissal a priest who knows only one mass. In another, a simple-minded girl who can recite only *Ave Maria gratia plena Dominus tecum* receives a sign of special grace. The Virgin also protects those who show her special devotion: sinful monks, for instance, who forget their vows of chastity but not her worship. Her miracles also frequently deal with pathetic situations: a young wife, pregnant, who kills herself in a fit of mistaken jealousy, is revived; a mother's only son who dies is restored to life.

The miracle Chaucer selects combines the simplicity so greatly revered with the devotion to the Virgin so amply rewarded. The simplicity and devotion are demonstrated by a seven-year-old boy, who kneels before every statue of the Virgin he passes and recites the *Ave Maria*. They are revealed further in his determination to learn the *Alma redemptoris*, though he does not know what the Latin words mean. It is enough for him that it is an anthem in praise of the Virgin, and he sings it every day going to and from school through the Asian ghetto.

The simplicity and innocence, and the helplessness, are those of childhood, a fact we are never allowed to forget. The words 'litel', 'smal', 'yong', 'child', 'children', 'boy', 'innocent' are used again and again. (Perhaps here is the voice of the Prioress.) They solicit the reader's tender sympathy for the child and his devotion, horror, and pity at his manner of death.

Pathos is likewise elicited for the mother, a widow, alone and poor, in her anxious night of waiting and her journeys through the streets, as, half out of her mind, she searches for her child. It is a mirror-image of the Virgin's tearful search for the twelve-year-old Jesus when separated from him at the Temple. The many references to Mary as mother suggest an equation of the widow's suffering and the Virgin's compassion at the Crucifixion.

Feeling is further enhanced by the ruthless power and evil of the child's destroyers. The murder scene is swiftly rendered, the ruthlessness embodied in the rapid succession of verbs: 'hente', 'heeld', 'kitte', 'caste' (570–1). The repellent anti-Semitism is offensive to us, and some critics see it as a bitter comment on the Prioress. But it is an unhappy fact that anti-Semitism was endemic in the late Middle Ages. And the Virgin was the arch-enemy

of heretics, and of Jews. They are targets in a number of her miracles, which often ended with massacres or enforced conversions. It is more reasonable to conclude, however reluctantly, that Chaucer did not see beyond the prejudice of his age and took the story simply because it served his purpose.

That purpose was to demonstrate the Virgin's power and her surpassing tenderness and mercy. The narrative does that, and so does the language. Constant references celebrate her name, her blessedness above all other mortals, her mercy (510, 532, 538, 543, 550, 556, 618-19, 654, 656, 664, 678, 690). And so does the pathos. For the tender feelings generated are transferred to the Virgin herself. Tears of sorrow and joy are a fitting and welcome tribute. In fourteenth- and fifteenth-century art she often floats in an aura of tenderness and tears. She does so here.

The Clerk tells an immensely popular narrative, originally a folktale. Boccaccio introduced it to the literary world as the last story in his *Decameron* (1353). Petrarch recast it into Latin (1373-4), and in the next twenty years there appeared another Italian version, two French translations, one of which was given even wider circulation by its inclusion in a Parisian merchant's book of guidance for his young wife (*Le Ménagier de Paris*, c.1393), and a French dramatization (1395). Chaucer used Petrarch's Latin and one of the translations. Clearly a nerve was touched by this story of a peasant's daughter who promised complete obedience to the marquis who married her and kept that vow without a murmur though he tested her obedience inhumanly.

Its appeal six hundred years ago can best be understood, first, by reference to the high value that religious teaching placed on humility, obedience, and patience, the virtues Griselda displays so abundantly. Pride is, of course, the deadliest of the seven deadly sins, and the remedy against pride is humility (see the Parson, x, 388, 476). The archetypal examples of humility, and its attendant virtue, obedience, were Christ and the Virgin. Christ is 'the Master of humility'. God's descending into human form and Christ's submitting to the indignities and torments of the Passion were the ultimate acts of patience and obedience. The Virgin was cited even more insistently as a practitioner of these virtues. In her years at the Temple, one of her seven requests was for 'humility, patience, benignity, and meekness'. Her humility, said one commentator, was the celestial ladder by which God descended to earth. Her obedience and humility at the Annunciation are a constant theme.

The Parisian merchant who copied the story for his wife did so in recommending wifely obedience, though he hastened to add he would never make such extreme demands on her. Griselda's story takes place, of course,

within the context of a marriage, and in one sense it is about marriage. This fact alone makes her conduct unbearable to a modern reader. But the tale is neither foremost nor finally a demonstration lecture for husbands and wives. Its larger import, deriving from Petrarch's version, is the major reason it gripped so many. Her story dramatized for them the teaching that God tests his people. The tragedies of life are evidence enough for that. And it dramatized the humility required of the truly devout before God and the absolute obedience demanded in the face of that testing, a humility and obedience that frail mortality found difficult and, often, impossible. This is one source of the tale's poignancy. The racking demands on Griselda are extreme reflections of less drastic though surely painful testings of the faithful and devout. Her triumph chides them and reminds them how far short they have fallen.

Chaucer heightens this religious dimension. He adds the allusion to Job (932–8). More subtle are the touches by which he casts over the figure of Griselda the shadow of the Virgin. Her absolute humility is Mary's virtue. Her beauty and her early maturity (211–12, 218–20) are also reminiscent of Mary. Treatments of the Virgin stressed her beauty, and her maturity and wisdom even as a young girl in the Temple. Like the Virgin, Griselda is poor and never idle; the detail of her spinning while watching the sheep (223–4) is a pointed reference. There is an oblique allusion to the Nativity (206–7); the marquis's announcement that he wishes to take her as his wife on condition she obey him absolutely and her unquestioning acceptance arouses echoes of the Annunciation (see especially 292–4). To make this connection may seem blasphemous, but it is not. The scene is different in all but one or two details, and the echo is of the faintest, but the echo is there.

The association of Griselda with the Virgin draws to her much of the tender feeling surrounding Mary. It also makes more acceptable Griselda's patience and suffering by invoking the experience of that other rare mortal. The pathos depends on our believing in Griselda's agony. Her language and reactions with Walter conceal and deny any pain – they do so outrageously when he demands she give up her second child (617–72). But this is the obedience God demands. We penetrate to her real feelings in various ways: her farewell to her daughter (547–72) and to her son (679–83), her gentle admonitions to Walter when she leaves his house (813–89) and when she meets his new bride (1032–43).

Griselda's self-contained dignity is what finally exalts her. She is another of Chaucer's isolated women, isolated by her poverty, her low birth, her vows of obedience to her husband, her separations, her firmness, her suffering. She moves alone, in marriage, in childbirth, in bereavement, a powerful image of the isolation of the human soul. The narrative's method is accumulated

pathos. She never weeps, nor are we urged to weep, until the climax. Then there is a storm of feeling, expressed most tellingly in the iron grasp on her two children, when Griselda at last is not alone with her love and her pain. And then she recovers her dignity, rising, abashed at her trance. And for the first time we have a sense of Walter and Griselda together (1113).

For some, Walter is an even greater problem than Griselda. Today we would call him obsessed. The narrator protests at his cruelty (460-2, 621-3), and this, together with Chaucer's humanization of the tale, his greater 'realism', it is claimed, make Walter's monstrous actions and Griselda's improbable obedience all the more implausible. But her alliance with the image of the Virgin roots her conduct in a laudable mode of action, and the realism makes her suffering a human suffering that we can respond to. As for Walter, critics forget that life at times can be monstrous.

We must remember, finally, that obedience was demanded not only by religion but by many social relationships in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries: wife to husband, fief to feudal lord, subject to superior. Humility and subservience on one side, arrogance and outrageous demand on the other were often the order of the day in a society so hierarchical. The strain on psyche and ego may be imagined. And these were the centuries in which that hierarchy was beginning to show signs of stress and change. In religion many hungered after a more personal relationship with divinity. The increased circulation of money, the growth of trade, a slightly accelerated social mobility must have called into question in many instances the absolute rigidity of former relations of inferiority. This may be the real nerve the story touched. Though the narrative holds up absolute obedience as the ideal, it also acknowledges the terrible demands that can be made in its name and their irrationality, and above all it gives imaginative and sympathetic recognition to the price of obedience, the suffering it can entail. Griselda captures the imagination not only for her 'patience', her obedience. She does so even more because of her great pain. We can identify with that. Chaucer's restraint and his sensitivity make it possible. Griselda is his greatest triumph in the pathetic mode.

In *The Anatomy of Criticism* Northrop Frye places pathos in the category of the low mimetic, of domestic tragedy. Most of us will live our lives in the low mimetic mode. We shall not dwell or end in epic or heroic tragedy. Pathos, then, is rooted in a level of experience common to most humankind. Behind the melodramatic and extreme situations which it employs and which we hope we shall never know are experiences that are commonplace and familiar: the loss of a parent, the death of a child, a separation of husband and wife. The emotions dramatized in pathos are emotions we shall know:

terror, grief, overwhelming joy. We shall probably never know the agony of the loss of a kingdom, but we shall all know, at some time, the grief caused by the loss of someone we love.

Pathos may seem alien because it works with extremes. It willingly tramples over probability if need be to portray these extremes – of goodness, of evil, of suffering, of faith, of innocence. From this pushing to extremes arises its abstract character. Qualifications and complexities do not interest it. Pure innocence, pure evil, pure goodness, are what it wants, and it cuts away everything extraneous to get them. It needs them in order to get the strong emotional effect it aims for. This employment of extremes and this pursuit of emotional impact are precisely what the modern reader objects to as forced and dishonest. But the truth is that at moments of strong feeling we do simplify and exaggerate. When we weep for a dead friend we forget all faults and he or she becomes for the moment pure generosity, or pure goodness. When we explode with anger the object of our wrath becomes villainy personified. Pathos is more honest about, and less afraid of, raw feeling than is irony.

The simplicities of the tales of pathos are what is most difficult for a modern reader to accept. Yet simplicity is their essence, and they demand a corresponding simplicity in the reader if they are to receive a proper response – T. S. Eliot's 'condition of complete simplicity / Costing not less than everything'. The tears that flow in such abundance in these narratives and the tears so ardently sought from the reader are valued as cleansing, redeeming, and above all revelatory. The mask dissolves and the shared humanity and weakness are declared. When the hero weeps, he becomes one with the least of his followers.

And if the art of the pathetic is not the highest art, it is not necessarily a cheap or easy art. True, the effect of pathos may be achieved easily, or cheaply. But what a particular culture will accept as legitimate devices for achieving pathos – what it is truly strongly moved by – must be allowed the artist as legitimate resources. And there can be a skilful and an honest art of the pathetic, where situation, language, and mode of treatment justify the emotional effect sought for. That skilful and honest art may be found in Chaucer's tales of pathos.

NOTES

1. See Jill Mann, 'Parents and Children in the "Canterbury Tales"' in *Literature in Fourteenth-Century England*, eds. Piero Boitani and Anna Torti (Tübingen/Cambridge, 1983), pp. 165–83.
2. See 'The Author' (pp. xiv–xxiv) and 'The Manuscripts' (pp. xxiv–xxv) in the English translation of John of Caulibus, *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, trans.

- and eds. Francis X. Taney, Sister Anne Miller, OSF, and C. Mary Stallings-Taney (Asheville, N.C., 2001), referred to hereafter as *Meditations*. One set of illustrations from an Italian manuscript is included in the older translation, *Meditations on the Life of Christ: An Illustrated Manuscript of the Fourteenth Century*, trans. Isa Ragusa, eds. Isa Ragusa and Rosalie E. Green (Princeton, N.J., 1961). The Latin text can be found in *Meditaciones Vite Christi*, ed. Mary Stallings-Taney, *Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Medievalis* 153 (Turnhout, 1997).
3. Sherry L. Reames, 'The Second Nun's Prologue and Tale' in *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*, vol. 1, eds. Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 491–528. The quotations are on p. 494. See also Sherry L. Reames, 'A Recent Discovery Concerning the Sources of Chaucer's "Second Nun's Tale"', *Modern Philology*, 87 (1989–90), 337–61.
 4. Thomas H. Bestul, 'The *Man of Law's Tale* and the Rhetorical Foundations of Chaucerian Pathos', *Chaucer Review*, 9 (1974–5), 216–26.

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