Chaucer and Mythology

My research for the study of the mythographic tradition in the Middle Ages thus far has revealed that the early Middle Ages had a far more profound effect than is now recognized on what we like to think of as the originality of mythographers such as the Third Vatican Mythographer and Pierre Bersuire as well as on fourteenth-century poets like Chaucer. For example, perhaps the most significant mythographer was the sixth-century Fulgentius whose Mythologies and Expositio on Virgil were so frequently reworked. The most important contributions derive from the commentaries Chaucer scholars in general are least familiar with—the earlier Martianus Capella, Boethius, and Ecloga Theodulti commentaries—although I hope to shed new light also on the later and more familiar (because better known) Ovid, Virgil, and handbook traditions. These later traditions themselves incorporated material from the earlier commentaries. Because individual chapters of my book will be organized by the myths central to each commentary tradition, the survey should facilitate further study of the use of individual myths by medieval poets like Chaucer, whether in the classroom or in individual research projects. I will mention just a few examples of how these traditions may have influenced Chaucer.

While the Virgil tradition has probably been the best documented and studied of all the epic commentaries, little has been done with (and little is generally known about) commentaries on the non-epic Virgilian works, which are commonly thought to have had little influence on later medieval literature. For example, a gloss on the Georgics yields an interesting interpretation of Priapus in the Parlement of Foules, who

Within the temple in sovereign place stonde,
In swich streme as whan the asse hym shente
With cri by nyghte, and with scepere in his honde.
Ful besly men guene to sette, of sundry hewe,
Garlandes ful of freshe flores newe.
(11.253-59)

The scepter and the garlands of flowers, their freshness suggesting renewal, even his central role in the temple of Venus with the hothouse garden, are clarified by a reference in Virgil’s Georgics 4.109-11, in which Priapus is a kind of scarecrow, a “god of gardens” whose flowers attract bees and who holds a willow-hook. In the Berne scholia on the Georgics, Priapus’ role is to protect and ensure fertility; he also holds a willow-hook to guard against thieves, as well as—I hesitate to add this—birds. He is called “lord of the Hellespont” according to Adanan the Scot (ed. H. Hagen, 4.109-11), probable author of the scholia, because he was born in a town thereon and because he is believed to control all magic arts (this ability apparently accounts for the great size of his phallos). This view of Priapus also enhances the allusion to him as “god of gardens” in the Merchant’s Tale, in that his protection of the garden in which the blind January and the deceitful May daily may have “improved” January’s fertility.

The other non-epic work of Virgil, the Eclogues, found imitators as well as glossators in the Middle Ages—for example, the important ninth-century schoolbook Ecloga Theodulti. This work, a debate between two shepherds over the superiority of biblical fable to classical myth, provides illuminating parallels between classical gods and biblical figures. An example (ed. M.Y. Jacobs, diss. 1963, pp. 39-41) preserved in Chaucer’s lyric “The Former Age” links Nimrod as builder of the Tower of Babel with Jupiter as “the lekerous, That first was fader of delica-

The Chaucer Tapes

I have for five years been collecting on cassette tapes oral renditions of Canterbury Tales passages famed for their critical ambiguity: the portrait of the Prioresse from the General Prologue, plus excerpts from Prologues and Tales of The Pardoner, Merchant, Wife of Bath, and Nun’s Priest. I believe that much critical controversy stems from the nature of the performance. When the Host replies to the Pardoner he is furious, or mildly irritated, or joking by pretending to be angry? How should this be rendered by the modern reader? Instead of seeking evidence in the text that one’s own interpretation is right, I argue that critics ought to analyze what qualities of a passage allow for flexibility in interpretation, for it is those very qualities that have allowed Chaucer’s text to live on through the centuries.

My thesis and data have proved so fruitful that I’ve written an entire book on just the Prioresse, Pardoner, and Merchant; Alcyon and that goodly priest Sir John will have to wait for the next book. Three hours of oral renditions by various scholars accompany my book, including as many as twenty-six rendi-

Continued p. 2
Chaucer and Mythology

Martianus’ emphasis on Apollo as god of divination. The situation in which a mortal’s petition is considered and granted or denied after a debate among gods—like that of Chaucer’s January in the Merchant’s Tale—finds mythological antecedents in the granting of divinity to the bride Philolophy in the first book of Martianus. Further, commentaries on Martianus help to explain the puzzling exaggeration of Venus’ tears in the “Envoi to Scogion.” Scolgan has offended so gorgeously by giving up his lady that Venus’ tears threaten to drown us all, which sets a humorous turn to the myth of Venus and Adonis. Adonis’ death is likened by Martin of Laon, in commenting on Martianus 2.192, to the descent of the sun into the lower hemisphere during the advent of winter, which brings on Venus’ tears as terrestrial rivers of plenty—as if she were the source not only of all beauty but also of all abundance: “quasi Venere totam pulchritudinem et copiam lacrimarum fundente” (ed. C. Lutz, 74.13, p. 9). Scolgan takes the place of the departed “sun,” Adonis.

From the Boethius commentaries—that window into the Homeric poems—comes Greek mythological material concerning heroes that is moralized and used by later writers like Chaucer. The myths primarily glossed in the Consolation concern, first, Orpheus’ descent into the Underworld and the Underworld inhabitants in III12; second, Circe and Ulysses in IV3; and Agamemnon’s sacrifice of Iphigenia at the start of the Trojan War and Ulysses’ conflict with Polyphemus in IV7; and third, the labors of Hercules in IV7. In the Anonymous Erfurt commentator’s gloss on Orpheus’ descent into the Underworld to retrieve Euridice (III12), Pluto is identified as the ruler of the Underworld, one of three brothers who govern the major regions of the cosmos: Jupiter, the air, Neptune, the water, and Pluto the earth and underworld (ed. E.T. Silk, p. 218). Pluto and Proserpina are of course introduced as “gods of the underworld” in Chaucer’s Merchant’s Tale, meaning mythic ruler of earth as opposed to the heavens or the waters and hence appropriate judges of mortals who choose foolishly and consequencipitously. The specific appearance of Pluto in the Merchant’s Tale also suggests a kind of literal luxuriosness common both to worldly January and to the hero Orpheus, who functions in both this world and in the underworld.

Also from the Anonymous Erfurt commentator on Boethius Vp3 comes a possible model for January in the Merchant’s Tale. Tiresias is struck blind by Juno for confessing, after his experience as a woman, that women enjoy sex more than men, but he is granted divinity for his answer by Jupiter. The ironic connection between blind January and Tiresias—one who can see and refuses to do so and one who chooses to see too much—is found in the Erfurt commentary, which refers the reader back to the Boethian context for the gloss. In Vp3 where the persona Boethius is having trouble understanding the idea of divine foreknowledge and free will—he asks what knowledge is worth, if it is not certain: “Such knowledge is no better than that expressed by the ridiculous prophecy of Tiresias: ‘Whatever I say will either be or not be’ ” (trans. Green). The ambivalence of this “ridiculous prophecy” is related by Erfurt to the change of Tiresias’ sex after he had separated two copulating serpents with a rod; the ambivalent answer of Tiresias is linked to his dual sexual nature, whose ambivalence reflects the uncertainty of man’s knowing in contrast to God’s certainty: “Quod etiam dixi, quoniam nihil differre Dr providentia uaticinium Tiresiae si incerta prouideret, nec differre etiam ab humana opinione si dicere incerta sicet homines quorum est incertus euentus” (ed. Silk, p. 290).

In Chaucer the two sexual natures of Tiresias are embodied in January and May, just as the punishment and reward bestowed upon Tiresias are both granted as gifts to January and May. Therein, too, Tiresias’ copulating snakes are transformed into the serpent-like Damian and the subtle May swaying in the pear tree above January’s head, and Tiresias’ rod can be visualized quite literally as the pear tree which January embraces. It can be seen symbolically as a symbol of the virility January yearns to demonstrate through May’s illusory pregnancy and also a rod that joins the lovers. But most importantly, as the Erfurt commentator moralized this passage, it is man’s not knowing—January’s uncertainty about what he saw—in contrast to the full knowledge of God, or here the gods Pluto and Proserpina, which provides the butt of the joke.

In terms of my progress on the project thus far, I have finished a thousand-page rough draft of the first volume of this study, which I am slowly revising into publishable copy, and I have collected all the materials for the second volume. Pieces of this have begun to be published here and there. I hope that the first volume will be completed within the next few years.

Jane Chance
Rice University

This is a condensation of one of the reports read at the “Work in Progress” session of the York Congress. Others will be published in subsequent Newsletters.

The Chaucer Tapes

According to attitudes projected by the readings, the responses can be grouped as follows:

six Hecklers (Host mocks or teases Merchant)
five Noisy Neighbors (Host hopes to learn more details of Merchant’s sex life)
four Happy Go Lucky Numbskulls (Host is oblivious to Merchant’s inner torment)
four Shrieks (Host urges Merchant to talk out inner torment for own good)
three Lords of the Revels (Host reminds Merchant of tale-telling contest)
three Sympathizers (Merchant gets hoped-for response)

Consider the potential variety were we to factor in gesture and appearance as well as voice for each pilgrim and character. We do have some evidence, which I discuss, from artists and illustrators through six centuries. But most Chaucer scholars do not sketch, whereas nearly all teach, right aloud, and thereby pass interpretations on to students and grandstudents.

No one comes cold to Chaucer. It happens that among my data I have two pairs, each consisting of a teacher and former student, whose readings betray remarkable similarities in detail as well as in overall interpretation. For instance, I doubt that reader R1 told his class twenty years ago, “I’d read line 1264 of the Merchant’s Tale stressing the adverbs, ‘For weldeok is so ey and so cleene,’ yet his student R2 read with just this emphasis. Nor did reader R3 tell his class “I’d stress the adjectives in line 1264, ‘For weldeok is so ey and so cleene,’ ” yet that is the reading of his student, R4.

Such details, retained unconsciously, are analogous to the broader interpretive patterns retained from one’s earliest Chaucer teachers. In the pear-tree scene, for example, one senior Chaucerian creates a senile, doddering January easily dissuaded in the end by May’s efficient and blatantly insincere tone of voice. That reader’s former student has reduced some effects and exaggerated others, to create a mentally retarded adult being cared for by a nurse who knows her duties but wishes January wouldn’t keep tugging at her sleeve. These two conflicts between a weak male and a strong female differ from a variety of conflicts represented, between a strong, relatively intelligent January and a May who with elaborately convincing intonation pretends to be weak and helpless, whether helpless as a cute little girl, or as a high-class mistress, or a femme fatale, or a loyally pregnant wife.

Some Mays even seem to fake crying, including the May whose performance Alexander Pope imagined in 1709 when he modernized the tale as January and May. Although Pope did not make a tape for me, his imagin-
1984 Report of the Executive Director, New Chaucer Society

Read at the Business Meeting, York Congress, 11 August 1984

The third year of the location of office of the New Chaucer Society at the University of Tennessee finds the Society in good health. Its membership now stands at 552: 406 from the United States; 53 from the United Kingdom; 28 from Canada; 23 from Japan; 13 from West Germany; 5 from South Africa; 4 from Australia; 3 each from Italy and The Netherlands; 2 each from Belgium, Israel, and Spain; one each from Austria, Denmark, France, Ireland, Korea, New Zealand, Singapore, and Switzerland. Several non-U.S. members joined especially to attend the York Congress. They will receive the 1984 publications and we very much hope that they will stay with us and attend the 1986 Congress in Philadelphia.

The Fourth Biennial Congress of the NCS, held at York 5-11 August 1984, was well subscribed. 220 members registered; 59 were on the program, representing nearly all of the regions in which we have members. The NCS members were accompanied by 65 dependents, making a total attendance of 285. We are particularly grateful to Derek Pearsall for handling the arrangements in York. Anna Baklin, Nicholas Havely, Carol Meale, and Karen Stern served on the Local Committee in York. Mark Allen and William Pollard from the U.S. assisted with administration of the congress.

The splendid program for the York Congress included a wide range of symposia, seminars, and individual papers. The program was well received, and I hope that this report will give some idea of the richness of the Congress.

The next Congress will be held at St. Andrews, Scotland, 4-10 August 1985. The Congress will be chaired by John Fleming, University of St. Andrews. The program will be announced in the next Newsletter.

Betsy Bowden
Rutgers University, Camden

This is a condensation of one of the reports read at the "Work in Progress" session of the York Congress. Others will be published in subsequent Newsletters.
are sometimes not sure where agency orders are going). Heffernan received 26 submissions for SAC 6, of which he printed 8; and 26 books for review, of which he reviewed 19. I hope that as the membership stabilizes and funds accumulate, it will be possible to publish more papers and review more books. Through rigorous screening, Heffernan has managed to keep the backlog low so that accepted papers can still be published within a year of acceptance.

The annual bibliography, compiled under the direction of Lorrayne Baird, continues to be a valuable part of SAC. Our profession owes a debt of gratitude to the many scholars throughout the world who contribute annotations to the bibliography, which grows more judicious and more comprehensive with each issue. Discussion is proceeding between Lorrayne Baird and A.J. Colaianne about the possibility of storing the annual bibliography in the computers at Virginia Polytechnic Institute along with the data for the Toronto Chaucer bibliographies now being published. Such cooperation could lay grounds for a comprehensive Chaucer data base. Technical and financial details remain to be worked out.

The Trustees have authorized the creation of an annual New Chaucer Society Prize of $200 to be awarded each year for the best graduate student paper read before the Chaucer Division at the convention of the Modern Language Association of America. Alan Gaylord, chair of the 1984 Chaucer Division Executive Committee, announced the competition in a mailing to the MLA Chaucerians last spring. He received 22 submissions. Several were superior performances deserving of recognition. (The first winner is Paul Morrison of Victoria College, University of Toronto.) The International Secretaries have been invited to look into the possibility of similar prizes to encourage student research in other countries.

The NCS Trustees met in Knoxville, Tennessee, in May 1983, and in York in August 1984. The Actions of the 1983 meeting were reported in the October 1983 Newsletter; those of the 1984 meeting are reported in this issue. The next meeting of the Trustees is scheduled in Philadelphia at the time of the 1986 Congress.

The terms of Trustees Robert Frank, Donald Fry, Donald Howard, and Paul Ruggiers end with the York Congress. A nominating Committee composed of Florence Ridley (ch), John Fleming, V.A. Kolbe, Anne Middleton, and James Wimsatt prepared a ballot of new trustees which was sent to the members in February 1984. As a result of this ballot, Larry Benson, Alfred David, Jill Mann, and Charles Owen were elected trustees to serve from the end of the 1984 Congress until the end of the 1988 Congress. Derek Pearsall, Florence Ridley, and Chauncey Wood continue to serve as trustees until the end of the 1986 Congress.

Paul Ruggiers regretted that he could not attend the York Congress, but his cardiologist has advised against his travelling abroad. As the begetter of our Society, he should be with us, but he promises to attend the Philadelphia meeting in 86.

The term of Derek Brewer as NCS President ends with the York Congress. Derek Brewer was a founding trustee of the NCS, serving from 1978 until he assumed the presidency in 1983. We will hardly know how to get along without his guidance and are happy to think that the completion of his terms as Trustee and President does not cut him off from the society of Chaucerians. I express to him and to our graduating trustees the appreciation of the Society for their good counsel during our formative years, and our hope for their continued interest in our affairs.

Our President to serve from the conclusion of this congress in 1984 to the conclusion of the next congress in 1986 is Beryl Rowland of York University, Canada, who has served as the International Secretary for Canada since 1979. She was selected to attend the York Congress but had not recovered from an operation on her hand. She will serve ex officio on the 1986 Program Committee.

At the end of June 1984, the current account of the NCS stood at $26,992.87 in Knoxville and $-5,300 in York. The York account represents payments for the Congress and will be exhausted by Congress expenses. Against the Knoxville account, we must debit some $30,000 for the SAC Proceedings volume and some $7,000 for bills not yet paid for SAC 6. However, some $6,000 will come in from invoices to libraries for SAC 6. In addition to the current account, the endowment fund now stands at $1,350.69; $70,97 was added to this fund during 1984. Thanks to the contribution of $3,000 by the English Department of the University of Tennessee towards the cost of printing the Newsletter and postage, and the contributed services of Jane Fisher in handling membership and finances, the financial situation of the Society is satisfactory.

The revised NCS Constitution was approved by all but a few of those who checked this box on the spring ballot. As you recall, it mandates that the Executive Director shall report to the members on the administration and financial affairs of the Society at each biennial congress, but that all voting on society business shall be by mail ballot of the entire membership. We are just now in the process of establishing our procedures in accordance with the Constitution. This represents the first official report of the Executive Director. I would propose, Mr. President, that the floor now be thrown open for discussion of the report. If there are questions I can answer, I will be glad to do so. If there are suggestions as to procedures or future activities of the society, I will take them before the Trustees who will either act on them or submit them to a mail ballot of the membership.

John H. Fisher
Executive Director

In the discussion that followed at the York Business Meeting, it was suggested that concurrent sessions be dropped at congresses, or that cassette recordings of all papers be provided; that individual sessions be limited to two papers; that session chairpersons not read papers and hold deliveries firmly to the allotted times; that name tags be made more legible. The Director promised to take these matters up with the 1986 Program Committee, but pointed out that the SAC Proceedings volume is intended to make most or many of the papers available to the whole membership.

Formal thanks were voted to Derek Pearsall, to the students and faculty, and to the staff of the University of York for their splendid conduct of the 1984 NCS Congress; to Joseph Trabern, Head, and to the English Department of the University of Tennessee for their continuing support of the Society; and to Jane Fisher for her warm and skillful administration of its affairs.
Nomination by Petition for Trustees 1986-90

Because of the March date of the 1986 NCS Congress, election of the 1986-90 class of trustees must take place in the spring of 1985. The terms of Derek Pearsall, Florence Ridley, and Chauncey Wood will end with the close of the 1986 Congress. Larry Benson, Alfred David, Jill Mann, and Charles Owen will continue to serve through the 1988 Congress.

By Constitutional provision, a Nominating Committee appointed by the President will submit six nominations for the three positions. Nominations may also be made by written petition. Such nominations, signed by ten members, should be mailed to the Executive Director (John H. Fisher, Department of English, University of Tennessee, Knoxville 37996) before 15 January 1985. Assurance must be provided that the nominees are willing to serve. Both nominees and signers must be members of the NCS in good standing. Nominations by petition will be put on the ballot in addition to nominations by the Committee.

The ballot will be attached to the February 1985 Newsletter and the election will end 1 April 1985.

Ohio State Medieval Conference

The sixteenth annual conference sponsored by the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies at The Ohio State University will be held in Columbus 22-23 February 1985. The topic will be "Popular Religious Culture in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance." Expected speakers and topics are Ruth Mellinkoff (UCLA), "Warts and Wens of Infirmity"; Elizabeth Fenea (Texas, Austin), "Islamic Saints and Spirits"; Henry Kamen (Warwick, U.K.), "Jews and the Inquisition"; William Prizer (Santa Barbara), Liturgy and church music; Susan Karant-Nunn (Portand State), "Lutheranism and Peasant Culture in 16th-Century Germany"; Brian Armstrong (Georgia State), "Protestant and Catholic Clergy Before the Revocation."

For further information, write Ken Schurb, 322 Dulles Hall, Ohio State University, Columbus 43210.

St. Mary's Ewelme Restoration Appeal

One of the interesting questions, given the stratification of medieval society, is how Thomas Chaucer managed to marry Maud Berghersh, one of the richest heiresses in England; how their daughter Alice became by her first marriage Countess of Salisbury and by her second Duchess of Suffolk; and how their grandson (Geoffrey's great grandson), John de la Pole, Earl of Lincoln, came to be officially recognized as the heir to the English throne (only to die in battle before he could inherit). Such advancements are not usual for the descendants of an esquire of lesser degree. They have been explored by M.B. Rudd, Russell Krauss, and others (see the Chaucer Life Records, pp. 541-44).

The mystery still broods over the lovely village of Ewelme (pronounced youlm) near Henley in Oxfordshire. Ewelme was the principal seat of Thomas and Maud, and later of Alice and William de la Pole, 1st Duke of Suffolk.

Nothing remains of the manor house, fine enough to be confiscated by Henry VII and eventually divided to Elizabeth, who spent part of her childhood there. But the tombs of Thomas and Alice still stand in the handsome stone church built after 1430 by Alice and William, and the lovely brick almshouses and school adjoin the church, built in 1437. These are as close a physical link as we have with Chaucer the man—Allegate, the Wool Quay, Westminster Close, the Tabard Inn all having long since disappeared.

To combat rising damp, which is affecting the east end of the church and threatening the tomb of Alice Chaucer, and to make other needed repairs, the St. Mary's Restoration Appeal has been established. Chaucerians who wish to contribute should make checks to St. Mary's Ewelme Restoration Appeal, Account no. 65283902, and mail them to the Hon. Treasurer, Ewelme P.C.C., 1 Chaucer Court, Ewelme, Oxon. OX9 6HW.

And Ewelme itself rewards a visit. Geoffrey can hardly have spent much time there: Thomas married Maud in 1539 and Geoffrey died in 1400. But one would like to imagine that he retreated there at least once or twice from the bustle of Westminster. One would like to know what he thought of the rural serenity, so different from what he wrote about in his poetry.

for the splendid arrangements for the York Congress by Derek Pearsall, the members of his Local Committee on Arrangements, and the officers and staff of the University; for the excellent program arranged by Paul Strohm, Florence Ridley, and Derek Pearsall; and for the continuing financial and administrative assistance by the English Department of the University of Tennessee and by John and Jane Fisher.
Enclosed is my subscription for ______ copy(s) at $15 per copy of the SAC supplement containing papers from the 1984 York congress.

Amount enclosed $________

Name ____________________________________________

Address __________________________________________

Mail international money orders in dollars or checks, made out to The New Chaucer Society, drawn on a U.S. bank, to the New Chaucer Society, Department of English, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Tennessee 37996.