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Abstract:

In 2007 the late Gloria Cigman published a novel, *A Wife There Was*, based on one of Chaucer's best known Canterbury pilgrims, the Wife of Bath. An imagined reconstruction of the character's life story, told in the first person by Alison herself, it is in fact a historical novel highlighting social, economic, religious and feminist issues of the day. From this starting point, the present article explores the relationship between literature and history, between fiction and life, and more especially between realistic fiction and "truth". The main focus is on two of Chaucer's other pilgrims, the Parson and the Clerk, one a teacher, the other a student, who together provide insights into different aspects of the late medieval educational system. While both characters appear to be idealised, the study of penitential treatises and didactic manuals of the time shows how true to life they in fact are – not that the poet necessarily had any particular such individuals in mind, but rather that people like them did exist and would have been familiar in Fourteenth-Century England.

From Fiction to Reality: Learning (and Teaching) with Some of Chaucer's Pilgrims

While Chaucer's pilgrims may seem far removed from life today, belonging as they do to a very different era, modern readers can still identify with the existential struggle they illustrate. Literary characters are not real people, but in so far as they are realistically depicted, they represent types and classes drawn from life, from the poet's observation of English society in his own time, the late Fourteenth Century. Caricatures they may be, but the audience of *The Canterbury Tales* would have recognised in them types to be met with every day, in the same way that we often do when reading modern novels, those at least which purport to be drawn from life. It is the essence of realistic fiction that although not "true" in a literal sense – the events are in the writer's mind, not actually happening to the invented characters – the story shows situations that the author expects the audience to understand, perhaps even to have experienced themselves. Whether we laugh in amusement or cry in sympathy, whether we feel for their suffering or take inspiration from their courage, we accept that similar people do exist in real life. Hence our ability to identify with them: "there but for fortune go you or I" is a common feeling. The lessons to be learned from fiction can thus be applicable in our own lives, as readers tend to see aspects of themselves in the characters. It is not only modern "kitchen-sink" drama that can speak to us in this way, but also classical and medieval literature, despite the distance in time and the gaps in culture that separate us from earlier periods of history. Science and technology may have changed the way things are done today, but human nature remains the same now as it was in the Fourteenth Century.

This perception lies at the root of Gloria Cigman's novel about one of Chaucer's pilgrims on the road to Canterbury: Alison, the Wife of Bath.¹ How far is it possible to imagine an authentic background for such a character's life? What kind of childhood might she have had? What kind of education or training could she have received? How did she learn a craft, and later become a businesswoman, capable of managing her own affairs as well as any man did? Beyond what Chaucer tells us in the Prologue to Alison's tale, what stories lay behind her multiple marriages, and how did she feel about them? To answer such questions with any degree of plausibility requires a thorough knowledge of social and economic conditions in Chaucer's time, a knowledge gained by years of reading and pondering. The late Gloria Cigman (1928-2018) was not only a specialist and teacher of medieval English literature; she also had imagination and human empathy which enabled her to make the kind of leap into another mind that is the hallmark of the true novelist. *A Wife There Was* is an

¹ Gloria Cigman, *A Wife There Was* (Oxford, Trafford, 2007). French translation by Marthe Mensah, *Il était une femme* (Barr, Calleva éditions, 2009 ; reprinted by Le Verger éditeur, 2018).

authentic historical novel, its sense of realism communicating not the literal "truth" (though it contains many true facts), but an insight into the kind of life a woman like Alison might really have had.

While not everyone has the ability to write a novel, many of Chaucer's pilgrims invite us to study the historical setting in which real people like them lived. The present paper will focus on the Parson and the Clerk, two characters who resemble each other since the latter can be seen as a younger version of the former. They are both models of their class and profession, to the extent that they are sometimes considered to be idealised, or too good to be true, lacking somewhat in robustness in contrast to Alison's outsize humanity and self-dramatization. But if the Parson and the Clerk represent one extreme – ascetic, virtuous, studious, even saintly – then the Wife of Bath represents another, a caricature of erotic jollity; she is an extrovert while they are introverts, but that does not make her closer to real life than they are. In the literature of social criticism (estates satire) the setting up of standards to be followed presupposes the need for such models in contrast to most people's lack of conformity to the ideal. It should not be inferred, however, that such models did not exist in real life – that Chaucer cannot have met such people, or that he wishes to undermine their authenticity. As Owst reminds us in his ground-breaking study of the relationship between medieval preaching and literature, "we need not look far beyond the English pulpit and its records to account for the Realism which blossoms so freely in Langland and Chaucer".²

The Parson may in fact be compared with other parish priests, real people who wrote about the duties of their state in life and whose works have come down to us, such as John Mirk (or Myrc),³ or the anonymous author of *Jacob's Well*.⁴ Such a comparison does not imply any attempt to establish a correspondence between Chaucer's pilgrims and identifiable historical persons, even if Chaucer sometimes uses the names of real people living in his own day, such as Harry Bailly, the Host of the Tabard Inn.⁵ Chaucer's characters belong to that tradition of realistic literature based on the simple fact that most writers draw their inspiration from people whom the author has known, met, read about or heard of. We do not need to ask if Chaucer was thinking of any particular individual, but merely to recognise that the Parson is plausible because people like him could be encountered in everyday life. Such priests have left ample written evidence in works produced for both the clergy and lay people, providing a glimpse of what an ordinary parish priest could be like. The ideals certainly existed, as manuals of the time make clear; and while religious writers may not always practise what

² G.R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England* (Cambridge [1933], 2nd revised ed. Oxford, Blackwell, 1961), 40.

³ John Myrc. *Instructions for Parish Priests*, ed. Edward Peacock, EETS OS 31 (London, OUP, 1868). This short work, only 60 printed pages in the EETS text, is made up of 1934 lines in rhymed couplets.

⁴ *Jacob's Well* Part I, ed. Arthur Brandeis, EETS OS 115 (London, Kegan Paul, 1900).

⁵ See Leo Carruthers, "Narrative Voice, Narrative Framework: The Host As 'Author' of *The Canterbury Tales*," in *Drama, Narrative and Poetry in The Canterbury Tales*, ed. Wendy Harding (Toulouse, PUM, 2003), 51-67.

they preach, for his portrait of the Parson Chaucer had in mind those who do. There is no good reason to suppose the poet intended any satire when he wrote, "A bettre preest I trowe that nowher noon ys" (I A 524).⁶

In addition to this praise, the Parson is described in the General Prologue as a learned man and a clerk, that is, one who has received a university education. This was not the case with all priests of his day, not all of whom would even have studied theology at a higher level, though all would have received a modicum of training in Christian doctrine, sufficient to enable them to explain the sacraments to the people. Naturally modest, the Parson's later assertion that he was unlearned (*not textueel*, line 57 of the prologue to his sermon) is to be taken as a form of polite self-deprecation. Note, too, that the Parson's so-called tale does not tell a story but is in fact a sermon-treatise on penitence, including a learned discussion of the seven deadly sins. The fact that he was a clerk also provides a point of contact with the Clerk of Oxford, a poor student of *logyk* (philosophy); this devout young man who prays for his benefactors seems likely to enter the priesthood and follow in the Parson's footsteps.

It is no accident that the reference to the Parson's education is immediately followed by a declaration that he was both preacher and teacher, activities that form part of his duties as a parish priest. Indeed, a priest of that time was a teacher in more senses than one: of religion, certainly, but also a teacher of grammar and consequently an instrument in the educational system. The two functions go hand in hand and are constantly rhymed together in Mirk's *Instructions for Parish Priests*, a manual aiming to show the priest who is not a *grete clerk* (line 13) "How thow schalt thy paresche preche, And what thee nedeth hem to teche" (lines 17-18). In his sermon it is the Gospel that the Parson preaches and Christian doctrine that he teaches. While this may seem commonplace for a priest, it is not as straightforward as might be thought when one discovers that not all the clergy were very well instructed and, as Mirk says, it was often a case of the blind leading the blind. The parish clergy in Chaucer's day did not receive the kind of education that we associate with the modern seminary, an institution that dates only from the Counter-Reformation, set up by the Council of Trent (1545-63). In the Middle Ages clerical "training by apprenticeship" as it has been called,⁷ was much more haphazard than today and often left a lot to be desired. Bishops were aware of the need to educate their clergy but the type and quality of training varied greatly from one diocese to another, depending to a large extent on personal interests and priorities. For this reason many bishops throughout the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries issued decrees and constitutions summarising the subjects that priests were required to teach and preach – indeed, a priest was not supposed to preach at all without a licence from the bishop. Whatever the faults of clerical training, however, it is no more than we might expect that a parish priest should be a teacher of religious knowledge. But the wider role played by such men in the

⁶ All Chaucer quotations are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford, OUP, 1988).

⁷ *Medieval Education*, ed. Ronald B. Begley & Joseph W. Koterski, SJ (New York, Fordham University Press, 2005), xii.

medieval educational system is worth recalling.

Before the Education Acts of 1870 and 1880 attendance at primary school was not compulsory in England. There was, consequently, no obligation on anyone in the Middle Ages to send their children to school if they were not interested. Large sections of the population never learned to read or write, nor perhaps did they wish to. Higher education was even more restricted: not even all members of the clergy could hope to go to university. For this reason a "clerk" (*clericus* in Latin) was not merely someone who could read and write and thus engage in secretarial duties, but also a student.⁸ The Clerk of Oxford is not someone engaged in office work, in the modern sense of *clerk*, but primarily one who is in clerical orders, since all students at Oxford and Cambridge were required to be in minor orders at least, the diaconate being the first step leading to the priesthood. The idea that all of the medieval clergy were literate while all of the laity were illiterate needs to be nuanced at both ends of the scale. For one thing, not all the clergy were well educated and in some cases they knew little more of philosophy and theology than did their parishioners. Secondly, there was a significant growth of literacy among the middle classes due to the foundation of grammar schools in towns, in the centuries following the fourth Lateran Council (1215). This was part of a general move by popes and bishops to educate people in the fundamentals of their faith, and to provide training for priests in order to give instruction to the people. Little by little this led to a better educated and better informed public.

As one might expect for the period, these measures were mainly aimed at boys; in the general opinion, a woman's place was in the home or convent and so girls did not need to go to school. In the Church's view, literacy was more important for boys than for girls, not only because the priesthood was restricted to males but also because literate men might be trained for civil administration. This did not mean that no woman ever learned to read; on the contrary, many references in literature show that middle and upper-class women could read in French and English, the two languages of general communication in England during the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries; but it did mean that, with rare exceptions in convents, they were not usually familiar with Latin, the language of theology, science and law. How the Wife of Bath might have got around the problem of gender discrimination and managed to go to school is one of the secrets of Gloria Cigman's novel.

What kind of school career could the average middle-class boy expect to follow? The normal progression was from elementary school to grammar or cathedral school and from there (for a minority) to university. In an educational system not uniform or supervised on a national level, all kinds of local variations could be found in towns and parishes, mostly depending on the initiative of the clergy, secular and regular.⁹ The elementary school was for

⁸ Michael T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record. England 1066-1307* (Oxford, Blackwell [1989], 2nd ed. 1993), chapter 7, "Literate and Illiterate: Meanings of 'Clericus' and 'Litteratus'," 226-30.

⁹ See Nicholas Orme, *English Schools in the Middle Ages* (London, Methuen, 1973); also *Medieval Children*, 2 vols. (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2001-2003).

young boys, up to the age of eight, who would start by learning the fundamentals of Latin and singing. Grammar was taught from two standard texts by Donatus and Priscian, late Roman grammar masters. Donatus (mid-Fourth Century) was the author of an *Ars grammatica* which is an analysis of the parts of speech, most attention being paid to the noun and its adjectives; it remained in use for hundreds of years, to the extent that in Middle English the word *Donat* is used to signify an elementary book of instruction. Priscian (early Sixth Century) was a grammarian at Constantinople who wrote a Latin Grammar in eighteen books, rich in quotations from the classical authors, which was also widely used in the Middle Ages.¹⁰ Boys were expected to know their *Donatus* well before entering a grammar school. They would learn it under the tuition of their local parish priest, who was therefore a schoolmaster as well as having the cure of souls. In some cases elementary schools were under ecclesiastical control and the parson required a licence from the bishop to teach, an extension of the bishop's right, at another level, to control preaching.

At the age of eight a boy could hope to go to grammar school where he would continue his studies in Latin grammar and be introduced to Latin literature. Grammar schools existed only in larger towns and were run by the higher clergy. Since the larger towns were often the seat of a bishop (in medieval England there were only seventeen dioceses)¹¹ this could mean that the grammar school was more or less the same as the cathedral school, but there was a difference. More ancient, cathedral schools had a distinctly religious and liturgical purpose, since the choir boys were trained to sing in public in Church services. As the boys were also maintained and educated by the diocese, parents who might not otherwise be able to provide a good education for their sons were very happy to send them to the cathedral school. If they felt so inclined, or were encouraged by their parents, boys could progress to theological studies at the age of sixteen; it was possible to do this at the cathedral school, where they could remain until ordination, but if they were lucky, and if supported by the bishop or another patron, they might go on to Oxford or Cambridge. The cathedral school therefore functioned partly as a diocesan seminary, a forerunner of the minor and major seminaries that were set up to train Catholic priests after the Reformation.

The main difference between the grammar school and the cathedral school was that the boys in a grammar school would not be expected to sing in choir and might be more likely to go on to university. In practice the distinction was not always very precise, at least up to the age of sixteen. In Exeter, for example, the boys in the cathedral choir attended the grammar school, which was in fact run by the cathedral chapter while being open to others besides the choirboys. In 1344 a new schoolroom and a dwelling for the schoolmaster were completed through the generosity of the dean of Exeter. During the course of the century the

¹⁰ See *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*, ed. Sir Paul Harvey (Oxford, Clarendon, 1937, 2nd ed. 1974), 345.

¹¹ R.N. Swanson, *Church and Society in Late Medieval England* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1989), 1-3 with map. To the English dioceses may be added a further four in Wales, subject to the jurisdiction of Canterbury.

grammar master acquired a monopoly of teaching in the city and the surrounding countryside up to a distance of seven miles. He was not paid by the cathedral chapter but lived wholly on pupils' fees.¹² This includes the pupils who were paid for by the chapter but it also implies that the wealthy middle classes were ready to pay for their sons' education.

Only the brightest would be sent on to university, if their families could afford to pay for them – or, as in the case of Chaucer's Clerk, if they were supported by a generous benefactor such as the bishop or a lay patron. Here they would pursue higher studies in philosophy, theology and canon law. Only some of them would eventually take a degree; many left the university without doing so. In either case they could still return to their bishop after a period of study and seek ordination, hoping to receive a benefice to a parish, or else to be employed in the ecclesiastical courts or in other forms of public administration. In the later Middle Ages it grew increasingly common for those who became civil servants to return to the lay state after leaving the university, so that gradually the word "clerk" began to lose its connection with the Church and to acquire its modern meaning, which was a long and slow process. On the eve of the English Reformation the post of Lord Chancellor could still be occupied by a powerful ecclesiastic like Cardinal Wolsey (1472-1530), though he was succeeded in 1529 by a layman, Sir Thomas More (1478-1535).

For boys not going into the Church or public administration it is a matter of conjecture how much education, in the sense of literacy, was thought necessary; it must have varied greatly from family to family. There is much evidence that during the Fourteenth Century, and even more so as time went on, there was an ever-growing class of lay people who could read and write in English and French and who also had some knowledge of Latin.¹³ The reasons for acquiring an education must have depended on the family and their professional, social, military and religious interests. Among the landed gentry, where the eldest son was expected to inherit the bulk of the family property, younger sons had to find ways to earn a livelihood, warfare and the Church being the most acceptable.¹⁴ For the middle class, the universities were becoming training grounds for royal officials, judges, lawyers and estate managers, who might or might not be in holy orders. Some parents would no doubt push their sons in the direction of a Church career for purely economic reasons. More pious parents would also be happy to see their sons entering the priesthood for spiritual reasons; religion was not divorced from secular life as would later happen. Such an environment provided many opportunities, economic and social, practical and intellectual, for the spread of literacy and the demand for education. Geoffrey Chaucer's father was a prosperous London wine-

¹² Janet Coleman, *English Literature in History, 1350-1400. Medieval Readers and Writers* (London, Hutchinson, 1981), 27.

¹³ On the struggle to translate Latin and publish in the vernacular in the period 1370-1410 see Fiona Somerset, *Clerical Discourse and Lay Audience in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998).

¹⁴ Warfare was a commonplace of medieval life, all monarchs expecting the nobility and the gentry to raise troops to fight in support of the king's cause; but there was no standing army – a permanent, professional body of military – in England before Cromwell created the New Model Army in 1645.

merchant who did not send his son to university, but did make sure he got a good start in life by placing him as a page in one of the royal households; Chaucer would spend the rest of his career as a civil servant working in various Crown departments.¹⁵

During the course of the Fourteenth Century the language of instruction in the grammar schools changed from French to English. While boys went to school to study Latin grammar and literature, the medium of education was their native tongue, which by the middle of the century was English for most people. French was the language of the upper classes after the Norman Conquest and was used in schools up to the years following the Black Death (1346), a period of great social upheaval. A contemporary historian, John of Trevisa (c. 1340-1402), himself a parish priest in Berkeley (Gloucestershire), says that the movement to replace French in grammar schools started in his native Cornwall in 1348-9 and was complete all over England by 1385.¹⁶ He may in fact have exaggerated, since we learn from a passage in *Jacob's Well* (written perhaps forty years later, c. 1425) that "if a grammarian speak his own language in school, English, he shall be smote with a palmer on the hand, or scoured [i.e. beaten], or taken by the cheek or by the ear, and he shall be taught to speak Latin or French".¹⁷ However, this example contradicting Trevisa's generalisation may be merely anecdotal. It may safely be said that the use of English in lay education c. 1348-1400 is one reflection of a number of political, social and religious movements taking place in England which saw the strengthening of an urban middle class, the increase of national awareness and the growth of the modern nation state.

It was possible for families to seek a school providing free tuition and there is evidence that wealthy patrons, no doubt for pious and philanthropic reasons, sometimes paid the schoolmaster in their parish not to turn away anyone who genuinely wanted to learn. This was the case in the school at Wotton-under-Edge (Gloucestershire), established in 1384 by Katherine, Lady Berkeley, whose aim was to provide for members of the public wishing to be taught grammar but lacking the means.¹⁸ Going a step further, a poor student could seek a rich benefactor, to whom he would forever remain suitably grateful, as did the pilgrim Clerk of Oxford who was, Chaucer says, mindful to pray for those who enabled him to pursue his studies. An interesting development at Oxford in this period was the foundation of New College in 1379 by William of Wykeham, Bishop of Winchester and Chancellor of England, one of the richest prelates of the day. His purpose was to supply the Church with parish priests to make good the heavy losses caused by the Black Death, priests who would be better

¹⁵ Chaucer's name first appears in the royal accounts in 1356 as a page to Elizabeth, Countess of Ulster, wife of Lionel of Antwerp, second surviving son of King Edward III. See Derek Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1992), 34.

¹⁶ John of Trevisa's Translation of Higden's *Polychronicon*, chapter lix, in *Fourteenth Century Verse and Prose*, ed. Kenneth Sisam (Oxford, Clarendon, 1921, corrected 1967), 148-50.

¹⁷ From the unedited part of *Jacob's Well*, Salisbury Cathedral Library ms. 103, ch. 65, fo. 143v (here with slightly modernised spelling).

¹⁸ Nicholas Orme, *Education in the West of England, 1066-1548* (Exeter, Exeter UP, 1976), 193. Katherine was the widow of Lord Berkeley, of Berkeley Castle, Gloucestershire.

educated than in the past, by giving them a university training. The first college in Oxford to accommodate undergraduates, New College was an innovation; before this time they were housed in halls of residence, whereas colleges had been for graduates only, who lived in community.¹⁹ Very soon after, in 1382, the bishop founded the College of St Mary in his cathedral town of Winchester as a grammar school from which the university college would draw its students; not until 1854, nearly five hundred years later, did New College, Oxford, take students from any other school. Winchester is the best known grammar school of this type, originally run by a nucleus of secular priests. Its connection with a particular university college inspired imitation, as in Henry VI's dual foundation of Eton (a grammar school) and King's College, Cambridge, in 1441.

Many other grammar schools were founded in England during the period; it has been estimated that seventy-seven pre-university schools, some free, some fee-paying, existed by the end of the Fourteenth Century. Initially masters depended on fees paid by parents, but gradually, where a generous ecclesiastical or noble patron could be found, more schools began to provide free education. As said earlier, before admittance a pupil had to be competent in reading, singing and *Donatus*, which he would have studied in elementary school under his parish priest. Since very few of their pupils would go on to the arts faculties in Oxford and Cambridge (and even fewer would ever become priests), it meant that more and more lay people were becoming literate. What became of these scholars is hard to say unless, in particular cases, we can trace their careers beyond the town schools either to cathedral schools of higher study, or to university. In the town school they learned reading, singing and grammar; in the cathedral school they continued with Latin, logic and the liberal arts but also studied theology and law, taught by university graduates. In this way, current intellectual attitudes to moral issues were passed on to a wider range of non-university priests and laity. In the words of one historian, "It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of the educated layman in late medieval ecclesiastical history".²⁰ Chaucer himself, a busy civil servant all his working life and a poet only in his spare time, is a perfect example of an educated, non-university layman with a good knowledge of Latin, French and even Italian literature.

Education can be a means of social control, but it also tends to escape from the authorities and become an instrument of social change. In one respect the Church was a victim of its own success, in that the increase in lay literacy facilitated the spread of ideas and the wish for reform. It is no accident that the last decades of the Fourteenth Century saw the rise of the popular heretical movement called Lollardy which spread among the middle classes. Some of its well-known leaders were friends of Chaucer's, though the poet himself seems to have kept a prudent distance from their tenets. Harry Bailey, the Host of the

¹⁹ Michael Hall, *Oxford* (Cambridge, Pevensey Press, 1981, 2nd ed. 1983), 59-60.

²⁰ William A. Pantin, *The English Church in the Fourteenth Century* (Cambridge, CUP, 1955, repr. Medieval Academy of America, 1980), 189.

Canterbury Tales, claims to "smell a Loller [Lollard] in the wind" when the Parson reprimands him for swearing, but there is nothing else to suggest that the Parson had any heretical leanings; on the contrary, his sermon is entirely orthodox. The Lollards were the followers of an Oxford scholar, John Wyclif (c. 1330-84), one of the principal defenders of poor parish priests in an age of much corruption, religious as well as political. As a theologian his doctrines were controversial, though he was never formally condemned as a heretic; if he had been, he would probably have gone to the stake. Among other things, he advocated, like many religious reformers before and since, a return to a more primitive, Bible-based form of Christianity, a teaching certain to conflict with the hierarchy's view of itself as the unique and authentic interpreter of Scripture and tradition. In order to further his beliefs, Wyclif encouraged the preparation of a new English translation of the Bible and insisted that people should have access to Scripture in their native tongue. This initiative was a logical outcome of several complementary movements: the spread of literacy, the recovery of the English language, and popular demand for religious literature. If such a move had come from a more orthodox quarter, the English Bible might have had much popular success. But given his other unconventional views, some of which were undeniably heretical (e.g. his attack on the doctrine of the Eucharist), Wyclif was opposed on all fronts by the bishops. He finished his days as parish priest of Lutterworth (Leicestershire), which meant in effect exile to a remote village forced on him by his superiors who wished him far away from the university.

The Church's efforts to promote education were those of a paternalistic institution with a specific religious aim, the salvation of souls. A minimum of instruction in Christian doctrine was thus required of the faithful, hence the need for good priests who were trained teachers. For most people the only form of instruction available was religious, through the parish priest. In the wake of the fourth Lateran Council of 1215, many manuals were produced to help the parish priest to fulfil his duties in this respect. Originally in Latin, they have names like *Oculus Sacerdotis*, *Speculum Curatorum*, *Regimen Animarum*, and *Memoriale Sacerdotum*.²¹ These are partly intended as handbooks for the priest's own information but contain much that was meant to be passed on, in the vernacular, to the people. The first part of the *Oculus Sacerdotis* (c. 1320-28) by William of Pagula is a manual for confessors, instructing the priest how to hear confessions. Yet it finds room for "advice to be given to expectant mothers, who are told to avoid heavy work, and mothers are enjoined to suckle their own children, as this is shown to be best, both by Scripture and medical science".²² Part II is a programme of instruction, in which, among other things, the priest is to expound to his parishioners the various practical duties of a layman.

As the poorer clergy had not always received a higher education and found Latin difficult, it became necessary to translate such books into English, often in revised or adapted

²¹ See Pantin, *op. cit.*, ch. IX.

²² Pantin, *op. cit.*, 197.

versions. Thus Mirk's *Instructions for Parish Priests* is an abridged English version of the *Oculus Sacerdotis*. There was naturally much that was borrowed and handed on from one generation to the next and translations were not always strict, so that the question of sources and influences becomes acutely difficult for the modern editor: this applies to the Parson's Tale itself, which is not a "tale" in the sense of a story, but rather a penitential manual in sermon form, resembling other treatises of the period.²³ Some of these manuals are very simple (no more than summaries of Christian doctrine), produced by or for bishops as a sort of catechism, like *Dan John Gaytryge's Sermon*. Others, made by scholars, are complex and show a high degree of learning, aimed not so much at lay people as at the clergy, in an attempt to provide some ongoing professional instruction. John Mirk specifically wrote in English for priests "mean of lore" (line 1750), i.e. of little learning, "that have no books of their own" (line 1924).

Many other religious and moral treatises in the vernacular were intended for spiritual reading for priests, religious and lay people. In a mainly oral culture those who were unable to read (or who could not afford to buy books) might be acquainted with various forms of literature as a result of being read to by others. Public reading of spiritual works was a feature of courtly culture in the homes of the middle and upper classes, as well as in religious communities of both sexes. Margery Kempe is a good example of a middle-class laywoman, daughter of a wealthy burgess of Lynn, who says that while she was unable to read herself, she had learned a great deal by listening to her parish priest reading to her from mystical treatises, four of which are named in her *Book*.²⁴ It is not always easy to tell if a particular manual or treatise is intended for use by priests or by literate lay people. A book ostensibly written for the laity like the *Somme le Roi*, composed in Paris in 1279 and translated into English a number of times in the following centuries, could well be read, or listened to, with profit in convents; indeed, a study of the pronouns used in one translation, *The Book of Vices and Virtues*, suggests that it was made for religious women.²⁵ Other scenarios suggest themselves for other treatises: for example, Mirk's *Instructions for Parish Priests* has a clear-cut title that seems to leave no room for doubt as to its intended audience, but the fact that it is written in English rhymed couplets, in a sort of popular jingle easy to memorise by "priests mean of lore", also raises the possibility that it was meant to be picked up in the same form by parishioners.

Another case is *Jacob's Well*, a long allegorical sermon series composed for public preaching in a parish church: it is mainly addressed to the laity (listeners) but has some

²³ For an account of its probable sources, both major and minor, see the *Riverside Chaucer*, Explanatory Notes, 956-65, Textual Notes, 1134-5.

²⁴ *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Barry Windeatt (London, Longman, 2000), 9-10. Margery's father was mayor of Lynn (Norfolk), a town once known as Bishop's Lynn before taking its modern name of King's Lynn.

²⁵ See Leo Carruthers, *La Somme le Roi et ses traductions anglaises: étude comparée* (Paris, AMAES no. 12, 1986), 65.

pointed barbs aimed at members of the clergy and religious orders (readers).²⁶ Such a work is plainly written for religious instruction in the form of popular preaching. Its unknown author may have been a secular priest or canon, a parish priest with the cure of souls, of the same type as John Mirk; at the same time he was probably a town schoolmaster, as certain allusions in the text would suggest. No doubt thinking wryly of his own schoolhouse, he reproves men for spending their time in the devil's schoolhouse, i.e. the tavern, where the only lessons they learn are those of gluttony and lechery (148/6-12) – an image inherited from the earlier *Somme le Roi*. Although writing for adults, he occasionally shows familiarity with children and school life. Sometimes he holds up their innocence, or their childish fears, as a lesson to the congregation: for example, men should hear and believe the word of God with the simplicity of a child who believes everything that is said, praying to God with tears and feeling bad, like a child that does not know his lesson standing fearful before the schoolmaster (245/12-22); people should be simple and generous like the little boy who shares his bread freely with his companions, even the cats and dogs, for a child is pure (309/15-21), etc. Literate and cultivated, well-educated and urbane, the writer shows a particular interest in canon and civil law and has some familiarity with the intricacies of the ecclesiastical courts. This is the kind of man who, as part of his parish duties, would have taught the first elements of Latin grammar to his young pupils.

Chaucer's Parson, who is portrayed as learned, holy, devoted to his parishioners, a teacher and a preacher, can easily be imagined as the type of priest who would have been the author of *Jacob's Well*. John Mirk, author of the (much shorter) *Instructions for Parish Priests*, is another priest of the same stamp. Such men would have been available as models to Chaucer, whose Parson thus becomes a type – not merely a fiction but a form of reality. He may represent an ideal, but it was not an improbable one; it was a living ideal that actually existed. The parish priest was expected to care for all aspects of his parishioners' lives, not just to instruct them in their religious observance. He was both confessor and psychiatrist, marriage counsellor and schoolteacher, defender of the poor, protector of widows and orphans. At the very least, such an ideal was held up as a goal to aim for. Portrayed as a Good Shepherd, Chaucer's Parson certainly practised what he preached: "This noble ensauple to his sheepe he yaf, / That first he wroghte, and afterward he taughte" (I A 496-7).

Chaucer's Clerk of Oxford illustrates some aspects of university life, the high point of the educational system. As said above, he is a "clerk" precisely because he is a student, since all university students were obliged to be in minor orders at least. Taking major orders, i.e. being ordained as a priest, was a choice to be made upon graduation; for professors it was compulsory only for doctors of theology but not in law, the other major faculty. The portrait

²⁶ See Leo Carruthers, "Know Thyself: Criticism, Reform and the Audience of *Jacob's Well*," in *Medieval Sermons and Society: Cloister, City, University*, ed. Jacqueline Hamesse et al. (Louvain-la-Neuve, FIDEM, 1998), 219-40.

in the General Prologue defines the Clerk in terms of his devotion to learning and his ascetic appearance, matched by the gaunt look of his old nag, "as lean as a rake". Everything about him reminds us of his poverty, including his threadbare clothes (I A 290); he is obviously an impoverished student. He is also an ideal one, for he is devoted to his studies in logic and philosophy. After graduation he will almost certainly become a priest of the same type as the Parson, for he refuses to serve the world by taking up a secular office (I A 292), i.e. he will not end up as a civil servant, like so many of his fellow clerks. He is not specifically said to be studying theology, but this is not a sign of his being interested only in more worldly matters, in the secular branch of learning, for it was not considered necessary for a priest to have made a deep study of theology beyond the essential doctrines of the faith. Theology was a higher branch of learning practised by specialists, doctors of the university, having little to do with the practical administration of the sacraments or the running of a parish. It was no shame for a priest not to be an intellectual, as long as he knew the laws of God and of the Church well enough to be able to teach them to his flock; as we have seen, many manuals were available to help him to carry out his duties effectively.

The elements of similarity between the younger Clerk and the older Parson may lead us to ask how typical, in fact, Chaucer's Clerk of Oxford is. Did people like him really exist? Does he have any literary antecedents? Parallels for the parish priest may be found in the manuals, as mentioned above, but the Clerk is a more difficult case: as Hastings Rashdall says, "the life of the virtuous student has no annals".²⁷ Medieval students have left fewer personal records than their professors, who are often known through their writings. Literature, of course, tends to focus on the dramatic or unusual, not on the ordinary; the humdrum, day-to-day existence of most people tends to get overlooked. The absence of literary antecedents is not therefore to be taken as proof that people like the Clerk of Oxford did not exist in real life. He speaks little, and then only of "moral vertu", the proper end of philosophy. He prays for his friends who pay for his studies (I A 299), suggesting that he comes from a modest background, not from a well-off family. Such a youth will have attended either grammar school or cathedral school. From there, he may have been encouraged by the bishop to go to university, and he may have been recommended to the notice of a lord or lady who has agreed to pay for his studies; to give alms for education was seen as a pious act, hence the founding and endowment of schools and colleges. From this portrait readers will clearly draw their own conclusions about less ideal clerks: those who treated education as a means to advance in the world, who would prefer expensive clothes and playing music to the books for which the Clerk longs (he does not *possess* twenty books, as lines 293-4 are sometimes interpreted, but would only *prefer* to have them).

In some of the other tales Chaucer does give us portraits of students of a less

²⁷ Hastings Rashdall, *The Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages* (Oxford [1895], revised by F.M. Powicke & A.B. Emden, 3 vols., Oxford, Clarendon, 1936), vol. III, 441. On student life see chapter XIV.

admirable, though certainly more amusing, kind. They are not pilgrims like the Clerk of the General Prologue, but appear as characters within the stories told by other pilgrims, in particular the Miller and the Reeve. Both of the latter tell fabliaux, or tales of low life and burlesque comedy, which warns us what to expect. Nicholas, the Oxford clerk of the Miller's Tale, and Aleyn and John, the two Cambridge students of the Reeve's Tale, belong to a more typical literary type: the drinking, whoring, thieving layabout, made famous in student poetry by the medieval *goliards*.²⁸ All three get into scrapes involving cuckoldry and ridicule of authority figures, while getting the better of rich tradesmen. Nicholas manages to sleep with his landlord's wife but then has his bottom branded by his rival's red-hot iron, while Aleyn and John not only sleep with the miller's wife and daughter but also retrieve their stolen flour in the form of a cake. Nicholas may not be as poor as the pilgrim Clerk, since, unlike him, he manages to have both books *and* a musical instrument, his "gay sautrie" (I A 3208-15).²⁹

Before the rule of residence was imposed in c. 1410,³⁰ and certainly still in Chaucer's day, rich students could live independently with their own servants, while a poor student might have to work in what little spare time he had, often as a servant, fetching and carrying water for example. Many students lived in dire poverty and Chaucer's Poor Clerk would by no means have been an exception. Life was hard, without many creature comforts. Students were officially allowed no distractions except on feast days. Needless to say, such prohibitions frequently prompted illicit amusements in the form of drinking, gambling, singing, fighting, poaching, hawking, and playing practical jokes; in this light the lecherous students of the Reeve's Tale might simply appear to be normal, healthy young men out for a bit of fun and adventure. One cannot help feeling, though, that the Clerk of Oxford, with his grave countenance and sober looks, suspected by the Host of preparing a sermon for his fellow-pilgrims (IV E 13-14), would have reproved the disreputable Aleyn and John rather than join them: "Sownynge in moral vertu was his speche, / And gladly wolde he lerne and gladly teche" (I A 307-8).

The fact that the Clerk is said to be ready for a benefice (i.e. an appointment to a parish) does not necessarily mean that he has completed his Master's studies, since it was possible (after ordination) to obtain a benefice without taking a degree. It appears that he has been studying for the MA for several years and will soon take his degree; the reference to "logic" in the context may stand for the Arts course in general, so that Chaucer may not mean to imply more than that the Clerk had been at university for a long time. Like many other English students of the day, he has had occasion to spend some time abroad and particularly mentions the University of Padua, where he first heard the story that he goes on to relate. Attributed explicitly to Petrarch, the Clerk's Tale of Patient Griselda has nothing to do with university life, but it is in the prologue to the tale that the Clerk refers to Padua (IV E 26-33).

²⁸ On this topic see Helen Waddell, *The Wandering Scholars* (London, Constable, 1927, 7th ed. 1934).

²⁹ Helen Cooper, *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales* (Oxford, OUP, 1989, 2nd ed. 1991), 43.

³⁰ Michael Hall, *Oxford, op.cit.*, 6

Another popular centre to attract his contemporaries was the University of Paris, where the so-called "English nation" grouped together all North European students, a tradition going back to the earliest days of Paris, from which Oxford itself had been founded.³¹ In the *Speculum Stultorum* or "Mirror of Fools" (c. 1180), Nigel Wireker satirizes the English students at Paris in the person of an ass, Brunellus, who studies there for seven years without learning a word, braying at the end the same as he did at the beginning, and leaving at last with the resolve to become a monk or a bishop. Chaucer himself, in the Nun's Priest's Tale, refers to this Brunellus as "Daun Burnell the Asse" (VII 3312) – a forerunner of the type of student described in Chaucer's fabliaux.

For graduates of this worldly type, civil service jobs paid well and often led to ecclesiastical preferment. To be made a rector, or titular parish priest, did not necessarily mean living in the parish or taking any interest in the running of it; preferment was a way of paying a man for services rendered, since tithes from the parish provided the incumbent's income. This led to a high level of absenteeism as well as to the abuse of accumulating benefices, since the higher clergy, such as bishops who were often officers of the Crown, could be titular of many parishes, thus earning high revenues. In the absence of the titular the real work on the ground was done by a vicar (from Latin *vicarius*, literally a substitute); but vicars, paid by the bishop or by the rector who held the living, were often very poor. Chaucer was fully aware of the social, economic and religious implications of the system. His contemporary John Wyclif, the Oxford reformer, was noted for his defence of poor priests. He complained that it was not the good clerks who were presented to livings but what he called "kitchen clerks or pen clerks", wise in worldly affairs but knowing nothing of God or the sacraments or Holy Church.³² While Chaucer's portrait of the Parson recalls Wyclif's "poor priests", his portrait of the Clerk is the very antithesis of Wyclif's "kitchen clerks".

Literature can thus be a key to life. Whether we speak of the austere Poor Parson, the studious Clerk of Oxford or the wealthy, amorous Wife of Bath, behind each character may be found, not a particular individual whom the poet had in mind, but realistic human types such as could be met with in everyday life. No doubt the same could be shown to be true for Chaucer's other pilgrims, were we to explore further behind the façade, as Gloria Cigman did in her novel. Evidence for their existence may be found in historical archives of various kinds, depending on the character and his/her profession: not only in the poetry and prose written for entertainment, like the *Canterbury Tales*, but also in religious sermons and treatises, as well as in the records preserved in towns, trade guilds, universities and ecclesiastical libraries.

³¹ See Charles Homer Haskins, *The Rise of Universities* (Ithaca & London, Cornell UP, 1923, 2nd ed. 1957).

³² Quoted in *The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*, ed. R.T. Davies (London, Harrap, 1953), 90.