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The Pilgrimage of Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales

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THE PILGRIMAGE OF GEOFFREY CHAUCER'S

CANTERBURY TALES

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis was derived from a desire to make visual the spiritual significance and physical experience of the medieval pilgrimage envisioned by Geoffrey Chaucer in his *Canterbury Tales*. The final illustrations involved consist of twelve personal expressions which denote symbolically the relationship between the medieval thought and aesthetic. The idea of illustrating the pilgrimage developed and was stimulated by the many intriguing monuments of faith seen in France.
From earliest times of the most primitive human life came the concept that not one man singularly but his whole specie banded together formed a significant pivotal point in the structure of his world. Through his awareness and observations of celestial and terrestrial movements in rhythmic patterns man developed spiritual, super-natural and scientific beliefs which could better explain his position and power. Man developed manners in which to measure these events, and realized the relativity of all segments of his environment. Man envisioned a superior being or god like himself who controlled the natural cycles of his environment for the advantage or disadvantage of man. Man could see in relationship to this god such elements which proved through repetition and pattern to relate and interrelate symbolically to various movements in the celestial and terrestrial world. In the Middle Ages these different studies became known as astrology, alchemy, astronomy as well as formalized...
religion. In medieval thought based on the planets, the humours, and signs of the zodiac were perfectly consistent and inter-related. Many of these ideas became a part of organized religion believing in the validity of all orders of creation as parts of the divine plan.

Although this religion was termed Christian, it still retained many primitively symbolic relationships. This symbolic personification is best seen in many of the religious arts of the medieval period. The concepts of realism and illusionism were continually struggled with, resulting in the question of what is real. Involved in this concern for realism or illusionism was the rivalry between pagan and Christian doctrine. Religious iconography was sought as a tool against paganism and to further promote Christianity by directing the faithful from material bonds of secular life to the contemplation of divine truth. The medieval man built cathedrals such as Canterbury to direct and inspire the faithful. The cathedral became the symbol of divine rational proportions and was said to be the testament of praise to the creator. It became the destination of pilgrimages such as the one described by Chaucer.

In his writings Chaucer exemplifies this medieval concept of order, proportions, and beauty, as can be visibly seen in the cathedrals today.
"For Chaucer, the system of man was locked in the system of the universe, and treated as something magical in origin rather than scientific. The interlocking consistency of the theories as well as the assurance that it was all based upon the work of a creator whose ways were incalculable were to be accepted by mankind."¹

Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and concept of the pilgrimage relate to zodiac sequences thus embracing the orders of creation in significant descriptions of perfect order and harmony. He saw events in time as organized rhythmic and harmonious patterns.

Chaucer used the idea of seasonal changes and cycles as symbolic and related to the concept of the pilgrimage. The purpose of the pilgrimage was the pursuit of religious enlightenment and penance, and upon which the pilgrim is forced to overcome physical perils that tried his faith. The pilgrims constituted a variety of people who were brought together supposedly by prayer. The seasons and months of the year became symbolic of the joys and sorrows of life from youth to old age as well as periods of seeking and finding true faith exemplified in reaching the cathedral.

Chaucer begins his tale with spring to convey the idea of hope, rebirth and a happy beginning for the search for religious enlightenment.

"Philosophically, it typifies the resurgence of vegetative soul in the plants, the animal soul in the birds, and the human soul in mankind, seeking a spiritual pathway with undertaking the pilgrimage. For mankind spring typified a time of elevation to the plane of eternity."\(^2\)

To medieval mankind all nature was real only as it was symbolic of the true reality that was to be known in the life to come.

Chaucer did not overlook the various surface reasons for pilgrimages and indicates this in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*. The general concept of the pilgrimage can be understood on several levels from enlightenment and penance to wanderlust and involuntary force, a fact significant to remember in both the tales and the illustrations.

Chaucer frequently shifts from an aesthetic concern to a spiritual one, from reality to illusion. The individual tales can be understood as anecdotes, moral lessons constituting a description of a kind of medieval life. He describes each pilgrim with realism and a progressive vision. His journey is a kind of image and pattern of man's uncertain but lively progress through an infinitely varied world toward a Christian destination.

The idea of the pilgrimage seems quite mysterious even today when each spring thousands of people flock to places such as

\(^2\)Ibid., p. 21.
Notre-Dame in Paris to view the remains of martyrs and saints as well as pieces from the original crown of thorns of Christ. People today seek evidence of faith in some artistically dimensional form. Such monuments of faith as Notre-Dame display an interesting view of medieval reality, the horror and beauty of life conveyed symbolically. The medieval artists responsible for these magnificent works gave themselves so completely to creating a monument of faith that they gave to future pilgrims evidence of their own faith. This evidence or physical goal of a pilgrimage is not faith nor enlightenment itself. It is not the reaching of a destination which is important but the steps through which one goes toward it. Faith of these pilgrims will be reached in the struggle and the process of reaching the destination not in the destination itself. The pilgrimage proved to be basically a symbolic experience.

Chaucer leaves his tales unfinished with the pilgrims never reaching Canterbury Cathedral, and it remains a vision forever unidentified and mysterious. Chaucer perhaps questioned the value of reaching the cathedral. He may have been saying that the ability for this experience to be of value in spiritual attainment lies within each individual pilgrim. Reaching Canterbury could not offer any assurance of spiritual benefit. He places no limit upon time in his tales nor destinations but records the pilgrimage
as a cycle which always returns to its beginnings. It seems to be an ever flowing experience of events. The entire work displays varied levels of reality.
Before the final illustrations developed, I had struggled through several ideas and concepts expressing Chaucer's thought in his Canterbury Tales. My first idea which I did not complete, consisted of taking an excerpt from his tales and handsetting it in fourteen point American uncial type in two color reproduction with decorative illustrations culminating in a small printed book. My main interest and concern became the illustrations. The forms first derived were cold, sterile, impersonal as well as the concept being inhibiting. The complications of not enough type and a desire for more illustrations in color was limiting. Through continuous reading and research about Chaucer I realized more fully the form and concept which I wanted the illustrations to have.

For the final illustrations the approach to the work was to convey the concept of the psychological and physical pilgrimage with the aid of gesture drawings and free-flowing forms in patterns. This pilgrimage can be conceived of as a period of spiritual search through great moral perils. It was to be thought of as a positive and in
some cases negative experience. For the mind it could be an inner struggle toward religious enlightenment with periods of mysterious uncertainty symbolized in seasons and months of the year. Thus in imagery my goal was to illustrate symbolically through the moods of seasons the inner pilgrimage.

The images are to be understood as symbols defined in various line techniques and color. It is hoped that the illustrations convey an atmospheric quality and character which is medieval displaying relationships between the celestial and terrestrial powers as a whole. I prefered not to illustrate a literal interpretation of his tales which the reader could gain from reading the text. A literal interpretation would have been inhibiting to the free quality I desired in the technique.

An attempt was made to create a multiple unity with each illustration also being an entity itself. No one illustration was meant to be more significant than another. I felt a need to pattern the illustrations in an organized system which would have a similar character to Pieter Brueghel's work, A sixteenth century Flemish painter. All detail in the images was to be subtle. To further the concept of multiple unity each illustration was mounted on wood and contained in a slipcase of wood. The purpose of the wood mount was to give the individual piece more substance and stability.

The idea of conveying the months of the year used symbolically
as a tool was derived from an understanding of medieval thought and superstition which existed with the Christian ethic. The seasons begin with April and culminate in March as did Chaucer's pilgrimage begin in spring, and attempt to convey the idea of a journey through time.

The arch form and sun images where present in the upper portion of the illustration proved to be a device to give a kind of medieval order and control, and to convey a formal power outside the medieval reality. The formallness of the lines in the arch work in opposition to the fra-

quality of line below. The lines of the lower portion of the illustration were meant to crawl, pierce and interconnect with other forms. The technique and general composition resulted from the influence of medieval illuminations and works of men such as Durer and Breughel. The idea was to give subtle variations in points of view conveying movement, in shallow space. The lines generating from forms, color, and shape were designed to give various feelings of hope, despair, joy, uncertainty and to convey the moving image.

The final illustrations are fictitious and do not relate directly to any medieval illustrations in books. I have in deriving these images consulted many sources and made many studies to gain a feel for medieval art and aesthetic in gesture, thought and movement. With the images being fictitious it could also be thought of as a pilgrimage in a dream which never took place, or perhaps a fragment of the memory.
Instead of the viewer envisioning as a pilgrim he watches quietly as the images of cottages and trees slip by him. His thought maybe transcending reality, and he, the viewer, only an intermediate being. These illustrations could merely be mental pictures of the scenes and events going by while the viewer was searching within himself for religious truth. Perhaps this better explains the fantasy in technique of some images and the color associations to seasons.
CONCLUSION

Many of the aspirations hoped for in this project were not accomplished, and many inferior aspects are evident. However, the future direction and goal of my illustration was better realized by this experience. In many of the aspects of the technique I feel I have gained greater skill in personal expression. This thesis can be summed up by saying it was merely a growing experience artistically as well as intellectually.
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The Pilgrimage of Geoffrey Chaucer's
CANTERBURY TALES

Illustrated by WINIFRED G. BIXLER
ROUGHS FROM THE ART OF THE CELTS - PART OF A STONE CROSS.
CASTLE FORMS FROM EARLIEST ILLUSTRATIONS.
EMPHASIS ON COMING AND GOING.
the wife of Bath's tale

By Geoffrey Chaucer

an excerpt from his Canterbury Tales.
In th'olde dayes of the King Arthour
Of which that Britouns spoken greet honour.
Al was this land fulfild of fairye:
The elf-queene with hir joly compaignye
Daunced ful ofte in many a greene mede—
This was the olde opinion as I rede;
I speke of many hundred yeres ago.
But now can no man see none elves mo.
For which oppression was swich clamour,
And swich pursuit unto the King Arthour,
That danned was this knight for to be deed
By cours of lawe: & sholde han lost his heed—
Paraventure swich was the statut tho—
But that the queene & othere ladies mo
So longe prayeden the king of grace:
Til he his lif him graunted in the place:
And yaf him to the queene: al at hir wille:
To chese wheither she wolde him save or spille.
The queene thanked the king with al hir might:
And after this thus spak she to the knight:
Whan that she saw hir time upon a day:
"Thou standest yit:* quodshe: <in swich array
That of thy lif hastou no surete.
I graunte thee lif if thou canst tellen me
And saith his Matins & his holy thinges,

This makest thine head been no fallices.
Troopes, beares, shippes, gunneries,
Cities, bourgs, castells, hye tounes,
Blessing halles, chamberes, kennere, bowness,
As thikke as mores in the same beam,
That searchen evere land and evere streame,
Of limouns, and othere holy freere,
But now the greete charche and præres
I speke of many hundreded yeares ago,
This was the olde oprimon as I rede;
Danold fal otere in many a greene meede—
The elf-groen with his gaye compaigne
All was his land fulfille of fayre,
Of whiche that Briugons speken greete honoun
In thole days of King Arthur

preserved were victories
with unto fountain bright
On th'olde dayes of King Arthour,
Of which that Britouns spoken greet honour,
All was this land fulfild of fayrye:
The elf-queen with bin joly compaignye
Dancused fal ofte in many a greene mede—
This was the olde opinion as I rede;
Speke of many hundred yeres ago.
But now can no man see none elves now,
Or now the grete charitee & prayers
Of limitours & othere holy freres/
That serchen every land & every streem/
As thikke as motes in the sonne-beem/
Blessing halles/ chambres/ kichenes/ bowres/
Cities/ burghes/ castels/ bye towres/
Thropes/ bernes/ shipnes dayeries—
This maketh that ther been no fairies.
UX
For now the grete charitee & prayeres  
Of limitours/ & othere holy freres/  
That serchen every land & every streem/  
As thikke as motes in the sonne-beem/  
Blessing halles/ chambres/ kichenes/ bowres/  
Citees/ burghes/ castels/ bye towres/  
Thropes/ berres/ shipnes dayeries—  
This maketh that ther been no fairies.  
For ther as wont to walken was an elf  
Then walketh now the limitour himself/  
In undermeles & in morweninges/  
And saith his Matins & his holy thinges/  
As he gooth in his limitacioun.  
Wommen may go saufly up & down:  
In every bussh or under every tree  
Ther is noon other incubus but he/  
And he ne wol doon hem but dishonour.  
(And so bifel it that this King Arthur  
Hadde in his hous a lusty bacheler/  
That on a day cam riding fro river/  
And happed that/ allone as he was born/  
He sawgh a maide walking him biforn;  
Of which maide anon/ maugree hir heed/  
By verray force he rafte hir maidenheed/
For now the grete charitee & prayers
Of limitours & other holy freeres/
That serchen every land & every streem/
As thikke as motes in the sonne-beem/
Blessing halles/ chambers/ kichenes/ bowres/
Citees/ burghes/ castels/ bye towres/
Thropes/ bernes/ shipnes dayerries—
This maketh that ther been no fairies.
For ther as wone to walken was an elf
Then walketh now the limitour himself/
In undermeles & in morweninges/
And saith his Matins & his holy thinges/
As he gooth in his limitacioun.
Wommenmay go saufly up & down:
In every busshe or under every tree
Then is noon other incubus but he/
And he ne wole doon hem but dishonour.
And so bisele it that this King Arthur
Hadde in his hous a lusty bachelour/
That on a day cam riding fro river/
(And happed that/ alone as he was born/
He sawgh a maide walking him biforn;
Of which maide anoone/ maugree hir heed/
By verray force he raftte hir maidenheed;
For which oppression was swich clamour/
And swich pursuitle unto the King Arthour/
That dammed was this knight for to be deed
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So longe prayeden the king of grace/
Til he his lif him graunted in the place/
And yat him to the queene/ al at hir wille/
To chese wheither she wolde him saue or spille.
The queene thanked the king with al hir might/
And after this thus spak she to the knight/
Whan that she saw hir time upon a day:
«Thou standest yet?» quod she/ «in swich array
That of thy lif yet hastou no surete.
I graunte thee lif if thou canst tellen me
What thing it is that wommen most desire:
Be war & keep thy nikke boon from iren.
And if thou canst nat tellen me anoone/
Yet wol I thee leve for to goon
A twelfmouth & a day to seeche & lere
An answere saffisant in this matter/
And surete wol I han er that thou pace/
Thy body for to yeelden in this place.
Wo was this knight/ & sormefally he siketh.
But what/ he may nat doon al as him liketh/
And atte laste he chees him for to wende/
And come again right at the yernes ende/
With swich answere as God wolde him purveye/
And taketh his leve & wendeth forth his waye.
He seeketh every hous & every place
When as he hopeth for to finde grace/
To learne what thing wommen love most.
But he coude arren in no coost
When as he mighte finde in this materere
Two creatures according in fere.