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Chaucer Illustrated

La Salle University Art Museum

Brother Daniel Burke FSC

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CHAUCER ILLUSTRATED

Kelmscott and Other Interpretations
of Chaucer's Stories

La Salle University Art Museum
March 25 - May 31, 1994

Chaucer Illustrated

Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1343-1400) was the son of a London vintner. His career prospects rose steadily through his military service, his successful writing, and an advantageous marriage to Philippa, sister-in-law of John of Gaunt. He was appointed finally to several important positions in the court of Richard II. Amid the various intrigues and political crises of that doomed king, Chaucer travelled extensively in Europe on commercial and diplomatic missions, but found time for his family and for public readings of his extensive literary work.

Among his books was a translation of the immensely popular French allegory *The Romance of the Rose* and of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*. But his assured place in English literary history rests mainly on a few dream and vision poems--*The Book of the Duchess*, in memory of Gaunt's first wife; *The House of Fame*, concerning the vicissitudes of love and fame; and *The Legend of Good Women*, accounts of the heroines of myth and history. But more particularly, there are his tragic romance of *Troilus and Criseyde*, played out in the setting of the Trojan War, and his unfinished masterpiece, *The Canterbury Tales*, a series of twenty-four stories which a group of pilgrims exchange as they wend their way to the shrine of St. Thomas à Beckett at Canterbury.

The descriptions of the pilgrims in the General Prologue of the *Tales*, their rowdy interactions, and their edifying and not so edifying stories are a realistic and fascinating panorama of medieval English life. It has had a devoted readership ever since.

One testimony to that devotion that should be mentioned comes in 1549 from John Day, the editor of an English Bible published that year. In the preface addressed to Edward VI, Day says he wished "magistrates and Nobility, would as willingly spare an hour or two a day from their worldly business, for reading this Bible, as they have been wont to do in reading Chronicles and Canterbury Tales." (Incidentally, the copy of the Day Bible in La Salle's Susan Dunleavy Collection appears to have been used later by Sir Francis Bacon and has annotations in his hand). Chaucer was indeed a poet laureate--humane, witty and wise beyond other writers of his time and most of those thereafter.

The most important illustrations of Chaucer's work were produced only ten years after his death in 1400--the miniatures of the Canterbury pilgrims in the Ellesmere manuscript. The tradition of such illustration thereafter is not as rich or continuous as for some other writers, notably Dante. But the Chaucerian tradition does have some splendid highpoints, especially the woodcuts of Edward Burne-Jones for the Kelmscott collected works of 1896. A grouping of richly decorated pages from that work is the centerpiece of the present exhibition of prints and books drawn mainly from La Salle's collections. And the main interest is with *The Canterbury Tales*.

The Ellesmere manuscript, which Henry Huntington acquired in 1917 for his research library in San Marino, California is often described as the most important and beautiful of any English literary work. It is basic to later critical editions of the *Tales*, and its miniature portraits remain the most successful

translation of Chaucer's vivid descriptions of his pilgrims in the General Prologue and in the Head and End-Links of the *Tales*.

Three artists seem to have worked on the sprightly miniatures. One provided the portrait of Chaucer himself, perhaps inspired by an earlier full-length portrait, for here it seems reduced in the lower body to fit the rather small horse that the poet, like the other pilgrims in the portraits, is astride. The other two artists divided the pilgrim group, one standing the Wife of Bath, Monk, Manciple, Second Nun, Canon Yeoman, and Nun's Priest on a small patch of turf like Chaucer's. All three are faithful to the text, incorporating telling details of social rank (like the caparisoned horse of the Prioress or Knight), trade (the Pardoner's relics or the Physician's urinal flask), physical appearance, or personality. There is little detailed modelling of faces or clothing, but the coloring and small touches of white highlights are effective. While these depictions rely heavily on the General Prologue for their features, the miniatures themselves are placed beside the illuminated initial that begins each pilgrim's tale and the vertical stem of a decorative vine with its various flourishes.

In 1483, William Caxton, the first English printer, published his second edition of *The Canterbury Tales*. In his prologue, he tells us that he was able to consult a manuscript that helped him to correct textual errors of his first edition. It seems likely that the same manuscript, or another one available to Caxton, had a set of portrait miniatures, though only three of the eighty-three surviving have any of them. (One of the three manuscripts is here in Philadelphia, at the Rosenbach Library.) In any event, Caxton was able to add to his edition a series of woodcut portraits obviously

based on the manuscript tradition and add another grouping of the pilgrims with their host at the Tabard Inn. While they are relatively crude compared to most of the Ellesmere series, the woodcuts signal not only economies in the new mass production of books but also the concurrent shift of artists' interest from painting miniatures on vellum to expanding their designs on the larger spaces of wood panel and canvas. In any event, the woodcuts were popular enough to be reprinted by Caxton's successors Richard Pynson and Wynkyn de Worde in their editions of the *Tales* in 1492 and 1498. They seem also to have been used, perhaps re-cut, in the first half of the 16th century. Specifically, they appear in William Thynne's first and second printed editions of the collected works in 1532 and 1542; the latter is exhibited here. They were not, unfortunately, any improvement over Caxton. They disappeared for a century and a half, after Stow's edition in 1561.

Aside from Caxton's scene of the Tabard dinner party and an early 15th century woodcarving of scenes from the *Pardoner's Tale*, there were few if any forays into the illustration of narrative episodes as such, until well into the 18th century. The next important illustrations were George Vertue's engraved frontispiece of Chaucer and engraved portraits of the Pilgrims in John Urry's edition of 1721 (with its garbled text) and the narrative scenes, rather humorless and pedestrian, of Thomas Stothard in Bell's Chaucer (1787-88). The latter artist, however, had a notable success with his painting of *The Canterbury Pilgrims in Procession* (1807). It anticipated (actually borrowed the design) and stole the fire from the reception of William Blake's painting (1809) and prints of the same subject. But Blake's archetypal figures couldn't compete either with Stothard's realism. "Every age," said the poet,

"is a Canterbury Pilgrimage; we all pass on, each sustaining one or another of these characters; so could a child be born who is not one of these characters."

The clear high-water mark in narrative illustration, however, were the Burne-Jones designs for William Morris's collected Chaucer (1896), his last production for his Kelmscott Press. Burne-Jones had collaborated with Morris on earlier projects. So when Morris announced that the Kelmscott edition of Chaucer's collected works would have sixty illustrations, he probably foresaw that his artist friend would follow his usual habit of adding others as he went. In the end, there were eighty-seven, each skillfully cut by the wood-cutter William Hooper and set in the elaborate vine patterns designed by Morris. It was as if the simple vinets of the Ellesmere manuscript had returned fully grown.

As a prominent Pre-Raphaelite artist, Burne-Jones was clearly influenced by fifteenth century masters like Mantegna and Botticelli, especially in his graceful and ethereal feminine figures, whether clothed or nude. And he refused to illustrate fabliaux like the Miller's Tale. In the best of the illustrations, the characters are presented in significant turning points of the plot (as in the Prioress's Tale) or in the drama of the climax (as in Wife of Bath's Tale). But, for the most part, they present their figures rather statically, setting them in the shallow space of a room or enclosed garden with a back wall, short side walls, and a central perspective that sometimes extends to a farther landscape framed in a window.

The huge project of the collected works also involved Morris's more readable form of black-letter type, which he called Troy or Chaucer; it should be compared with the last of the black-letter editions by Speght (1687) in the La Salle collection. The book had been announced in December, 1892 and, in a race with Morris's failing health, was finally completed in May, 1896; he died a few months later. His Chaucer was, however, a masterpiece--of beauty, if not readability--and it remains among the most important books ever printed. With his other work, it was a watershed of the modern private press movement and its emphasis on craftsmanship.

In this century, the tradition of individual miniature portraits of the pilgrims was continued in the full-figure enlargements of Rockwell Kent in 1930; in the glowing reds and blues of Arthur Szyk's miniatures in his Persian style for the Limited Editions Club and Heritage Press books in 1946; and in the bright silkscreen prints of Ronald King's abstractions for the Circle Press editions of the General Prologue in 1967, and 1978.

The narrative tradition has had notable contributions by Eric Gill in his Golden Cockerel edition of the *Tales* in 1929; in the sometimes bawdy series of black and white etchings by the late Dame Elizabeth Frink in 1972, with their minimally drawn but sculpturally convincing figures; and in the woodcuts and engravings of various artists in the Folio Society volumes of 1986.

Br. Daniel Burke
Director

Further Reading

A. A. Egerton, *The Ellesmere Chaucer Reproduced in Facsimile*, 2 vols (Manchester University Press, 1911).

E. F. Piper, "The Miniatures of the Ellesmere Chaucer," *Philological Quarterly*, III (1924), 241-56.

M. Richert, "Illumination," in *The Text of the Canterbury Tales*, eds., J. M. Mawly and E. Rickert, I (Chicago, 1940), 561-605.

J. Thorpe, *A Noble Heritage* (Huntington Library, 1974).

T. Stemmler, *The Ellesmere Miniatures of the Canterbury Pilgrims* (Mannheim, 1979³).

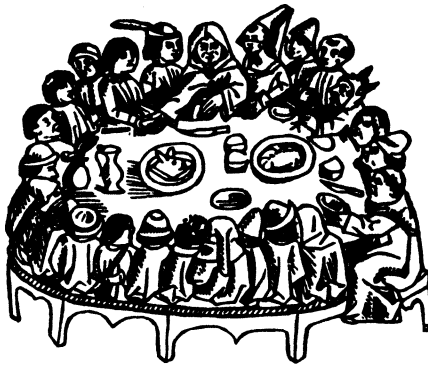
M. Stevens, "The Ellesmere Miniatures . . .," *Studies in Iconography*, 7-8 (1981-82), 113-34.

B. B. Boyd, *Chaucer and the Medieval Book* (Huntington Library, 1973).

A. S. Miskimin, *The Renaissance Chaucer* (Yale University Press, 1975), 226-61 ("From Manuscript to Print").

F. E. Penninger, *William Caxton* (Twayne, 1979).

- C. W. A. Alderson and A. C. Henderson, *Chaucer and Augustan Scholarship* (University of California Press, 1970).
- A. S. Miskimin, "The Illustrated Eighteenth Century Chaucer," *Modern Philology* (1979), 26-55.
- G. Keynes, *Blake Studies* (Oxford, 1971), 25-27.
- B. Bowden, *Chaucer Aloud* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987).
- D. F. Johnson, *William Morris' Ornamentation and Illustration for the Kelmscott Chaucer* (Dover, 1973).
- D. Robinson, *William Morris, Edward Burne-Jones, and the Kelmscott Chaucer* (Gordon Fraser Gallery, 1982).



Special Exhibitions Room

- I *The Ellesmere Chaucer Reproduced in Facsimile*, ed., A. Egerton
(Manchester University Press, 1911), 2 volumes.

Lent by Bryn Mawr College

Additional photographs of the miniatures.

- II *Facsimile of the Kelmscott Chaucer*, ed., J. T. Winterich
(World Publishing Company, 1958)

- III Illustrations from *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Printed by
William Morris at The Kelmscott Press, 1896)

Woodcuts designed by Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones
(1833-1898), British

Cut by William H. Hooper; the borders around the text
and illustrations were designed by William Morris.

These illustrations are additional sheets from the original
printing of the book, preserved by one of the hand-press
printers. They produced 13 deluxe copies on vellum, 425
on paper.

1 Title Page

Beginning of the Prologue (Chaucer in the Garden)

The initial illustration facing the title shows Chaucer in one of his favorite settings, an enclosed garden. He stands near a fountain, jotting in a small book. The text is of his most famous lines, the description of spring at the beginning of the General Prologue. The two pages, with Morris's elaborate ornamentation, is a good example on his emphasis on the unified effect a double opening should have.

2-2a The Knight's Tale

A scene from Chaucer's shortened adaptation of Boccaccio's *Teseida*. Rival lovers Palamon and Arcite contend for the hand of fair Emelye. Here Palamon, hiding in a forest, comes upon Arcite sighing sorrowfully for his beloved. A drawing of an earlier version of the scene by Burne-Jones (lent by Bryn Mawr College) can be compared with the final version.

3 The Prioress's Tale

One of the more dramatic scenes among the illustrations, as two evil men plot the death of the prayerful child.

4 The Wife of Bath's Tale

The climax here of a story of how a knight is under penalty of his life by Queen Guinevere to answer the problem of what women most desire. He gets the answer here (not only love, but sovereignty over their husbands) from a loathly lady--providing he marries her. His first kiss transforms her (on the facing page) to a beautiful young woman.

5 The Tale of the Clerk of Oxenford

The tale, adapted from Petrarca and Boccaccio, shows patient Griselda in one of her several trials from her relentless husband, the Marquis Walter.

6-7 Romance of the Rose

Part of the lengthy French allegory on love was translated by Chaucer, though the Kelmscott and other editions usually include the whole story. Here are depicted the evil figures on the outside wall of the Garden of Love and the figures of Beauty and Riches within.

8 The Legend of Lucrece

One of the many legends of heroic women, which, in the dream-vision of *The Legend of Good Women*, Chaucer is condemned to write to make amends for the slurs of his *Troilus* and *Romance of the Rose*. In the Roman legend, Lucretia is raped by the king's son and in the present illustration her shame is prompting her to commit suicide.

9 The House of Fame

At the opening of this dream-vision, Chaucer speculates on the causes of dreams; the illustration suggests that the figure on the right, Chaucer himself, participates in one. The poem goes on to involve him in scenes of Virgil's *Aeneid*; in the House of Fame and Rumor where its arbitrary workings on humans are detailed; and finally, with famous characters of the past who explain how they have been treated by Fame.

10 Troilus and Criseyde

The conclusion of the lengthy romance is depicted together with the Kelmscott emblem as a final signature. In the print, Chaucer is reminded of his Christian duties by an angel. Thus, he belatedly makes due reservations about the pagan love story he has just graphically detailed, one of many interplays of earnestness and playfulness which characterize all his work.

Book Cases

Case I

Chaucer's Workes 1542

2nd Edition (London: William Thynne, 1542).

Anonymous (18th century)

Geoffrey Chaucer

Ink Drawing

Lent by Bryn Mawr College

This portrait drawing is based on that in the *Hoccleve* manuscript, 1410. Note the "penner"--pen case--which hangs around his neck, a typical mark of most of his early portraits.

The Works of Our Ancient, Learned, and Excellent English Poet, Jeffrey Chaucer, ed., Thomas Speght (London, 1687).

Case II

The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed., John Urry (London: Printed for Bernard Lintot, 1721).

John Bell, *Poets of Great Britian* (London, 1782), vols. 1, 3, 6.
Lent by the Library Company of Phialdelphia

Case III

Engravings by Eric Gill, 1928-1933

"Pardoner's Tale": engraving . . . from the original woodblocks
for the Golden Cockerel Press (London: Faber and Faber Ltd.,
1934).

The Canterbury Tales

With Portraits-in-Miniature by Arthur Szyk (New York: The
Limited Editions Club, 1946).

The Canterbury Tales

With Portraits-in-Miniature by Arthur Szyk (New York: The
Heritage Press, 1946).

Lent by Robin Satinsky

Case IV

The Canterbury Tales of Geoffrey Chaucer
Together with a Version in Modern English
by William van Wyck
Illustrated by Rockwell Kent
(New York: Covici-Friede, 1930), 2 vols.

The Canterbury Tales
Original Text Edited by F. N. Robinson
Translation by David Wright
Illustrations by various artists
(London: The Folio Society, 1986)



20th Century Gallery

Dame Elizabeth Frink, DBE (1930-1993), British

The Canterbury Tales 1972

Edition of 50

Etching and aquatint

Published by Leslie Waddington, London

Lent by Lewis University, Romeo, Illinois

1 The Arrival at Canterbury

Since Chaucer's *Tales* are unfinished, the arrival scene here is something imagined beyond the text. Nor is it listed in current catalogues of Frink's work. It is the same size as a set of five Canterbury prints from 1970 which seem to have been preliminary work for the larger set of 1972.

2 Sir Thopas

Chaucer's own tale is a parody of medieval romance stories--told in short lines with jingling rime. The print here depicts Sir Thopas's encounter with the giant Sir Oliphant. It is all too much for the Host Harry Bailey: "'This sort of thing is doggerel,' he said." Chaucer responds to the demand for another story with the dull Tale of Melibeus--in prose.

3 The Miller's Tale, II

The Miller's story is a ribald fabliau of how a wife and her lover deceive a gullible carpenter, by predicting a new flood like Noah's. In the climax of humorous chaos and reversals, still another lover takes revenge for another deception--with a red-hot plowshare.

4 The Second Nun's Tale

Frink provides a rather relaxed depiction of the martyrdom of St. Cecilia, a noble Roman matron whose life is featured in the popular medieval collection, *The Golden Legend*, and adapted by Chaucer for the Second Nun.

5 The Summoner's Tale

Frink makes it clear what the greedy monk has inherited from a death-bed legacy in this fabliau and attempts to divide among the members of his community.

6 The Pardoner's Tale

The scene here, from what is Chaucer's most popular tale, shows three drunken revelers inquiring of an old man where they can find Death, intending, they say, to do away with him. He directs them to a tree in the forest where they

find not Death but a hoard of gold. The youngest is sent back to the town for food, while the others guard the gold. But in his absence they . . .

7 The Physician's Tale

Virginia, in the account of the Roman historian Livy, is killed, tragically by her own father and at her own request, to escape the sexual harassment of the corrupt judge Apius.

8 The Prioress' Tale

The story of the murdered boy is testimony to the delicacy of the Prioress as she is described in the General Prologue--and to the unfortunate anti-Semitism of her age. Here the murdered child continues to sing in death his favorite hymn to the Blessed Mother, until the Abbot removes a grain from his tongue that Mary had placed there.

9 The Manciple's Tale

The Manciple tells the traditional story of a white crow who can speak and tells Phoebus that his wife is unfaithful. After the husband murders her, he is driven by remorse to pluck the crow of its feathers and cast it away. And that, says the fabulist, is why crows are black.

Ronald King (Contemporary), British
The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales
(Surrey, England: Circle Press Publications, 1978)
Folio 2nd Edition-limited: 57/250
Color screen prints

1 The Knight

A Knight there was, and that a noble man,
Who from the earliest time when he began
To ride forth, loved the way of chivalry,
Honor and faith and generosity.
Nobly he bare himself in his lord's war,
And he had ridden abroad (no man so far),
In many a Christian and a heathen land,
Well honored for his worth on every hand.
(From the Modern English version of J. W. Nicholson)

2 The Squire

With him there went a Squire, that was his son--
A lover and soldier, full of life and fun,
With locks tight-curved, as if just out of press;
His age in years was twenty, I should guess.
In stature he appeared of middle height,
And great of strength, and wondrous quick and light.
And he had gone campaigning recently
In Flanders, in Artois, and Picardy,
And in this short space bore a gallant part,
Hoping for favor in his lady's heart.

3 The Prioress

Also there was a nun, a Prioress,
And she went smiling, innocent and coy;
The greatest oath she swore was by Saint Loy;
And she was known as Madame Eglentine.
Full well she sang the services divine,
Intoning through her nose right prettily,
And fair she spoke her French and fluently
After the school of Stratford-at-the-Bow;
(The French of Paris--that she didn't know).

4 The Monk

A Monk there was, as fair as ever was born,
An outrider, that loved the hounds and horn,
A manly man, to be an abbot able.
Full many a blooded horse he had in stable,
And when he rode ye might his bridle hear
Jingle upon the whistling wind as clear
And loud as ever the chapel bell could ring
Where this same monk and lord was governing.

5 The Franklin

A Franklin in his company appeared;
As white as any daisy shone his beard;
Sanguine was his complexion; he loved dearly

To have his sop in wine each morning early
Always to pleasure would his custom run,
For he was Epicurus's own son,
Who held opinion that in pleasure solely
Can man find perfect bliss and have it wholly.

6 The Friar

The was a Friar, a wanton and a merry,
Licensed to beg--a gay, important fellow.
In all four orders no man was so mellow
With talk and dalliance. He had brought to pass
The marrying of many a buxom lass,
Paying himself the priest and the recorder:
He was a noble pillar to his order!

7 The Wife of Bath

A Good Wife was there dwelling near the city
Of Bath--a little deaf, which was a pity.
Such a great skill on making cloth she spent
That she surpassed the folk of Ypres and Ghent.
No parish wife would dream of such a thing
As going before her with an offering,
And if one did, so angry would she be
It put her wholly out of charity.

8 The Parson

There was a Parson, too, that had his cure
In a small town, a good and a poor;
But rich he was in holy thought and work.
Also he was a learned man, a clerk,
Seeking Christ's gospel faithfully to preach;
Most piously his people would he teach.
Benign and wondrous diligent was he,
And very patient in adversity--
Often had he been tried to desperation!

9 The Miller

The Miller, big alike of bone and muscle,
Was a stout fellow, fit for any tussle,
And proved so, winning, everywhere he went,
The prize ram in the wrestling tournament.
He was thick-shouldered, knotty, broad and tough;
There was no door but he could tear it off
Its hasps, or break it, running, with his head.

10 The Summoner

There was a Summoner with us in that place,
That had a fiery-red cherubic face,
With pimples, and his eyes were small and narrow;
As hot he was and lecherous as a sparrow;

Black scabby brows he had, and scraggly beard;
His was a face that all the children feared.

11 The Manciple

There was a Manciple from an inn of court,
And many a buyer might to him resort
To mark a steward's life the way he led it.
For whether he chose to pay or take on credit,
Always he schemed so well and carefully
That first in stock and well-prepared was he.
Now is not that a gift of God indeed,
That one unlettered man should so exceed
The wisdom of a group of learnèd men?

12 The Host

Our Host, a seemly man, was fit withal
To be a marshal in a banquet hall,
For he was large, with eyes that brightly shone:
In Cheapside was no fairer burgess known.
Bold of his speech he was, wise and well-taught;
In short, in ways of manhood lacked for naught.