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## *Eros* and Pilgrimage in Chaucer's and Shakespeare's Poetry

# ABSTRACT

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The paper discusses erotic desire and the motif of going on pilgrimage in the opening of Geoffrey Chaucer's General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* and in William Shakespeare's sonnets. What connects most of the texts chosen for consideration in the paper is their diptych-like composition, corresponding to the dual theme of *eros* and pilgrimage. At the outset, I read the first eighteen lines of Chaucer's Prologue and demonstrate how the passage attempts to balance and reconcile the eroticism underlying the description of nature at springtime with Christian devotion and the spirit of compunction. I support the view that the passage is the first wing of a diptych-like construction opening the General Prologue. The second part of the paper focuses on the motif of pilgrimage, particularly erotic pilgrimage, in Shakespeare's sonnets. I observe that most of the sonnets that exploit the conceit of travel to the beloved form lyrical diptychs. Shakespeare reverses the medieval hierarchy of pilgrimage and desire espoused by Chaucer. Both poets explore and use to their own ends the tensions inherent in the juxtaposition of sacred and profane love. Their compositions encode deeper emotional patterns of desire: Chaucer's narrator channels sexual drives into the route of communal national penance, whereas the Shakespearean persona employs religious sentiments in the service of private erotic infatuations.

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**ABSTRACT**

- (1) Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
  - (2) The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
  - (3) And bathed every veyne in swich licour
  - (4) Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
  - (5) Whan Zephirus eek with his swete breeth
  - (6) Inspired hath in every holt and heath
  - (7) The tendre croppes; and the yonge sonne
  - (8) Hath in the Ram his half cours yronne,
  - (9) And smale foweles maken melodye,
  - (10) That slepen al the nyght with open ye
  - (11) (So priketh hem nature in hir corages),
  - (12) Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,
  - (13) And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,
  - (14) To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;
  - (15) And specially from every shires ende
  - (16) Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende,
  - (17) The hooly blisful martir for to seke,
  - (18) That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke.
- (Chaucer 23)

Chaucer's famous hymn to spring at the beginning of the General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* can be read as a self-contained text, even though it constitutes an integral part of the collection, being a chronographia employed as a preface to a longer work. The first eighteen lines introducing the renowned story collection are marked off as a separate unit in the Ellesmere manuscript, where the coloured, decorated capitals are used in lines 1 and 19: the scribe has thus divided the passage from the following text, recognizing the author's intention signalled by the *rime riche* (Wilcockson 345) that binds the ninth couplet (ll. 17–18) and falls decisively like the hymn's final note. The brilliant lines certainly draw attention to themselves. The multiple long vowels and diphthongs along with liquid and nasal consonants underscore the melodic quality, which rivals the evoked "melodye" made by the "smale foweles." The musical effect is strengthened by a particularly satisfying proportion of foreign to native English diction: words like *licour*, *engendred*, *inspired*, *nature*, *melodye*, *corages*— polysyllables of Franco-Latin origin, exotic-sounding and elevating the style, contrast with and diversify the dominant homely, native English sonority. The poetic melody is sustained by the use of enjambment, which creates the effect of flowing: the passage constitutes one long sentence, an expanded "when" clause, ultimately completed only at the end of line 18, the closure being reinforced by the perfect rhyme *seke/seeke*, which brings under the same sound different meanings and parts of speech.

This distinctness of sound makes one think in the context of Chaucer's lines of a sonnet (Italian *sonetto*, diminutive of *suono*, sound). Most sonnets consist of fourteen lines, though—at least such is the classroom dictum. Let us, nevertheless, toy for a moment with the idea of the first fourteen lines of the General Prologue being a sonnet, for it may help us understand the working of the text. The lines would be a sonnet of the English or so-called Shakespearean type, for Chaucer's five-stress lines closely approach the latter's characteristic iambic pentameter, and his division of thought readily falls into the pattern of three four-line segments and a final couplet. Like Chaucer, Shakespeare also uses "when...when...when."<sup>1</sup> The *volta*, so crucial in a sonnet, could be identified in Chaucer's passage in the word "pilgrimages" closing line 12, an important juncture leading to the couplet that rounds up the argument in lines 13–14. And although Chaucer writes in couplets throughout, it seems that this is not a major obstacle for viewing his text as a Shakespearean sonnet, since Shakespeare himself actually wrote one sonnet, number 126, in couplets. The only problem with this reading would seem to be that it is the eighteen, not just fourteen, lines that constitute a seamless entity in Chaucer's work.

But what is a sonnet? And must all sonnets consist of fourteen lines? In a recent article, Amanda Holton questions "the distinctiveness and modernity of the sonnet" and its "otherness" in relation to pre-Renaissance English poetry (373, 392). She points out that the sonnet's origin is not known for certain and that the form was established already in the 1230s, at the court of Frederick II, ruler of Sicily and southern Italy. As to medieval England, Holton finds there different examples of fourteen-line poems, derived from French poetry, which preceded the sonnet. She further demonstrates that certain features apparently inescapably associated with the sonnet, such as a clear formal division into octave and sestet, are in fact optional. In addition, while critics consider the sonnet to be particularly suitable to the development of a thought, some early sonnets in English are static and lack a driving argument, which shows that sonnets can be "non-argumentative poems" (Holton 375). Nor are they always connected, as critics would like them to be, with "deep contradictions," with "subjectivity and frustrated desire," or with "the foregrounding of the poetic persona" (Holton 375). In short, there are few constant traits that define the sonnet. One may add that even the fourteen lines is not an absolute must, for in the modern, post-Shakespearean tradition of sonnet

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<sup>1</sup> Many of Shakespeare's sonnets begin with "when," for example: "When to the sessions of sweet silent thought" (sonnet 30) or "When in the chronicle of wasted time" (sonnet 106), and in sonnet 64 all three quatrains begin with "when."

writing there is George Meredith's Victorian sequence of sixteen-line sonnets, *Modern Love*, whose form has in turn been adopted by the twentieth-century poet Tony Harrison (Łączyńska 281–82). Apparently, the sonnet is a more flexible form than we have been accustomed to think.

Although Chaucer's translation in *Troilus and Criseyde* of Petrarch's sonnet 88 in rhyme royal stanzas is often quoted as evidence of the English poet's unfamiliarity with the sonnet, many of the features usually attached to sonnets can be attested in the opening lines of the General Prologue. The passage is extraordinarily dynamic, if only by virtue of dealing with natural energies and movements and not of an inherent argument. It is organized around a subterranean opposition between sexual drives and metaphysical longings, which it manages to harness to its own purposes. And as to the number of lines, Chaucer's text could be construed in the likeness of Italian "Sonnets with a Tail," or so-called caudated sonnets (Going 102), the *cauda*, tail, consisting in this case of the last four lines (15–18), added after the concluding couplet.

In the passage under consideration Chaucer realizes the invocation of nature *topos*, though he not so much invokes nature as enumerates its various elements, not as a random catalogue but by way of unified images. Thus, the first four lines unfold the image of spring showers piercing the dry soil and providing water necessary for chemical reactions that ultimately lead to the germination of flowers. The quatrain is unified by its focus on underground processes and organic growth. The next four lines concentrate on the sphere of the air: the operation and effects of the wind and the movement of the sun. The third quatrain is unified by its concern with animate creatures endowed with hearts, "corages," thus preparing a transition to humans. The division into three quatrains is enhanced by semantic and syntactic parallelisms and lexical repetitions.

Characteristically, Chaucer's principal theme of religious devotion is introduced only at the end of line 12, where the word "pilgrimages" initiates a twist from the description of nature to the subject of penance. This shift is reinforced in the next two lines through the words "palmeres" (professional pilgrims who went on pilgrimages on behalf of other people) and "halwes" (shrines). The point of this couplet is extended over another four lines, focusing on a particular pilgrimage and specifying its circumstances. The entire passage constitutes one long sentence which unfolds a story, where the first eleven lines build up suspense, line 12 reaches the culminating point, and the last six lines bring resolution.

The initial description of nature brings out the power of universal sexual attraction. Sexuality is strongly implied in this longest part of the passage, where the natural elements and processes are personified and imbued with volition and passion. In the first quatrain, the union of rains and earth

gives birth to flowers. In the second, the gentle west wind personified as Zephyrus generates new shoots and buds on trees, while the young sun, representing male fecundity and compared to a ruddy champion running or riding along the arch of the sky, brings to mind heroic lovers of chivalric romances. In the third quatrain the birds making their melodies and staying awake all night are an even more obvious figure of a courtly lover (a bit later in the General Prologue the Squire is likened to one such bird: "So hooted he loved that by nyghtertale / He sleep namoore than dooth a nyhtengale," ll. 97–98; Chaucer 25) and there may be a sexual word-play on the verb "priketh" (Wilcockson 347). Chaucer's mention of the Ram, and his dating of the pilgrimage some time between the zodiacal signs of Aries and Taurus, evokes animals traditionally associated with male fecundity. The overall image of the generative forces underlying biological life may be envisaged as that of organic coitus, where the male rains, wind and sun, the former gods such as Sol, make contact with the female land, Mother Earth, and produce new life, and goddess Natura arouses sexually the avian and by extension human creatures.

The poetic conventions utilized in the passage (cf. Eckhardt 190) further underline what may be called its deliberately raised amorous horizon of expectations. Thus, the depiction of springtime, also known as the *reverdie*, raises the possibility of a love lyric. The fragrant breezes, fecund earth and twittering birds suggest the latent theme of love and desire. The description of springtime resembles introductions to dream vision poems, particularly *Le Roman de la rose*, where a landscape of flowers and birdsong introduces the theme of secular love. Not to mention the fact that in real life "a pilgrimage held a venal appeal to some" as "the anonymity of people enjoyed away from home brought opportunities for sex" (Westrem 200). Although latent eroticism definitely dominates in the first twelve lines of the passage, some spiritual connotations are evoked as well. The verb "inspireth," for instance, derived from the Latin *inspirare*, implies "infusion of a divine presence," while the image of the rebirth of nature may be read as a figure of the Creation of the world (Wilcockson 347).

Against the dominant, erotically charged atmosphere, reaching its climax in the noun "corages," which in this context signifies erotic love, Chaucer introduces, somewhat unexpectedly, the idea of going on "pilgrimages," and along with it the thoughts of penance and religious devotion. After this point the text moves increasingly away from the profane, towards the sacred. The opposition between these two spheres is pinpointed by the rhyme "corages/pilgrimages" (ll. 11–12), which charts the shift from the erotic to the spiritual. It is noteworthy that a similar rhyme is repeated within a few lines but in the reversed order, "pilgrimage/corage" (ll. 21–22). Apart from the meaningful reversal, the word "corage" is now

said to be “devout,” losing its association with erotic desire, and a revaluation, a turning away from the allure of nature to heavenly thoughts and pursuits, is therefore implied. The new focus on holy “pilgrimage(s)” is suggested also by the centrality of this word in the passage and by a possible numerical device: the lines in which the word occurs are numbered 12 and 21, numbers which reverse and mirror each other. In terms of medieval number symbolism, both numbers may be read as juxtaposing unity (1) against division (2) and suggesting a higher unity through the sum of their ciphers (3), which may bring to mind the concept of the Holy Trinity.

The surprising aspect of the Chaucerian text is the way it precedes and mingles the introduction of a pious occasion with a skilful gradation of erotic desire. Here lies the power of the passage, but the poet’s mastery shows itself also in reconciling the underlying *eros* with religious sensibility and in being able to avoid a clash between these seemingly irreconcilable spheres. The mediating role is fulfilled by the verb “longen” in central line 12. The idea of longing embraces both the sexual drives evoked in the preceding lines and the pilgrimages described in what follows. As a result, the pilgrimages are invested with ambiguity at this point of the poem: they are viewed, on the one hand, as a search for spiritual and physical healing but, on the other hand, are imbued with vague yearnings for novel experiences in distant and exotic lands and shores. The verb “seken,” implying a quest, possibly of an errant type, reinforces the multiple, indefinite significance of “longen.” Longing, which distinguishes human beings in the hierarchy of creation, is therefore implied to be both physical and metaphysical; it is synonymous with desire, curiosity, crossing the borders of the familiar world, and penetration of unknown territories. Though in the end going on pilgrimage is narrowed down to visiting the tomb of St. Thomas à Becket, the preceding context renders pilgrimage a much more ambivalent and dangerous enterprise. Finally, the presence of death at the end of Chaucer’s passage, through the references to the Archbishop’s martyrdom and human sickness, completes the poet’s extraordinary, multidimensional description of April, which is reminiscent of T. S. Eliot’s image of the same month at the outset of *The Waste Land* as “breeding lilacs out of the dead land, mixing / Memory and desire, stirring / Dull roots with spring rain” (ll. 1–4; 51).

Thus, in the first part of his introductory passage Chaucer is a pilgrim “to nature,” anticipating thereby Romantic poet-pilgrims,<sup>2</sup> though nature is for him strongly underwritten with *eros*. In the end, however, the medieval poet-pilgrim gathers up the diverse erotic emotions dispersed over

<sup>2</sup> Robin Jarvis distinguishes the pilgrim to nature among the principal categories of Romantic travellers. However, unlike Chaucer and Shakespeare in the poems discussed here, Wordsworth and Coleridge travelled mostly on foot.

his text and redirects and subordinates them to God through the image of a uniform and ordered human movement towards Canterbury Cathedral symbolizing the *civitas Dei*. This important shift is confirmed in the next section of the General Prologue, which according to Colin Wilcockson constitutes the second part of a diptych opening *The Canterbury Tales*, as indicated by the decorated capitals in the Ellesmere manuscript (345–50). The mode of this second part is wholly narrative and the story is focused entirely on the holy pilgrimage. The first-person narrative persona is introduced as a pious pilgrim and integrated with other pilgrims travelling like him to Canterbury. The inverted rhyme “pilgrimage/corage,” referring back to the preceding passage, implies the presence of the poetic self in that passage as well, but in a dispersed and indefinite fashion. Now the speaker defines himself as a pilgrim and turns wholeheartedly towards the “hooly blisful martir.”

Interestingly enough, the passage delimited by the first and the second occurrence of this central rhyme, that is, lines 11 through 22, comprises exactly twelve lines, which is yet another use of 12 in Chaucer’s composition, along with line 12 introducing manifold “pilgrimages” and line 21, the reversal of 12, focusing on the narrator’s pilgrimage to Canterbury “with ful devout corage.” The composition of the introductory passage draws our attention to number 12. Searching for a specific meaning of this number, one may note that the only number explicitly mentioned in the opening of the General Prologue is “nyne and twenty,” the number of Canterbury pilgrims, given, significantly, in line 24, a double of 12. The total number of pilgrims including Chaucer is thus made to be 30, with the sum of its ciphers, 3, once again suggesting the Holy Trinity. One remembers, as well, that 12 is a number of Revelation, or Apocalypse, and of the heavenly city of Jerusalem, as highlighted by the Middle English *Pearl* composed by a poet contemporary to Chaucer.

But Chaucer’s most topical allusion inscribed in the numbers 12 and 29 is to St. Thomas of Canterbury, for the numbers refer to the month and day of the liturgical celebration of the saint’s martyrdom in the medieval Church, December 29<sup>th</sup>. The allusion makes much sense in the light of the overall significance of the Chaucerian diptych, with its pivotal turn from the eroticized description of nature to the Canterbury pilgrimage.<sup>3</sup> The meaningful numbers, either explicitly mentioned or evoked in the text, help us appreciate its inner rhythm alternating joy, spring, rebirth, and resurrection with suffering, sickness, winter, and death. This is also

<sup>3</sup> Number symbolism, a kind of mathematical poetics, was often utilized by medieval poets in the composition of their texts, as demonstrated by numerous studies, such as A.C. Spearing’s paper on *Pearl* and other Middle English and Middle Scots poems.

the rhythm of the Christian liturgy, an awareness of which must have been deeply rooted, also subconsciously, in Chaucer's mind: a liturgy so designed as to celebrate martyrs like St. Thomas right after Christmas Day, and celebrate Christmas itself during the darkest month of winter, while commemorating the Crucifixion as well as the Resurrection in spring. T.S. Eliot captures this dual atmosphere of spring in the opening lines of *The Waste Land* with the imagery of birth and death, memory and desire, but the essential duality underlies also Chaucer's introduction to *The Canterbury Tales*.

Erotic and metaphysical discourses are intertwined also in Shakespeare's sonnets, some of which can be viewed as reversals of the pattern established in Chaucer's text in that they employ the idea of holy pilgrimage as an effective trope of erotic love. Whereas the Chaucerian persona ultimately displaces the erotic at the outset of *The Canterbury Tales*, and more explicitly in the Retraction, and becomes a repentant pilgrim, Shakespeare's persona can be defined as a passionate pilgrim.<sup>4</sup> Not all of Shakespeare's uses of pilgrimage are equally remote from the spirit of medieval poetry, though: in Sonnet 7, for example, the course of the sun in the sky is called his "golden pilgrimage" (l. 8; 1200), recalling Chaucer's image of the young sun running in the sky parallel to the humans travelling to Canterbury; Sonnet 60, in turn, employs the quest motif to convey the inevitable movement of human life towards death, "Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore, / So do our minutes hasten to their end" (ll. 1–2; 1207).

Typically, however, Shakespeare invests pilgrimage with new, non-religious meanings, which are merely subtly implicit in Chaucer. In general, Shakespeare likes to resort to religious discourse to convey the power of erotic desire: for instance, Sonnet 105, "Let not my love be call'd idolatry" (l. 1; 1214), plays upon the Catholic concept of the Holy Trinity, being an instance of sacred parody *à rebours*, whereby religious concepts are used for the ends of secular love poetry, not *vice versa*. Shakespeare repeatedly employs Christian concepts and religious vocabulary to magnify and elevate a deeply secular devotion. One could even risk a statement that in his poetry sacred words and images become erotic appetizers of desire. This is a tradition established before Chaucer, who employs it in his *Troilus* making, for example, Troilus fall in love with Criseyde in the temple.

In particular, in Shakespeare's sonnets a lover is figured as a pilgrim on the way to his beloved, seeking no forgiveness of sins but erotic fulfillment. The Bard's first sonnets, versions of what later became Sonnets 138

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<sup>4</sup> In her study of love's pilgrimage in English Renaissance literature, Grace Tiffany registers the various changes of pilgrimage from religious quest to, for example, "erotic adventures" in Shakespeare's and Donne's poetry (21).

and 144, were published in a volume entitled *The Passionate Pilgrim* (1599), whose title may have referred to a line in *Romeo and Juliet*, where lips are envisaged as “two blushing pilgrims” (Schoenfeld 57). Interestingly, many of Shakespeare’s sonnets that develop the *topos* of the lover’s journey to the beloved form sequences usually composed of two poems. This is the case with sonnets 27 and 28. The former describes the speaker’s mental journey to the addressee:

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Weary with toil, I haste me to my bed,  
 The dear repose for limbs with travel tir’d;  
 But then begins a journey in my head  
 To work my mind, when body’s work’s expir’d:  
 For then my thoughts—from far where I abide—  
 Intend a zealous pilgrimage to thee,  
 And keep my drooping eyelids open wide,  
 Looking on darkness which the blind do see:  
 Save that my soul’s imaginary sight  
 Presents thy shadow to my sightless view,  
 Which, like a jewel hung in ghastly night,  
 Makes black night beauteous and her old face new.  
 Lo! thus, by days my limbs, by night my mind,  
 For thee, and for myself no quiet find.  
 (Shakespeare 1202)

Three kinds of travel appear in the poem. The first is the actual riding during the day to the beloved, which exhausts the speaker’s “limbs” and makes him “weary with toil” so that he makes haste to repose. Going to bed alone is thus the second kind of travel, an anti-pilgrimage of sorts, ironically depicted in the opening line of the sonnet. The third kind of travel, on which the sonnet dwells, is “a journey in my head,” the mental travel to the beloved made by night, when the tired body seeks rest but the restless mind keeps the speaker’s “drooping eyelids open wide.” The epithet “zealous” imbues this imaginary pilgrimage to the beloved with sacred connotations, so does the evocation of light in the midst of darkness: the imaginary sight of the beloved is “like a jewel hung in ghastly night,” replacing both the sun shining during the day and the Son of God as the object of devotion. This nocturnal erotic travel is an entirely secular version of pilgrimage which reverses the medieval Christian concept and makes it subservient to Shakespeare’s elevation of human love.

The sonnet’s three types of pilgrimage between them render its persona a permanent erotic traveller who never finds quiet for himself and is reminiscent of Chaucer’s “smale foweles” that “slepen al the nyght with open ye.” This is, of course, a familiar *topos* of love literature and there is

no specific allusion to Chaucer on the part of Shakespeare. The pilgrimage in the sonnet is disorderly and nervous in comparison with the Chaucerian pilgrims' ride towards Canterbury, organized by the well-established spatiotemporal symbolic of medieval culture. The movement is at first extremely slow, as implied by the phrase "weary with toil"; then the speaker's tired body makes an ultimate effort: "I haste me to my bed"; and just when the "dear repose" seems to have been found, there begins another, arduous journey: "a journey in my head" and "a zealous pilgrimage to thee." His pilgrimage is a disoriented, haphazard, back-and-forth movement. The argument and the imagery of Sonnet 27 are taken up in Sonnet 28 so that the two poems form a bipartite composition. Sonnet 28 commences with the speaker reflecting upon his desire, thwarted with exhaustion, to return to the beloved: "How can I then return in happy plight, / That am debarr'd the benefit of rest?", and further develops the idea of the passionate lover's oppression and restlessness, when day and night "shake hands to torture me, / The one by toil, the other to complain / How far I toil, still further off from thee" (Shakespeare 1203).

Sonnet 34 describes the speaker's journey to the beloved when suddenly called by him and gives vivid details of the hasty ride which serve as metaphors of the rider's vulnerability in his eager approach and unexpected disappointment. He complains: "Why didst thou promise such a beautiful day, / And make me travel forth without a cloak, / To let base clouds o'ertake me in my way, / Hiding thy bravery in their rotten smoke?", and again: "'Tis not enough that through the clouds thou break, / To dry the rain on my storm-beaten face" (Shakespeare 1203). Comparing the beloved to the sun underscores Shakespeare's reversal of the familiar trope of pilgrimage (not of real pilgrimages, which had been abolished). In medieval literature the sun was a symbol used mostly for the resurrected Son of God, as in the sun/Son homophone. Shakespeare's pilgrimage is private, solitary, and decentred; it is directed not towards the centre of communal worship, as in Chaucer's passage, but towards the periphery of an individual erotic infatuation. In the sonnet, the so-conceived pilgrimage is forestalled, leaving the speaker with the sense of being disgraced and offended. In the metaphor of his bearing "the strong offence's cross" (1203) the poet again resorts to a Christian symbol and the concept of penance to emphasize the lover's passion.

In Sonnets 44 and 45 the impossibility of reaching the beloved by land and sea is contrasted with the speed of a mental journey. The two sonnets form a neatly symmetrical diptych exploiting a conceit based on the ideas of four elements and four humours. Sonnet 44 deplures slow physical travel through the elements of earth and water, whereas Sonnet 45 associates mental transportation with the other two elements, air and

fire. The speaker of the first sonnet wishes he were made of thought, but complains of being made of flesh and mostly “earth and water”:

If the dull substance of my flesh were thought,  
 Injurious distance should not stop my way;  
 For then, despite of space, I would be brought,  
 From limits far remote, where thou dost stay.  
 No matter then although my foot did stand  
 Upon the furthest earth remov'd from thee;  
 For nimble thought can jump both sea and land,  
 As soon as think the place where he would be.  
 But, ah! thought kills me that I am not thought,  
 To leap large lengths of miles when thou art gone,  
 But that, so much of earth and water wrought,  
 I must attend time's leisure with my moan;  
 Receiving nought by elements so slow  
 But heavy tears, badges of either's woe.  
 (Shakespeare 1205)

In Sonnet 45, on the other hand, the speaker praises the “swift motion” of travel in the mind, associating his thought with air and his desire with fire; such travel, he notes, covers distance instantaneously and overcomes the “present-absent” dichotomy (Shakespeare 1205).

Shakespeare takes up the motif of love's pilgrimage in Sonnets 50 and 51, another lyrical diptych, homogenous in its imagery and contrastively juxtaposing slow with speedy travel. Sonnet 50 describes an anti-pilgrimage, which for Shakespeare is not a journey away from God but away from a beloved person:

How heavy do I journey on the way,  
 When what I seek, my weary travel's end,  
 Doth teach that ease and that repose to say,  
 ‘Thus far the miles are measur'd from thy friend!’  
 The beast that bears me, tired with my woe,  
 Plods dully on, to bear that weight in me,  
 As if by some instinct the wretch did know  
 His rider lov'd not speed, being made from thee:  
 The bloody spur cannot provoke him on  
 That sometimes anger thrusts into his hide,  
 Which heavily he answers with a groan  
 More sharp to me than spurring to his side;  
 For that same groan doth put this in my mind:  
 My grief lies onward, and my joy behind.  
 (Shakespeare 1206)

The speaker's riding is slow because it takes him mile after mile away from his friend, and away from joy. The speaker is torn between the desire of his tired body to reach the end of travel and find rest, "ease" and "repose," after the toil of the long journey, and his unwillingness to move away from the beloved. The key conceit of the sonnet transfers the rider's spiritual heaviness, the inner "weight" that he bears, onto his horse, the beast that bears him and which symbolizes his irrationality. The beast is imbued with sensitivity and empathy and thus is a projection of the speaker's deepest feelings and desires. Although the rational and practical part within the rider is angry with the horse and makes him thrust his spurs in the animal's hide to provoke faster movement, his hidden passion and the irrational desire not to cover distance away from the beloved identify him with the beast, which "plods dully on." The identification with the poor beast, which is underscored by alliteration in "my woe—that weight in me—the wretch" and by lexical repetition in "How heavy do I journey on the way—which heavily he answers with a groan," enables Shakespeare to depict vividly the kind of dull pain accompanying frustrated erotic desire. The psychology of erotic bondage, which tends to be masochistic and self-destructive, is captured in the image of the "bloody spur" thrust into the horse's hide, with the implication that the rider is at the same time wounding himself. The beast's groan corresponds with the lover's own, sharper, suffering. Unlike the medieval pilgrimage, dominated by the sense of adventure and joyful expectation, despite the reality of moral and physical disease, the anti-pilgrimage of love is ridden with sorrow: "My grief lies onward." The sonnet's imagery and vocabulary, with the sharp groans, blood, and heaviness, are all employed towards conveying the dark side of erotic obsession. The speaker's kicking against the pricks may remind one of St Paul's "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12:7).

The second part of the diptych, Sonnet 51, begins and ends by verbalizing an excuse for the horse's slowness and, in the middle, develops an image of an eager pilgrimage towards a union with the beloved, which diametrically contrasts with the preceding depiction of an erotic anti-pilgrimage in that its racy swiftness is vividly painted.

Thus can my love excuse the slow offence  
 Of my dull bearer when from thee I speed:  
 From where thou art why should I haste me thence?  
 Till I return, of posting is no need.  
 O! what excuse will my poor beast then find,  
 When swift extremity can seem but slow?  
 Then should I spur, though mounted on the wind,  
 In winged speed no motion shall I know:

Then can no horse with my desire keep pace;  
 Therefore desire, of perfect'st love being made,  
 Shall neigh—no dull flesh—in his fiery race;  
 But love, for love, thus shall excuse my jade,—  
 'Since from thee going he went wilful-slow,  
 Towards thee I'll run and give him leave to go.'  
 (Shakespeare 1206)

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Speaking in the name of gentle and generous love that overfills him, the poem's persona is willing to excuse "the slow offence" of his "dull bearer": there is no need of posting when I ride away from thee, he argues. From this new perspective the jade's being "wilful-slow" is not only forgivable but even deserves a reward, so in the end the lover will run and "give him leave to go." The speaker has consoled himself by an imaginary return to his friend. The main part of the sonnet is therefore filled with images that unfold a fantasy of an extreme speed of desire: when "swift extremity can seem but slow," when one seems to be "mounted on the wind" and still wishes to go faster, when one knows "no motion" in "winged speed," and when no horse can "keep pace" with one's desire. The imagery aims at transcending physical limitations. The love's pilgrimage is depicted as the "fiery race" of desire and symbolized by the cheerful neigh, which contrasts with the preceding sonnet's heavy groan. The diptych thus effectively portrays love's pilgrimage and anti-pilgrimage and the paradoxes of erotic desire, its dark side and its bliss.

Sonnets 97, 98, and 99 are unified by the speaker's sadness caused by separation from his beloved presented against the background of four seasons. Although this is a sequence of three sonnets, their structure is diptych-like, as Sonnet 97 is in the mood of winter and autumn, while the other two sonnets are set in spring and summer. In Sonnet 97, "How like a winter hath my absence been / From thee," the friend's withdrawal is compared to winter, with its "freezings," its "dark days," and "old December's bareness every where," preceded by an autumn whose harvest cannot be enjoyed either by the "widowed" speaker (Shakespeare 1212). Although Sonnet 98 depicts spring, the speaker is still unable to enjoy its beauties, for his friend is away from him: "From you have I been absent in the spring" (Shakespeare 1213). Sonnet 99 further develops the mood of loneliness and dissatisfaction as the speaker claims that the beauties of nature in the full bloom of summer are only poor imitations of his friend's beauty: "The forward violet thus did I chide: / Sweet thief, whence didst thou steal thy sweet that smells, / If not from my love's breath?" (Shakespeare 1213).

Unlike Chaucer's narrator, therefore, the Shakespearean persona cannot find comfort in the Christian sense of joy-in-suffering, nor can he

share the joys of nature, for a true summer is for him, as he says in Sonnet 97, marked solely by the presence of his beloved: “For summer and his pleasures wait on thee, / And, thou away, the very birds are mute” (1212). Sonnet 98 echoes the opening of the General Prologue while highlighting differences between Shakespeare’s and Chaucer’s rendering of the motif of pilgrimage and desire:

From you have I been absent in the spring,  
 When proud-pied April, dress’d in all his trim,  
 Hath put a spirit of youth in every thing,  
 That heavy Saturn laugh’d and leap’d with him.  
 Yet nor the lays of birds, nor the sweet smell  
 Of different flowers in odour and in hue,  
 Could make me any summer’s story tell,  
 Or from their lap pluck them where they grew:  
 Nor did I wonder at the lily’s white,  
 Nor praise the deep vermilion of the rose;  
 They were but sweet, but figures of delight,  
 Drawn after you, you pattern of all those.  
 Yet seem’d it winter still, and, you away,  
 As with your shadow I with these did play.  
 (Shakespeare 1213)

Whereas in Chaucer’s text nature leads naturally on to the thoughts of the Son of God, Shakespeare reads nature, darkened by the friend’s absence, as the latter’s imperfect sign and shadow. In Shakespeare’s sonnets the goal of pilgrimage is mostly unreachable, leaving the speaker unhappy despite all his noble efforts to rise above the discontents of erotic desire. These discontents reach a peak in Sonnet 147, which gives a particularly accurate diagnosis of the lover’s condition: “My love is as a fever, longing still / For that which longer nurseth the disease,” it consists in being “frantic-mad with evermore unrest,” and the speaker realizes that his formerly idealized beloved is “as black as hell” and “as dark as night” (Shakespeare 1220).

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