



THE CHAUCER NEWSLETTER

A Publication of the New Chaucer Society

Volume 6, Number 1

R01-1032-01-000-84

Spring 1984

Pilgrims in the Blean

"Experience, though noon auctoritee . . . is right ynough for me/ to speke of . . . Bobbe-up-and-down,/ Under the Blee, in Caunterbury weye." Forgive the unnatural grafting of texts, but it will serve, I trowe, as apologia for this anecdotal, rather than scholarly, introduction to my sylvan topic. A few years ago, when I was leading a small group of undergraduates to Canterbury on the A-2 motorway from London, the bus paused at a turn in the village of Upper Harbledown long enough to allow us a moving hillside look at what must also have been Chaucer's pilgrims' view of the town and cathedral below. Of course, our emotions had already been quietly stirred by certain familiar landmarks picked among the clutter of road signs from Southwark: Greenwich, Dartford, Rochester, Sittingbourne, Ospringe, Boughton. But Harbledown became at once our Pisgah and "thropes ende," for, as most of the notes tell us, it is probably the modern site of Bobbe-up-and-down, the "litel toun . . . under the Blee, in Caunterbury weye," only a mile downhill to the "Jerusalem celestial" of the Canterbury Cathedral itself. It was here that the pilgrims would have had their first view of the sacred object of their three- or four-day journey, here that they would have begun assuming their penitential postures, like Henry II stripping himself for the monk's lashes, here that the game of *curiositas* would, for most, have given way to the earnest of *cari-tas*. Until the white walls of Canterbury came in sight, G.G. Coulton observed acerbically long ago, most of Chaucer's pilgrims would not have put off the Old Adam.¹

When I noticed that we had motored through a considerable woodsy area before we passed to gaze at Canterbury from the hillside clearing, I turned to the elderly Kentish gentleman sitting to my right and asked, do these woods have a name? The Blean, he answered, but hesitantly, as if summoning up the word from some ancestral memory of an earlier, more formidable, wilderness. And then epiphany, as from a celestial omnibus! Chaucer could not have been composing a mere travelogue, I thought, when he arranged for the alchemist Canon and his Yeoman to overtake the company at Boughton-under-Blee (G 556) and then square off the petulant Host and the drunken Cook at Bobbe-up-and-down/ Under

the Blee (H 2-3) a tale later. Surely, more important than either Boughton or Bobbe-up-and-down in the progress of this pilgrimage was the Blee itself. Whether Bobbe-up-and-down under the Blee is Harbledown, as most commentators claim, or Up-and-Down Field in the parish of Thanington, as some dissidents theorize,² is less important than Chaucer's allusion to a *forest* as the setting for the narration of his ante-penultimate and penultimate tales.

Even for his dull, sublunary readers whose soul is *sensus*, Chaucer's reference to the Blean would have conjured up the image of a formidable Wood. In the poet's day, according to Professor Magoun, the Blean formed the north-east part of an extensive forest belt which covered the greater part of Kent, commencing at Boughton and reaching virtually to the walls of Canterbury.³ Modern tourist maps of southeast England still show the Blean as the most extensive woods in Kent, bisected for some seven miles by the A-2 motorway (Watling Street or the old "Canterbury wey") before thinning out west of Canterbury through parts of Harbledown. (In its northern reaches, near Dargate, there is a natural reserve which protects the modern Blean from further incursions of civilization.)

Although there is no record of Chaucer specifically traversing the Blean, it is obvious that his frequent involvement in the affairs of Kent would have made the Blean more than a word for him. We recall that from 1385 to 1389 Chaucer served as Justice of the Peace for Kent, and in 1386 was elected to the Parliament as Knight of the Shire for Kent.⁴ It is also interesting to note that in 1391 Chaucer, while carrying a considerable sum of money as Clerk of the Works, was robbed near "Le Fowle Ok" in Kent.⁵ Perhaps it is pursuing the obvious to point out that on any trip to the continent Chaucer would necessarily have passed over Kentish roads from London to Dover, including the seven- or eight-mile stretch through the Blean Forest between Boughton and Canterbury. And although his official duties never involved him with that particular forest, it is curious to recall that the last office Chaucer ever held was that of deputy forester of North Petherton in Somerset at a time when he still retained his residence in Kent. The first appointment to that position was made in 1391, and in 1398, two years be-

continued

In York and Around England: Cultural Events, Summer 1984

The highlight of activities within the arts in York during 1984 will be the York Festival and Mystery Plays, which lasts from 8th June - 2nd July. The York Plays, which were last mounted in 1980, form the longest of the surviving medieval dramatic cycles and are the only ones to be performed regularly in England. Since their revival over thirty years ago they have proved a great attraction to visitors and inhabitants of the city alike. There will be performances every night in the spectacular setting of the ruined St. Mary's Abbey in the centre of York, and, as a continuation of medieval tradition, the players will be, almost without exception, local people: only Christ will be portrayed by a professional actor. The Plays will be directed, as is usual, by one of Britain's leading theatre directors.

The Festival offers a wide range of musical events held in many of the historic buildings of York, including the Minster and the Guildhall. Among the artists of international standing due to appear are the Academy of St. Martin's-in-the-Fields; the choir of King's College, Cambridge; the Halle Orchestra and Chorus; Opera North; the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra; and the Philharmonia Orchestra. The early music group, The York Waits, will be giving two concerts. A brochure giving full details may be obtained from the York Festival Office, 1 Museum Street, York YO1 2DT, England (please enclose a stamped addressed envelope).

Another major event of 1984 will be the opening of the Jorvik Viking Centre in April. Following the highly successful and exciting excavations of the Coppergate site in the city over the last few years, this project aims to let the visitor experience York as it was during its existence as a trading and manufacturing centre a millennium ago. Both the concept and the design are innovatory permanent museum displays: "time cars" are used to convey visitors from present-day Coppergate back to the year 984, a journey which includes reconstructions of various aspects of town life, from a market to a busy wharf, and which culminates in a reconstruction of the "Viking Dig" itself, where it is possible to see the wooden buildings of the tenth century, pre-

continued

Blean Forest *continued*

fore his death, the North Petherton appointment was renewed and ran, according to the educated guess of Crow and Olson, until April 18, 1400.⁶

For us unruly readers afflicted with what Donne long ago called "spiritual wantonness," even the stark documentation in Chaucer's late life-records urges supra-literal meanings. How remarkable that Chaucer should have closed out his career as a *forester* on or about April 18, the most famous date in the Chaucer canon (B¹, 5-6), while living out his last ten months in a house described in the lease as located on the grounds of Westminster Abbey "in the garden of the Chapel of the Blessed Mary."⁷ Not only his work but even his own life seems eerily to have conformed to the paradigm for pilgrimage described by D.W. Robertson: "a figure of the Christian soul [passing] through the world's wilderness toward the celestial Jerusalem,"⁸ and by Donald Howard: "a passage through a wilderness (the world) to a city (eternal life)," often depicted in late medieval art as a background landscape divided between a wilderness and a walled garden or town.⁹

Whatever the disposition of these coincidences in the ultimate scheme of things, there can be no denying that Chaucer repeatedly exploited the negative or diabolical implications of wilderness elsewhere in his poetry, an exploitation that required no more arcane example than Dante's *selva oscura*, the most celebrated symbol in Western literature of a wilderness impeding a paradise. The most obvious example which occurs to me now entirely escaped me fifteen years ago when I found patterns of Christian consolation in *The Book of the Duchess*,¹⁰ that is, the great wood as the setting of the Knight's despair and hart/heart hunting, which leads in the poem's finale to the apocalyptic "long castel with walles white,/ Be seynt Johan! on a ryche hill" (1318-19). But other examples of forests or woods serving as an impedimental setting to spiritual fulfillment may also be found in *Troilus and Criseyde*, IV, 1545; the *Knight's Tale*, A 1618 and 1975-76; the *Friar's Tale*, D 1380; and the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, B 4601. Even in his *jeu d'esprit*, "Lenvoy de Chaucer a Scogan," Chaucer humorously contrasts his friend's good fortune upstream at court to his own ill fortune at Greenwich—down the river "forgete in solytaire wilderness" (43-46).

The allusions to the Blean Woods near the end of the *Canterbury Tales* may be merely topographical references. But emboldened by my own epiphanic experience at the edge of the wood in Harbledown, I am confident that these casual references, like so many other examples of the words as cozens to the deed contribute to his strategy of decoying realism. I have argued elsewhere that there is a stun-

ning eschatological urgency to the deceptively quotidian imagery of the late prologues and tales.¹¹ From the *Second Nun's Tale* on, Chaucer pleads for an earnest interpretation of game. By leading his pilgrims "under the Blee," from Boughton to Bobbe-up-and-down, Chaucer has done more than give their dark wood a local habitation and a name. His Catholic readers would have detected therein something akin to a Kentish eschaton, for the pilgrims were emerging after fifty-six miles of pilgrimage from a forest into a belvedere, from a *selva oscura* into a *mons gaudiū*. For reasons perhaps of pious reserve, or of penitential propriety (the Parson's goad to confession was still to follow), Chaucer chose to mute the Mountjoy, but not without implying—as we modern pilgrims discovered six-hundred years later—that the dark wood opens spectacularly upon the promised land. In an earlier piece, Chaucer was less coy about wilderness, pilgrimage, and the high way:

Here is non home, here nis but wyldernessesse.
Forth, pylgrim, forth! Forth, beste,
out of thy stal!
Know thy contree, look up, thank God
of al;
Hold the heye wey, and lat thy gost
thee lede;
And trouthe thee shal delivere, it is no
drede.

Rodney Delasanta
Providence College

¹Chaucer and his England. 1908. London: Methuen & Co., 1963, p. 126.

²Francis P. Magoun, Jr., "Chaucer's Great Britain," *Mediaeval Studies*, 16 (1954), 135.

³Magoun, p. 134.

⁴Martin M. Crow and Clair C. Olson, eds., *Chaucer Life-Records*. London: Oxford University Press, 1966. Chapters 16 and 17.

⁵Crow and Olson, pp. 486-489.

⁶Crow and Olson, pp. 497-498.

⁷Crow and Olson, p. 540.

⁸D.W. Robertson, Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963, p. 373.

⁹Donald R. Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976, p. 70.

¹⁰"Christian Affirmation in the *Book of the Duchess*," *PMLA*, 84 (1969), 245-251.

¹¹"The Theme of Judgment in the *Canterbury Tales*," *MLQ*, 31 (1970), 298-307; "Penance and Poetry in the *Canterbury Tales*," *PMLA*, 92 (1978), 240-247.

Conference on Arthurian Studies

Sponsored by the Medieval Studies Program, English Department, University of Alabama, Birmingham 35294, 12-13 October 1984. Call for papers: submit two copies of a five-hundred word abstract to Mary Flowers Braswell, Department of English, UAB.

York Cultural Events *continued*

served for so long in the water-logged conditions of the site, re-erected in their original positions.

The York Archaeological Trust also organizes Heritage Weekends. For example, on selected weekends from May to November it is possible to rediscover "Viking York" not only through the Jorvik Centre, but also through illustrated lectures and tours of the Trust's Conservation Laboratory and of the churches and battlegrounds of the Viking age in the surrounding countryside. A "Medieval York" weekend is on offer from 15th-17th June and from 29th June - 1st July, which includes guided tours of the medieval churches, college, and guild buildings of York; and on the weekends 27th-29th July and 7th-9th September a tour of the "Abbeys of York and Yorkshire" is offered, which consists of visits to some of the most outstanding medieval monastic remains. Further information on these weekends may be obtained from York Archaeological Trust, 3 King's Court, King's Square, York YO1 2LE, England.

The Archaeological Trust, in conjunction with the University of Leeds, is presenting two conferences in 1984. On 27th-29th April the theme will be "Presenting the Past to the Present," with specific reference to the restoration and preservation of the archaeological finds from the Coppergate site; and on 14th-16th September, the topic will be "Highlights of British Archaeology," at which the year's new discoveries will be discussed. Both these weekends will be based in York. Details may be obtained from the Director of Continuing Education, Department of Adult and Continuing Education, The University, Leeds LS2 9JT.

The museums in York are well worth visiting. The Castle Museum contains one of the best-known collections relating to the social history of Britain, and the National Railway Museum is housed in the city. The Yorkshire Museum has a permanent display of medieval artefacts (including many from St. Mary's Abbey, in the one-time grounds of which it stands), and a newly-opened Viking gallery.

Yorkshire as a whole in 1984 will provide a rich season of music festivals. For instance, Harrogate will be hosting the International Youth Music Festival from 18th-25th April, and the International Music Festival is scheduled to be held there from 1st-15th August. From 25th-28th October, Bradford will be commemorating the anniversary of the death of Delius with a festival of his music. Information sheets giving details of events in Yorkshire as a whole are issued three times a year and are available from the Yorkshire and Humberside Tourist Board, 312 Tadcaster Road, York, England.

Outside Yorkshire the principal festivals of

music and the arts are the Chichester Festival Theatre season (May - September), the Glyndebourne (Sussex) Festival opera season (28th May - 17th August), the Aldeburgh (Suffolk) Festival (8th June - 24th June), the Cheltenham International Festival of Music (7th-22nd July), the Southern Cathedrals Festival at Winchester (25th-29th July), the Edinburgh International Festival (19th August - 8th September), and the Three Choirs Festival, at Worcester and Hereford (18th-25th August). There are smaller festivals of music and the arts, many of them in the most attractive country towns: Malvern (20th May - 2nd June), Bath (25th May - 10th June), Ludlow (23rd June - 7th July), Lichfield (7th-15th July), Cambridge (13th July - 1st August), Chester (18th-28th July), King's Lynn (20th-28th July), Buxton (28th July - 12th August), and Arundel, Sussex (24th August - 2nd September).

Further afield, there is the Royal National Eisteddfod of Wales, at Lampeter, Dyfed (4th-11th August), the Mananan (Isle of Man) International Festival of Music and the Arts (27th June - 8th July), and in Scotland a plethora of days of Highland Games, as at Inverkeithing (4th August), Aboyne (4th August) and Perth (12th August). In London there will be the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition (16th May - 20th August), the Regent's Park Open Air Theatre season (4th June - 25th August), the City of London Festival (15th-28th July), and the Henry Wood Promenade Concerts at the Albert Hall (20th July - 15th September). At Stratford-upon-Avon there will be performances of a repertoire of Shakespeare plays in the summer season of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre.

For those who lament the decline of the inner cities, there will be the International Gathering of Town Criers, at Lyme Regis (16th-22nd July), and, unbelievably, the 33rd National Town Criers Championships, at Hastings (4th August). For those with a special interest in the more ludicrous aspects of the Middle Ages, there is a series of Medieval Jousting Tournaments being held at Belvoir (pronounced "Beaver") Castle in Leicestershire (27th-28th May, 24th June, 29th July, 26th-27th August).

Medieval drama buffs, if they are not already sated with the York plays, can see a performance of the Coventry Mystery Plays, at Coventry Cathedral (31st July - 18th August). It is not yet quite clear whether this is the "real" Coventry cycle, in which case the performance will be very short, or the "so-called" Coventry cycle, in which case it will be very long.

Derek Pearsall
Carol Meale
University of York

Medieval English Studies Activities in Japan

On July 2, 1983, the summer meeting of the Society for Medieval English Language and Literature, Tokyo, was held at Meiji-gakuin University. More than a hundred members attended it and five papers were read. Mrs. Atsuko Tamaki, in "Salvation of the Unlearned in *Piers Plowman*," made reference to the "Cistercian programme," and argued that the A-text expounds Langland's idea that the common people should live honestly and do their manual work, and illustrates how their souls would be saved. Next, Mrs. Kusue Kurokawa (Kawamura College) in "Production of 'The Harrowing of Hell' in the York Cycle Plays" suggested how the play would be produced, and gave details about the construction of Hell Mouth, making use of the text in *Records of Early English Drama*, and medieval art. Mrs. Masa Ikegami (Keio University) treated "Open Syllable Lengthening and Middle English Rhymes" and observed that rhymes between /e/ and /o/ lengthened in open syllables and the originally long /ɛ:/ and /ɔ:/ did not frequently occur in Eastern texts (East Anglia, East Midland, the London area) until about the middle of the fifteenth century.

Before the next two papers, Tadahiro Ikegami (Seijo University) reported on the May Trustees meeting of the New Chaucer Society at Knoxville, Tennessee. Professor Shigeru Ono (Tokyo Metropolitan University), in "Undergytan as a 'Winchester' Word" observed that *undergytan* was not so frequent as *understandan* and became obsolete in Early ME. It was used especially in the "Winchester group" which includes Ælfric's works, and it was not used by Wulfstan whose choice of words often differed from Ælfric's. He suggested that this is a case of the obsolescence of Ælfric's ("Winchester") vocabulary as against the survival of Wulfstan's.

Finally, Professor Isamu Saito (Doshisha University) in "What Contribution did the Framework of Pilgrimage make to *The Canterbury Tales*?" asserted that the idea of "pilgrimage" affects the structure and meaning of *The Canterbury Tales* in three ways: in the first place it affords Chaucer a good reason to collect "sundry tales" from "sundry folk"; secondly, pilgrimage, as fourteenth-century lay people naively believed, was the best place of meeting for "game"; thirdly, pilgrimage, as an essentially religious exercise, presupposed "earnest" penitence at the final stage of human life.

Tadahiro Ikegami
Seijo University

Chaucer at MLA Washington 1984

Session I. *The Voices of Chaucer*. Papers on how the text leads us to imagine its speaking.

Session II. *Open session*. Papers on any subject dealing with Chaucer. A place is reserved in this session for the best paper submitted by a graduate student. This paper will carry a prize of \$200. Mss submitted for consideration for this prize must be accompanied by a letter from a professor or other official testifying to the graduate status of the author.

Session III. *Reading Troilus aloud*. Sample tapes should be submitted.

All inquiries, abstracts, and tapes should be submitted to Alan T. Gaylord, Department of English, Dartmouth College, Hanover, N.H. 03755, by 19 March 1984.

Barons, Take Hede Of My Sentence

We apologize for the rise in dues, but with increased printing and postage charges, the cost of SAC 5 was over \$10,000. Even with generous support from the Tennessee English Department, we are barely solvent. SAC 6 has been sent to the printer and will be mailed early in June to members who have paid their 1984 dues.

We apologize, also, for insisting that dues be paid by international money orders or checks on a U.S. bank. From checks drawn on non-U.S. banks, we lose nearly \$10. We are trying very hard not to make an official differentiation between U.S. and non-U.S. dues, and we continue to pay postage on all items, which for non-U.S. members is substantially higher. We realize that buying U.S. currency is expensive, but this seems preferable to placing a surcharge on non-U.S. membership.

The cost of SAC makes us nervous about planning a proceedings supplement for the York congress. But the quality of the program would make us derelict not to try. We hope for such a supplement after each biennial congress unless this one proves financially disastrous. As an incentive, we are offering the supplement to members at the pre-publication price of \$15 (which will not quite cover costs). After publication, it will cost \$25 for members and \$30 for libraries. Please take advantage of the pre-publication offer by using the form on the last page of this newsletter (if you have not done so already in your York registration).

John H. Fisher
Director

Enclosed is my subscription for _____ copy(s) at \$15 per copy of the SAC supplement containing papers from the 1984 York congress.

Amount enclosed \$ _____

Name _____

Address _____

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

The University of Tennessee
R01-1032-01-003-84

THE NEW CHAUCER SOCIETY



THE NEW CHAUCER SOCIETY
Department of English
University of Tennessee
Knoxville, Tennessee 37996

First Class Postage PAID Knoxville, Tenn. Permit No. 481
