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*The Colours of Rethoryk: The Medieval World's Influence on Red and White Color Symbolism
in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales**

Frederick W. Smallshaw

Senior Honors Project

**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the graduation requirements
of the Westover Honors College**

Westover Honors College

April 24, 2023

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*... Colours ne know I none, withouten drede,
But swiche colours as growen in the mede,
Or ells swich as men dye or peynte.
Colours of rethoryk been to me queynte;
My spirit feeleth noght of swich mateere ...*

- The Franklin's Prologue (723-727)

Part I: Introduction

Chapter I. Setting a Scene – The Scrope-Grosvenor Trial

In October of 1386, a member of that year’s “Wonderful” Parliament of Westminster was summoned before the English High Court of Chivalry to provide a deposition. The case in question was a high-profile one, as its presentation before the national government and royal authority would suggest. It concerned two noble families’ contest over the right to a coat of arms of particular color and decoration, the *Azure a bend Or*. The opposing parties – the knights Sir Richard Scrope and Sir Robert Grosvenor – each claimed ancient ownership over the design and color combination. Scrope’s family testament, however, was verifiably older and more authentic, and in the words of the summoned witness’s affidavit,

... in all my time these have always been repudiated to be their arms, as common fame and public voice urges and has urged. And when I saw those arms on banners, on stained-glass windows, on paintings, and on clothing, they were commonly called the arms of Le Scrope.¹

The case, on its surface, calls to light the prominent role which visual culture occupied in the lives of both the well-to-do and the common people in late medieval England. Even before the widespread regulation of heraldry by Henry VIII, cases concerning one man’s usurpation of arms from another were rather frequent in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Heraldry and other accompanying art forms were, as the affidavit suggests, indicative of one’s public and even spiritual standing, and the eagerness with which members of the public interacted with such artforms is telling of their solidified place in the social fabric of the time. Where this case diverges uniquely from others like it is in the particular character of that witness who took the

¹ Quoted in Donald Howard, *Chaucer: His Life, His Works, His World* (New York: Fawcett Columbine Books, 1987), 390.

stand in 1386. He had in fact been Geoffrey Chaucer, by that time an impressively accoladed statesman and accomplished poet but still in the early stages of composing what would be his greatest work, *The Canterbury Tales*. Thanks in part to Chaucer's testimony, Richard Scrope ultimately ended up retaining the rights to the *Azure a bend Or* years later when the case was finally settled and the parties reconciled before King Richard II. Robert Grosvenor settled for the distinctly designed *Azure a garb Or*.

While Chaucer's testimony ended up being one of several hundred witness testimonies in this years-long case, his full deposition for the Scrope-Grosvenor trial offers remarkable insight into his individual persona. It is the only existing record of Chaucer's spoken words. It draws to light his high-profile service as comptroller of wool customs and chief clerk of the King's works, his participation in the English military on the continent, and even his brief stint in Parliament. It captures his sharp wit and proclivity for storytelling and anecdote, even before an austere court of law. However, in a less direct manner, the account also captures a crucial element of Chaucer's society that proved fundamental to his storytelling. *Banners, stained-glass windows, paintings, clothing* – here Chaucer lists by name four of the most important modes of art and visual culture of the medieval period. While his citation of these artforms reveals itself in the context of a courtroom, it takes little for modern audiences to further discern Chaucer's employment of these in his physical environment, in his memory, and in his imagination.

And Chaucer's time period certainly afforded him an incredible amount to work with, visually speaking. Banners were popular, as the Scrope-Grosvenor trial evinces, for displaying one's *nobilis*, or legitimacy to own land,² and for attesting to one's attunement to the codes of

² Arthur Charles Fox-Davies, *A Complete Guide to Heraldry* (London: T.C. & E.C. Jack, 1909), 17.

chivalry, the guiding social and religious code for those of upper-class medieval society. Clothing and dyed fabrics operated in a similar manner: those of the higher echelons had exclusive rights to certain colors and styles, and it was in their best interest to conspicuously display these at the expense of the lower classes forbidden from adorning themselves in such garb. Moreover, stained-glass windows were perhaps the most egalitarian of artforms in the medieval world; because Church attendance, veneration of saints and relics, and pilgrimage were essentially required for social functioning, the scenes depicted in the windows of western Europe's grand



Figure 1. The coat of arms of Sir Geoffrey Luttrell are presented in the margins of Psalm 94 in Luttrell's personal psalter.

cathedrals had a guaranteed and steady audience. Stained-glass windows also served a crucial didactic purpose, as what the illiterate masses could not attain from a reading of the Bible or comprehend from a Latin mass, they learned through images in their place of worship and pilgrimage. And paintings, conversely, were perhaps the most exclusive of these art forms. The “paint” Chaucer mentions refers to ink illuminations, or illustrations, of manuscripts, which were the written products of primarily religious scholarship that remained primarily in the hands of monastic communities. Those that did belong to members of the lay population were commonly for both religious and social instruction for the noble reader; customized prayer books, for example, could display marginal scenes of the owner's life and heraldic symbols while the majority of the page was taken up with the text of a particular psalm (Figure 1). Art for the rich, art for the poor, religious art, secular art – Chaucer's witness deposition identifies each of these

modes of visual imagery, demonstrating his knowledge of the social hierarchy of his day and the cultural avenues which reached each of them.

Chapter II. Chaucer the Poet, Chaucer the Artist

Geoffrey Chaucer's works, most notably *The Canterbury Tales*, have withstood centuries of commentary and criticism. Scholarship from the early twentieth century to the present has made extensive commentary on Chaucer's use of visual imagery and symbolism in *The Canterbury Tales*. From a literary approach, scholars point to Chaucer's diverse and extensive descriptions of visuals in poetry as a primary rhetorical avenue, where he applies commentary to instances where a physical image (known in this case as a symbol) is most appropriate to elicit a desired emotion or convey a certain idea concerning morality.³ While literary analysis of this sort may be the initial angle at which scholars approach Chaucer, viewing these instances of visual description through a historical lens offers just as much benefit. Historians and art historians of late medieval England have analyzed Chaucer's choice of visual descriptors as they apply to broader historical significance. They have identified the trends, whether in fabric material or architectural detail or color of skin, in historical literature, art, and material culture which Chaucer incorporated into his body of work. The significance of Chaucer's imagery thus goes beyond the idea of timeless literary concepts of morality or emotion; his language paints a portrait of what people of his time valued in terms of art and other visual expressions of culture, pointing to Chaucer as a master social critic through *The Canterbury Tales* and its diverse array of characters, each as discrepant in social status as they are in moral virtue from one another.

³ For just one example of literary analysis of symbolism, see Naomi Pasquine, "Chaucer's Knight's Tale: A Symbolic Reading," (Master's Thesis, University of Richmond, 1973).

To argue the magnitude of this connection between the social commentary of Chaucer and the visual culture of his age and society, scholars have embarked on two broadly identifiable avenues (as are relevant to this thesis and pertain chiefly, if not exclusively, to *The Canterbury Tales*). The first avenue takes a chiefly historical approach, placing Chaucer's pilgrims and the characters of their tales directly into the time period in which they make their journey to Canterbury. The second avenue is more fluid in its approach to the tales and is sometimes more historical, sometimes more literary, yet it retains its pertinence to this thesis due to its focus on color symbolism specifically. The symbols as they appear in literature, that is, always have a "societal" inspiration behind them – usually religious, sometimes a remnant of ancient culture, still other times something different.⁴ Supplementary scholarship that does not pertain to Chaucer, yet offers general arguments about the history of color symbolism or the importance of art and material culture in late medieval England, has proven as equally indispensable as that which deals with Chaucer and *The Canterbury Tales* directly.

These two avenues of scholarship converge to form a basis for where this thesis will seek to expand on current literature. There is significant discussion surrounding color symbolism as a whole in *The Canterbury Tales*; notably, C. P. Biggam's article, in which she constructs a hierarchy of Chaucer's color terms based on their frequency of occurrence, identifies that Red and associated terms denoting the color (ruddy, scarlet, etc.) is the most frequently occurring of all hues in Chaucer's works.⁵ Beyond its identification, Biggam does not provide a significant analysis of the importance of Red as it serves as a descriptor. Moreover, the current scholarship which does venture into the significance of color symbolism draws conclusions almost

⁴ Both of these avenues, as will be explored more later, are on display in Susanna Fein and David Raybin's edited volume *Chaucer: Visual Approaches* (Penn State University Press, 2016).

⁵ C. P. Biggam, "Aspects of Chaucer's Adjectives on Hue." In *The Chaucer Review* 28, no. 1 (1993), 41-53.

exclusively on the *literary* significance of color usage and how it is symbolic for general and timeless literary concepts such as emotion, wellness, or morality, to identify several. One example of this approach and a fundamental starting point for this thesis is Robert Blanch's and Julian Wasserman's discussion on the role of Red and White in the Knight's Tale, asserting that those colors in tandem "form a natural unity or completeness expressive of a type of harmony found in certain ideal individuals."⁶ Their analysis seeks to explain character development in the Knight's Tale and thus does not question as extensively the historical implications of its color symbolism and where parallel evidence can be found in expressions beyond literature. Other sources that do take this color-oriented approach do not have *The Canterbury Tales* as an object of focus, if it is referenced at all; such endeavors are more readily undertaken on less fragmented works.⁷ This research synthesizes the two avenues in a discussion of the importance of the pairing of the colors Red and White in the descriptive and symbolic frameworks of *The Canterbury Tales* as the work was influenced by art and material culture of its age, identifying the areas where various connotations attributed to Red in literature are conveyed through non-literary sources related to the work through the historical events of Chaucer's diverse and eventful life and career. This thesis ultimately elucidates how Chaucer used more than esoteric literary concepts in devising the historical and social commentary present in *The Canterbury Tales*.

This thesis will not be the first work dedicated to throwing light on Chaucer's non-literary inspirations. The standard, of sorts, for such scholarship takes the form of V.A. Kolve's work *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative*. Though it focuses on just the first five Canterbury

⁶ Blanch and Wasserman, "White and Red in the Knight's Tale."

⁷ See Robert Blanch, "Games Poets Play: The Ambiguous Use of Color Symbolism in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Nottingham Mediaeval Studies* 20 (1976).

Tales – Knight, Miller, Reeve, Cook, Man of Law – the work is exhaustive, guided by the common theme that Chaucer, as the “great originator” in England of literature that imitated the natural world.⁸ In recent years, scholars have worked to both critique and expand on Kolve by singling out artforms as they relate to the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole, to its individualized tales, and even to subthemes of these tales. From manuscript illumination and painting to architecture and stained glass, the study of Chaucer’s artistic inspiration has become more nuanced. For example, in his article “Intervisual Texts, Intertextual Images: Chaucer and the Luttrell Psalter,” Ashby Kinch identifies the Luttrell Psalter (Figure 1) and its rich illustration and importance as a companion to the picture of daily medieval life which Chaucer provides in *The Canterbury Tales*, as a document quite refined and specific to the “muddled” class of urban gentry in its intent with image.⁹ This Psalter, commissioned by Sir Geoffrey Luttrell in the 1320s, is replete with what Kinch describes as “conventional religious narratives” and most importantly with affirmations of Sir Geoffrey’s lordship due to its heraldic symbols and coats of arms.¹⁰ While Chaucer indeed was no stranger to the influence of heraldic imagery, it is the Luttrell Psalter’s flow of *bas-de-page* imagery, linked together in continuous narrative scenes of grotesque *babewyns* and human-animal hybrids across its folios, that most nearly parallels Chaucer’s framework for the *Canterbury Tales*¹¹. In the same volume, Kathryn Vulic addresses the septenary (seven-part) diagram of the Paternoster prayer (a chief concept in “The Parson’s Tale”)

⁸ V.A. Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative: The First Five Canterbury Tales* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1984), 359.

⁹ Ashby Kinch, “Intervisual Texts, Intertextual Images: Chaucer and the Luttrell Psalter,” in *Chaucer: Visual Approaches*, edited by Susanna Fein and David Raybin (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2016), 13.

¹⁰ Kinch, 7.

¹¹ Kinch, 8.

as it appears in the fourteenth-century Vernon manuscript.¹² The Parson is one of the few pilgrims of a religious vocation who explicitly rejects colors, or more specifically, the sumptuousness associated with them, in his “tale,” which is in fact a sermon to his audience on the importance of penitence, penance, and absolution. While Vulic does not focus on the significance of the Parson’s opinion towards color, her work creates an intriguing question of whether the Parson was aware of the visual tradition and rich, even sumptuary, embellishment of the Paternoster prayer which he so prioritizes. This thesis will explore the opinions of the Parson as a potent sector of medieval opinion in Chaucer’s age as he would have experienced it and possibly transferred that opinion into this rigid character.

Color factors prominently in Jessica Brantley’s article “*The Franklin’s Tale* and the Sister Arts.” Using Plutarch’s ancient philosophical observation that “Painting is mute poetry, poetry a speaking picture,” the character of the Franklin synthesizes and harmonizes the painted colors (i.e., those of reproduction by man) with the “truthful colors of nature,” presenting visual culture and artistic production (i.e., the “sister arts” to poetry and literature) in a thoroughly positive connotation.¹³ Brantley, however, addresses the opposite viewpoint as well, where real-life ecclesiastical figures like Isidore of Seville and Bernard of Clairvaux rejected the use of, or at least the equation of truth, with colors produced synthetically by man, and by extension, with the “lying fictions” of poets.¹⁴ This assessment gives greater refinement to another of the arguments in Vulic’s discussion, where the Parson’s rejection of sumptuous embellishment while simultaneously praising a prayer with a long history of ornamentation hints at a hypocrisy that

¹² Kathryn Vulic, “The Vernon Paternoster Diagram, Medieval Graphic Design, and the *Parson’s Tale*,” in *Chaucer: Visual Approaches*, edited by Susanna Fein and David Raybin (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2016), 64.

¹³ Jessica Brantley, “The Franklin’s Tale and the Sister Arts,” in *Chaucer: Visual Approaches*, edited by Susanna Fein and David Raybin (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016), 142.

¹⁴ Brantley, in Fein and Raybin, 142.

has more explicit manifestations in other pilgrims. Equally intriguing is Brantley's argument that, though Chaucer himself is a pilgrim in the poem, the Franklin, based on his knightly background and tendency to ironically deny his knowledge, is most alike to Chaucer the real-life poet and statesman.¹⁵ This denial extends to his interest in the use of colors as they apply to rhetoric, which in turn could function as an admittance on Chaucer's part that visual imagery was a seminal influence for his work. While Brantley's work creates intriguing avenues of scholarship concerning the personal connections between his pilgrims and Chaucer himself, the Franklin's tale does not lend itself contextually to the subject of this thesis and will thus not be discussed in this paper. His prologue, however, inspired this work's title and accentuates the critical notion that throughout history, "color" has been partitioned into the largely arbitrary categories of visual (or literal) and rhetorical; this thesis aims to deconstruct any stark distinction between those classifications and demonstrate their inherent linkage.

Equally pertinent to this thesis is David Raybin's "Miracle Windows and the Pilgrimage to Canterbury." The windows of Canterbury Cathedral's Trinity Chapel feature over forty scenes of the miraculous activities of Saint Thomas à Becket, the martyr whose shrine the pilgrims are on their way to venerate. Color abounds in these window scenes, which are predominantly those of Becket healing various illnesses. As Raybin argues, the current windows of the Trinity Chapel are one of the greatest "triumph[s] for the history of Western art, architecture, and tourism" due to the tantamount commercial and spiritual forces driving their production. A fire had destroyed the Canterbury Cathedral in 1174, and the supervisors of its reconstruction had the relics of its most famous martyr saint in mind when deciding how best to both venerate Becket accordingly and to encourage monetary contribution by way of pilgrimage to what was, at that point, still a

¹⁵ Brantley, in Fein and Raybin, 145.

relatively obscure area of England.¹⁶ The result was both a massive new edifice and the production and installation of the vibrant windows, which served as powerful and inspirational explanations of Thomas a Becket's good works to an illiterate populace making pilgrimage there. A fair portion of Chaucer's own pilgrims can be counted among this demographic, and it can thus be inferred that the images in the windows were a driving force, as Raybin argues, behind the voyage that immediately constitutes the frame story of the *Canterbury Tales* as well as behind Chaucer's own initial idea for the work as a whole. Raybin's perspective argues a different side of the point brought up by previous authors on Chaucer's visual inspirations who choose to comment on the scholarly, theoretical nature of colors' truthfulness and pertinence in settings where morality was concerned; for the common medieval pilgrim, image and color were essential to the understanding of religious significance and daily function, as the Canterbury windows evince.

As a way to give further credence to the studies which contribute to the growing field surrounding Chaucer's and other literary figures' non-textual influences, V. A. Kolve brings up an important "apology" made for the incorporation of some non-contemporaneous sources which scholars use as evidence of thematic inspiration for great works like *The Canterbury Tales*. To Kolve, contemporaneity should be treated, in moderation, as arbitrary, seeing as "a king, clad in crown and breechcloth, does not look very different, whether portrayed in the twelfth or fifteenth century."¹⁷ That is to say, visual sources presented in past scholarship and in this thesis vary widely in their date and locale of creation, from ancient times to the High Middle Ages to even after Chaucer's death. The fact of the matter is that contemporaneity between Chaucer's lifetime

¹⁶ David Raybin, "Miracle Windows and the Pilgrimage to Canterbury," in *Chaucer: Visual Approaches*, edited by Susanna Fein and David Raybin (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016), 154.

¹⁷ Kolve, 7.

and the time of a piece's creation is not requisite to thematic influence (in this case color symbolism) as this thesis seeks to demonstrate. To echo Kolve once more, it is not to be implied in this thesis that Chaucer actually looked on these specific objects, "only that he would have understood them, and that he could have counted on some substantial part of his audience to share with him that skill."¹⁸

Chapter III. Medieval Color Usage and the Red-White Pairing

Of particular importance to the medieval world's visual arts, and to Chaucer's storytelling, was the concept of color – as a scientific endeavor, as an economic venue, as a status symbol, as an indicator of religious purity or lack thereof. Modern foray into color theory identifies three modes of historical color interpretation. *Saturation* assesses a color's intensity as it relates to its mixture with either white or black; *brightness* assesses a color's luminosity in terms of its sheen or reflectivity; and *hue* assesses a color based on its light properties.¹⁹ By these parameters, *hue* is the color method that differentiates color essentially, or prismatically (red from yellow from blue), while *saturation* and *brightness* use pigmentary difference to differentiate between colors (sometimes of the same hue). For example, to a medieval eye, two colors that differed in hue – say, red and blue – could be given the same Anglo-Saxon-derived term *wann* if they exhibited similar properties of low saturation, or paleness.²⁰ Especially

¹⁸ Kolve, 8.

¹⁹ Zoriana Lotut, "Reading Medieval Colour: The Case of Blue in *The Canterbury Tales*," in *Journal of the International Colour Association* 29 (2022), 29.

²⁰ Heather Pulliam, "Color," in *Studies in Iconography* 33, special issue *Medieval Art History Today – Critical Terms* (2012): 4.

pertinent to this paper is the term *scarlet*. While the term came to be associated with Red hue in the medieval period, *scarlet* was historically used especially in economic sectors to refer to the colors of woolen cloths dyed in insect-based dyestuffs, ranging in color from mulberry to vibrant green.²¹ When dyers recognized the acclaim which those red-dyed “scarlet” garments received among their prosperous buyers, the term came to categorize exclusively red-hued cloth and associated dyes.²² The color lexeme in this case identified the richness of the fabric, and by extension that of the individual it adorned. Despite this unique method of color differentiation, the medieval palette was still one of considerable diversity (Figure 2).



Figure 2. A manuscript detail of a medieval painter with a diverse palette of colors, 1360-1375.

Medieval color theories were considerably influenced by the ancient Greeks. In one of the earliest treatises on color theory, *de Coloribus* (“On Colors”), Aristotle²³ theorized that the simplest of colors – white, black, and yellow – all belong first to the elements of air, fire, earth, and water.²⁴ These and other more “complex” colors were believed to be inherent qualities of the object which they colored.²⁵ As laid out in his *De Sensu et Sensibilibus* (“On Sense and Sensible Objects”), Aristotle proposed a spectrum of five core colors – yellow, red, violet, green, and blue

²¹ Amy Butler Greenfield, *A Perfect Red: Empire, Espionage, and the Quest for the Color of Desire* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005), 24.

²² Kassia St. Clair, *The Secret Lives of Color*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2017), 161.

²³ The *De Coloribus* is historically attributed to Aristotle, but its true authorship has come into question in recent decades.

²⁴ Aristotle (?), *de Coloribus (On Colors)*. Cambridge, MA, and London: Loeb Classical Library, 1936.

²⁵ Pleij, *Colors Demonic and Divine*, 11.

– falling in that order between white and black from least to most opacity.²⁶ Many scholars of the Middle Ages took to expanding on Aristotle’s and other theories of antiquity, some with greater lasting impact than others. In his *Etymologiae*, the seventh-century Spanish theologian Isidore of Seville (560-636) derived the term and idea of *color* from the Latin *calor*, “to heat,” and subscribed to the importance placed on physical materiality when it came to color extraction and production:

Colorings (*color*) are so named because they are perfected by the heat (*calor*) of fire or of the sun, or because in the beginning they used to be filtered (*colere*) so that they would be as fine as possible. Colorings either occur naturally or are manufactured. They occur naturally, as for example, red ochre, red earth, Paraetionium, Melinum, Eretria, and gold-coloring. The others are manufactured either by artifice or by mixture.²⁷

More correctly, the thirteenth-century Franciscan friar Vincent of Beauvais identified that color was fundamentally influenced by light, contrary to both Aristotle’s supposition of inherency and Isidore of Seville’s heat-based hypothesis. In addition to Christian scholars, Arabic scholars, notably the thirteenth-century astronomer Nasir al-din al-Tusi, also expanded on color theories.²⁸ Instead of the single-path of Aristotle’s view, Islamic scholars surmised that each color in between white and black was its own path of multiple hues traveling on a gradient of opacity²⁹ (Figure 3). Grounded in naturalism and materiality, this approach dominated medieval Europeans’ assessment of colors because any color which was identifiable had to first be extractable from an organic source. As medieval color preparation developed alongside Christian theology, however, the ideas of color permeated new contexts and took on heightened levels of interpretation. Scholars posit that of the three approaches to assessing color – hue, brightness,

²⁶ Eric Kirchner, “Color Theory and Color Order in Medieval Islam,” in *Color Research and Application* 40, no. 1 (2015), 7.

²⁷ Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, translated by Stephen Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach, and Oliver Berghof (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 380.

²⁸ Kirchner, 8.

²⁹ Kirchner, 8.

and saturation – early medieval scientists and theologians alike prized the second of these above the others for its dependence on external light in giving colors their visual value.³⁰ Light, *lux* or *lumen*, took on a metaphysical layer above just the physical, allowing colors’ variation in brightness to be compared to broader moral concepts of good and evil, joy and suffering, Heaven and Hell.³¹ While light- and intensity-oriented color vocabulary remained indispensable descriptors to scribes throughout the medieval period, what scholars commonly agree upon as the bridge between Old and Early Modern English was the expansion of and more frequent use of terms that diversified *hue*.³² Medieval authors stood on the front lines of this expansion, and chief among them was Geoffrey Chaucer. He drew from Old English, French, and Latin sources,³³ far surpassing his English contemporaries in both application of existing vocabulary and invention of novel hue descriptors.

Like ancient civilizations, medieval color theorists and color craftsmen (dyers) developed significance for colors determined by their prevalence in the natural world. Cultural and symbolic connotation were attributed to these, recorded, and then put on physical display through various modes of visual culture. In medieval culture especially, the color Red stood out as a hue of vital importance and diverse interpretation. Drawing again from ancient customs, medieval people viewed the color Red as a symbol of death due to its obvious relations with shed blood, and by extension warfare and

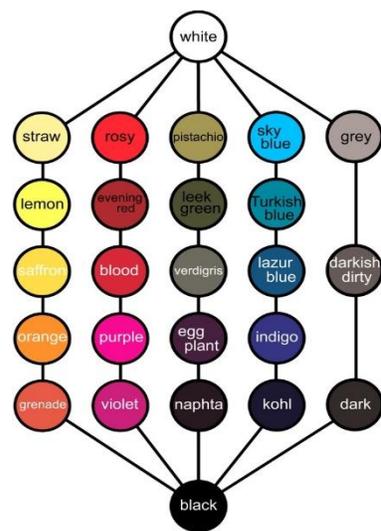


Figure 3. A modern reconstruction of al-Tusi's theory of color order.

³⁰ Lotut, 30.

³¹ Lotut, 31.

³² Pulliam, 4.

³³ C. P. Biggam. "Aspects of Chaucer's Adjectives of Hue," in *The Chaucer Review* 28, no. 1 (1993): 52.

violence.³⁴ Red's associations with blood expanded further to encompass aspects of individual health; those of "sanguine" complexion were so called because of their youthful athleticism, physical power, and sexual drive. Love and beauty, especially that of the high style in courtly literature, descended from this concept and became firmly entrenched as literary traditions of the High and Late Middle Ages. Christianity also had its own diverse connotations of Red. Often the sexual drive associated with sanguinity was taken as a sign of moral depravity and licentiousness, manifesting in the sin of Lust and such biblical characters as the Whore of Babylon. Red also appeared frequently in disquisitions on the vice of Drunkenness due to the color of wine. The sin of Vanity sometimes took on a Red character as well, especially with reference to the wearing of red clothing. Perhaps the most summative biblical opinion of the color red comes from the resoundingly negative interpretation of it in Isaiah 1:18 – "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." Beyond, and even within, Scripture, however, Red – and especially some of its specified appellations like *crimson* and *scarlet* – were positive, even coveted symbols of health, wealth, and refinement that stemmed directly from the high-quality goods which medieval dyers and textile workers prepared in these colors.³⁵

As the verse from Isaiah indicates, another color deeply permeated western culture from the time of the ancient Greeks. White, often equated to such objects such as snow, wool, and alabaster, was valued on the one hand for its active ability to "purify" and refine. Some of the earliest western records thus document a type of white pigment derived from lead, sometimes

³⁴ Philip Thomas, "Red and White: A Roman Color Symbol," in *Rheinisches Museum fuer Philologie* 122 (1979): 311.

³⁵ Greenfield, 24.

referred to as *ceruse*, being used by women as a foundation to achieve an appearance of smooth, clear skin.³⁶ Such practices persisted into the early modern and modern world, where women continued to use this pigment, despite its toxicity, to achieve a sense of at least outward purity. In a more symbolic sense, white in other forms of visual culture was a manifestation of purity of the body and spirit. Alabaster, a white stone favored by medieval artists for working into religious sculpture to adorn places of worship (Figure 4), plays a significantly symbolic role in a gospel story of a woman, the penitent Mary Magdalene, who breaks open a vessel of pure alabaster and anoints the house with the fragrant oil within, equating the purity of the white stone to the regained purity of Mary (Matthew 26:7; Mark 14:3; Luke 7:37).



Figure 4. A mid-fourteenth century alabaster sculpture of the Virgin and Child with remnants of polychrome paint.

A paradox arises here, however, because recent scientific and historical analysis of alabaster sculptures in medieval English cathedrals reveals that these monuments were not left in their “pure” white form, but painted to complement other polychrome elements of these churches, namely stained glass windows.³⁷ If the true purity to be reflected on in these sculptures resided in the whiteness of their basic material, what then was the purpose of obscuring it with paints? A similar dilemma arises concerning that most prized staple of medieval English economy, wool. As medieval religious scholars perceived it, the white woolen cloth alluded to in Isaiah 1:18 was literally undyed and therefore symbolically unsullied,

³⁶ St. Clair, 45.

³⁷ Lucia Pereira-Pardo, Diego Tamburini, and Joanne Dyer, “Shedding light on the colours of medieval alabaster sculptures: Scientific analysis and Digital Reconstruction of their Original Polychromy,” in *Color Research and Application* 44, no. 1 (2018), 222.

untainted, “pure.”³⁸ Rarely, however, was the wool of northern European sheep purely white, as natural pigmentation, ranging anywhere from grey to beige to black, had been reintroduced into the sheep of these areas after the fall of Rome and the genetic influence of sheep from the Mediterranean area that were whiter in color declined.³⁹ Moreover, dyed cloth later played an indispensable role in identifying religious seasons by the particular color of the clerics’ vestments and to what holiday they corresponded – Pope Innocent III outlined the Roman Catholic liturgical colors as red for feast days of martyrs, black for seasons of penitence, violet during Lent and Advent, and green for ordinary days, with other vestment color combinations existing on the parochial level and employed at the local priest’s discretion.⁴⁰ While Innocent’s assignment of white robes to festival days of lords was indeed done as a testament to their purity, it is evident that by that time other colors were not so antagonistic to white as previous church fathers had argued. Not all connotations of White were positive, for that matter; its relationship with death was twofold, as White was a physical feature of both old age (typically seen in hair) as well as physical infirmity (seen through pallor, or a draining of the face of color due to injury, sickness, or fear). Such diversity of connotation surrounding both Red and White allowed for their employment in various literary and visual contexts.

Just as their individual connotations could vary widely, so too could the connotation of White and Red when strategically employed in a pairing. And, as history makes evident, artists took many opportunities to convey ideas of the human condition through the pairing of these colors. Ancient Roman writers equated the symbolism of Red and White together as a harbinger

³⁸ Michel Pastoureau, in Jessica Hemming, “Red, White, and Black in Symbolic Thought: The Tricolour Folk Motif, Colour Naming, and Trichromatic Vision,” in *Folklore* 123, no. 3 (2012), 322.

³⁹ Jane Schneider, “Peacocks and Penguins: the Political Economy of European Cloth and Colors,” in *American Ethnologist* 5, no. 3 (1978), 423.

⁴⁰ J. Barrington Bates, “Am I Blue? Some Historical Evidence for Liturgical Colors,” in *Studia Liturgica*, 33, no. 1 (2003), 77.

of old age and death, as indicated by the presence of lilies and poppies in the writings of such preeminent authors as Horace, Ovid, and Virgil.⁴¹ Red and White floral motifs extend in ancient Roman literature to encompass ideas of purity and love as well, with the picking, shearing, or other defilement of these flowers in such literature signifying a defilement of a character's, usually a woman's, virginal purity.⁴² The presentation of various liquid forms of Red and White was equally symbolic; red and white wine, blood, and milk were often present at Roman funerary rituals and used as complementary offerings to the dead.⁴³ The symbolism of antiquity translated into the practices of early and medieval Christians as well. The white swan, often presented in ancient texts as a harbinger of death and thus often being coupled with scenes of blood,⁴⁴ has been discussed in medieval treatises on food as an animal of hypocrisy – its white outer coat disguises black skin and uncharacteristically dark red meat, leading medieval cooks and religious scholars alike to associate the consumption of swans with melancholy and even go as far as to associate them with the Black Death.⁴⁵ Such connotations of the Red and White color pairing were not exclusively negative; White retained its sense of purity, and when coupled with Red could elicit several desired symbolic effects: Red as sexual “ripeness,” often seen in contrasts in art and literature with red, “ruddy” complexions on white skin or with clear glassy eyes, was at once a sign of fertility or of promiscuity, depending on the behavior of the pair's benefactor.⁴⁶ It was thus typical to see these traits in descriptions of females, though it was not uncommon to achieve a different rhetorical effect when these traits were applied to the male body, as this thesis will later elaborate on. Beyond their secular uses, Red and White had positive

⁴¹ Thomas, 312.

⁴² Thomas, 314.

⁴³ Feldherr, Andrew, “*Non inter nota sepulcra*: Catullus 101 and Roman Funerary Ritual,” in *Classical Antiquity* 19, no. 2 (2000), 213.

⁴⁴ Thomas, 315-316.

⁴⁵ C. M. Woolgar, “Medieval Food and Color,” in *Journal of Medieval History* 44, no. 1 (2018), 4-5.

⁴⁶ Hemming, 312.

and negative implications in religious contexts as well. White could still stand for purity in the face of Red as any number of the Seven Deadly Sins, but Red's redeeming attribute was found in its equation with martyrdom and sacrifice. The idea of the sacrificial lamb extends back to early Jewish custom where Red and White pairing presents itself: Jewish *tamid*, or daily offering rites, stipulated that pure, unblemished lambs were to be slaughtered and their blood mixed with white flour and wine to be drunk.⁴⁷ Later examples of lambs in the Old Testament identifying them as "gentle" (Jeremiah 11:19) and substitutionary for the death of others (Genesis 22) fit neatly into dialogues surrounding the prefiguration of Christ, thus making the Red and White pairing easily translatable from Old to New Testament as well.⁴⁸ Red blood in contrast with white wool, either as cloth or as a lamb, supremely seen in the figure of Christ as Lamb of God. As such, this thesis will explore Chaucer's influences from dialogues around animal and vegetable life, clothing, the body, social roles and status, and how he both perpetuated the historic implications of the Red and White color pairing and manipulated it in ways which were unique to his own personal experiences and to his overall goals with *The Canterbury Tales*.

Knowing the immense and rich history of the visual arts and colors, particularly of Red and White, that had developed up until that point, it is important again to note that when Chaucer stood before the High Court of Chivalry in 1386 and listed those elements of medieval visual culture, he was right at the beginning of writing his most famous poem, *The Canterbury Tales*. We can thus take it as no surprise that this work has for centuries been considered a holistic portrait of English medieval life – a raucous, vibrant group of socially, economically, and morally variegated pilgrims en route to the shrine of Saint Thomas a Becket. These pilgrims'

⁴⁷ Christopher Skinner, "Another Look at the 'Lamb of God'," in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 161, (2004), 90.

⁴⁸ Skinner, 93-94.

own appearances and experiences are as colorfully detailed as the tales which they recite to pass the journey's time. Few of Geoffrey Chaucer's storytelling pilgrims are without a "colorful" reference in their General Prologue descriptions or in their own tales; that is, each makes meaningful and strategic use of direct and oblique mentions of colors and objects whose presence and context strongly suggest a certain hue. Direct color references are readily discernible by a mere surface-level reading. The Yeoman's "cote and hood of grene" (GP 103), the Cook's "blankmanger" (white pudding), the Physician's love of "gold in special" (444), the Shipman's "hewe al broun" from the hot sun (394), the Wife of Bath's stockings "of fyn scarlet reed" (456); each conjures a striking image of a physical object, supplementing the tangible picture of that character and aiding in a reader's moral assessment of them after this initial image has been created. This secondary assessment is supplemented by drawing connections between other, more oblique descriptions which *suggest* a color, thereby prompting a deeper reading of the text and thus of the characters themselves. For example, the Cook's white pudding might, in isolation, present as an appetizing dish and thus speak positively of the character and capability of this pilgrim; the "mormal," or open sore on his shin (GP 386) referenced right before his dish, however, prompts a reader to create a contrasting and thoroughly unappetizing view of Red and White hues, challenging this initial positive supposition of the Cook's character. The bald head of the unscrupulous Monk, "that stemed as a forneys of a leed" (202), vibrantly produces an image of a red-faced and merry cleric. This supposition is supported by the accompanying "white" assertion that he is "nat pale as a forpynd goost" (205), contrasting the Red and White hues yet supporting the overall idea of the Monk's lustiness. The unsavory portrayal of the lecherous Summoner is directly enhanced by the incurable "whelkes white" (632) on his face; immediately another hue is introduced alongside this image in the "wyn, reed as blood" (635)

which the Summoner loves to drink, adding a strong sense of moral weakness to the blatantly apparent physical infirmity of this pilgrim. These instances call to the foreground perhaps the two most important colors of the Canterbury Tales, those of White and Red. One sees immediately the physical implications of these colors: blood, flesh, virility, aging, physical injury – White and Red lend themselves almost exclusively to providing compelling descriptions of such physical phenomena. These colors’ implications of the emotional, moral, religious, and intangible aspects of human psychology are tantamount in importance. Anger, senility, lust, and contrarily chastity, martyrdom, loyalty to the divine – each manifests in various presentations of these two hues.

Chaucer’s attunement to Red and White in particular could possibly stem from the same institution which implicated him in the Scrope-Grosvenor trial. As well-off members of the *armigerous*, or “arm-bearing,” class, the Chaucer family had its own coat of arms with distinct pattern and colors. Theirs was the *Per Pale Argent and Gules a Bend Countercharged*, which appears most notably in both the fifteenth-century portrait of Chaucer (Figure 5) as well as on his tomb in Westminster Abbey (Figure 6). The heraldic tinctures *argent* (silver) and *gules* (red) appear to be a popular color pairing based on the recorded coats of arms of those who gave depositions in the trial.

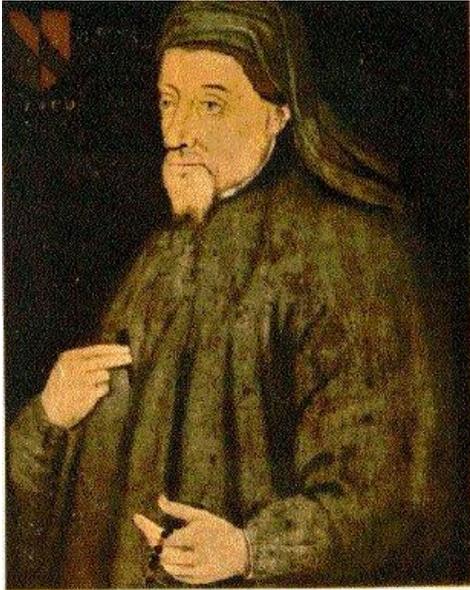


Figure 5. The fifteenth-century "Harvard Portrait" of Chaucer, with his faded coat of arms in the upper left hand corner.

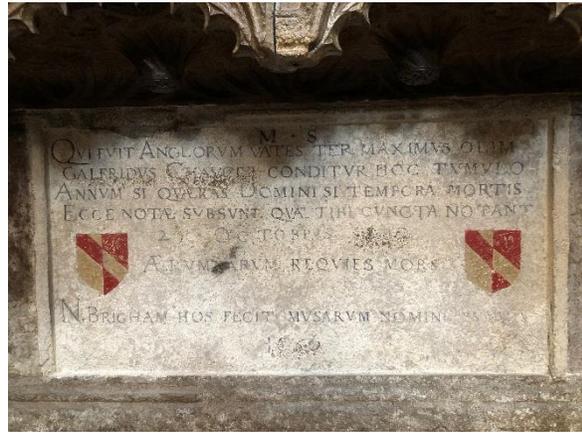


Figure 6. The inscription above Chaucer's tomb in Westminster Abbey, flanked by his argent and gules coat of arms.

By his words in the Scrope-Grosvenor trial and his own heraldic symbolism, Chaucer admits to being attuned to the visual artistic presentations around him. Can it not then be said that these presentations, especially in terms of their color, influenced *The Canterbury Tales*, his most monumental work and cornerstone contribution to the English language? As a poetic colorist and employer of historic Red and White color pairing, Chaucer was rooted in knowledge equal parts abstract literary tradition and tangible “real-world” experience; he was indeed both a founder and a product of not just a literary, but also of a flourishing artistic historical age.

Part II: Preliminary Considerations

Chapter IV. A Discussion of Thematic Ordering

Historically, a significant portion of scholarship on *The Canterbury Tales* is devoted to making sense of Chaucer's choice of order for the pilgrims and their corresponding tales. The current order of events and tale-tellings in most existing complete manuscripts is as follows: General Prologue, Knight, Miller, Reeve, Cook, Man of Law, Wife of Bath, Friar, Summoner, Clerk, Merchant, Squire, Franklin, Physician, Pardoner, Shipman, Prioress, Thopas and Melibee (the pilgrim Chaucer), Monk, Nun's Priest, Second Nun, Canon's Yeoman, Manciple, Parson, Retraction. These are divided into ten Fragments based on length and theme. Though the order of tale-telling makes up the basis of the work, our initial acquaintance with these characters (and quite a few more who are not assigned a tale) does not follow the same order. The pilgrims are introduced by the pilgrim Chaucer in the General Prologue in descending order by their estate, that is, their social standing, beginning with the Knight on down to the Pardoner. Their physical order *en-route* to Canterbury is different as well, with the Miller leading the band and his enemy, the Reeve, taking up the rear.

Scholars have identified that such diverse ordering is not random – that is, not simply a product of Chaucer's whimsy or at the mercy of what order they appeared in his mind – and indeed has both overarching significance and more localized significance when organized thematically into sets. For example, beginning the main body of work with the theatrical tale of the Knight and the lovelorn quest of its characters is an ideal allegorical parallel to the beginning of the physical quest of pilgrimage; subsequently ending the work with a sermon from the Parson once the pilgrims are at the outskirts of Canterbury leads the pilgrims and audience to reflect on their physical journey and equate it with the spiritual one they undertake naturally in the course

of their Christian lives. Other studies of the Canterbury order look at the frame structure events to establish order. The rival Miller and Reeve, for example, are juxtaposed at opposite ends of the physical pilgrim parade yet naturally tell back-to-back tales of retaliation. Still other studies look to thematic similarities between consecutive tales.⁴⁹ The so-called “Marriage Group” (consisting of the Wife of Bath, the Friar, the Clerk, the Merchant, and the Nun’s Priest) all tell their tales in sequence under the common theme of what constitutes a good woman and good wife. Still others are paired in ways that juxtapose the morality of one in comparison with the other – the Second Nun’s virtuous telling of the Legend of Saint Cecilia, for example, is followed by the Canon’s Yeoman’s ignominious recount of his dealings in the shady business of alchemy.⁵⁰

This statement shall serve as an identification and acknowledgement of such ordering, yet also acknowledge that Chaucer’s use of Red and White color symbolism is not necessarily bound to his authorial intent as expressed by the order of the tales. This thesis will thus rearrange tales in order to explore new connections where deemed appropriate. The theme of chivalry between The Knight’s Tale, The Tale of Sir Thopas, The Nun’s Priest’s Tale, and The Squire’s Tale is one such novel approach; new connections will be drawn concerning the role of comedy in The Miller’s Tale and The Reeve’s Tale; moral hypocrisies and failed duties will be exposed concerning The Prioress; and The Second Nun’s Tale and The Parson’s Tale will each stand alone in their unique treatment of color symbolism. The thematic ordering of this thesis can thus be described as a development of Red and White color pairing: beginning with a tragic

⁴⁹ See, for example, Michael Murphy’s edition and commentary on the *Canterbury Marriage Tales* (New York: Conal and Gavin, 2000).

⁵⁰ See Joseph Grennen, “Saint Cecilia’s ‘Chemical Wedding:’ the Unity of the *Canterbury Tales*, Fragment VIII,” in *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 65, no. 3 (1966), 466-481.

distortion, leading into comedic distortions, on to hypocritical distortions, then peaking at a proposed pure pairing, and finally a rejection of the pairing.

Chapter V. Subjectivity in Iconography and Color Symbolism

In his work, Kolve brings to light a certain “elephant in the room” of medieval iconography, using the ribald Miller as its example. This boisterous pilgrim is an equally vociferous musician:

A baggepipe wel koude he blowe and sowne,
And therwithal he broghte us out of towne. (GP 565-566)

From this contextual relationship between the Miller and bagpipes (which conveniently, as Kolve notes, can be depicted in such a way to resemble male genitalia), scholars have been quick to draw the conclusion that the Miller’s particular choice of instrument is further evidence of the unwaveringly immoral heart of this character.⁵¹ Even Donald Howard accepts only the negative connotations of this instrument as the given assumption for the rude, lower-class Miller, commenting on the associations not only with sexual lewdness, but also of gluttony due to the bagpipes’ simultaneous stomach-like form.⁵²

While acknowledging such an assessment’s validity in the context of the Miller, Kolve points out in many icons and images of the Apocalypse and Last Judgement that the chorus of the heavenly host is augmented by an array of musical instruments – among them are bagpipes, giving off no hints of carnal or gluttonous sin in this context.⁵³ Indeed, Kolve’s argument with this example is that above all in medieval iconography, “context governs: we must take care in our lexicography of signs not only to survey the full range of demonstrable symbolic meaning,

⁵¹ Kolve, 75.

⁵² Howard, 144.

⁵³ Kolve, 75.

but also to allow for the literal meaning of things – respecting both the possibility and the dignity of literal meaning.”⁵⁴ Such attention to iconographic context extends naturally to the context of color symbolism in medieval art and material culture. As the previous sections of this work have noted, Red and White, both in isolation and in tandem, are entirely fluid concepts in terms of their moral symbolism. Even once a context is decided upon and an assessment about the symbolic nature of the pair is made, as Kolve notes, this should not and cannot be taken as the be all and end all of that type of symbolism. Nor does this mean, however, that the pursuit of understanding color symbolism is a completely subjective and thus unworthy cause. Contrarily, this thesis will seek to expand on the wisdom of V. A. Kolve and augment our understanding and appreciation of such a diversity of symbolic interpretation. When in tandem, Red and White will serve at once in this thesis as virtue’s epitome and as its antithesis; when compared, they will present as harmonious counterparts and bitter rivals. Without degrading color symbolism to mere caprice and individualized or culturally isolated fancy, this thesis will rather elevate such diversity of interpretation, presenting it as a positive product of a culture at once rooted in artistic tradition yet open to innovation.

⁵⁴ Kolve, 75.

Part III: The Tales

Chapter VI. Red and White's Tragic Distortion – Wrath and Paganism in *The Knight's Tale*

Despite its intensely Christian undertones, the Knight's Tale is a decidedly pagan text concerning the love triangle of two Greek warriors, Arcite and Palamon, and their shared love interest Emelye. Each is guided by both mortals and Roman gods to approach love with different attitudes; the result is a battle between Arcite and Palamon for Emelye's hand, resulting, due to Arcite's own dealings with the war god Mars and the fateful intervention of other malicious entities, in Arcite's tragic death. Aiding in the sense of tragedy is that the battle takes place as a tournament, a "game" of sorts arranged by Duke Theseus to allow Arcite and Palamon equal opportunity to win Emelye's hand. Conflating recreation with physical fighting had long been the practice of European civilizations up to Chaucer's time, but it is especially helpful to consider medieval attitudes on "pagan" displays of violence, both for sport and for exhibition. While discussing "War and Games" in his *Etymologiae*, Isidore of Seville remarks on the importance of colors in ancient pagan practices of warfare. The victorious side's combatants "would be smeared all over with red pigment, as if in imitation of the appearances of divine fire."⁵⁵ When not in war, colors played an equally important role in the clothing of their horses (*de coloribus equorum*) at races and other festival tournaments. As Isidore describes,

The pagans also associate, in a similar way, the colors decking the horses with the first principles of the elements, linking red with the sun, that is, with fire, white with air, green with earth, and blue with water. According to them, the reds race for summer, because it is the fiery color, and everything turns gold then. The whites for winter, because it is icy, and everything turns white in the cold ... Again, they dedicate those racing in red to Mars, from whom the Romans descend, and because the standards of the Romans are embellished with scarlet, or because Mars delights in blood. Those in white are dedicated

⁵⁵ Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, 360.

to the zephyrs and mild weather ... Thus, since in this spectacle they pollute themselves with the cult of their gods and with the cosmic elements, they are most certainly known to worship those same gods and elements. Hence, Christian, you should pay attention to the fact that unclean divinities possess the circus. For this reason that place, which many of Satan's spirits have haunted, will be alien to you, for the devil and his angels have entirely filled it.⁵⁶

Isidore's opinion of colors is decidedly more negative than other Christian writers of his time and certainly more negative than contemporary medieval writers, but it is important still to note that his expectation concerning a "correct" presentation of colors would have been shared by Christian theologians down the centuries. Isidore's presentation followed Christian interpretations of the colors Red and White, and not the elements of pagan mythology with which warriors of antiquity associated them.

While paganism in Europe might have been at least formally supplanted by Christianity, the necessity for war and ferocity was not abated by the time of the Middle Ages. Christianity and violence in fact harmonized most significantly in this time period in the events of the Crusades, a series of well-intentioned, yet ultimately unsuccessful wars to reclaim the Holy Land across many centuries all the way up into the fourteenth century with the siege of Alexandria of 1365.⁵⁷ As it happens, one of Chaucer's pilgrims took part in this siege. As the first of the Canterbury pilgrims to be described and the first to tell a tale, Chaucer's Knight immediately stands out as a member of a profession of profound literary and historical importance. His extensive service in holy battle makes him no stranger to foreign peoples and danger of all sorts:

At Alisaundre he was whan it was wonne.
Ful ofte tyme he hadde the obrd bigonne
Aboven alle nacions in Pruce;
In Lettow hadde he reysed and in Ruce,

⁵⁶ Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, 369.

⁵⁷ Calabrese, in Lambdin and Lambdin, 8.

No Cristen man so ofte of his degree.
In Gernade at the seege eek hadde he be
Of Algezir, and riden in Belmarye.
At Lyveys was he and at Satalye,
Whan they were wonne, and in the Grete See
At many a noble armee hadde he be.
At mortal batailles hadde he been fifteen,
And foughten for our faith at Traymssene
In lystes thries, and ay slayn his foo.
This ilke worthy knight hadde been also
Somtyme with the lord of Palatye
Agayn another hethen in Turkye. (GP 51-66)

The litany of foreign lands and the successes he achieved there set up the Knight as a supposed champion of his noble profession with a firm religious bent to it. The concepts of knighthood and the knightly class, however, stemming from Frankish kingdoms of the continent, were rooted in a culture of fear and violence in the early Middle Ages; before the development of chivalric code of conduct, knights entered into vassalage to a lord as rough and illiterate figures who served only to protect their lord from any number of external threats.⁵⁸ Christianity swept Europe and its armies, but little could be done to prevent Christian-on-Christian violence as well. It became so commonplace and disruptive to society that religious leaders issued pleas of abatement. Pope Urban II's 1095 speech at the Council of Clermont admonished Christian knights of Europe to turn their violent natures towards a more just cause, aiding the Eastern Church in its struggle against the Turks:

⁵⁸ Michael A. Calabrese, "A Knyght Ther Was," in *Chaucer's Pilgrims: An Historical Guide to the Pilgrims of the Canterbury Tales*, edited by Laura Lambdin and Robert Lambdin (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996), 4.

You the oppressors of children, plunderers of widows; you, guilty of homicide, of sacrilege, robbers of another's rights; ... as vultures swell fetid corpses, so do you sense battle from afar and run to them eagerly ... either lay down the girdle of such knighthood, or advance boldly, as knights of Christ, and rush as quickly as you can to the defense of the Eastern Church.⁵⁹

Although it is told some 300 years after this papal battle call, the Knight's Tale remains true to those themes of foreign enemies, domestic enemies, and certainly bloodthirst. While its literary style is dignified, its subject matter concerning pagan mythology and ritual appear to set the tale up for a jarring conclusion where its character meets a courtly, though decidedly un-Christian, death. The tale indeed has Christian undertones as many scholars suggest with its allusions to that classical Christian philosopher Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*.⁶⁰ But it seems its superficial un-Christian message alerts an audience to the lack of "true" divine revelation and thus the subjection of its non-Christian characters to the cruelty of ignorance, wrath, and Fortune.

Red and White manifest respectively as the token colors in the heraldic symbols of Arcite and Palamon, the Athenian cousins around whom the tale circles. Their simultaneous love for fair Emelye leads to the pitting of these historically harmonious hues against one another. As Blanch and Wasserman deftly assert, "together they [Red and White] form a natural unity or completeness expressive of a type of harmony found in certain ideal individuals."⁶¹ The ideal individual in this case is Emelye, whose personal pairing of Red and White surpasses even natural beauty:

Emelye, that fairer was to sene
Than is the lylie upon his stalk grene,
And fresher than the May with floures newe

⁵⁹ Pope Urban II, "Letter to the Crusaders," in *The First Crusade: The Accounts of Eyewitnesses and Participants*, August C. Krey (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1921).

⁶⁰ Naomi Pasquine, "Chaucer's Knight's Tale: A Symbolic Reading," Master's Thesis, University of Richmond (1972), 12.

⁶¹ Blanch and Wasserman, "White and Red in the Knight's Tale."

For with the rose colour stroof hir hewe
I not which was the fyner of hem two. (KT 1035-1039)

The floral motif continues in Emelye's domestic activities in the garden below where Arcite and Palamon are being held prisoner by Duke Theseus:

She gadereth floures, party white and rede
To make a subtil garland for hire hede;
And as an aungel hevenysshly she soong. (KT 1053-1055)

Duke Theseus himself, who eventually releases the two knights and funds their tournament for Emelye's hand, displays his own form of Red and White color pairing in his personal heraldic symbols:

The rede statue of Mars, with spere and targe,
So shyneth in his white baner large. KT (975-976)

If Theseus then serves as a figure of Boethian moderation throughout the tale,⁶² Arcite and Palamon are his opposites, never able to attain an understanding of the true Red and White pairing because of their antagonism towards one another in the battle for Emelye; just as Red and White ought to harmoniously complement one another, so too ought they, as relatives, abstain from inflicting harm on one another.⁶³ Their individualism prevails, however, and each takes to bolstering his own military might under his respective half of the color pairing. Arcite's singular prayer to "myghty Mars the Rede" implores the god of war for a victory over Palamon in their battle, yet not for Emelye's hand in marriage; Palamon, contrarily, prays only to Venus for Emelye to requite his love, yet not for a victory in battle.⁶⁴ Both knights' failure to address both of these elements in tandem, or to address both gods in a single night of prayer, seals the

⁶² Blanch and Wasserman, 184.

⁶³ Blanch and Wasserman, 185.

⁶⁴ Blanch and Wasserman, 185.

impossibility of Red and White's reconciliation on the battlefield. Even during their battle subtle signs of the color pairing are found on either side: Arcite's ally in battle, the Indian king Emetreus, wears simultaneously pearls and rubies on his armor, while the glowing red eyes of Palamon's ally Lycurgus are softened by the four white bulls and white hounds accompanying his chariot. Yet the knights themselves remain fixed under their respective colors:

And westward, thurgh the gates under Marte,
Arcite, and eek the hondred of his parte,
With baner reed is entered right anon;
And in that selve moment Palamon
Is under Venus, estward in the place
With baner whyt and hardy chier and face. (KT 2581-2586)

Arcite's death in the ensuing battle, presaged by the divine intervention of Saturn in Emelye's prayer the night before, seems to be the final cruel acknowledgement of the disruption of the Red and White color pairing, where Arcite's face, displaying neither white pallor nor red passion, rather turns "blak ... as any cole or crowe" (2692) due to the excess of blood pooling in his face. Echoing the acrimony of Isidore of Seville's assessment of pagan color associations, Chaucer asserts here with Arcite's fate that the championing of Mars and wrath in excess, though seemingly for a justifiable passion, will ultimately lead to one's demise.

Disapproval of excessive displays of wrath has ancient origins mirroring the time period which the *Knight's Tale* presents. The Roman historian Cassius Dio, in his description of a gladiator battle organized by Julius Caesar, writes that the dictator was "blamed for the great number of those slain ... [for] he had not become sated with the bloodshed" of the tournament.⁶⁵ The event which Dio is describing is not only jarringly similar to the events taking place in the

⁶⁵ Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, translated 1914 by E. Cary, 2000, *Bates College*.

Knight's tale – a battle between two armies, organized by a fierce ruler and taking place in an arena constructed in the woods – but it similarly condemns the vice of bloodshed for personal satisfaction, a tenet of the sin of Wrath. Dio's disapproval of Julius Caesar could in this case be interpreted as a critique of his "wasting" of the gladiators' blood for



Figure 7. A red-figure vase painting (4th century BC) of the wrathful Lycurgus being driven mad by the winged goddess Fury.

his own malicious enjoyment rather than using it for a worthwhile cause. The same could be said of Theseus then in the Knight's Tale, and the "violent energies"⁶⁶ which Arcite, Palamon, Lycurgus, and Emetreus exhibit are simply unfortunate machinations which "mighty Mars the Red" is behind in this tale. The mythical character of Lycurgus was known especially for his wrathful behavior getting him into trouble; in Greek mythology, "King Lykourgos," after his impious attack on Dionysus, was sentenced to torment by the Furies, who drove him mad enough to slay his wife and children in rage before being killed himself by Zeus.⁶⁷ The scene became a popular one to depict in ancient Greek red-figure ceramics (Figure 7). That Chaucer's own Knight's Tale is set in Athens and that a ruby-adorned, glowing-eyed Lycurgus himself takes part in the bloodshed solidifies Chaucer's knowledge and fascination with classical Greek history. Of the many figures Chaucer could have selected, moreover, his choice of Lycurgus contributes again to the problem of piety in the Knight's Tale; no matter how much Boethian

⁶⁶ Jeffrey Helterman, "The Dehumanizing Metamorphoses of the Knight's Tale," *ELH* 38, no. 4 (1971), 498.

⁶⁷ Edith Hamilton, *Mythology*, (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1942), 66-67.

philosophy underlies Theseus's intentions for starting the battle, or in the devotion of Arcite and Palamon to their respective deities, the stark divide which this devotion perpetuates and their allyship with infamously non-deferential pagans solidifies the fate which befalls Arcite and the tragic collapse of the Red and White color pairing which the cousins' bond symbolizes.

While Chaucer's familiarity with the traditions of Greek and Roman mythology as they survived in popular medieval culture is probable, it is certain that he was familiar with "wrath" of its own medieval type in the forms of everyday violence and momentous warfare. Chaucer's first "entry into public life" was in the form of military service in the royal army of King Edward III when he was just a teenager.⁶⁸ The occasion was a part of what later came to be known as the Hundred Years



Figure 8. King Edward III surveys a mass grave of bloodied soldiers after the battle of Crecy in this painting from the early fifteenth century.

War, begun by King Edward III asserting his claim to the French throne in 1340.⁶⁹ Chaucer's service in the English army, however brief (only between the years of 1359 and 1360) was eventful and subjected Chaucer to considerable violence. Under the leadership division of Edward's son Lionel, Chaucer participated as a yeoman in a campaign on French soil marching toward the city of Reims.⁷⁰ The event can be described as a quintessential *chevauchee*, a medieval war tactic of raiding and pillaging enemy countryside in an effort to weaken both resources and morale; as Howard notes, "looting, wanton destruction, rape and

⁶⁸ Oliver Emerson, "Chaucer's First Military Service – A Study of Edward III's Invasion of France in 1359-1360," in *The Romanic Review* 3, no. 4 (1912), 321.

⁶⁹ Miri Rubin, *The Hollow Crown: A History of Britain in the Late Middle Ages* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 75.

⁷⁰ Howard, 71.

murder of defenseless civilians were taken for granted,”⁷¹ and the campaigns of the English across northern France resulted in many civilian casualties and immense military losses (Figure 8). The French historian Jean Froissart recalled one such instance of English devastation at Amiens in 1356:

The next day the king departed, breunning and wasting all before him, and at night lodged in a good village called Grandvilliers. The next day the king passed by Dargies: there was none to defend the castle, wherefore it was soon taken and brent. Then they went forth destroying the country all about, and so came to the castle of Poix, where there was a good town and two castles. There was nobody in them but two fair damosels, daughters to the lord of Poix; they were soon taken, and had been violated.⁷²

Equally harsh treatment, however, was taken out on these soldiers by the English army itself if their actions were deemed exceedingly inappropriate:

Then the king of England entered into the country of Beauvoisis, breunning and exiling the plain country, and lodged at a fair abbey and a rich called Saint-Messie near to Beauvais: there the king tarried a night and in the morning departed. And when he was on his way he looked behind him and saw the abbey afire: he caused incontinent twenty of them to be hanged that set the fire there, for he had commanded before on pain of death none to violate any church nor to bren any abbey.⁷³

Chaucer himself was captured in a retaliation by the French and held for ransom in 1360 which King Edward paid.⁷⁴ He never made it to Paris for the city’s siege in April of that year nor was he present at the Treaty of Bretigny in May, but he is sure to have known the reasons for the English’s acceptance of the truce – a storm had rolled in so violent that they believed it a retaliation from God for the violence wrought upon the French countryside.⁷⁵ Wrath, needless to say, was at the forefront of all parts of the lived experience at that stage of Chaucer’s life. It was

⁷¹ Howard, 71.

⁷² Jean Froissart, *Chronicles*, translated by John Bouchiere (Oxford: Shakespeare Head Press, 1927), 7.

⁷³ Froissart, trans. Bouchiere, 7.

⁷⁴ For a full account of Chaucer’s ransom, see *Chaucer: Life Records*, 23-28.

⁷⁵ Howard, 73

here on the battlefield, however, that he would first have become acquainted with the Scrope coat of arms which he would bear witness for those many years later, and the impact which these and other visuals of battle had on his memory surely make themselves known in the moral undercurrents masquerading as heraldic symbolism in *The Knight's Tale*.

In closing the present examination of the Knight's Tale, some scholars have posited that Chaucer's presentation of the Knight in the General Prologue does not befit a "properly dressed" court knight⁷⁶:

Of fustian he wered a gypon
Al bismotered with his habergeon
For he was late ycome from his viage,
And wente for to doon his pilgrymage. (GP 75-78).

This image of a battle-worn knight transitioning directly from soldier to pilgrim, leaving not enough time to even change out of his armor, has often been considered a testament to his "meek" and pious nature. However, when taking into account Chaucer's exposure to the violence of the French battlefield and destruction of the *chevauchee*, the image of the "bismotered" armor, red rust dotting the sleek silver (white) frame, distorts our image of the Knight into one of the more rough, uncivilized, mercenary figures of the actual medieval battlefield. The Knight's true demeanor, whether the chivalrous ideal of literary legend or the feudal warrior of medieval reality, will remain up to scholarly speculation, but it is important to note that Chaucer was indeed closely acquainted with both forms.

⁷⁶ Laura Hodges, "Costume Rhetoric in the Knight's Portrait: Chaucer's Every-Knight and his Bismotered Gypon," in *The Chaucer Review* 29, no. 3 (1995), 275.

Chapter VII. Chivalry on Trial

Despite Red's association with the downfall of Arcite in its manifestation as Wrath, the color occurs throughout the *Knight's Tale* in ways which can be described as "refined" presentations. As the primary hue associated with blood, Red had the opportunity to present itself as the image of "blood royal," a concept not dissimilar to the familial feud cited at the beginning of this paper. The Scopes and Grosvenors, and indeed every aristocratic medieval family of distinction, attempted to consecrate their esteemed lineages with visually distinct symbols. This solidified into the system of heraldry and the assignment of unique crests to represent both families as well as distinguished groups of knights who were recognized for their service. The Hospitallers, Teutonics, and Templars were some of these notable Catholic military orders, whose members saw themselves as *defensores fidei*, defenders of the faith, and were expected to uphold the ideals of gallantry, honor, piety, and love.⁷⁷ In physical battle, an army united under a leader who could distinguish himself outside of his armor with a coat of arms; the Knights Templar, in particular, distinguished themselves from 1145 onwards with a white surcoat and a red cross across the left breast and on their horses' liveries, pennants and banners (Figure 9). In times of peace the tradition evolved into displays of pride for one's family (bloodline) or the integrity of the organization. The broader code of chivalry and its "rules" concerning proper battlefield ethics and Christian virtue encompassed the idea of heraldry and, by Chaucer's time, had devolved into such a matter of familial preservation and honor that rights to coats of arms were being contested in court. Suspicion circulated around the power which certain chivalric orders, including the Knights Templar, had in medieval society, as the organization's dual

⁷⁷ Kahrl, 208.

function as both a monastic and a military order gave it secular and religious superiority.⁷⁸ This resentment boiled over into accusations of heresy against the Knights Templar, including While these accusations are seen by scholars today as rumors spread by other orders envious of the influence which



Figure 9. Christ leads a legion of Knights Templar into battle.

the Knights Templar had in western Europe, it was enough to diminish their reputation to the point of the order's formal abolition by Pope Clement V in 1312.⁷⁹ Where the *Knight's Tale* displays Chaucer's attempts at replicating the great tragedies of classical literature and upholding some of the traditional chivalric orders' values, several later tales mock the seriousness of the Knight by poking fun at the diminished state of chivalry after the Knights Templar's abolition and the ascension of the more frivolous obsessions with visual refinement, wealth, and worldly comfort that came to define the institution in his time.

The Tale of Sir Thopas

Scholars have noted that by Chaucer's time, though warfare and knighthood still served important procedural roles, the glamour of the institution of chivalry and the courtly Christian knight, in a proper sense of the term, had largely fallen by the wayside after the short-lived victories of the previous centuries' Crusades.⁸⁰ What had once been a vital institution of devout service to the Church and the King had devolved, and continued to devolve after Chaucer's death into the fifteenth century, into a sparse population of "strenuous" knights (those who willingly

⁷⁸ Mark Cartwright, "Knight's Templar," *World History Encyclopedia*, September 28, 2018,

⁷⁹ Cartwright, 2018.

⁸⁰ Pollard, 141.

took up arms) and a greater population of “knights” who busied themselves with other, less-than-honorific affairs.⁸¹ In a curiously pre-quixotic style, Chaucer’s chivalric parodies in *The Canterbury Tales* utilize Red and White in a way that gently toys with the idea of the color as a symbol of courtly romance and noble warfare, as continued to be the style in literature and manuscript illumination well into the fifteenth century even as the lived experience of chivalry faltered (Figure 10). Chaucer’s opinion towards chivalry is perhaps made even more apparent by the fact that the first of these parodies he, or rather his pilgrim character, tells himself. The *Tale of Sir Thopas* begins with a description of its titular young knight. Everything from Thopas’s lips to his shield has notes of Red and White which evince his beauty, vitality, and high class:

Whit was his face as payndemayn,
 Hise lippes rede as rose.
 His rode is lyk scarlet in grayn,
 And I yow telle in good certain
 He hadde a seemly nose. (725-729)

...

His shield was al of gold so reed,
 And thereinne was a bores heed,
 A charbocle bayside.
 And there he swoor on ale and breed
 How that the gaunt shal be deed
 Bityde what bityde. (869-874)



Figure 10. Red abounds in this illumination of two courtly lovers from the *Codex Manesse*, early fifteenth century.

The imagery attributed to Sir Thopas and the ensuing tale of his daring adventure into Fairyland ooze romantic elegance, and its and its diversity of metrical verse reminisces on the variation which other romantic poets of the time employed as an ostentatious show of rhetorical

⁸¹ Pollard, 145.

embellishment.⁸² Thopas's preoccupation with outward image and frivolity encapsulate the straying from true knightly affairs which scholars attribute to the decline in medieval chivalry. Stereotyped gender roles arise in Thopas's appearance and actions as well; Chaucer continuously employs the double-meaning Middle English verb *pryk*, meaning in literal context, to spur on a horse. *Pryking* meant also, however, to puncture with a needle, and the term was thus used in association with traditionally female activities of sewing and embroidery. Chaucer's use of this double-entendre evinces his attention to wordplay in enhancing the comedic value of a tale which already intends to mock the courtly literature he would have encountered at court. The visual presentation of Thopas and his elegant Red and White features are already edging on the feminine side,⁸³ and to further implicate him in the female occupation of embroidery solidifies that Thopas is grossly neglecting the duties which his title requires.

Chaucer in fact anticipated readers' reactions to the tale's absurdity so much that he does not even have a chance to finish it – in a bout of frustrated indignation, the host “stynteth Chaucer of his tale of Thopas,” demanding that he begin a new tale with no rhyming, but to include “som murthe or som doctryne” (935). Thus begins the second of the pilgrim Chaucer's tales, the *Tale of Melibee*, the longest of all the tales and what scholars generally refer to as the most deliberately boring. As C. P. Biggam notes, in all of its 921 lines the Melibee does not employ a single color descriptor; conversely, the Thopas is “packed with colors,” especially Red and White, despite its relative brevity.⁸⁴ Though the *Tale of Sir Thopas* has a parodic intent, it was only deliberately that Chaucer could have chosen to employ and then not employ color

⁸² John M. Manly, “The Stanza-Forms of Sir Thopas,” in *Modern Philology* 8, no. 1 (1910), 144.

⁸³ Though not treated in this thesis, a helpful occurrence of Red and White's presentation in feminine beauty can be found in the character of Virginia in *The Physician's Tale*, ll. 30-38.

⁸⁴ Biggam, 47.

symbolism between it and the Melibee back-to-back. The *Tale of Melibee*,⁸⁵ a moralistic treatise on achieving political unity through diplomacy rather than violence, can be seen as a more sincere attempt at honoring the virtues stipulated of those first orders of medieval knights. The absence of color symbolism in this tale in relation to its vibrant predecessor could indicate Chaucer's acknowledgement that a serious return to knightly values would include an increase in sobriety among members of the knightly class.

The Squire's Tale

Chaucer's Squire is a fine portrait of the juvenescence and agility that was becoming of a man of his age, ability, and status in late-medieval England. The General Prologue description of him seems to let none of these qualities go unnoticed:

With hym ther was his son, a yong Squier,
A lovyere and a lusty bacheler,
With lokkes cruller as they were leyd in presse.
Of twenty yeer of age he was, I gesse.
Of his stature he was of even lengthe,
And wonderly delyvere, and of greet strength. (GP 79-84)

...

Embrouded was he, as it were a meede
Al ful of fresshe floures, whyte and reede.
Syngynge he was, or floytyng, al the day;
He was as fresh as is the month of Maye. (GP 89-92)

In the Squire we thus find not only another replica of Sir Thopas, but a real-life participant in the Canterbury pilgrimage frame story, giving him a greater sense of realism and closeness to

⁸⁵ Chaucer's influence for this tale came from the 1246 *Book of Consolation and Counsel* by the political author Albertanus of Brescia.

Chaucer's own lived experience. Chaucer formally entered the service of the King's (then Edward III's) household in 1367 with a lifelong annuity of 20 marks.⁸⁶ It is apparent from existing records that Chaucer was no stranger to material finery in this position; one of the most abundant types of documentation concerns itself with the "robes and allowances for them" granted to Chaucer as a member of the royal household. It is known that he received from the Keeper of the Royal Wardrobe a "Christmas robe" in November of 1368, a "Summer Robe" in May of 1369, "Liveries of Mourning" for Edward III's queen Philippa's funeral in September of 1369, "Winter and Summer Robes" in 1373, "Winter and Summer Robes" in 1377, and "Liveries of Mourning" again for King Richard II's mother Joan, Princess of Wales's funeral in September of 1385, likely among others in non-extant records.⁸⁷ The image, then, which Chaucer creates of the Squire as a fastidiously dressed youth, complete with an elegant embroidered pattern of Red and White flowers, could very well draw from his own experience as a young professional entering into courtly life for the first time.

While their household rank and experience is something which Chaucer and the Squire might share, it is clear from the Squire's own tale that his rhetorical ability (seen especially through Red and White pairing) is not up to par with Chaucer or others on the pilgrimage. Specifically, the Squire's ineptitude at replicating the "classical order" of his father's tale extends to his equivalent inability to present meaningful Red and White color pairings in his own tale. Set in an exotic land of "Sarraye, in the land of Tartarye," the tale follows the actions of a noble lady, Canacee, after her father gifts her a ring which gives her the ability to speak with animals. Only in one episode does Canacee actually exercise this ability, and it is here where the one

⁸⁶ *Chaucer Life Records*, edited by Martin M. Crow and Clair C. Olson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1966), 123.

⁸⁷ *Chaucer Life Records*, 94-105.

profound instance of Red and White color pairing occurs. On a walk, Canacee discovers a distressed peregrine in a tree:

Amydde a tree, for drye as whit as chalk,
As Canacee was pleyyng in hir walk,
Ther sat a faucon over hire heed ful hye,
That with a pitous voys so gan to crye
That all the wode resounded of hire cry
Ybeten hadde she hirself so pitously
With bothe hir wynges til the red blood
Ran endelong the tree ther-as she stood. (409-416)

The source of the peregrine's woe, like much of the Knight's Tale's inspirations, comes from Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*: the kite to whom the peregrine is betrothed betrays her for a more novel and glamorous bird, thereby rejecting the Boethian concept that Nature inspires humans and animals alike to reject those misleading elements of superficial gilt and be led to truly harmonious, "fit" pairings.⁸⁸ The Squire's illusory fascination with the "brilliant, heroic existence" of chivalry parallels the perverted fascination with glitz and glamor among the beasts of his tale; such futile attempts at regaining this past ideal were on display in Chaucer's own life, where the transition of power from Edward III to Richard II brought about a slew of significantly less noble campaigns led for political reasons, notably the "Despenser Crusade."⁸⁹ These resulted in even greater devastation to civilians in France, and Chaucer implicates the Squire directly in these affairs of looting and debauchery in the General Prologue:

And he hadde been somtyme in chyvachie
In Flaundes, in Artoys, and Pycardie. (GP 85-86)

⁸⁸ Stanley Kahrl, "Chaucer's *Squire's Tale* and the Decline of Medieval Chivalry," *The Chaucer Review* 7, no. 3 (1973), 206.

⁸⁹ Kahrl, 209.

While Chaucer's military service was not contemporaneous to that of the Squire, he would have had equal opportunity to experience such a character in his experiences at the Plantagenet Court. Towards the end of the fourteenth century, many knights had grown tired of dropping everything to fight for their monarch and thus invoked the "knight's fee" to cover the obligation of military service; their children, the Squires, thus began receiving less formal battle training and more training for participation in courtly life.⁹⁰ The picture of the Squire supports his affiliation with that institution by the "floures, whyte and reede" embroidered on his clothes, paralleling this motif's appearance in courtly literature of the High French style yet flipping (as the Squire does with the philosophical concept in his tale) the original symbolism of this pair in its context of the Knights Templar. While the Squire's father the Knight would not have been a member of the Knights Templar himself (it is rather inferred that he associated with the Teutonic Order due to his campaigns in Prussia, their headquarters⁹¹), it is still apparent that the Squire is at once trying to both join the ranks of these knights of old and outdo them with his rhetorical strategies. He even calls to attention to the fact that original chivalry is in fact largely bygone:

Who koude telle yow the forme of daunces
So unkouthe, and swiche fresshe contenaunces,
Swich subtil looking and dissymulynges
For drede of jalouse mennes apercevynges?
No man but Launcelot, and he is deed. (ST 283-287)

The chivalry of Arthurian figures like Lancelot had its merits, as the Squire notes, but what he is attempting with his own tale will far surpass anything that these figures and their dwindling progeny (the Knight included) could have composed. His attempt culminates,

⁹⁰ Huey, in Lambdin and Lambdin, 20.

⁹¹ Kahrl, 206.

unsuccessfully, in a disappointing image – a chalk-white tree bloodied by a romantically slighted and lovesick bird. Such is the extent of the young squire’s attempts at presenting a Red and White pairing in his own tale, at least before the Franklin interrupts him to prevent any more increase in absurdity and unrelenting rhetorical embellishment.

The Nun’s Priest’s Tale

Emerging from the Canterbury retinue as a virtually anonymous character, the Nun’s Priest, the “goodly man sir John,” proceeds to tell what some scholars insist as being “the most Chaucerian of the tales” in its form, development, oblique references to other tales, and of course its imagery.⁹² The presentations of Red and White contribute immensely to this assessment. The protagonist, stately “Chauntecleer the Cok,” displays much of the same colorful vitality of Sir Thopas:

His coomb was redder than the fyn coral
And batailled as it were a castel wal.
His byle was blak, and as the jeet it shoon.
Lyk asure were his legges and his toon.
His nayles whitter than the lylve flour
And lyk the burned gold was his colour. (2859-2864)

However, as Howard notes, readers are jarred by the fact that this character, who embodies all of the visual chivalric attributes, is in fact not a knight, a squire, or even a human – he is a beast, a rooster. His paramour, the Dame Pertelote, is similarly equal parts beautiful, courtly lover to Chauntecleer (3160-3162 “for whan I see the beautee of youre face - / ye been so scarlet reed about youre eyen / it maketh al my drede for to dyen!”) and barnyard hen, clucking and strutting

⁹² Howard, 437.

about their enclosure. Like the *Tale of Sir Thopas*, the *Nun's Priest's Tale* parodies the idea of high chivalric dialogue between lovers, with all its disquisitions on beauty and philosophy, by making their speakers be animals.⁹³ Some of Chaucer's imagery surrounding Chauntecleer targets the institution of chivalry most specifically: his notched comb mimicking the battlements of a castle (from which heraldic banners were often displayed) has particular parallels with



Figure 11. An ivory mirror case depicting knights besieging the Castle of Love, c. 1320-1340.

images of knights assailing damsels held high in the towers of the “Castle of Love” (Figure 11), a commentary on the excessiveness of some courtly overtures. Animal imagery at face value, however, was not rare to medieval writers and audiences. In fact, one of the key attributes of what scholars deem “comedic” about medieval manuscripts are the marginal scenes of animals performing human activities like jousting, preaching, and hunting with bows and arrows. Their symbolism suggests something greater than just the whim of the painter to include grotesque details for amusement.⁹⁴ Animals were a vital symbolic tradition for authors of science and philosophy since antiquity, and writings about animals and what they represented became so common in the Christian faith that a genre was named and dedicated to this type of writing style.⁹⁵ The *Physiologus*, the earliest Greek example and cornerstone of what would become the genre of the medieval bestiary, is even referenced by Chaucer in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*:

⁹³ Howard, 438.

⁹⁴ Frederica Law-Turner, “Beasts, Benedictines and the Ormesby Master: Pictorial Exegesis in English Fourteenth-century Manuscript Illumination,” in *The British Art Journal* 1, no. 1 (1999), 5.

⁹⁵ Mary Allyson Armistead, “The *Middle English Physiologus*: A Critical Translation and Commentary,” Ph.D. diss, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and University (2001), 1.

Agayn the sonne, and Chauntecleer so free
Soong murier than the mermayde in the see
(For Physiologus seith sikerly
How that they syngen wel and myrily). (3269-3272).

The direct reference to the “animals as Christian symbols” literature in the *Physiologus* parallels the function of Chaucer’s abrupt and jarring switch from Thopas to Melibee. The chivalric colors Red and White manifest ironically in the predominant colors of its main protagonists, Chaunticleer and Pertelote, and Red appears also in its main antagonist, Russel the Fox:

His colour was bitwise yellow and reed,
And tipped was his tayl and both hise eeris,
With blak unlyk the remnant of his heeris,
His snowte smal with glowynge eyen tweye. (2902-2905)

Just as *Physiologus* and other medieval bestiaries would have informed Chaucer of a rooster’s apparently divine mandate for being the best singers in the animal world, so too would manuscript illuminations have informed him of the colors associated with these animals and how they factored into the Christianized lens through which each animal was viewed. The *Physiologus*’s assessment on the Nature and Significance of the Fox (*Natura et Significacio wulpis*)⁹⁶ details the commonly understood deceitfulness of foxes and their consequent



Figure 12. A red fox wears a miter and preaches to an audience of a red rooster and other birds in this marginal manuscript illumination.

⁹⁶ Armistead, 68.

association with the Devil; authors, like Chaucer, and illustrators likewise took this opportunity to subtly lampoon medieval institutions of power, especially moral power, by giving its members fox-like characteristics or even full-fledged vulpine personas to accentuate the hypocrisy and corruption occurring within their offices (Figure 12). The ubiquity of understanding of the red fox's moral depravity in turn sheds light on the *Nun's Priest's Tale* as not just a humorous tale of colorful beasts speaking in high court style, but a cautionary exemplum of outstanding medieval moral importance. From the *Physiologus*:

The Devil is thus like the fox,
With his evil tricks and treachery,
And men, like the fox's name,
Are deserving of shame
For whoever says good to another
And thinks evil things in his mind
Is a fox and a fiend indeed. (301-305)

Thus where Chaucer uses the Nun's Priest to poke fun at the secular institution of chivalry, so too does he use the opportunity to lampoon the institution which the Nun's Priest and others in the pilgrimage retinue represent, the Church. As some scholars posit, the Nun's Priest's service to two women in the retinue places him in a position of heightened scrutiny common to the time, as medieval records suggest a concerning level of inappropriate relationships between nuns and those male clerics placed in their spiritual service.⁹⁷ The parallels between the harem of "sevene hennes" over which Chauntecleer presides in his tale further implicates the Nun's Priest in possible illicit affairs at his own abbey. Yet in comparison with others on the pilgrimage of similar vocation, the Nun's Priest's personal sumptuousness is far

⁹⁷ Catherine Cox, "And Preestes Three," in *Chaucer's Pilgrims: an Historical Guide to the Pilgrims in the Canterbury Tales*, edited by Laura C. and Robert T. Lambdin (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996), 64.

less apparent and incriminating. The Monk, “a manly man” whose tale precedes the Nun’s Priests’s, loves hunting and fine foods and, most concerningly, disregards the traditional rigor required by a monastic life:

The reule of Seint Maure or of Seint Beneit –
By cause that it was old and somdel streit
This ilke Monke leet olde thynges pace,
And heeld after the newe world the space. (GP 173-176)

The Monk, thus, has willfully left ascetic monasticism behind and replaced it with a life of comfort. As was made evident with the character of the Squire, Chaucer was cognizant of the decline in the traditional demands of a chivalric life and made it clear between the deficiency of the Squire’s abilities vis-à-vis his father the Knight. Continuing on this topic of deficiency, it is important to note that, thematically, the Nun’s Priest’s Tale is told directly after that of the Monk, who is prevented from finishing by the Knight’s interruption. The Nun’s Priest then weaves the color-laden story of Chauntecleer. It thus tracks that the Nun’s Priest is telling his tale in direct reaction to the Monk, parodying the latter’s decline in traditional religious monastic values, as well as the broader decline in chivalric orders after the disbanding of the religiously-centered Knights Templar, by presenting the Monk as a colorful, worldly, and prideful rooster (here it helps to recall a previous discussion of traditional religious garb, which stipulated that monks wear uncolored garments). By inserting the Knight into this interlude, Chaucer allies him with the Nun’s Priest and thus further extends the link between the prideful and polychrome Chauntecleer to not just worldly clerics like the Monk, but to the worldly characters of latter-day chivalry like the Squire. With these characters Chaucer thus brings religion and chivalry’s interdependence to the forefront, playfully exposing deficiencies on both sides.

Chapter VIII. Red and White's Comic Distortion – Sex, Pride, and Sumptuousness

If any tales or characters have emerged as the most entertaining of the Canterbury pilgrimage, they are perhaps the explicit and combative fabliaux of the Miller and the Reeve. It is unsurprising that these professionals' vulgar tales in retaliation to one another contain their own version of the recurring theme of the pairing of Red and White in vulgar manners that contribute to the hilarity of their plots. Beneath this hilarity lies the ones whose interaction with the color pairing is the most carefully concealed and requires the most conjecture on the part of an audience to formulate.

The Miller's Tale

The Miller's Tale relies heavily and ironically on white in its portrait of the lusty and unscrupulous Alisoun:

Fair was this yonge wyf, and therewithal
As any wezele hir body gent and small.
A ceynt she werede, barred al of silk,
A barmclooth as whit as morne milk. (3233-3236)
...
Whit was hir smok, and broyden al bifoore
And eek bihynde, on hir coler aboute, (3238-3239)
...
She was ful moore blissful on to see
Than is th enewe pere-jonette tree,
And softer than the wolle is of a wether.
And by hir girdle heeng a purs of lether,
Tasseled with silk and perled with latoun. (3247-3251)

Alisoun's visual purity, or beauty, in these instances has many religious parallels and those which complement her sex. The adversaries competing for Alisoun's "hand," if the prize of their endeavors can be so positively described, each embody a complementary Red in their own contexts. The cunning young cleric Nicolas's "presse ycovered with a faldyng reed" (3212) alludes to the deeds of fornication taking place in bed between Alisoun and himself after she tricks her dimwitted husband, John the carpenter. The prim and proper parish clerk Absalon yearns for Alisoun as well, and his desire to complement her white figure is apparent in his own red attributes. His red skin and red hose, drawing the eye to the lower half of his body, alert the audience to his desires towards Alisoun:

His rode was reed, his eyen greye as goos.
With Poules window corven on his shoos,
In hoses rede he went fetisly.
Clad he was very trimly and properly (3317-3320)

While Absalon's overtures prove ultimately unsuccessful, the interplay between fabric and flesh serves as the crux of the comedic distortion of Red and White in this tale. Nicolas succeeds in fooling the simple John into believing the next coming of the Great Flood is nigh, and while each of them is suspended in a raft from John's ceiling awaiting this coming apocalypse, the lusty Nicolas can have his way with Alisoun in the secrecy of her own boat/bed: "thus swyved was this carpenteris wyf" (3850) sums up the obscene harmony of the ruddy flesh of Nicolas and the white Alisoun.

Flesh and its corruption continues to play a comical role in the tale when Absalon, believing he is leaning in to kiss Alisoun's lips through her window, meets instead with her anus. His "hoote love," now "coold and al quaint" (3754) is traded in for a "hoote kultour" (3812). Set

on avenging his slighted pride, Absalon returns to the window, and when Nicolas tries to copy the joke played on Absalon by Alisoun, Absalon

Was redy with his iren hoot,
Nicholas amydde the ers he smoot.
Of goth the skyn an hande-brede aboute,
The hoote kultour brende so his toute,
And for smerte he wende for to dye. (MT 3809-3813)

The multitude of crude sins on display in this tale, coupled with the explicit presentations of genitalia and the physical injuries inflicted on its characters, epitomize this tale as one in the *fabliau* genre of low and bawdy humor (fittingly told by one of the Canterbury retinue's lowest-ranking pilgrims). The imagery one can associate with this tale, especially in its manifestations of Red and White, have a significantly more serious context. The imminent threat of a divinely inspired disaster (albeit a fabricated one) is the undercurrent of much of this tale's development. Indeed, "Nowelis flood" would have been one of the most well-known disaster scenes in the bible for common people due to its popularity among avenues of artistic production. Medieval mystery play cycles incorporated it into their docketts, and artists working in various media displayed the accompanying scenes of preparation, destruction, and salvation. Equally popular were those scenes from Revelation of the Last Judgement, where particularly colored figures appeared, presaging the coming end of the world. Revelation 17:3-4 tells of "a woman, sit upon a scarlet coloured beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns; and the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication."⁹⁸ She is the so-called Whore of Babylon, a promiscuous woman drunk on the blood of Jesus's

⁹⁸ Revelation 17:3-4, KJV.



Figure 13. *The Whore of Babylon rides atop the Dragon.*

followers (17:6) and embodying the Christian stigmatization of sex outside of procreative and marital affairs (Figure 13). Another figure from Revelation exhibits both Red and White explicitly: “His head and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow; and his eyes were as a flame of fire; and his feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace, and his voice as the sound of many waters” (Revelation 1:14-15). He is the Ancient of Days, an image

of Jesus Christ that is prefigured first in the book of Daniel: “I beheld till the thrones were cast down, and the Ancient of Days did sit, whose garment was white as snow, and the hair of his head like the pure wool: his throne was like the fiery flame, and his wheels as burning fire.”⁹⁹ Later references to this figure like the one in Revelation intended to equate Christ with the eternal God by presenting Him as a wise father-figure (Figure 14). Just as in images of the Lamb of God, Red and White factor equally into this image of Christ appearing at the Last Judgement, diminishing the worldly foibles of characters like Alisoun, Nicolas, and Absalon to mere trifles. While the sense of apocalyptic urgency is broached with a considerable amount of comedic levity in the *Miller’s Tale*, Chaucer’s medieval audience would have been entirely acquainted with the sincere need for salvation; it is indeed this conscious desire for repentance which leads them on their quest to Canterbury to begin with.



Figure 14. *An Eastern Orthodox fresco of the Ancient of Days, fourteenth century.*

⁹⁹ Daniel 7” 9-10, KJV.

The Reeve's Tale

In retaliation to the tale the Miller has just told lampooning his profession of carpentry, the Reeve constructs his own, equally vitriolic story of the inappropriately prideful thief “deynous Symkyn” (3941). Like the Miller's, the Reeve's Tale features red garments prominently, though their connotations are symbolic of another deadly sin - pride. The miller Simkin and his wife have apparently invested much preparation into their public appearance:

With his typet wounde aboute his heed,
And she came after in a gyte of reed;
And Symkyn hadde hosen of the same. (RT 3953-3955)

Their assumed high status through wearing such garments is mirrored in their demeanors: the wife is “proud and brazen as ... a magpie” (3950). “As any peacock he was proud and gay” (3926) is Chaucer's most definitive statement of Simkin's vice. Pride is not unique to just these two individuals, but rather is a sin which runs in the family: the wife's father, a parson, sought to wed her into the “blood of noble ancestry,” or a well-to-do family, which he believed (rather erroneously) that Simkin represented (3981-3982). This parson's own slyness is a contrast to his “holy blood,” a synecdochical testament to his bondage to the Catholic Church; rather than engage in morally upstanding acts which his title ostensibly implies, this parson engages in illicit activities like marrying off his illegitimate daughter to gain privilege and esteem for his own family (3983-3986). Such a compilation of vices is not to go unpunished, and it is again through an ironic pairing of red and white that Simkin and his family meet their ultimate comeuppance. After mistakenly copulating with one of their student guests, Symkyn's wife, by the light of the moon,

... saugh a whit thing in hir ye.
 And whan she gan this white thing espye,
 She wende the clerk hadde wered a volupeer,
 ...
 And smoot the millere on the pyled skulle,
 That doun he goth, and cride, "Harrow! I dye!"
 Thise clerkes beete hym weel and let hym lye (RT 4301 -4308)

The confusion, again centering around the fusion of garments and flesh, ultimately allows the students to escape even after dealing several parting blows to their swindling host. Symkyn's entire family is thus humiliated through the delightfully satisfying pairing of Red pride and White skin.

Scholars have often cited the Reeve's Tale as Chaucer's upholding the common attitudes of medieval social order. In the context of Red as pride, the English Sumptuary Laws of the fourteenth century provide insight into what was viewed as "acceptable" for members of the various classes to wear.¹⁰⁰ Garments like red velvet, satin, and taffeta (Figure 15) were highly luxurious and expensive materials and were thus reserved for high-ranking and wealthy members of medieval society per the sumptuary laws.¹⁰¹ Men below the rank of banneret (knights of high enough rank suitable for displaying a banner¹⁰²) were prohibited from wearing crimson, velvet, and gold, and even the length of their garments was regulated.¹⁰³ The regulations on dress were extensive, as an excerpt from the *Statutes of the Realm* in the year 1363 evinces:

That Carters, Ploughmen, Drivers of the Plough, Oxherds, Cowherds, Shepherds, and all other Keepers of Beasts, Threshers of Corn, and all Manner of People of the Estate [of a Groom,

¹⁰⁰ S. K. Silverman, "The 1363 English Sumptuary Law: A Comparison of Fabric Prices of the Late Fourteenth Century." PhD Dissertation, The Ohio State University (2011), 4.

¹⁰¹ Silverman, 6.

¹⁰² Fox-Davies, 103.

¹⁰³ Kim Phillips, "Masculinities and the Medieval English Sumptuary Laws," in *Gender and History* 19, no. 1 (2007), 4.

attending to Husbandry,] and all other People that have not Forty Shillings of Goods, nor [of Chattels,] shall not take nor wear no Manner of Cloth, but Blanket, and Russet [Wool] of Twelve-Pence; and shall wear Girdles of Linen according to their Estate; and that in the manner that pertaineth to them, and not excessively. And it is ordained, that if any wear or do contrary to any of the Points aforesaid, that he shall forfeit the King all the Apparel that he hath so worn against the Form of this Ordinance.¹⁰⁴



Figure 15. A medieval cloth merchant measures a sheath of red-dyed fabric.

The view which the fellow villagers take towards Simkin and his wife as being conceited are thus a testament to these characters' base reality – Simkin's lower-to-middling position as a miller and his low reputation as a "quarrelsome bully" about the village, combined with the wife's scandalous family background and upbringing, are incongruous with the outwardly prideful and red appearance they present (3936). The *sight* is another medieval phenomenon referenced in other tales regarding marvelous, shocking events which have some sort of visual and emotional effect on their witnesses.¹⁰⁵ The "ful fair sight" (3951) of Simkin and his wife parading into church is thus a gross juxtaposition of rightful *sights* and the misplaced pride which these figures take in their outward appearance of nobility. Symkyn's baldness and its critical contribution to the plot can also be taken as a foreshadowing of his disgrace. As historian Anu Korhonen points out, "honorable adult manhood" was founded upon being able to maintain a sense of patriarchal order within one's own household; a man's baldness could symbolize anything from old age to impotence (in reference to the biblical Samson), and anything from diminished manhood, social ostracism, and,

¹⁰⁴ *Statutes of the Realm, Volume the First* (London: Dawsons of Pall Mall, 1963),

¹⁰⁵ Craig E. Bertolet, "Dressing Symkyn's Wife: Chaucer's Reeve's Tale and Bad Taste," in *The Chaucer Review* 52, no. 4 (2017), 56.

in Symkyn's case, cuckoldry, were sure to accompany it.¹⁰⁶ These social expectations made their way into illuminations of the time as well (Figure 16).

Historical events taking place outside of England, but not outside of Chaucer's sphere of duty, could have served as a model for the outrageous parading of garments present in the Reeve's Tale. Chaucer was sworn in as Controller of Wool Customs for the city of London in 1374, overseeing the import and export of raw and finished goods from overseas. Such business took him abroad to the city of Bruges in 1377 and to the region of Flanders in 1378, two low-country epicenters of wool manufacture. In the year



Figure 16. King David addresses a scantily dressed bald man in a decorated initial 'D.'

1379 and as part of the broader context of the ongoing Hundred Years War, a skirmish broke out between Bruges and the Flemish city of Ghent, where the guilds of weavers and fullers (wool refiners) vied for top political influence. One account has since attributed the skirmish between the cities as a folly of the masses, who used the wealth derived from wool manufacture to “outclass the nobility” in their ostentatious dress.¹⁰⁷ Not least among these were the “scarlet caps with silver buttons”¹⁰⁸ worn on holidays, drawing conspicuously close to the colors of Symkyn and his wife. Chaucer could hardly have been oblivious to the 1379 skirmish nor of the grumblings about audacious commoners wearing clothes out of their rank, and it is tempting to

¹⁰⁶ Anu Korhonen, “Strange Things Out of Hair: Baldness and Masculinity in Early Modern England,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 41, no. 2 (2010) 378.

¹⁰⁷ Pleij, 25.

¹⁰⁸ Pleij, 25.

assert that the very prideful nature of the characters in the Reeve's Tale came from observations he made himself in his time as the Wool Customs Controller.

Perhaps Chaucer chose to employ the color pairing more subtly in these two fabliaux to create a firm distance between the characters' vulgarity and the sanctity which the color pairing represents; this raises the question, then, of why he would choose to employ the pairing at all. By their biblical and legal parallels, we can safely assume that the contexts of Red and White's appearances in these tales serves a moral purpose similar to that of the tragic distortion in the Knight's Tale. Their satirical representation indicates that the ribaldry and foible of the tales is meant to be enjoyed through the transparent, yet solid screen between fiction and reality, the page and the lived experience. If one breaks the barrier and lives the sin, one risks incurring not just physical maladies like a burned behind or cracked skull, but the wrath of an omnipotent God at the twilight of this mortal world.

Chapter IX. Red and White's Hypocritical Distortion – Moral Hypocrisy and Vocational Pretense in *The Prioress's Tale*

Some pilgrims, particularly those of high status and noble profession, parade themselves as gifted or virtuous individuals attuned to the expectations of their position in the medieval social fabric. Their grace and refinedness, however, is called into question with a closer reading of the symbolism and color imagery in their General Prologue descriptions and that of the tales they weave. Red and White factor into these descriptions, and in the case of the Prioress, their harmony is falsely purported as a seemingly righteous one, yet the graphic images of each of their tales and the intensely secular, immoral presentation of colors in their Prologue descriptions exposes each of these pilgrims as not truly upholding the values which they claim with their

stories. The distortion of Red and White is thus a hypocritical one, the colors awkwardly forced together into an ironic matrimony of superficial virtue yet permeated more deeply by vice.

The Prioress, “cleped madame Eglentyne” (GP 121) has historically been the subject of intense scholarly scrutiny due to the elegant, romantic (and therefore hypocritical) nature she displays while on the pilgrimage. In addition to her fine manners and knowledge of French, several colors come into play when ascribing this earthly refinement to the Prioress:

Hir nose tretys, hir eyen greye as glas,
Hir mouth ful small, and therto softe and reed. (GP 152-153)
...
Of smal coral about hire arm she bar
A peire of bedes, gauded al with grene,
And theron heng a brooch of gold ful sheene,
On which ther was first write a crowned A,
And after Amor vincit omnia. (GP 158-162)

The Latin inscription on the Prioress’s brooch is derived from Virgil’s *Eclogue X*: “Love conquers all things – let us yield to love!”¹⁰⁹ A pagan author, pagan contents, and carnal subject matter to boot – the question arises, then, of what right or reason Madame Eglantine has to display this brooch and her other secular characteristics when her profession, codified in the *Ancrene Riwe*, stipulates celibacy, modesty, and rejection of the material world as its chief tenets of spiritual well-being.¹¹⁰ Edward Condren has notably suggested that two “camps of analysis” exist concerning the Prioress: the “soft,” which exonerates her from condemnation due to a certain childlike innocence about her character, and the “hard,” which points out the fierce

¹⁰⁹ Virgil, *The Eclogues*, translated by John William Mackail (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1908).

¹¹⁰ *Ancrene Riwe*, trans. James Morton (2000),

bigotry she conveys both in her outward appearance and in her tale.¹¹¹ It was not uncommon in Chaucer's age for women of sundry social standings to take the veil; ladies rendered destitute and alone by the plague, unfaithful wives, and even queens and princesses ended up in the cloisters.¹¹² Though maybe not a princess, the Prioress is certainly of an aristocratic background, which some male clerical figures began to express their apprehension about: throughout the Middle Ages, councils issued decrees forbidding nuns from going on pilgrimage, their one semi-valid reason for leaving the abbey.¹¹³ The previous anecdote could be attributed to a sense of patriarchal insecurity, but it should not be denied that religious integrity within both monasteries and nunneries suffered by the admittance of ever-worldlier candidates who often rose to positions of power.¹¹⁴ Chaucer counts the Prioress among these. Throughout her character and tale, the line between Red and White color pairing of a truly religious nature and a secular one is made glaringly apparent as the Prioress tries and fails to mask her own worldliness with affectations of the vocation she professes to uphold.

The Prioress begins her tale with an invocation of the Virgin Mary, "the white lylle flour" (461) with an air of reverence. Though she admits she does not wish to emulate Mary (481-483 "my konnyng is so wayk, O blissful Queene, / ... that I ne may the weighte nat susteene"), it is difficult not to draw comparisons between her piteous weeping over a "bled mous" or one of her pet dogs in the General Prologue to the way Mary dotes over the hero of her tale. The Prioress's invocation of the symbolic flower of Mary creates another opportunity for comparison. She shares her name, "Eglentyne," with a flower as well – a wild and barbed species

¹¹¹ Condren, 207.

¹¹² Maureen Hourigan, "Ther Was Also a Nonne, A Prioressse," in *Chaucer's Pilgrims: An Historical Guide to the Pilgrims of the Canterbury Tales*, edited by Laura Lambdin and Robert Lambdin (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996), 41.

¹¹³ Hourigan, 42.

¹¹⁴ Hourigan, 42.

of rose. A red rose against a pure white lily – the Prioress could, while feigning ignorance and humility, be subversively forwarding this comparison as a way of attesting to her knowledge of Red and White color pairing. The medieval rose was not necessarily a negative symbol, yet its connotation was ambiguous. It served at once as the embodiment of romantic love stemming from French courtly literature as well as a second flower to encompass the facets of Mary’s experience with faith – Red roses stood for her sorrows, White for her joy, Gold for her glory. The symbol of the lily was the predominant flower in artistic contexts where the Virgin Mary



Figure 17. An early fifteenth-century Italian wood panel of the "Madonna of the Quail" in her rose garden.

was represented, yet one artistic motif that centered her association with roses was the *hortus conclusus*, or secluded garden (Figure 17). Mary’s sequestration within the garden and flanking by rose-covered foliage encase her in a private, almost womb-like¹¹⁵ sanctity. The Prioress, if we are to interpret her presence on the pilgrimage as negative, has already defied her own vocationally mandated sanctity by abandoning her abbey; to draw such a close connection between herself and this multifaceted flower seems like she has been set up to miss the mark.

As the Prioress’s tale goes, a young clergeon “in Asye, in a greet cite” (488) is killed one day for singing the hymn *Alma redemptoris* (Gracious mother of the Redeemer) as he passes through the city’s Jewry. The deed is carried out by Jews, whom the Prioress in medieval fashion condemns:

O cursed folk of Herodes al newe,

¹¹⁵ Caterina Bellinetti, “Finding new meanings in the *Hortus Conclusus*,” in *Art & Object*, April 27, 2020.

What may youre yvel entente yow availle?
Mordre wol out, certeyn, it wol not faille
And namely ther th'onour of God shal sprede;
The blood out crieth on your cursed dede. (PT 574-578)

When his mother and other Christians are guided to the boy's body flung into a drainage pit, they find him still faithfully singing his hymn despite the gaping slit in his throat thanks to a "greyn," or a communion wafer, placed on his tongue by the Virgin Mary. The removal of the wafer allows the boy's martyred spirit to ascend to heaven after all of the Jews involved, and even some extra, have been hanged. Throughout the tale, violent images of murder and dastardly deeds in the "wasps nest" of the Jewry are interspersed with callbacks to the possessions of the Prioress in the General Prologue. Her multicolored bangles reappear as precious virtues of the clergeon himself:

This gemme of chastite, this emeraude,
And eek of martyrdom the ruby bright (609-610)

The dainty white "wastel-breed" (147) she feeds her hounds blasphemously parallels the communion wafer, and even her piteous weeping at the sight of a "mous, / kaught in a trappe, deed or bleede," mirrors her detached relationship to the clergeon as she weaves her tale, a link which some scholars posit exonerates her from any faltering in her vocation because she is essentially a woman of great feeling.¹¹⁶ As Chaucer so often says throughout his works of some of his most upstanding characters, "pitee runneth soone in a gentil hearte." On one group of people in her tale, however, the Prioress takes no pity. The Jews of England in the Late Middle Ages, though remarkably few thanks to their expulsion from the island by Edward I in 1290, were still a race held in disdain within that country thanks to the stigmatized notion of the blood

¹¹⁶ Paul Ruggiers. *The Art of the Canterbury Tales* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965), 182.

libel, in which Jews were implicated with murdering Christian children in manners mocking the ignominious death of Christ to use their blood in baking matzah.¹¹⁷ The myth had footholds throughout Europe in more solidified Jewish communities and had seen two notable invocations in England: the deaths of William of Norwich in 1144 (Figure 18) and Hugh of Lincoln in 1255. The latter occurred less than a decade after Pope Innocent IV's 1247 Papal Bull insisting that blood libel allegations were fraudulent:

... They are wrongly accused of partaking of the heart of a murdered child at the Passover, with the chart that this is prescribed by their laws, since the truth is completely the opposite. Whenever a corpse is found somewhere, it is to the Jews that murder is wickedly imputed. They are persecuted on the pretext of such fables or of others quite similar, and contrary to the privileges that have been granted to them by the Holy See, they are deprived of trial and regular judgement ... their fate is perhaps worse than that of their fathers in Egypt...¹¹⁸

Despite such isolated, yet earnest attempts at maintaining Jewish communities' innocence in the face of such hysteria, their harsh treatment in other sectors of society remained unfettered. Their prominence among the textile industries of Europe subjected them to suspicion and envy by foreign merchants, and it often ended up that the most "distinctly Jewish" profession was that of the dye industry, one already looked down on for the unsavory amount of toil required to produce the desired good and its outward similarities with dubious affairs like alchemy.¹¹⁹ While this meant that Jews in many areas of Europe would have made color their profession, their subjection to similar sumptuary



Figure 18. A rood screen depicts the crucifixion of the twelve-year-old William of Norwich.

¹¹⁷ Roger Dahood, "The Anglo-Norman 'Hugo de Lincolnia': A Critical Edition and Translation from the Unique Text in Paris, Bibliotheque national de France MS fr. 902," in *The Chaucer Review* 49, no. 1 (2014), 1.

¹¹⁸ Pope Innocent IV, *Lachrymabilem Judaeorum*, Jewish Virtual Library, *American Israeli Cooperative Enterprise*, 2008, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/papal-bulls>.

¹¹⁹ Schneider, 420.

laws as governed characters like the Miller and Reeve stipulated that they were to “go about meanly clad in sad-colored raiment.”¹²⁰

Though her tale deals with an anonymous young martyr and not Hugh himself, the Prioress seeks still to make the inspiration plain by lamenting the latter’s untimely death:

O yonge Hugh of Lyncoln, slayn also
With cursed Jewes, as it is notable,
For it is but a little while ago (PT 684-686)

Some scholars posit that the Prioress’s condemnation of the Jews to a point where the ostensible goal which she lays out at the tale’s onset to make Mary its focus – “Gydeth my song that I shal of yow seye” (487) – is obfuscated by such excessive, even illegal violence.¹²¹ This could be taken as another element of Chaucer’s satire; just as the Prioress fails at masking the imbalance in her double life of secular glamour and religious superiority, so too she fails at keeping separate the intents of her story, creating instead a glaring contrast between violence covered in a thin and rosy veil of Christian charity.

Chapter X: Religious Harmony Achieved – The Introduction of a Moral Color Standard in *The Second Nun’s Tale*

Chaucer’s Second Nun is, by one scholar’s assessment, naught but a “poor chapelyn,” a “dim figure,” “the teller of a tale uncriticized.”¹²² Ascription of such dismissive language to the Second Nun draws to the forefront her relative anonymity in the Canterbury retinue, as does most scholarly discussion of her physical character. Her initial description at the Tabard Inn is in

¹²⁰ Schneider, 433.

¹²¹ Roger Dahood, “The Punishment of the Jews, Hugh of Lincoln, and the Question of Satire in Chaucer’s *Prioress’s Tale*,” in *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 36 (2005), 472.

¹²² Edwin F. Piper, “The Miniatures of the Ellesmere Chaucer,” in *Philological Quarterly* 3 (1924), 253.

fact lumped in with the introduction of another tale-teller, the Nun's Priest, and the extent of their conjoined appearance in the General Prologue is achieved in just two lines and thirteen words:

Another nonne with hire hadde she
that was hire chapelyn, and preestes three. (GP 163-164)

Moreover, the only elaboration on the Second Nun's character – a note of her secretarial position within her convent – circles wholly around her relation to that “she” whom she serves, the Prioress. The Second Nun is at least given her own individualized acknowledgement (unlike the Nun's Priest), but all that is solidified from this mention is her subordination to the Prioress; such subordination is inferred between other characters (the Squire to the Knight, for instance), but in such instances both subordinated characters are treated with generous outward assessment by the narrating Chaucer. The Second Nun is afforded nothing of the sort. And even Chaucer's title for the nun when she comes to weave her tale is one that seemingly marks her as lesser than her superior Madame Eglantine; the Prioress proceeds on pilgrimage with an air of grace and sentimentality, sauntering “prior” to her assistant, who is deemed “secondary” in not just literal occurrence but in inferred importance. “Dim” though the initial picture of the Second Nun may be, it serves this thesis to point out Chaucer's subtle ulterior motive at work in the relationship between the Second Nun and her Prioress, and indeed to virtually every other pilgrim whose tale presents Red and White color pairing. These two women's femininity, their professed faith and religious vocation, and especially the hagiographic contents of their tales make them ideal figures to compare in a scholarly context. As an earlier chapter in this thesis has discussed, it is no scholarly debate that the demeanor and array of the Prioress subject her to criticism. In fact, it can be reasonably assumed that, just as the Prioress asserts “mordyr will out” in her tale of the martyred clergeon, so too Chaucer asserts “hypocrisy will out” by setting her up to tell a tale of

incongruous violence masked in righteousness. Such hypocrisy is not on display in the Second Nun's Tale; rather, when assessed by its employment of color symbolism and recall of symbols directly from the *Prioress's Tale*, one determines that the Second Nun's Tale serves as a moral standard by which the worldly Prioress and her ignorantly woven story fail to live up to. Further, the brevity of the Second Nun's description is less to mark her as a "dim" or vague character, but rather to indirectly highlight her humble countenance in relation to her outrageously secular superior. Unlike the Prioress's attempt, the Second Nun's tale proves a masterful craft of true religious devotion interwoven with virtuous Red and White color pairing and epitomizes that lesson from Scripture that "the first will be last and the last - or in this case, the *Second* - will be first."

The style and motive inspiring the Second Nun's Tale are not unique when the time comes for her to tell her story towards the end of the voyage to Canterbury. In fact, religious exempla of pure women – "Good Women," as Chaucer called them once in an earlier treatise on *The Legends of* such figures – have already cropped up in the figures of Constance in the Man of Law's Tale, Virginia in the Physician's Tale, Griselda in the Clerk's Tale, and even Dame Prudence in Chaucer's rambling prose tale, The Melibee. Moreover, we have encountered invocations to the Virgin Mary already in several tales, most notably in the Prioress's Tale. Where the Second Nun's Tale offers a novel departure, then, is in the verifiable existence of the character around whom it centers. Unlike the fictitious personification of virtues or the dubious historical associations which the Prioress's Tale has with such "saints" as Hugh of Lincoln and William of Norwich, the Second Nun's Tale is, as Chaucer would have perceived it, a true attempt at hagiography, or documentation of the life and legend surrounding a saint recognized by the Catholic Church. Scholars agree that Chaucer's intent for the *Legend of Saint Cecilia* was

to incorporate it into his earlier work, *The Legend of Good Women*, which he abandoned in 1394 due, presumably, to the deaths of several women in King Richard II's court with whom he was acquainted.¹²³ The account of the historical figure of Saint Cecilia itself originates from Jacobus de Voraigne's *Legenda Aurea*, or "Golden Legend," the standard text for saints' lives up until the fourteenth century. One such legend therein documents the miraculous tale of a Roman woman from the second or third century A.D. The narrator credits him as such with the Latin preface *Interpretacio nominis Cecile quam point Frater Jacobus Januensis in Legenda* ("Interpretation of the name of Cecilia which Brother Jacob of Genoa put in the *Legend*") before the disquisition on the etymology of Cecilia's name, which comes to the multifaceted conclusion that *Cecilia* means "heaven's lily" (87), "way for the blind" (92), "lack of blindness" (100), or "the heaven of people" (104). Floral motifs thus appear again in this tale, yet in a more sanctified and well-defended manner than their appearance by the Prioress.

Cecilia, pledged to be married to the once pagan Valerian, is protected by an angel who presents them both with floral crowns upon Valerian's conversion:

Valerian goth hoom and fynt Cecilie
 Withinne his chabre with an angel stonde.
 This angel hadde of roses and of lilie
 Corones two, the which he bar in honde;
 And first to Cecile, as I understonde,
 He yaf that oon, and after gan he take
 That oother to Valerian, hir make. (SNT 218-224)

¹²³ Howard, 468.

The angel implores the couple to protect their crowns by remaining chaste and pure; only when one abides by these virtues can they see the crowns and smell their fragrance (Figure 19).

Valerian implores his brother Tiburce to join them in converting to Christianity:

Valerian seyde: “Two corones han we,
Snow white and rose reed, that shynen cleere,
Which that thyne eyen han no might to see;
And as thou smellest hem thurgh my preyer,
So shaltow seen hem, leeve brother deere,
If it so be thou wolt, withouten slouthe,
Bileve aright and known verray trouthe.” (SNT 253-259)

Set apart from the nonbelieving world, Cecilia, Valerian and Tiburce become suspects of subterfuge in imperial Rome for their refusal to continue in the practices of idolatry and worship of Roman deities. The magistrate Almachius has Valerian and Tiburce killed and tries to do the same to Cecilia by trapping her in a cauldron and lighting a fire beneath it. Cecilia survives this ordeal by the grace of God, and goes on giving her Christian following instructions for several days after the Romans slit her throat. When she ascends to heaven, her followers “with sheetes han the blood ful faire yhent” (536), a final instance of Red blood mingling with White fabric and translating to the many upstanding syntheses of these hues which the Second Nun has presented throughout the tale.



Figure 19. A rood screen painting of Saint Cecilia and her floral crown, North Elmham priory.

Perhaps the most pertinent historical parallel to be drawn between Red and White color pairing in the *Second Nun's Tale* comes between it and the very saint whom the pilgrims proceed

towards Canterbury to venerate. Indeed, in 1180, ten years after the murder of Thomas Becket in Canterbury Cathedral, the scholar and monk Edward Grim published *Vita S. Thomae (Life of Saint Thomas)*. The focal points of this volume are the events leading up to the martyrdom, the act itself, and the years following during which King Henry II did his penance. Grim, having been in service to Becket during his primacy at Canterbury and present at the murder, paints the following gory picture of what he witnessed:

Then the third knight inflicted a terrible wound as he lay, by which the sword was broken against the pavement, and the crown which was large was separated from the head; so that the blood *white*¹²⁴ with the brain and the brain *red* with blood, dyed the surface of the virgin mother church with the life and death of the confessor and martyr in *the colors of the lily and the rose*.¹²⁵

Imagery of Thomas Becket concerning his martyrdom are thus “head-centered,” where he typically is surrounded by a red halo symbolizing the blood of a martyr (Figure 20) and often accompanied by white swords with gold or red hilts either close to or directly piercing his head (Figure 21). The eminent fifth century monk and transplant to England, Benedict of Nursia, summarily described the importance of blood to the force behind Christian theology and practice in Book IV of his *Holy Rule*: “Just as the blood of Christ brings eternal life to the soul which has been called back from the finality of death, so also the blood of the martyr gives back temporal life to the body divested of its soul.”¹²⁶ The blood of Christ in the Catholic Eucharist is believed

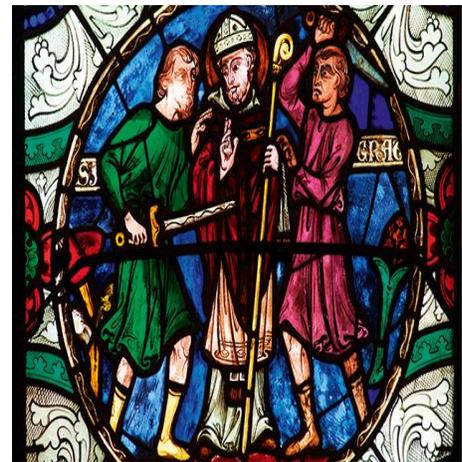


Figure 20. A stained-glass window at Canterbury Cathedral depicts the murder of Saint Thomas Becket, adorned with a red cloak, red halo, and red puncture wound on his palm to symbolize his martyrdom and unity with Christ.

¹²⁴ All italics are done by the author for emphasis.

¹²⁵ Edward Grim, “The Murder of Thomas a Becket,” in *Eyewitness to History*, edited by John Carey (New York: Avon Books, 1987), 35.

¹²⁶ Benedict of Nursia, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, trans. W.K. Lowther-Clarke (London: S.P.C.K., 1931), 4.

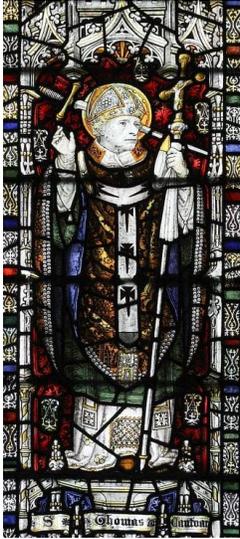


Figure 21. A stained-glass window of Saint Thomas, his head pierced with a sword, Durham Cathedral.

to literally be present through transubstantiation of the wine for believers to drink of “in remembrance” of Jesus, and, having done so, they have been “made well” by their faith.¹²⁷ The powerful message of Red as martyrdom and a unifying factor of believers through salvation would not have been lost on medieval pilgrims, especially not those paying homage at Canterbury Cathedral as Chaucer’s do. In the stained-glass windows of the Cathedral, hagiographical scenes of its most famous Archbishop and resident saint, the martyred Thomas à Becket, are replete with instances of Red as symbols of

his holiness and supernatural abilities of healing. As Madeline Caviness

notes in her commentary on the provenance of the Canterbury Windows, a

uniquely Canterburian cult existed surrounding blood where that of Saint Thomas and other

saints (or at least what was believed to be it) was mixed with water and administered as a potion

in healing rituals.¹²⁸ Coupled with the conventional import surrounding blood in the sacrament of

the Eucharist and in the Passion of the Christ through the stigmata, a veritable obsession with

blood, and by extension its Red visual presentation, was in place at Canterbury. Unity and

bondage through mixing of blood was a salient and quite righteous phenomenon of the Middle

Ages.

While Chaucer’s familiarity with the *Vita S. Thomae* remains a matter of probable, though still speculative debate, it has been made clear in this thesis that the exact color imagery which Edward Grim employs in his account is the same as that which Chaucer employs in his religious and secular pilgrims’ tales. Moreover, that the imagery surrounding the saintly life of

¹²⁷ Bettina Bildhauer, “Blood in Medieval Culture,” in *History Compass* 4, no. 6 (2006), 1050.

¹²⁸ Madeline Caviness, *The Early Stained Glass of Canterbury Cathedral, 1175-1220* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), 149.

Thomas Becket should draw parallels so exactly between that of the Second Nun's Tale (and not so exactly with any of the others), establishes a precedent to which the other tales, regardless of how their symbolism is employed, must compare. Saint Thomas's defiled Red and White crown and the Red and White floral crowns of Cecilia and Valerian allude consummately to that "corone of lif that may nat faille" (SNT 388), the Lord Jesus Christ. The Second Nun, at first surmised by some to be demure, dim, even irrelevant in the face of other pilgrims, thus emerges as possibly the most morally sound color rhetorician, by which the others must measure their color pairing and, by extension, their morality.

Chapter XI: Color Condemned – Decoloration, Lollardy, and *The Parson's Tale*

The Parson makes his detestation of any kind of fiction, literary or visual, clear to the Host:

Thou getest fable noon ytoold for me,
For Paul, that writeth unto Thymoethee,
Repreveth hem that weyven soothfastnesse
And tellen fables and swich wrecchednesse. (31-34)

When he is called upon to round out the journey, he chooses to provide a treatise on sin, penance, damnation, and salvation – a sobering end to a raucous journey, yet one which reorients his audience in a way of preparing them for what they have embarked on their pilgrimage for.

Looking back over his audience, many of whom are decked out in polychrome fineries and have told tales of individuals of equal habiliment, it seems only fitting that the Parson would comment on the dangers of colorful material excess:

As to the first sin, that is in superfluity of clothing, which makes it so dear, to the harm of the people; not only the cost of embroidering, the ostentatious notching or ornamenting with bars, undulating stripes, vertical stripes, folding or decorative borders, and similar waste of cloth in vanity ... And moreover, the wretched swollen members that they show through their style of clothing, in parting of their hoses into white and red, seems that half their shameful private members were flayed. And if so be that they divide their hoses in

other colors, as is white and black, or white and blue, or black and red, and so forth, then seems it, as by variance of color, that half the part of their private members were corrupt by the fire of Saint Anthony (inflammation of the skin), or by cancer, or by other such mischance.

Such entreaties were not uncommon from Parsons at the time, but what is important to note is the choice of color combinations which the Parson chooses to identify: first among these he chooses “White and Red,” relegating the rest into a category of “others” of almost lesser severity. That he would call upon and condemn that color pairing which has thus far threaded its way through so many of the preceding tales identifies an extended opinion of the Parson in opposition to all of the previous pilgrims – that displays of this color pairing, regardless of what good intentions it may harbor, are tantamount to the wicked attempts of Satan to obscure God’s natural order of the world through embellishment and deception. The Parson, as we have encountered several times throughout this work, was in good moral company when it came to his vitriol towards coloration. Just as the practice of using Red and White had its start in days of antiquity, so too did the rejection of this pairing as something meant to deceive. Xenophon chastises those women who make up their faces with a “plaster of ceruse and minium,” a combination of White and Red earthen material as a¹²⁹ Christian leaders like Pope Gregory the Great (r. 590-604) maintained that *color* derived from *celare, occultare*, “to cover up,” and it was from this etymological origin that coloration was the Devil’s method of distorting reality and Creation.¹³⁰ Saint Benedict stipulated that monks should wear black robes, which was the most common shade of undyed cloth and thus was closest to the natural purity which monastic life required; any dyeing of this cloth would obscure that purity.¹³¹ The Bible itself lends its own approbation to decoloration, conflicting with other instances exalting the symbolic influence of color pairings. The

¹²⁹ St. Clair, 161.

¹³⁰ Pleij, 63.

¹³¹ Schneider, 421-422.

Apocryphal Gospel of Philip maintains that Christ “went into the dye works of Levi; he took seventy-two cloths of different colors and threw them into the vat. He took them out all white.”¹³² A Christian author of the second century, the “Pastor of Hermas,” recounts in one of his parables a group of maidens constructing a



Figure 22. A fresco of the maidens building the tower from a fifth-sixth century catacomb in Naples.

tower out of a multitude of diversely colored blocks; once added to the tower, each block loses its color and appears only white (Figure 22). The White in these instances, it seems, cannot be readily compared with the White presenting itself in the Red and White syntheses throughout the *Canterbury Tales*. This White is not that of the lily flower, of milk or of pale skin; rather it is a sense of the color of eternity, which by Christianity’s account should indeed be colorless. The White in these instances rejects notions of any form of color complementation, even negative ones.

Chaucer hints at the Parson’s discouragement of visual imagery with a scene taking place well before his tale. When the Man of Law concludes his story, the Host calls on the Parson to tell next, upon which the Parson reproaches him for his taking God’s name in vain:

Oure Host answerede, “O Jankin, be ye there?
 I smelle a Lollere in the wynd,” quod he.
 “Now! goode men,” quod oure Hoste, “herkeneth me;
 Abydeth, for Goddes digne passioun,
 For we schal han a predicacioun;

¹³² Pleij, 65.

This Lollere heer wil prechen us somewhat.” (MLT 1172-1177)

The accusation does not escalate any further thanks to an interjection from the Shipman, yet it has still been made and left up to the pilgrims’, and a reader’s, speculation. The Host believes the Parson to be a Lollard, one of those English followers of the heretical John Wycliffe, a skeptic maintaining Christ’s body’s transubstantiation at the Eucharist was a form of Catholic idolatry. Other forms of idolatry, specifically those of images of saints, relics, and ornately decorated shrines (Becket’s included) would be equally targeted by Lollards after Wycliffe’s death in 1384, once the group took on a distinctly iconoclastic character.¹³³ Wycliffe would have been dead at least ten years before Chaucer’s generally accepted timeframe of writing the Parson’s Tale. It tracks, then, that the Parson is a faithful member of the pilgrimage who believes outwardly in the necessity of penance and paying homage to ecclesiastical figures, yet his person and tale reflect the influences which the Lollards were beginning to gain at disrupting the veil of Catholic grandeur. In 1394, a congregation of Lollards, risking heresy by doing so, petitioned to Parliament with Twelve Conclusions pertaining to different facets of material excess in the Church, ranging from topics of exorcisms and clerical celibacy to Crusades and abortion. The Eighth Conclusion targeted “Pilgrimages” outright, where the veneration of relics like “the Rood tree, nails, and the spear, and the Crown of God” was no better than worshiping the remains of the lips of Judas himself, as none of these was in the form of truly devout worship, *latría*, which Christ stipulated.¹³⁴ These rather were classified as *dulia*, the worship of man, lower creatures, and manmade things, and such had no place in institutions with true Christian intention. The

¹³³ George Macaulay Trevelyan, *England in the Age of Wycliffe* (London: Longman, Greens, and Co., 1929) 178-179.

¹³⁴ “Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards,” in *Documents Illustrative of English Church History*, edited by Henry Gee and William J. Hardy (London: Macmillan and Co., 1896), 129-130.

Twelfth Conclusion elaborates even more acrimoniously on other types of “Arts and Crafts” practiced and displayed throughout the realm:

... the abundance of unnecessary arts practiced in our realm nourished much sin in waste, profusion, and disguise. This, experience and reason prove in some measure, because nature is sufficient for a man’s necessity with few arts. The corollary is that since St. Paul says: ‘having food and raiment, let us be therewith content,’ it seems to us that goldsmiths and armourers and all kinds of arts not necessary for a man, according to the apostle, should be destroyed for the increase of virtue; because although these two said arts were exceedingly necessary in the old law, the New Testament abolishes them and many others.¹³⁵

This conclusion implies that “all kinds of arts” encompassed a diverse array of material finery, including those visual cultural mainstays – banners, stained-glass windows, paintings, and clothing – which Chaucer indeed knew. Not only would the production of such arts have to cease to prevent further moral decline, but all existing craftsmanship would also have to be destroyed to prevent any doubt as to what was actually being worshipped in Church ritual. The Conclusions end with a reference to a larger work where the views of the Lollards are more thoroughly articulated “in our own language,” which they hope to make “accessible to all Christian people.” Printing and disseminating works in English was one of Wycliffe’s and the Lollard’s most fervent demands, maintaining that printing Scripture in vernacular tongues was the most effective means of elucidating its true intentions – intentions often contrary to those of the Church in Rome – to a wide audience of believers. On a different side of the same token, Chaucer himself abided by this same philosophy in the production of *The Canterbury Tales*: its original language is not clerical Latin or courtly French, but Middle English, highlighting a sense of importance which Chaucer felt for elevating the language of his nation. While inspiring national pride or fomenting insurrection against established Catholic practices were decidedly

¹³⁵ “Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards,” 132.

not Chaucer's main goals with *The Canterbury Tales*, it still is worth noting how he can comment on this aspect of his lived experience while simultaneously interweaving the common thread of Red and White color symbolism.

Placing the most Lollard-adjacent character at the end of his *Canterbury Tales* was a prescient decision of Chaucer's. Later religious movements across Europe, culminating in that broad period known as the Protestant Reformation, ushered in more restrained views of worship and of colorful ornamentation; such revolutionary figures as Martin Luther credited the work of Wycliff as forming the basis of his own arguments in splitting from both the clerical practices of Rome and the overall colorful gaud and glamour of Roman Catholicism. Chaucer would have no way of knowing in his time what was to be the fate of colors in the centuries following him and his *Canterbury Tales*, and we are left only in relief that he was able to produce them in the time which he did.

Part IV: Conclusions

Chapter XII: Chaucer, the *Makere*

The final piece of writing Chaucer likely ever produced was his “Retraction” to *The Canterbury Tales*. The Parson had begun his tale when the pilgrims “were entryng at a thropes ende” (12) – the outskirts of the village of Canterbury. By the time he had concluded, they would have found themselves in the village, perhaps even at their main destination. Chaucer does not end the journey with a resolving denouement from the frame story, however; we never find out what happens to the Canterbury band after the Parson utters the last phrase of his sermon. What comes instead draws us back into our own real world with a statement from Chaucer not as narrator, but as author. This is Chaucer’s Retraction. Anything that pleases or displeases his audience, Chaucer writes, “I pray them also they blame it on the fault of my lack of wit and not to my will, that would much prefer to have said better if I had had cunning.” Each of his works, from the *Troilus* down to “the tales of Canterbury, those that tend towards sin” – he begs forgiveness from Christ for these “worldly vanities.”

Coupling this solemn denouncement of his entire oeuvre with the exhaustive treatise on penance of the Parson directly before it, we might glean from these final pieces that Chaucer, at the end of his life, had lost some of his playful character from across his earlier, more productive years.¹³⁶ A portrait of him from about this time, reproduced in many manuscript marginalia, shows what we can expect of the wise, yet weary character he had become (Figure 21). As Howard notes, however, the Retraction could have been Chaucer’s ultimate experimentation with humor, calling out by name the *Canterbury Tales* in his request for exoneration, yet in so

¹³⁶ Howard, 497.

doing solidifying it for his posterity as a work worthy of being “saved” (ironically, or strategically, his own final wish for himself at the end of the Retraction). This latter take on the Retraction is not to say that Chaucer was being subversive towards Christianity all along. The ribaldry and piety, horror and wonder of the *Canterbury Tales*, especially through the lens of our recurring Red and White color pairing, evinces just how many footholds spirituality had in medieval life and the visual treasures this period of history produced. To further assuage any skeptics of Chaucer’s piety, one looks to later commentary on the ideals of the medieval Carnival, a period leading up to the fasting days of Lent where members of all medieval society’s estates engaged in parodies of Church and aristocratic rituals. As the twentieth-century Christian apologist W.H. Auden writes,

One can only blaspheme if one believes. The world of Laughter is much more closely related to the world of Worship and Prayer than either is to the everyday, secular world of Work, for both are worlds in which we are equal, in the first as individual members of our species, in the latter as unique persons.¹³⁷

Just as one approaches the *Canterbury Tales* with a mind open to humor’s harmonious relationship with holiness, so too can we approach it with a mind open to how visual color presentations influenced Chaucer’s style and rhetorical color presentations, as this thesis has sought to make plain. Penitent though Chaucer may have been for his creations, they were, in the end, *his* creations, his intellectual oeuvre, and the introduction to the Retraction suggests a more nuanced relationship with these *Canterbury Tales*:

“Here taketh the makere of this booke his leve.”

That Chaucer saw himself as not just an author or poet, but a *makere*, one who is tasked with the construction of a work that goes beyond simply aural comprehension, offers one final and

¹³⁷ W. H. Auden, “Concerning the Unpredictable,” in *Forewords and Afterwords*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1943), 472.

compelling piece of evidence for his influence from visual sources from his place in history. Color and material culture were with him from his early career to the time he took the stand before Parliament, from his construction of *The Canterbury Tales* to his death in 1400. Throughout these eventful years, his moral, social, and intellectual compasses were steadily guided by “the White and the Red,” those two hues that have intrigued civilizations since color comprehension was first perceived. These literal “Colours of Rethoryk” still hold great significance in our age, and for this, in great part, we have Chaucer to thank.



Figure 21. The “Hoccleve” portrait depicts Chaucer as he would have looked at the end of his life.

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