

The tale of Beryn and the siege of Thebes:
alternative ideas of the Canterbury Tales.

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John M. Bowers

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

The Tale of Beryn and The Siege of Thebes: Alternative Ideas of The Canterbury Tales John M. Bowers
Princeton University It is difficult to say that few people have read John Lydgate's *Siege of Thebes* or the anonymous
Tale of Beryn, two fifteenth-century attempts to continue the literary journey and tale-telling of Chaucer's
unfinished masterpiece. Yet in a real sense very few people have read *The Canterbury Tales*. What they have
experienced is a modern fabrication by Skeat, Robinson, Baugh, Fisher, and other editors who offer the
poem as a single work, albeit marred by gaps and rough edges, but nonetheless recounting what was said
on a one-way trip from Southwerk to the outskirts of Canterbury. This is technically a fabrication because no
surviving manuscript arranges the fragments in an order which gives perfect geographical support to this

design-not without the notorious "Bradshaw shift" -and no single manuscript, not even Ellesmere, contains all the tales and links to be found in a modern edition with its scholarly confluents. To recognize and investigate a recoverable "idea" of this assemblage, as Donald Howard has done so provocatively, really means to grant full confidence to the authority of Ellesmere, a manuscript that implies but by no means specifies a one-way journey.

2 His and other unity studies have

1 John Lydgate, *Siege of Thebes*, ed. Axel Erdmann and Eilert Ekwall, 2 vols., EETS. e.s., nos. 108, 125 (London, 1911, 1930); and *The Tale of Beryn*, with a Prologue of the Merry Adventure of the Pardoner with a Tapster at Canterbury, ed. F.J. Furnivall and W.G. Stone, EETS, e.s., no. 105 (London, 1909). Chaucer quotations and lineations are from Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Complete Poetry and Prose*, ed. John H. Fisher (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977).

2 Donald R. Howard. *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 212-13 et passim, accepts the Ellesmere order as the starting point for his critical discussion. In his chapter "The Idea of an Idea," pp. 1-20, he distinguishes an idea as something different from the author's intention, genre, style, language, tradition, values, mental archetype, and cultural mythology -yet including all of these: "This whole is an idea" (p. 19).

3 *STUDIES IN THE AGE OF CHAUCER* proceeded with the assurance that Ellesmere preserves the poet's own final arrangement of the Canterbury fragments, despite the fact that this confidence was not shared by an earlier generation of textual scholars at work analyzing the full range of surviving manuscripts. Bruce Dorff, Tatlock, Manly, and Dempster reached a critical consensus in concluding that none of the manuscript sequences, however attractive, had any final authority in determining the order of the groups.

3 Largely excluding the testimony of these textual experts, unity studies have also tended to fall prey to a circularity in their own logic. A typical argument begins with the assumption that there must be an orderly and meaningful arrangement of details in the frame narrative, proceeds to set Ellesmere's time and place references in a naturalistic sequence -leaving the pilgrims unnaturalistically outside Canterbury (or the Celestial Jerusalem) without the return to the Tabard announced in *The General Prologue* -and then concludes that the frame narrative does indeed have an orderly and meaningful arrangement which gives rise to an aesthetic unity.

4 3 Aage Brusndorff. *The Chaucer Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), pp. 119-20, 125-26; S. P. Tatlock, "The Canterbury Tales in 1400," *PMLA* 50 (1935):105-06, 131-33; John M. Manly and Edith Rickert, eds., *The Text of The Canterbury Tales: Studied on the Basis of All Known Manuscripts*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1940), 2:475-94 (hereafter Manly and Rickert); and Germaine Dempster, "Manly's Conception of the Early History of the Canterbury Tales," *PMLA* 61 (1946):384, 386-89, alluding to Tatlock, pp. 106, 131; Robert A. Pratt, "The Order of the Canterbury Tales," *PMLA* 66 (1951):1141-67, proceeds under the proviso that his conclusions have merit only "if Chaucer had a definite intention" (p. 1142).

4 The search for an aesthetic wholeness not based on the older principle of roadside drama was begun by Ralph Baldwin, *The Unity of the Canterbury Tales* (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1955), and has...

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Princeton University

It is safe to say that few people have read John Lydgate's *Siege of Thebes* or the anonymous *Tale of Beryn*, two fifteenth-century attempts to continue the literary journey and tale-telling of Chaucer's unfinished masterpiece.¹ Yet in a real sense very few people have read *The Canterbury Tales*. What they have experienced is a modern fabrication by Skeat, Robinson, Baugh, Fisher, and other editors who offer the poem as a single work, albeit marred by gaps and rough edges, but nonetheless recounting what was said on a one-way trip from Southwerk to the outskirts of Canterbury. This is technically a fabrication because no surviving manuscript arranges the fragments in an order which gives perfect geographical support to this design— not without the notorious "Bradshaw shift" — and no single manuscript, not even Ellesmere, contains all the tales and links to be found in a modern edition with its scholarly confections.

To recognize and investigate a recoverable "idea" of this assemblage, as Donald Howard has done so provocatively, really means to grant full confidence to the authority of Ellesmere, a manuscript that implies but by no means specifies a one-way journey.² His and other unity studies have

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Chaucer, the Merchant, and Their Tale: Getting beyond Old Controversies: Part 1, personification uniformly rotates from a number of out of the ordinary image, regardless of the self-Assembly of clusters.

The tale of Beryn and the siege of Thebes: alternative ideas of the Canterbury Tales, unlike dust and ion tails, the hexameter turns the author's small Park with wild animals to the South-West of Manama.

