

“Ellesmere Chaucer”

Melissa Mott

“Ellesmere Chaucer” is described in great detail in the University of California’s Digital Scriptorium. Through this website, photos of the original binding, as well as the restored one, are shown. The original “Ellesmere was a dark shade of green and had six ribs going across the actual binding of the book. There was a gold emblem on the cover and “Chaucer,” along with something else not visible from the picture, also written in gold letters on the binding. After the book was restored, the entire book now plain white, although still containing the six ribs along the binding (“Huntington Catalog Images”). It was restored in 1995 and went from the green goatskin to “sewn on seven double flax cords using original fifteenth century stations” as well as “boards of quarter-sawn English oak laced on and pegged, covered with alum-tawed calfskin”. This was restored by Anthony G. Cains and Maria Fredericks (Dutschke, “Guide to Medieval”).

In the Guide to Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts in the Huntington Library from the Digital Scriptorium, each tale was written in the order of which it appeared in *The Canterbury Tales*, which is important since this is one of the most complete versions. In order, it is first the *General Prologue*, followed by the *Prologue and Miller’s Tale*, *Prologue and Reeve’s tale*, *Prologue and Cook’s Tale*, *Prologue and Man of Law’s Tale*, *Prologue and Wife of Bath’s Tale*, *Prologue and Friar’s Tale*, *Prologue and Summoner’s Tale*, *Prologue and Clerk’s Tale*, *Prologue and Merchant’s Tale*, *Prologue and Squire’s Tale*, *Prologue and Franklin’s Tale*, *Physician’s Tale*, *Prologue and Pardoner’s Tale*, *Shipman’s Tale*, *Prologue and Prioress’s Tale*, *Thopas*, *Melibeus*, *Monk’s Tale*, *Prologue and Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, *Prologue and Second Nun’s*

Tale, Prologue and Canon's Yeoman's Tale, Prologue and Manciple's Tale, and finally, the Prologue and Parson's Tale (Dutschke, "Guide to Medieval").

The borders of many pages are created with vines and leaves, covering the left, top, and bottom of the page. Most passages also begin with initial letters in a highly decorated form. A single page itself is about 16x11 inches, making it remarkably large compared to modern-day standards. There are twenty-three pilgrims drawn for almost each tale at the prologue, which shows significant amount of "fidelity to the text" because there was so much detail put into it. These pictures vary in their size, but the largest is about 100x80 millimeters and the smallest is about 45x45 millimeters. There is believed to be three different artists responsible for the artwork done in the text. The first had done the first sixteen drawings of the pilgrims, as well as the last one. The second artist had possibly done the portrait of what is believed to be Chaucer himself, and the third artist had drawn the Monk, Nun's Priest, Second Nun, Canon's Yeoman, and the Manciple (Dutschke, "Guide to Medieval").

It is not factually known who had held onto this manuscript for centuries. However, there has been speculation about a man named Sir Robert Dury. There is a note on folio 1 from around 1528-1536 that seems to have some kind of relationship with him. Sir Dury was a privy councilor under Henry VII and then knighted in 1497 where he obtained his seat only a few miles north of the De Vere seat located at the Castle Hedingham. Some researchers believe Dury to have gotten a hold of "Ellesmere" just by connections (Hanna 15). On folios ii-iv, there is a 200-lined poem sometimes titled "Per Rotheley." In this, it has a "panegyric" to De Vere ranking of Oxford, making some believe that Thomas De Vere to have the manuscript (Hanna 13). A little after the start of the fifteen century, it was known that "Ellesmere" tended to stay close with Lydgate's *Siege of Thebes*, which was apparently made for William de la Pole. In 1430, de la

Pole also ended up marrying Alice, who was known to be Chaucer's granddaughter (Hanna 16-17). Because of all this speculation, it is only known for sure that for about three centuries, Sir Thomas Egerton had held onto it in his own personal library. Once it was available for purchase, H. E. Huntington made the first move. "Ellesmere Chaucer" is now being held in Huntington Library in California and has been since 1917 (Chaucer).

"Ellesmere Chaucer" is closely related with the "Hengwrt" manuscript. "Ellesmere" was created a little after "Hengwrt" was one of the most complete versions. However, "Hengwrt" is considered to be the "earliest and most authoritative copies of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*" (Mooney 97). Adam Pinkhurst was the scribe that had copied both manuscripts, also (Mooney 97). "Ellesmere" is important to Chaucer studies because it is to which all newer versions of *The Canterbury Tales* are based off of because it seems to be more complete and have a better order of the tales within it (Mooney 99).

The "Ellesmere Chaucer" is an incredibly unique book, given its detail to completeness, order, and artwork. It is something that, in the modern-day world, is astonishing to see. Looking at the inscriptions, the meticulous borders, the pilgrims drawn for each prologue, it is amazing to finally know who is responsible for all of this hard work and who had kept it for so long. Although it still is unclear where this manuscript was kept for so many years, it is known that it went from Sir Thomas Egerton's library to California at the Huntington Library.

Works Cited

Chaucer, Geoffrey, D. H. Woodward, and Martin Stevens. *The Canterbury Tales: The New Ellesmere Chaucer Monochromatic Facsimile (of Huntington Library MS EL 26 C 9)*. San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1997. Print.

Dutschke, C. W., and R. H. Rouse. "Guide to Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts in the Huntington Library." Bancroft.berkeley.edu. University of California Digital Scriptorium, 1989. Web. 23 Oct. 2013.
<<http://sunsite3.berkeley.edu/hehweb/EL26C9.html>>.

Hanna, Ralph, and A. S. G. Edwards. "Rotheley, the De Vere Circle, and the Ellesmere Chaucer." *Huntington Library Quarterly* 58.1 (1995): 11–35. *JSTOR*. Web. 24 Oct. 2013.
"Huntington Catalog Images." Bancroft.berkeley.edu. University of California Digital Scriptorium, 2002. Web. 23 Oct. 2013.
<http://dpg.lib.berkeley.edu/webdb/dsheh/heh_brf?CallNumber=El+26+C+9>.

Mooney, Linne R. "Chaucer's Scribe." *Speculum: A Journal of Medieval Studies* 81.1 (2006): 97-138. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 22 Oct. 2013.