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Interpreting
Blake’s Canterbury Pilgrims

by WARREN STEVENSON

BLAKE’S DRAWING of Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Pilgrims*, begun in 1806,2 completed in time for his ill-fated exhibition of May, 1809, and subsequently engraved, was one of a series of dramatic pictures including the earlier series for Blair’s *The Grave*, Young’s *Night Thoughts*, Gray’s poems, the Milton and Bunyan series, the illustration of Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, culminating in the great *Illustrations to Job*, and extending to the unfinished illustrations to Dante. As Northrop Frye observes, in these works Blake undertook “to illustrate other poets’ vision so that their readers may more easily understand their archetypal significance.”3 Apart from a few such pithy remarks by Frye and a brief commentary by S. Foster Damon,4 only one readily accessible study of this, one of Blake’s most famous illustrations, exists at the time of writing.5 Kiralis invites further studies, and one might expect *The Canterbury Pilgrims* to throw some more light on the symbolism of the Major Prophecies, which Blake had been contemporaneously working on,6 and to receive more illumination therefrom.

Any sound discussion of *The Canterbury Pilgrims* must take as its point of departure Blake’s *Descriptive Catalogue*, prepared for the 1809 exhibition, which includes not only, as Charles Lamb observed, “a most spirited criticism of Chaucer,”6 but also a commentary on the picture itself, without which we should be only imperfectly aware of the subtleties of Blake’s aim and method. The basic argument is as follows:

The characters of Chaucer’s Pilgrims are the characters which compose all ages and nations: as one age falls, another rises, different to mortal sight, but to immortals only the
same; for we see the same characters repeated again and again, in animals, vegetables, minerals, and in men; nothing new occurs in identical existence; Accident ever varies, Substance can never suffer change nor decay.

Of Chaucer’s characters, as described in his Canterbury Tales, some of the names or titles are altered by time, but the characters themselves for ever remain unaltered, and consequently they are the physiognomies or lineaments of universal human life, beyond which Nature never steps... As Newton numbered the stars, and as Linneus numbered the plants, so Chaucer numbered the classes of men.7

Of his own role as artist, Blake goes on to observe that he has “consequently varied the heads and forms of his personages into all Nature’s varieties; the Horses he has also varied to accord to their Riders; the costume is correct according to authentic monuments.”8 This statement

might be taken to imply a quasi-realistic or documentary approach to Blake's subject, constituting a limitation on his archetypal method. However, Blake does not hesitate to depart from Chaucer's text when it suits his purpose to do so; and these remarks should be taken in conjunction with another passage which occurs later in *A Descriptive Catalogue*: “Thus the reader will observe, that Chaucer makes every one of his characters perfect in his kind; every one is an Antique Statue; the image of a class, and not of an imperfect individual.” In both these statements Blake indicates a sculpturesque influence upon his work, deriving from his association with Flaxman and his study of the Gothic cathedrals. In his theory of art Blake, like his mediaeval predecessors, is for clear and determinate outline, and minute particularity in the delineation of char-

acter. He is against “generalization,” which is another name for the indeterminate or abstract. “A History Painter Paints the Hero, & not Man in General, but most minutely in Particular.” Accordingly, Blake recommends to our attention “every Lineament of Head, Hand & Foot, every particular of dress or Costume ... even to the Stuff & Embroidery of the Garments, the hair upon the Horses, the Leaves upon the Trees, & the Stones & Gravel upon the road.”

IT IS MORNING. The first beams of the sun, and the south wind (vide the smoking chimneys in the distance) symbolically push back the dark clouds which slant away towards the north. A group of thirty Pilgrims are emerging from the Gothic portal of the Tabard Inn, led by the Squire and the Knight, and comprehending, in Dryden's fine phrase, “God’s plenty.” They are being watched by some standing figures, and the sun is about to rise behind the Pilgrims, most of whom are facing west. Although their nominal journey takes them south-east, to Canterbury, their symbolic journey is westward, with “the current of / Creation.” Blake thus establishes an antithesis between the Pilgrims as pilgrims, and the Pilgrims as exemplars of the Divine Humanity—an antithesis which, it will be suggested, is basic to his symbolic and archetypal method of portraying each of the individual figures.

Visible against the sky are the black silhouettes of four flying birds, possible ravens of dawn. Five white dove-like birds are also awake to greet the dawn; two of these are hovering in flight, and three are perched on the scalloped eaves of the Tabard. Perhaps they symbolize the five senses of man, through which he may enter eternity, as Blake wrote in *Europe: A Prophecy*. At any rate, two of the birds appear to be billing and cooing, and one of the birds is hovering directly over the planet Venus, also known as Lucifer, the morning star, which is visible through the clouds over the Gothic church in the distance. So they may well represent the joys of generation.

Of the Pilgrims themselves, as Damon writes, “The upper classes lead the way, the lower classes follow, and democratic Harry Baily unites them.” Harry Baily's ample figure dominating the center of the picture assumes the cruciform position which in Blake is usually symbolic of self-sacrifice and forgiveness. And the Divine Vision is central to Blake's

15. Damon, p. 79.
purpose here. However, since this posture is also assumed by Satan while afflicting Job,17 as well as by Pitt in "The Spiritual Form of Pitt, guiding Behemoth," where he holds what looks like a whip in a manner which closely resembles Harry Baily's desceptively casual way of holding his riding stick, the latter's outstretched arms may also represent a marriage of Heaven and Hell, of Innocence and Experience, which enables him to command the other Pilgrims. As Blake remarks, the Host "holds the center of the cavalcade, is a first rate character, and his jokes are no trifles; . . . though uttered with audacity, and equally free with the Lord and the Peasant, they are always substantially and weightily expressive of knowledge and experience." I shall return to the Host later.

An example of the subtlety of Blake's technique, and of his skillful efforts to reconcile reasonable fidelity to Chaucer's text with fidelity to his own vision, may be seen in his portrayal of the Knight's group, of which he writes: "The knight is a true Hero, a good, great, and wise man; his whole length portrait on horseback, as written by Chaucer, cannot be surpassed. He has spent his life in the field; has ever been a conqueror, and is that species of character which in every age stands as the guardian of man against the oppressor. His son is like him with the germ of perhaps greater perfection still, as he blends literature and the arts with his war-like studies." In Chaucer's "Prologue," the Knight comes first; in Blake's picture, the Knight, whose "whole length portrait on horseback" is admirably rendered, is slightly preceded by his son, the Squire, whose handsome face framed with curly yellow hair topped with gay red plumes can perhaps best be described as Apollonian. The Squire's free-and-easy attitude is forward-looking, in contrast to the Knight's retrospective glance and gesture, which direct the viewer's eyes to the middle of the picture. Also, the Squire's gaily caparisoned mount is frisking and has a noticeably gayer expression than the Knight's war-horse, which is pacing with appropriately glaring eyes, like the mastiff which trots beside them.

A curious aspect of what may at first appear to be the wholly favorable portrayal of the Knight, who has just returned from the Crusades, is that it sorts oddly with Blake's view of war as "energy Enslaved," with his strong implicit condemnation of warfare throughout the Major Prophecies, and with his specific identification of "Religion hid in war" as the work of Rahab and Satan.18 Four of Blake's other pictures from the exhibition of 1809 deal with the theme of warfare—"The Spiritual Form of Pitt, Guiding Behemoth," "The Spiritual Form of Nelson, Guiding Leviathan," "The Bard," and "The Ancient Britons" (now lost). To these may be added a fifth—"The Whore of Babylon" (1809), at the bottom of which tiny figures are engaged in fighting. Thus, it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that Blake was preoccupied with the theme of warfare at

17. Blake's Job, Pl. VI.
this time. And yet, how neatly he sidesteps the issue in his remarks about the Knight’s military prowess and noble character. To see that the matter is far from being settled by Blake’s referring to him as a “guardian of man against the oppressor,” the oppressor in this instance presumably being the Moors, one need only recall the lines from Auguries of Innocence: “Nought can deform the Human Race / Like to the Armour’s iron brace.” And Blake’s Knight, unlike Chaucer’s, is portrayed in full armor. It is instructive to note that when Blake came to do his Job engravings fifteen years later, he repeated the visual effect of the “good” Knight’s scaled armor in his portrayal of Satan, whose upper breast, neck, shoulders, loins and thighs are likewise covered with scales. We may conclude that Blake calls the Knight “good” because he is distinguishing “between States & Individuals of those States” (The Four Zoas, viii:380), or between the Knight as an individual and the Knight qua Knight. To perceive the Knight as “good” requires a vision of forgiveness on the part of the beholder which it is the aim of Blake’s art to evoke and elucidate. And in the placement of the figures the Knight counterbalances Chaucer himself, reminding us that in Blake’s myth the “war of swords” is the antithesis of “intellectual war” (The Four Zoas, ix:854).

As for the Knight’s connection with organized religion, Blake duly notices it by placing on his breast a small cross, thus introducing a visual motif which is repeated twice in the portrayal of the Prioress, who follows the Knight, and to whose figure his extended hand points, and three times in the portrayal of the Pardoner, who comes next among the full-length figures, and whose gloved hand holding the gem-encrusted cross is extended towards the Prioress and Knight. Also, there hang from the Knight’s shoulders two red draperies—an almost feminine touch similar to the curtains of the tabernacle in Blake’s veil symbolism.

As with his treatment of the Knight, there seems at first glance to be a discrepancy between Blake’s remarks concerning the Prioress in his Descriptive Catalogue and his treatment of the related themes of chastity and religious restraint symbolized by Tirzah, daughter of Rahab, in the Prophecies. The tone of the former is deceptively suave: “This Lady is described also as of the first rank, rich and honoured. She has certain peculiarities and little delicate affectations, not unbecoming in her, being accompanied with what is truly grand and really polite; her person and face Chaucer has described with inminuteness; it is very elegant, and was the beauty of our ancestors, till after Elizabeth’s time, when voluptuousness and folly began to be accounted beautiful.” For Blake’s portrayal of the Prioress, like his portrait of the Knight, is charged with mordant irony. Damon unhesitatingly (and, I think, rightly) glosses her as “Tirzah,

20. See Blake’s Job, Pl. VI and commentary. For other examples of Blake’s use of scaly figures see Europe, Pl. IX (Huntington), where the nude figure representing war is entirely covered with scales; “Goliath Cursing David” (c. 1805), and “Satan Comes To The Gates of Hell” (1807).
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the Prude.” His supporting evidence is drawn from Blake’s myth, particularly the first chapter of Jerusalem, where Rahab and Tirzah divide the daughters of Albion between them, and from Blake’s later comment in A Descriptive Catalogue: “The characters of Women Chaucer has divided into two classes, the Lady Prioress and the Wife of Bath. Are not these leaders of the ages of men? The lady prioress, in some ages, predominates; and in some the wife of Bath, in whose character Chaucer has been equally minute and exact, because she is also a scourge and a blight.” Such outspoken remarks notwithstanding, there is no use in our asking whether Blake “praises” or “damns” these characters, except insofar as his praise or condemnation is directed at the state with which an individual has identified himself. He portrays them in all their subtlety and human complexity, with a shrewd insight and humor comparable to, though different from, that of Chaucer himself. It is not Blake’s purpose to judge, but to delineate character.

For Tirzah’s beauty there is the precedent of The Song of Solomon (vi. 4), as well as Chaucer’s own description of the Prioress. As to the inner symbolism of Blake’s portrait, the net-like covering over her horse’s body reminds one of his use of the net as a symbol of the snares of sex (“The Golden Net,” “How Sweet I roam’d”), and also of the net of Religion, which in the Major Prophecies becomes identified with the veil of Vala. This veil motif is repeated in the translucent covering of the upper portion of the Prioress’ body. The overall impression of artificially retarded innocence is reinforced by the two long braids, or pigtails, hanging over her shoulders, and by the somewhat stern, even prudish expression of the Prioress, which contrasts with the more wistful look of her attendant nun, whose visible stigmata may be compared with Blake’s favorable reference to St. Teresa in Jerusalem (72:50). The Prioress’ greyhounds, faithfully reproduced from Chaucer’s text, likewise remind one of the chaste Diana. Her scarlet saddle in contrast to her black clothing links her symbolically with the Knight, who is also portrayed in black and red. Beneath the cross suspended from the heavy chain on the Knight’s chest is a tiny wrought figure of a knight on horseback inside what looks like a crescent moon; above the cross hanging from the Prioress’ rosary is the brooch “wrought with a full curious pin,” doubtless inscribed with the motto, “Amor Vincit Omnia.” The red curtain-like draperies hanging from the Knight’s shoulders symbolize his subjection to the female will of Vala, as manifested in the religious institutions of his day and dramatically embodied in the demure, slightly frowning Prioress, in whose direction the sad-faced Knight-at-arms is turning with chivalric deference. One is reminded of

21. Damon, p. 79. See also his entries under “Tirzah” and “Rahab.”
the passage in *Jerusalem* (68:63) where one of the warriors exclaims, “I must rush again to War, for the Virgin has frown’d & refus’d.”

I shall pass over Blake’s portrayal of the Friar and the Monk, since his own discriminating commentary on these two characters “of a mixed kind” will suffice to place their massive, sculpturesque portraits in adequate perspective, and go on to the Pardoner, whose full figure, turned away from the viewer towards his “friend and compeer” the Summoner, dominates this part of the picture. Blake refers to the Pardoner as “the Age’s Knave,” and to the Summoner as “also a Devil of the first magnitude,” adding that “the uses to Society are perhaps equal of the Devil and of the Angel”—a remark which again indicates his antithetical method.

The jewel-encrusted cross in the Pardoner’s gloved right hand, and the large red crosses on his back and wallet, emphasize both his office and his flagitious hypocrisy. Frye points out that Blake associates triplicity with Antichrist, and Damon observes that for Blake, the cross is “an instrument of execution, of the Vengeance for Sin, and therefore should not symbolize the true religion of Forgiveness.” The Pardoner’s long, lank hair and effeminate clothing and countenance aptly hint at the nature of his relationship with the Summoner, who regards him with a sensual leer. The Pardoner’s horse is trying to get the bit between its teeth, and is enabled to do so because the Pardoner, alone among the Pilgrims, has relinquished his grip on the reins.

Harry Baily, in marked contrast, holds his horse’s reins in his left hand and a riding stick in his right; both are held loosely so that the impression is one of an easy assumption of authority. This accords well with his central position in the design, and the symbolic implications of his cruciform posture (what Damon somewhere calls “the living cross”) likewise contrast with the Pardoner’s swastika-like contortion. Harry has had the foresight to bring along a bedroll or extra blanket, which helps to balance his rotund figure and serves as an improvised back-rest. The impression of down-to-earth practicality is reinforced by the thick belt around his waist and the dagger at his side. The feathers in his cap repeat a motif introduced in the Apollonian portrayal of the Squire, as does the swirl of the red tip of the reins held over his horse’s head. His ruddy countenance, jovial expression, and elegant ruff give him an irresistible charm, and he appears as Blake describes him, “a first rate character . . . a leader of the age.”

According to Blake, the principal character in the next group—those who follow the Host—is the Good Parson, whose full-length portrait balances and contrasts with that of the Pardoner. Blake calls the Parson “an Apostle, a real Messenger of Heaven, sent in every age for its light and its warmth,” and adds: “He serves all, and is served by none; he is,
according to Christ’s definition, the greatest of his age.” The Parson’s white-bearded, black-cassocked figure mounted on a small, gentle-look­ing horse attains a calm dignity which is subtly emphasized by the arr­angement of the figure. His is the only one of the seven full-length figures which presents a perfect profile, and the stark, black-and-white coloration contrasts markedly with that of the other portraits. This rather severe effect is reinforced by the complete, absence of adornment on his person and mount. He noticeably resembles the figure of the Ancient Bard as portrayed in the illustrations to *Songs of Innocence and of Experience,* and also, inevitably, Urizen—for as priest, he is a pillar of the religious establishment. True, the Parson is a “good” pillar; but only insofar as we exercise the vision of “forgiveness” and distinguish his true individuality from his institutional role. Once again, Blake’s keen sense of paradox is evident.

Of the seven figures who appear between Harry Baily and the Parson, six—the Sergeant of Law, the Plowman, the Doctor of Physic, the Frank­lin, and two “Citizens of London,” or Guildsmen (a third, clothed in like livery, appears between the Prioress and the Monk)—are facing Harry Baily, and their horses are likewise looking at him, thus leading the viewer’s gaze back towards the center of the design. The Franklin’s plumed hat, like those of Harry Baily and the Squire, accords with his sanguine temperament and outgoing, hospitable nature. Blake calls him “the Bacchus” of the group, and observes that he presents a contrast to the dour Physician, whose exterior adornment belies his expression of gravity, if not malaise, albeit he is “perfect, learned, completely Master and Doctor in his art.” The seventh figure of this group, who is looking over his shoulder at the others and wears a beaver hat, is not the Mer­chant, whom Chaucer describes thus attired, but the Shipman. Evidently Blake has misapplied one detail of the Merchant’s dress to the Ship­man, whose uneasy posture and scowling expression at any rate accord with the rest of his portrayal by Chaucer.

The fork-bearded Merchant comes between the Parson and the Wife of Bath, at whom he is looking with an expression of doleful admiration. The Miller, playing his bagpipes, appears looking over the Wife’s right shoulder, and thus helps to provide an appropriate dramatic setting for this most flamboyant of characters, whose figure, as in Chaucer’s “Pro­logue,” complements and balances that of the Prioress, as Rahab comple­ments her daughter Tirzah in Blake’s myth. Each is seen as representing an aspect of Natural Religion and the Female Will, or sexual license and sexual repression, respectively.

That Blake’s Wife of Bath is portrayed as in the state of Rahab, his mythic name for the Whore of Babylon, there can be little doubt, notwith­standing the fact that most of the details of her portrayal are taken.

straight from Chaucer's text. She appears with hose of scarlet red, a voluminous foot-mantle or riding skirt over her large hips and thighs, riding a gaily bedecked horse, and holding a wine-glass which, on the literal level (like the Cook's tankard of foaming ale and the tavern boy and girl in the foreground), accords well with the departure-from-the-tavern setting, and on the symbolic level reminds one of the cup of the Whore of Revelation. In the painting, but not in the engraving, the Wife's right hand holding the wine-glass blocks out our view of the right eye of the Oxford Scholar's horse—doubtless, a horse of instruction. The three strands of pearls around her neck, from one of which depends a heart-shaped locket, and another, a small cross, continue the symbolism and connect it with institutionalized religion, as does the fact that she appears immediately beneath a Gothic church with seven or ten steeples (depending on whether or not one counts the three small steeples at the base of the large one on the right), ironically corresponding to the seven heads and ten horns of the beast of Revelation. What looks like a red horn projecting from the Wife's elaborate headdress, surrounded by six smaller horns, repeats this motif, which is carried on in the ten-pointed ruff around her neck. Between her legs one of her ‘spores sharp’ is visible, repeating the visual motif of Lucifer, the morning star, also called Venus, which appears between the two tallest steeples of the church.

The Wife's expression, like her posture, contrasts with that of the demure Prioress, and her unlovely features are, as Blake observes, faithful to Chaucer's description, albeit he chooses to ignore Chaucer's statement that she was "wimpled," probably for greater dramatic impact. The Wife's portrayal as one in the state of Rahab requires as much revelation as possible (vide her revealingly low-cut gown), and this apocalyptic context helps to explain both the serpent-like folds and design of her foot-mantle—a motif which is also evident in her horse's bridle—and the fact that the visible portion of the Miller's bagpipes just behind her right shoulder resembles a trumpet. The basic principle at work here, and throughout the Prophecies, is that the consolidation of error is a necessary prelude to the greater apprehension of truth. Hence the deliberate ambiguity of the Wife's placement beneath the Gothic church ("Gothic is Living Form"), the star called Venus and Lucifer, and the four flying raven-like birds with their low-keyed apocalyptic irony, as well as the hovering white dove-like birds directly over the star and the Wife, symbolizing the Holy Spirit, which alone perceives and makes Mystery manifest.

An interesting aspect of the Wife's portrayal is that the arrangement of her figure, with knees apart and heels together, closely resembles that of

Amoret from Blake’s painting of *Spenser’s Faerie Queene*. But Amoret occupies the center of the cavalcade, as does Harry Baily in *The Canterbury Pilgrims*, both figures, as aforementioned, having extended arms. As Damon observes of the later portrayal, Blake did not endorse Sir Guyon’s prudery; and it is instructive to note that Una is riding in the same position, with an open Bible in her lap. Once more, Blake’s sense of ironic ambivalence enables him to give primacy to aesthetic rather than didactic considerations. The ambivalence expresses itself positively in the vision of “forgiveness” which distinguishes the Wife’s true individuality from the state with which she has identified herself.

Chaucer himself is the last of the full-length figures on horseback, and the adjective which immediately comes to mind in connection with his portrayal is “Christ-like.” The modest, slightly bowed figure is richly apparelled, but without undue ostentation, and his black mount is in fine fettle.  

His embroidered clothing, recalling Chaucer’s description of the Squire; his bearded face rather resembling the Knight’s; the rosary in his right hand recapitulating an aspect of the Prioress’s; his rolled-up saddle-blanket similar to Harry Baily’s; his fine clothing and horse associating him with the gentry in spite of his penultimate position in the procession; his downcast eyes and composed attitude faintly reminiscent of the Parson (whose horse’s eyes are downcast)—all these recapitulant details subtly suggest that “Chaucer is himself the great poetical observer of men,” whose “more comprehensive soul” (to use Wordsworth’s phrase) epitomizes aspects of those characters he so adeptly portrays. Even the Pardoner’s demonic duplicity finds its appropriate analogue in Chaucer’s “angelic” duplicity, since his devout demeanor is at variance with the robust humor of the *Tales*.

Last of all in the procession rides the choleric Reeve, whose sinister expression taken in conjunction with Chaucer’s description of him (“they were adrad of him as of the deeth”) reminds one of Death in the apocalypse. He appears under the womb-like, tomb-like portal of the Tabard, from which the others have just emerged, and to which, symbolically as well as literally, they must return. Chaucer and the Clerk of Oxford also ride beneath this portal; but their figures are framed by solid arches, whereas that of the Reeve is framed by a hollow archway.

Standing beside the portal at the far left is a group of people watching the procession, including an old man, a woman holding an active naked infant, a boy, and two girls, one of whom is holding a doll. This pleasant scene, taken together with the doves atop the roof of the Tabard billing and cooing, suggests that the picture as a whole illustrates the Divine Vision of life as a progression from the state of Innocence in Beulah, through Generation or Experience (the journey itself) to Eden, which is

29. Beside Lavater’s aphorism, “All finery is a sign of littleness,” Blake wrote, “Not always” (# 185, Keynes, p. 71).

represented symbolically by the imminent sunrise and by the four figures who appear in the distance at the far right, like Blake’s Four Zoas, watching over the journey in which they also participate as aspects of the Human Form Divine.

In his drawing of The Canterbury Pilgrims, Blake’s antithetical method, employing ironic juxtaposition and counterpoint, constantly invites the viewer to participate in the exercise of the Divine Vision of forgiveness by distinguishing “States from Individuals in those States.”

The journey of the Pilgrims itself becomes metaphoric of a continuous dynamic progression. For as Blake wrote, “Every age is a Canterbury Pilgrimage.”

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32. Keynes, p. 570.