The Golden Cockerel Press

The Golden Cockerel Press was inaugurated in 1920, continuing from that year until 1961 under the control of various editors. The philosophy of its editors was in tune with Pre-Raphaelite thinking — artefacts should be created through a combination of practical skill and artistic intent. In 1924 the Press was purchased by Robert Gibbings, who ran it from that year until 1933, and it was he who commissioned Eric Gill to produce an illustrated text of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and, subsequently, of *The Canterbury Tales*. This four-volume edition of the tales made its appearance in 1929-1931 (about thirty years after the William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones illustrated edition, the *Kelmscott Chaucer*) and was one of the triumphs of The Golden Cockerel Press. This article will be primarily concerned with Gill's illustrations, though it is instructive from time to time to compare Gill's woodcuts with the illustrations of Chaucerian texts by other artists.

A Historical Survey

In theory, one might think that illustrators of Chaucer's works would aim to record the visual impact the textual narrative has on the reader's imagination. Inevitably, however, this impact is refracted not only through the personal literary responses of the artist, but also through the attitudes and expectations of the age in which the artist is living. Thus the pictures are often extensions of the text, rather than direct reflections. This refraction is something illustrators often shared with translators. Dryden's version of Chaucer's character sketch of the Poor Parson is, he says, "inlarg'd" to incorporate, among other matters, mention of the assassination of Richard II and the legitimacy of Henry IV's accession, with some implied parallels with James II and William III (Dearing 2000, 903). Furthermore, the sensibilities of different nations or periods may be seen in euphemistic squeamishness in translating Chaucer's frank sexual language.

Dryden baulks at translating some of Chaucer's works because, he explains, he is perplexed at Chaucer's introduction of characters "where obscene Words were proper in their Mouths [...] For that reason, such Tales shall be left untold by me" (Sargeaunt 1952, 275).

When authors and artists are contemporaries, there may well be collaboration in which the authors will dictate, or at any rate modify, the illustrations. In such cases,
we are presented not only with the artists' contributions but also with the hidden input of the authors' own interpretation of their works. An example of such collaboration can be seen in Charles Dodgson's (Lewis Carroll's) exchanges with the Alice illustrator, John Tenniel, and with his publisher. This can work in reverse: Dodgson is forced to scrap the chapter "The Wasp in a Wig" because Tenniel said he could not illustrate it. And Dodgson, sometimes to the frustration and expense to the publisher, insisted that certain illustrations should be scrapped if he considered them not as he envisaged they should be (cf. Cohen 1996; see also Cohen and Wakeling 2003).

The choice of what to illustrate is also indicative. The fullest, and best-known, manuscript of The Canterbury Tales, the Ellesmere, was probably made within a year or so of Chaucer's death (cf. Scott 1995, 87-119; cited by Olson 2003, 2). The illustrations are exclusively of the fictive narrators of the tales and each appears twice: in the relevant place in the General Prologue and then again at the beginning of the appropriate character's tale. Episodes within the tales do not figure in the illustrations. Restriction of the pictures to portraits of the pilgrims is the practice followed by Caxton, in his first-ever printed edition of The Canterbury Tales, though he also adds a picture of the pilgrims seated at the dining table at the Tabard Inn where they forgather.

These portraits reflect the coarseness or refinement of the tellers, and thus predicate an attitude to the ensuing stories. The tough-looking Miller plays his bagpipes. The Wife of Bath sits side-saddle and boldly looks directly at the viewer. In one instance in Caxton – the portrait of the Clerk – the wrong block is used: he is shown with bow and arrows. In another – the portrait of the Knight – the picture is at variance with the description given in the General Prologue. He is seen splendidly accoutred in full armour, and his horse has a tasselled saddle-cloth. This anticipates the spectacular chivalric feuding in the Knight's Tale, or reconstructs the Knight's probable appearance on the military campaigns mentioned in the General Prologue. Our story-telling Knight himself is rather drably dressed in an under-tunic which has been stained by his armour. Interestingly, the two tales Sir Thopas and Melibee, told by the fictive "Chaucer the Pilgrim," are preceded in Ellesmere by a portrait of Chaucer, thereby reinforcing the presence of their teller as a character in the pilgrimage. Potentially, he becomes as real (or unreal) as the Wife of Bath or the Miller, or any other of the pilgrims Chaucer imaginatively creates. In this instance there is, however, an important remove from text to reality in that, in place of the simple-minded, and poetically incompetent, "Chaucer Narrator" of Sir Thopas, the artist has substituted a (probably realistic) portrait of the dignified poet himself. The inconsistency results in conflicting reactions for the reader/viewer: are we to accept the comic self-mockery that Chaucer presents in the Sir Thopas episode – rather like his sending himself up as a boring recluse in The House of Fame? Or do we separate illustration from text and recognise the poet-genius behind the literary artefact?

Caxton's woodcuts of the pilgrims were re-used until around 1550, until which date there were no illustrations of episodes within the tales themselves. The nearest to that is the frontispiece scene of the pilgrims feasting at the Tabard Inn.

By the 18th century, and from then on, scenes from the stories were depicted, notably in the illustrations by John Mortimer (1740-1799). Unfortunately, Mortimer's proposed edition of The Canterbury Tales never materialized, but his pictures, en-

3 David R. Carlson points out that this erroneous illustration nevertheless "continued in use for the Clerk among the heirs of Caxton's blocks and again in the copies made for the Pynson series" (2003, 82).

4 For a discussion of this disparity in detail see Olson (2003).
graved by other craftsmen, were published separately in 1787, and appeared in Tyrwhitt's Tales a decade after Mortimer's death. His pictures were engaged with episodes in the narratives, with the exception of the frontispiece picture "Departure of the Canterbury Pilgrims" which is, of course, part of the overall narrative, even if not of incidents within the tales themselves. Mortimer's illustrations of the tales are closely based on the text, and are also interpretive of it.  

**Gill's Engravings**

Gill's 298 woodcuts for the text of The Canterbury Tales make that edition one of the most beautiful of the 20th century. Gill was a designer of typeface, and an important analysis of the relationship of typography to pictures can be found in Peter Holliday's chapter in Chaucer Illustrated.  This analysis is detailed and informative, and consequently I shall restrict myself to a discussion of the relationship of engravings to narrative. Many of the engravings are border decorations, a few of which are reused throughout the edition, and indeed some had already appeared in Gill's 1927 edition of Troilus and Criseyde. More detailed are the full-page illustrations at the beginning of each volume and the 26 half-page illustrations, one at the commencement of each tale. These latter wonderfully encapsulate major episodes in the ensuing stories. It will be no surprise to anyone familiar with Gill's other works to find that he is often at home with explicit scenes of sexual activity or suggestion.  

In many of the engravings we can enjoy seeing some salient episode of the story depicted. In others we can simply enjoy the sumptuousness of page decoration, without any obligation to make connections with the text. On just one occasion, however, there is a problem. Opposite Chaucer's description of the down-to-earth Poor Parson, there is a marginal picture of a priest stepping his way with niminy-piminy delicacy (General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales, 1929, vol. I, 19). A clash between picture and text is apparent. This comic picture is safely reused elsewhere where there is no possibility of relating it to the text.

**The Relationship between Pictures and Text in Gill's Edition: Some Examples**

Limitations of space preclude discussion of all of Gill's illustrations, but I have selected a few that are representative. As will be observed from the descriptions of the frontispieces below, the illustrations are often, though not exclusively, of late or climactic moments in the tales: the three main characters with John the carpenter asleep in his tub in the house-rafters while Nicholas and Alison make love in the Miller's Tale, which occurs half-way through the story; the students' sexual revenge in the Reeve's Tale (about three-quarters of the way through the story); the friar in the Summoner's Tale (vol. III, 91) feeling under the buttocks of the merchant prior to his discharging a fart, an incident described in the text on page 107, and the story ends only five pages later; the moment before the murder of the choirboy in the Prioress's Tale (about half-way through the story); the tableau of the three rioters and the death figure at the mid-

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5 For an excellent discussion of Mortimer's work, with accompanying reproductions of a number of his illustrations of The Canterbury Tales, see Bowden (2003).
7 E.g. the satyr playing a flute on 102, 134, 168 and 282 is reused in The Canterbury Tales. The naked woman seen from the rear in Troilus and Criseyde 161, 215 and 283 re-appears in The Canterbury Tales.
8 E.g. the copper engraving illustrations for Earth Receiving (Powys Matthes 1926).
point of the *Pardoner's Tale*. Gill, in other words, goes for the most dramatic moments of the tales, his frontispieces often intriguingly anticipating a moment of high drama.\(^9\)

a) The *General Prologue*

Our first encounter with Gill's illustrations is the title page woodcut. This frontispiece, which is unaccompanied by any text other than the announcement "Here beginneth the Book of the Tales of Canterbury," shows three creatures: Cupid, a woman (Venus?) in a skirt and a cockerel (see figure 1). The sexual-romantic content of many of the tales is thus already implied. The woman is bare-breasted, legs spread apart, and provocatively "covered" with a cloth so diaphanous that it consists only of a few lines of the engraving. Behind her, a conventionally naked Cupid holds an arrow next to, rather than obscuring, his genitals. In the foreground is a cockerel. The impact of the three figures (semi-naked woman, Cupid with phallic arrow, and cockerel) is erotic, though of course, the cockerel is a nudge towards the name of the publishers, "The Golden Cockerel Press." The implied link between this illustration and the text to come is emphasized: Cupid's left hand grips a capital H, the first letter of "HERE BEGINNETH" etc.

\[\begin{figure}[h]
    \centering
    \includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure1.png}
    \caption{Figure 1}
\end{figure}\]

That the illustration is graphically linked to the words is an indication that the ensuing text will be intimately connected to sexuality. True, the half-page illustration on the next page, directly above the opening of the *General Prologue*, depicts the assassination of Becket by four knights. Nevertheless, even here there is continuation of the erotic: the margin of that page has a naked youth, arms stretched upwards to support

\(^9\) For a contrary view see Holliday: "Gill eschews [in the title-pages] the portrayal of the dramatic details from the Tales […] His scenes are low key. They lead us into the story rather than show their dénouement" (2003, 353).
the capital W of the first line of The Canterbury Tales, "Whan that Aprille...". When Gill produces a frontispiece for volume II, it depicts again a naked woman (Venus?) with Cupid (figure 2). She, too, clasps the capital H of "HERE CONTINUETH THE BOOK" etc., and her foot is entangled with the subsequent text. Gill may well have been influenced by the usage in medieval manuscripts where sometimes the marginal figures engage with the text. An amusing example occurs in a 14th-century breviary where a man in the margin is pushing a capital P. It has apparently slipped and is tilting into the margin, and he is attempting to restore it to the vertical. The P is the first letter of the word "Positis," meaning "placed" or "positioned" (Wilcockson 1988, 40).

Figure 2

The aptness of the assassination scene has been questioned by Peter Holliday, who points out that Chaucer never actually describes Becket's murder: "The imagery is not determined by Chaucer's poem. Rather, its function is to frame the text areas on the page" (2003, 353-354). It seems to me, however, that the criticism is not wholly justified. Gill may be illustrating an event not explicitly described in The Canterbury Tales, but Becket's murder nevertheless underpins the General Prologue, its significance being highlighted by the rhetorical flourish of a *rime riche*.

10 *Rime riche*: a couplet in which the rhyme words have identical sounds, but different meanings.
11 All quotations from Chaucer in this article are from The Riverside Chaucer (Benson 1988).
12 For the numerological significance of the occurrence of the *rime riche* at lines 17 and 18, see Wilcockson (1999, 345-350).
That quest is the whole purpose of the pilgrimage. Furthermore, Chaucer does not say "St Thomas," he says "martir," thereby specifically drawing attention to the saint's violent death. This makes Gill's illustration of the brutality of the martyrdom essentially relevant.13

b) The Knight's Tale

Two young noblemen, Arcite and Palamoun, are imprisoned for life by their enemy, Duke Theseus, in a tower that overlooks a garden. One day the beautiful Emily walks in the garden. The prisoners see her and fall in love with her. This begins years of jealousy between them. Duke Theseus ordains that the two knights contest for Emily's hand in the lists and, in preparation, Arcite, Palamoun and Emily pray to their deities in specially built temples. Arcite wins at the jousting, but falls from his horse and dies. Eventually, Palamoun marries Emily.

In the frontispiece to the Knight's Tale, Gill keeps strictly to the tone of the story. The two love-sick young lovers gaze from their prison at the beautiful Emily as she walks in the enclosed garden, the hortus conclusus14 of classic medieval romance. Kelmscott depicts the same scene for its frontispiece, though, oddly, here Emily is reading a book. Gill's illustration, on the other hand, is faithful to the text since it shows her picking a flower: "She gadereth floures, party [partly] white and rede..." (vol. I, 38). Marginal scenes in later parts of this tale are suggestive and light-heartedly cheeky. For example, on pages 38 and 39 a young man holds his hand to his lips (blowing a kiss, perhaps?) and on the facing page a young woman, with arms and legs outspread, smiles back at him. These engravings for the double-page scene are re-employed on pages 68 and 69, and again on pages 102 and 103, though with a different male figure, but still with his hand to his lips. Another repeated facing-page drama, the satyr, is discussed below under "Taboo and Squeamishness."

These marginal pictures are often not specifically related to any particular episode in the story, though they contribute to the sensuousness of the tale, in a sexually suggestive way that is not present in the romantically high-minded Knight's Tale. The parallel with the Palamoun and Arcite rivalry is reinforced by there being two young men ogling the same woman, as I mentioned above. It is as if Gill is covertly suggesting that, dress them up as we will, high romance and fabliau are simply different takes on the sexual urge. After all, the tale that follows the Knight's Tale is the explicit fabliau, the Miller's Tale, which, with its rival lovers of a beautiful woman, intentionally parodies the Knight's elevated sentiments about love. Kelmscott has none of these suggestive or parodic pictures: the Knight's Tale in that edition has, in addition to the hortus conclusus frontispiece, three full-page illustrations, one each for the temple episodes. Gill's interest in the erotic takes him in a different direction.

13 The Host reinforces the martyrdom epithet: "The blissful martir quite yow youre meede." But in the remaining six references in Chaucer Thomas is referred to by his name without the attachment of the word "martyr" (General Prologue, 770).

14 The "enclosed garden" trope, common in medieval romance, was derived from the biblical Song of Solomon: "hortus conclusus soror mea sponsa [a garden enclosed is my sister my spouse]" (chapter 4, verse 12).
c) The Miller’s Tale

An Oxford student, Nicholas, lodges with an old carpenter, John, and his young wife, Alison. The two young people agree to make love. Nicholas convinces the carpenter that there will be a second Noah’s flood. The three of them wait in wooden tubs in the rafters, but, as soon as John is asleep, Nicholas and Alison climb down and spend the night together. The church clerk, Absalon, is in love with Alison, and he serenades her at the window and begs her to kiss him. Much farcical incident ensues, during which Absalon realises that Alison and Nicholas are engaged in a sexual affair. Eventually he takes his revenge.

The frontispiece (vol. I, 107) depicts all four characters: John asleep in his tub, the lovers in amorous embrace and the furious Absalon looking on (figure 3). The satyr and naked female we found on facing pages in the Knight’s Tale are later aptly re-used in the Miller’s Tale (vol. I, 112 and 113). Interestingly, the Kelmscott has no illustrations for either the Miller’s Tale or the Reeve’s Tale (see “Taboo and Squeamishness” below).

![Figure 3](image-url)

d) The Reeve’s Tale

Two Cambridge students, Alan and John, carry corn from their college estates to be ground by a thieving local miller. He has a wife, a sexually attractive eighteen-year-old daughter, Malyn, and a baby. After a trick has been played on them, the students are forced to stay the night at the mill, all of the characters sleeping in the only bedroom. Realizing that the miller has stolen some of their flour, the students take their revenge by having sex with (in effect, raping) the miller’s wife and daughter. The room is very dark. Alan creeps into Malyn’s bed. Meanwhile the miller’s wife “wente hire out to pisse,” and John takes the opportunity to move the baby’s cradle to the end of his bed, so that when she returns she will find it and assume that she has arrived at
her own bed. She climbs in and immediately engages in intercourse with John. Eventually the students retrieve their stolen corn and ride back to their college.

In the Reeve's Tale frontispiece (vol. I, 132) Gill depicts John in bed with the miller's wife. At the foot of their bed is the repositioned cot. Alan and Malyn watch from the back left, as does the miller back right (figure 4). In Chaucer's tale, John's sexual encounter with the miller's wife is not witnessed by the other characters, but the cast ensemble in Gill's picture has its own comic integrity. It is as if they are presenting an on-stage tableau in which all six characters at the mill (including the baby) are represented.

![Figure 4](image)

e) The Wife of Bath's Prologue to her Tale

Alison, the Wife of Bath, describes her married life from the age of twelve (the legal age of marriage in the 14th century). She chose rich old men for her first four husbands, making considerable sexual demands of them, and both sexually and psychologically dominated them. She had many extra-marital sexual encounters. At the death of each husband, she became increasingly rich. The fifth husband, Jankyn, was an Oxford scholar, twenty years her junior, who constantly read aloud from a book that recounted the stories of wicked women. In the end, she dominated him as well. Jankyn has now died, but she hopes to find a sixth husband.

This frontispiece does not depict an episode from Alison's life, but instead presents an iconic picture of womanly seduction. Jankyn's accounts of wicked women are taken from biblical and classical sources, one of which was "Of Eva first, that for her wischednes/Was al mankynde broght to wreccednesse" (Prologue to The Wife of Bath's Tale, Riverside Chaucer, 1987, 114, lines 715-716). Gill's frontispiece for the
Wife of Bath's "Prologue" depicts a naked Adam and Eve, with Eve passing the apple to Adam (vol. III, 34). On the facing page (35) the snake climbs up the foliage in the margin. The snake reappears later in this prologue. On page 39 a naked woman covers her genitals with a leaf – an allusion, perhaps, to the biblical account of Adam and Eve's realization of their nakedness. On page 43 a naked man and woman embrace, and at the foot of the page there is a bearded cuckold with horns and closed eyes. Ironically, at that point of the text Alison is berating one of her earlier husbands who has accused her of infidelity (of which she is in fact frequently guilty!).

f) The Wife of Bath's Tale

A knight at King Arthur's court has committed rape, the ultimate abuse of male power over women. His punishment is the death sentence, but Queen Guinevere and the ladies at the court beg that he be allowed a year's freedom, at the end of which he will be reprieved if he can correctly answer the question "What do women most desire?" He receives many suggestions until, on the penultimate day, an old hag tells him that she will tell him the answer provided that he promises to grant whatever she requests of him. The answer is "Dominion over their husbands." He makes the announcement at the court and is reprieved, but the old hag then demands that he marry her. He is disgusted, but knows he must keep his word. In the bedroom, she tells him she could be beautiful either by day or by night. He eventually authorises her to make the choice, and this act of subjugation results in her permanent reversion to her youthful beauty.

Gill's frontispiece to the tale (vol. III, 63) aptly shows a bare-breasted beautiful woman treading on the head of a prostrate man – a witty physical depiction of womanly authority. The scene is an iconic symbol, and no such action appears in the ensuing tale. The Wife of Bath's claim for such dominion would have particular resonances for Gill and his readers in the aftermath of the suffragette movement, for which he had produced such works as the 1910 "Votes for Women" stone carving, depicting intercourse with the woman on top.¹⁵ In the margin of this frontispiece is a second woman with a pointed witch's hat. Chaucer's telling of this tale contains no explanation for the shape-shifting old hag/young woman motif. All three analogues to the story, however, contain the lady's explanation to the knight that the curse of ugliness had been put on her by her wicked stepmother until she gained dominion over and married a perfect knight (see Bryan and Dempster 1941, 223-264). The inclusion of the witch illustration implies that Gill was aware of the (here unstated) element of enchantment which explains the lady's metamorphosis.

g) The Merchant's Tale

An old man, January, marries a young woman, May, for lust. She has an affair with a young courtier, Damian, consummated by sexual intercourse in a tree. By this stage in the story January has become blind, but miraculously his vision is restored and he now witnesses the sexual congress between Damian and May. He is, however, convinced by May that she had sacrificed her honour to restore his vision by "struggling" with a man up a tree.

¹⁵ Reproduced in MacCarthy (1989, plate 37).
The frontispiece shows a couple embracing while a second male figure looks in the opposite direction (vol. III, 156). This is an apt depiction of January, May and Damian before January realizes that his wife is having an affair with Damian. January's naive gullibility is reinforced by a subsequent picture in the margin: appositely, at the very end of the tale, an old man with cuckold horns sits smilinginanely.

h) The Prioress’s Tale

A little Christian boy learns by heart a hymn to the Virgin Mary the first words of which are Alma redemptoris. Becoming lost in the Jewish quarter of an Asian town, the boy is murdered. At his funeral the dead child miraculously sings the hymn he has learnt.

The frontispiece (vol. II, 60) shows a boy reading a book in which the capital A (of the word “Alma”) is visible. Men with knives are about to attack the child. The Prioress says that the mother had looked for the child “with modres pitee in hir brest enclosed” (l. 593), and on page 64 a woman in the marginal decoration, with her hand to her face, weeps. But we should be wary. Such apparent aptness may be fortuitous: the same “weeping woman” block is used on page 23 of volume 1, adjacent to the description of the Summoner, and yet again, on page 88 of volume III, against the text of the Friar’s Tale. In neither of these latter cases is the “weeping woman” motif relevant.

i) The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale

An avaricious and simple-minded priest is gulled into believing an alchemist who appears to demonstrate that he can turn base metal, and even a twig, into silver. The priest invests a lot of money with the alchemist, who absconds, never to be seen again.

Subtly integrated illustrations appear in the tale. Gill’s frontispiece (vol. IV, 76 and 77) shows three men, two of whom are observing black smoke emanating from an alchemist’s dish which he is heating over a tripod. On the facing page (77) a devil is perched high up in the foliage in the margin, with the curling black smoke winding up beneath him (figure 5). This devil reappears on page 89. The text on the facing page (88) reads:

Though that the feend noght in our sighte him shewe,
I trow he with us be, that ike shrewe!
[Even though the devil renders himself invisible to us,
I believe that same wicked creature is nevertheless in our company.]

Thus the illustration on the page plays with the sentiment that the devil lurks even though we cannot see him. In this case, however, the viewer is a privileged spectator in spite of the warning in the text that the cunning devil can render himself invisible. The artist-illustrator evidently possesses a power of perception denied to other people: he sees and depicts the “invisible” lurking devil.
j) The Pardoner’s Tale

Three drunken rioters hear that Death has taken away one of their friends. They vow to find Death and to kill him. They meet an old man who says that he longs to die, but that Death evades him. They violently threaten him, demanding that he show them where they can find Death. He directs them to an oak tree. They run there and find a huge heap of gold coins. They decide to give up their search for Death, and agree that two of them will keep watch while the third fetches wine and food from the nearby town. Driven by greed, the two guarding the hoard decide to murder their companion on his return. He meanwhile poisons the wine he purchases so that he alone can keep the coins. All three perish, demonstrating that they have indeed found Death by the tree where the treasure is stacked.
For this tale Gill produces one of his most arresting illustrations (figure 6). The three rioters hurry towards the heap of coins, and the roots of the oak tree reach down to the skeletal figure of Death (vol. III, 11). Their avarice has led them to Death. The idea of the Death-figure's grasping the roots of the tree cleverly plays on the Pardoner's sermon-text "Radix malorum est cupiditas" ["The root of the sins is avarice"] (Riverside Chaucer, 1987, 195, line 426).

Taboo and Squamishness

As mentioned above, since the 18th century illustrations moved away from the tellers to incidents in the tales. However, as late as the 20th century artists were coy about illustrating the more explicitly sexual scenes. In relatively unbuttoned Georgian times John Mortimer is happy to depict the sexual consummation of the affair between May and Damian in the Merchant's Tale, described in graphic detail by Chaucer. He shows the lovers in the tree with May's right foot on January's back (a detail faithfully taken from the text). She is being embraced by Damian, who clutches her waist, her legs are wide apart and her breasts are partly visible. Yet the two lovers are fully clothed. Hogarth, by contrast, who portrays a similar scene in his "Before and After" pictures (1731), is prepared to be far more frank: in the "After" painting the male lover's genitals are visible. One cannot help wondering whether Mortimer's restraint reflected a feeling that Chaucer (in spite of his outspokenness) was too iconic for bawdy illustration (see Bowden 2003, 126-132; and figure 36 on page 186; see also Finley and Rosenblum 2003, xxv). To depict everyday bawdiness explicitly was acceptable. Explicitly to illustrate bawdy scenes in a classic work of literature was inappropriate.

The Kelmscott Chaucer illustrator, Edward Burne-Jones, and the editor, William Morris, are similarly hesitant about depicting sexual scenes, and lose nerve. Morris wanted Burne-Jones to be daring; Burne-Jones notes, "Morris has been urgent with me that I should by no means exclude these stories [the fabliaux] from our scheme of adornment – especially he had hopes of my treatment of the Miller's Tale, but he ever had more robust and daring parts than I could assume." Nevertheless, as Duncan Robinson points out, either Burne-Jones or Morris himself objected even to the first design for a Troilus and Criseyde embrace, with their hands clasped on her upper leg. An embrace at the shoulders was substituted (Robinson 2003, 283). There are only three naked figures (all female) in The Canterbury Tales portion of the Kelmscott Chaucer, and these are very stylised and statuesque. Indeed one is a statue of a naked woman holding a mirror and an apple in the Franklin's Tale. A second occurs in a facing-page scene in the Wife of Bath's Tale, where on the left-hand page, the clothed old hag sits on the bed and the knight looks despairingly away, while in the right-hand page the now beautiful, naked lady faces the viewer (as yet the knight still faces us, unaware of her metamorphosis). The third naked figure in the Kelmscott Canterbury Tales is that of Venus in her temple in the Knight's Tale, where she is, as in the text, partly covered by the sea from the waist down. Illustrations for Chaucer's other poems in the Kelmscott Chaucer include a few formalised naked females. The only naked male is Cupid in the frontispiece for the House of Fame, and, exceptionally, departure from the text allows Venus in the Romaunt of the Rose to be seen naked (Robinson 2003, 287).

16 Letter to Swinburne, 3 August 1894, cited in Robinson (2003, 283).
Even that most flamboyant of fin de siècle artists, Aubrey Beardsley, seems to have been wary when dealing with an English classic – in his case, Malory's *Morte Darthur* (1909). A number of other texts that he illustrated, some of which were influenced by Japanese 18th-century Shunga art, were at the time considered notoriously explicit. Yet Beardsley, who in 1892 had been encouraged by Burne-Jones to make a career as an artist, approached this medieval masterpiece with a perhaps uncharacteristic degree of reticence. His 19 full-page illustrations, such as "How Queen Guenever rode on Maying" (554) and "How a devil in woman's likeness would have tempted Sir Bors" (486), which are directly linked to incidents in Malory's text, are utterly inoffensive. His other illustrations, which bear little or no relationship to the text, are, for the most part, designed to be purely decorative. An extreme example occurs on page 158 (and is repeated later): a woman who looks directly at the viewer wears a Stetson cowboy hat! Such a plethora of decoration adds a kind of sumptuousness to the volumes. Its general lack of relationship with the text is demonstrated by Beardsley's use of the same blocks (sometimes enlarged, sometimes diminished) at random moments in the narrative.

The one sexual element in Beardsley's illustrations for the *Morte Darthur* is the satyr. Some 30 pictures of satyrs occur. Often they are playing panpipes. Some are male, some female and some are hermaphrodite. Naked human figures occasionally appear alongside them. For instance a satyr embraces a boy, whose hand is in the satyr's lap (255). That said, however, it would seem that Beardsley felt that this venerated epic story of Arthur merited restraint.

The contrast between the approaches taken to classic works of English literature by the decadent Beardsley and the sexually open Gill just a few decades later is instructive. Gill was clearly au fait with Beardsley's *Morte Darthur* and was, it seems, taken by the satyr motif, a symbol of lust. Gill's *Troilus and Criseyde* contains two satyr engravings, both male. In one the satyr is up a tree with arms crossed (used six times). In the other (used five times) a satyr crouches and plays a pipe. This latter engraving is re-employed on six occasions in *The Canterbury Tales*, the satyr always occurring on the left-hand page because he looks to his left across the text at the mar-

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17 Gill was notorious for overt sexuality in many of his sculptures and engravings. This could be comic (as in the woodcut, *The Domestic Hose*, where a naked male figure grasps his impossibly large penis to water some flowers), or erotic (in depicting an explicit act of intercourse for an unused wood-engraving for *Lady Chatterley's Lover*), or even in religious scenes (as in the wood-engraving *Divine Lovers*). See MacCarthy (1989, 230; 258; 162).
original figure on the facing page (figure 7). In every case but the last the facing page has the same seductive naked female gazing with a "come hither" expression at the satyr. Only on page 185 is the female displaced — here by a young man who is climbing the marginal foliage. The text at that point is the Merchant's Tale. As Gill clearly took care to pair up the satyr and the woman in all five preceding instances, the change for this final usage to a young man is significant and implies that this character is the lecherous courtier, Damian, climbing a tree for his sexual tryst with May.

Although it is only in its last usage that there is a direct relationship between the satyr and the text, there seems to be a clear overall purpose to Gill's decision to reuse the image so many times. He wants to emphasise the pervasive sexual undertone of his Canterbury Tales. His often naked or scantily dressed figures, with their carefully worked facial expressions, exude a playful or sensuous invitation to seduce the viewer or the other figures on the same or on facing pages. In Beardsley it is sometimes impossible to determine the sex of the marginal figures, flowing hair and delicate faces often being possessed by naked male figures. In Gill's pictures, by contrast, there is no room for doubt. Indeed, his Canterbury Tales pave the way for the sexual frankness to be found in the late 20th-century illustrations by Elisabeth Frink, with her illustrations of naked love-making in the Wife of Bath's Tale and the Merchant's Tale, and an explicit illustration of the kissing of Alison's naked lower areas in the Miller's Tale (Frink 1972).

This explicitness seems part and parcel of the overall exuberance of Gill's Canterbury Tales — another point of contrast with Beardsley's more sedate Morte Darthur. In Beardsley's pictures there are only rare instances of drama acted out by the marginal figures on adjacent pages. In Gill's, on the other hand, dramatic interconnections are common, often with playful comedy. A wonderful example of black humour occurs in volume IV, 84, where a woman holds a mask to her face. On the facing page a young man halfway up tree sees it and is so terrified that his hair stands on end. On page 116 of the same volume, a skeleton crouches in the place formerly occupied by the woman, and on the facing page the scared man reappears. This time his terror is justified! Dramatic depictions of episodes in the tales beautifully catch the essence of the stories, whether serious or amusing, and, though many of the marginalia are not directly related to the text, their pervasive sexuality endows these volumes with a spirit of comedy and vitality.

Works Cited


19 Chaucer mentions "Satiry and Fauny" in Troilus and Criseyde 4, 1544, and "Nymphes, fawnes and amadrides" in the Knight's Tale, 2928.