

# The irenic effect of the Middle Ages on wartime England through film: the example of *A Canterbury Tale* by Powell and Pressburger (1944).

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## Biography

Agnès Blandeau teaches English at Nantes University. Her research work focuses on medieval English literature and on the representation of the Middle Ages in film. Her Ph.D. was published by MacFarland in 2006 under the title of *Pasolini, Chaucer and Boccaccio: Two Medieval Texts and their Translation to Film*. She has written over twenty articles on various aspects of medieval English literature as well as the cinematic perception and rendering of it. Since 2006, she has been the organiser of the British Film Festival in Nantes.

## Abstract

Among the films that Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger made together from 1939 to 1957, one stands out as a most peculiar and fascinating work, *A Canterbury Tale* (1944). As the title indicates, it relates a Chaucer-inspired quest on the old Pilgrims' Road across the idyllic landscape of Kent, the pastoral beauty of which seems medieval, as if unaffected by the Second World War. We are plunged into a remote past while being deeply rooted in the contemporary present of England three months after the Allies' landing in Normandy. The three protagonists, a young lady from London working for the Woman's Land Army, an American sergeant from Oregon and a British tank officer, set out to solve a mystery revolving around a man that pours glue over the hair of the local girls caught flirting with the GIs stationed in a Kent village. Behind the surface of this detective story lies a subtle and complex message of peace tinged with a nostalgia for the England of Chaucer's past, still echoing in the 1944 wartime reality. This paper examines how the resonance of the medieval spirit, both holy and profane, that presided over Chaucer's pilgrimage to Thomas-a-Becket's shrine, contributes to the irenic scope of a film, which can be described as unique in its cinematic attempt to attain heavenly peace. This is confirmed in the highly poetic shot, verging on the cosmic, of Canterbury Cathedral's spire in the visual epiphany that closes Powell and Pressburger's mesmeric tale that transcends the theme of war. The spiritual and temporal continuity between the enchanting Middle Ages and 1944 England hosting American troops is signified by the opening sequence of the film at the end of which the falcon released by Chaucer's squire changes into a spitfire in the Kentish sky.

## Resumé

*A Canterbury tale* (1944) tient une place particulière parmi les films réalisés en commun par Michael Powell et Emeric Pressburger. Comme le titre le suggère, il raconte une quête, à la manière de Chaucer, sur l'antique chemin des Pèlerins dans le paysage idyllique du Kent dont la beauté agreste semble se rapporter aux temps anciens, comme s'il n'avait pas été affecté par le second conflit mondial. Le spectateur se trouve plongé dans un passé lointain, tout en étant au cœur de l'Angleterre, trois mois après le débarquement des alliés en Normandie. Les trois protagonistes, une jeune femme de Londres, travaillant pour les auxiliaires féminines de l'Armée, un sergent américain de l'Oregon et un officier britannique des blindés, cherchent à résoudre une énigme tournant autour d'un homme qui verse de la colle dans les cheveux des filles du pays trouvés en train de flirter avec des GI casernés dans un village du Kent. Au delà du premier degré de cette intrigue policière, se dégage un message de paix, subtil et complexe, teinté de nostalgie pour l'Angleterre du temps de Chaucer, tout en se faisant l'écho de la réalité de la guerre en 1944. Cet article analyse comment les réminiscences médiévales, tant spirituelles que profanes qui dominent le pèlerinage de Chaucer vers le sanctuaire de Thomas Beckett, participent à la portée pacifique d'un film dont l'intrigue peut être considérée comme unique dans sa tentative pour atteindre une paix céleste. On en trouvera confirmation dans le plan hautement poétique à la limite du grandiose de la flèche de la cathédrale de Canterbury, épiphanie visuelle par laquelle se termine le conte envoutant de Powell et Pressburger qui transcende la thématique de la guerre. La continuité spirituelle et temporelle entre un moyen âge enchanté et l'Angleterre avec les troupes américaines y séjournant en 1944 est bien traduite par la première scène du film à la fin de laquelle le faucon lâché par le cavalier de Chaucer se métamorphose en un spitfire dans le ciel du Kent.

## Keywords

Michael Powell, Emeric Pressburger, *A Canterbury Tale* (1944), World War II, Blitz, Rationing, Medieval England, Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (1387-1400), 1944, Kent, Sussex, Home Front, Woman's Land Army, Woman's Army Core, WACS, *Open City* (1945), *Germany Year Zero* (1948), *Everyman* (c. 1495), Marcel Carné, *Les Visiteurs du soir* (1942), Guns, Tanks, Spitfire, Pastiche, Parody, Propaganda, Richard Fleischer, *Robin and Marian* (1976), *I Know Where I'm Going* (1945).

**Citation** *Arts of War and Peace* 1.2. (November 2013) **Can Literature and the Arts Be Irenic?**  
<http://www.awpreview.univ-paris-diderot.fr>

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*A Canterbury Tale* is a film produced during the second world war with a propaganda objective and a pastoral tonality.<sup>1</sup> It celebrates England's staunch resistance to the German bomb attacks, but also hymns the old rural crafts, village life and beauty of the Kentish Weald. What distinguishes this "why-we-fight" movie made by film *auteur* Michael Powell and screenwriter Emeric Pressburger, who collaborated for fifteen years,<sup>2</sup> is its personal, aesthetic style and most unusual

approach to the contemporary issue of wartime England. The plot, set in late August 1944, is indeed coloured with medieval undertones. As the title suggests, the film originates in the stories written by Geoffrey Chaucer at the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, known as *The Canterbury Tales*. The indefinite article “a” in the film’s title indicates a tribute paid to a major English text, cinematically quoted in the opening sequence. The incipit establishes an unexpected parallel between medieval and second-world-war England, a spiritual kinship between the Old Road to Canterbury and the itinerary of three modern-day pilgrims who happen to borrow the legendary way during their temporary stay in Kent, as the war is drawing to an end.

My purpose is to show that *A Canterbury Tale*, contemporaneous to classic wartime films made to promote English stoicism in face of barbarism and bolster the national morale, paradoxically delivers a message of peace while honouring the truth of the past. The reference to the blessed pre-capitalist days of the Canterbury pilgrims underlying the film tinges this depiction of England at war with irenic hues. The transition from the Middle Ages to August 1944 is one of continuity. It is signaled in an astonishingly poetic treatment of the war theme through the portrayal of two soldiers and a new member of the Women’s Land Army as 20<sup>th</sup>-century pilgrims engaged in a quest for blessings and revelations about themselves. The sense of national identity, so central to the 1940s British film production is toned down, diluted through the quaint and lyrical filter of a vision reaching a cosmic dimension at times.<sup>3</sup>

One may wonder how a film pertaining to the wartime propaganda film trend turns out to serve irenic purposes. The answer probably lies in Powell and Pressburger’s fascination with a remote past synonymous in the then British Neo-Romantic imagination<sup>4</sup> with a perception of pre-industrialist and pre-individualist perfection, a time when people would travel together, like Chaucer’s merry company, and converge on the concrete symbol of spiritual elevation; the cathedral, a material figuration of the celestial Jerusalem described by Chaucer’s Parson,<sup>5</sup> where penance is done, sins redeemed and blessings granted at last.

### **I ) The genre of *A Canterbury Tale*:**

Considering the topic of the film, one may label it at first sight as a “why-we-fight” film,<sup>6</sup> which nonetheless adopts an offbeat approach in its use of a benevolent and pacific GI’s point of view on Britain at war. However, the plot, that involves the three protagonists in a village near Canterbury investigating the mystery of a glue-man who punishes the local girls caught dating the soldiers stationed there, relates the film to the whodunit. The hitch is that the identity of the criminal is soon disclosed, which somewhat waters down the suspense. The film is also akin to the genre of melodrama since both the GI and the London girl who enrolled in the Women’s Land Army are yearning for news from their respective fiancé(e)s. Lastly, the quest motif points to the romance, since the protagonists are making their way to the cathedral. Besides, the film has a medieval prologue and a religious or rather pantheistic epilogue, in which a choir is heard singing to heaven as an upward movement of the camera reveals the cathedral’s spire and bells at the top ringing in expression of man’s timeless communion with an idealized past.

We are dealing with a most puzzling “war film”, which contains only two sequences showing tanks in exercise. The end takes us to Canterbury at last, where a great deal of the streets have been bombed out. Yet, strangely enough, unlike Rossellini’s neo-realist *Open City* (1945) and *Germany Year Zero* (1948), Powell and Pressburger’s film does not convey that overall feeling of desolation and destruction. As a lady in the street explains to Alison, who has just arrived in Canterbury, the

collapse of the shops (symbolic of materialism and consumerism) has made it possible to enjoy a far better view of the cathedral, the medieval heart and soul of the place.<sup>7</sup> The true essence of Englishness, embodied by the cathedral, becomes more blatant now that the screen of the skin-deep and the artificial has been removed. We see things as they truly are, namely as they used to be six centuries ago. Along with the three protagonists, the spectator is granted a miracle. He or she experiences an epiphany, that of the unobstructed view of the cathedral among the rubble caused by the German bombs. Canterbury cathedral is invested with “tremendous presence”, both concrete and spiritual. It stands for some remains of the Middle Ages brought back to life on the silver screen in the prologue and indirectly through references to the Old Pilgrim’s Road, the outdated crafts of the past, the magic of the Kentish scenery and the choir of distant voices that can be heard—provided you believe that England’s idyllic days of yore can be revived.

Although only the opening scene is set in Chaucer’s time, hints at his Tales can be spotted at various points in the film. The very names or occupations of a few protagonists suffice to bring to mind some colourful pilgrims or characters in their stories. The young London shop assistant who has enrolled in the Women’s Land Army is called Alison Smith. Now Alison happens to be the name of the strong-willed Wife of Bath as well as that of the petulant country wench married to an old carpenter in *The Miller’s Tale*. The character played by actress Sheila Sim is that of a pretty willful girl determined to unmask the glue man. Her family name, Smith, suggests she is an every(wo)man in quest of something she misses: news of her boyfriend, Geoffrey (like Geoffrey Chaucer), who she thinks has been killed in action and with whom she spent an unforgettable romantic holiday in a caravan near Canterbury in 1940. Several cues echo Chaucer’s text, such as “Tell the tale”, when Sergeant Peter Gibbs asks one of his men to tell Alison in what circumstances the glue man poured some glue in the hair of a Chillingbourne girl he was flirting with. Later, during his conference at the Colpepper Institute, the town’s magistrate, Colpepper, lectures his listeners about the modern-day pilgrims seeking blessings for some, penance for others. This baffling character played by Eric Portman could be interpreted as a 20th-century impersonation of Chaucer’s Sergeant-at-Law and Parson at the same time, a double figure of authority and wisdom. On the train to Canterbury, to Peter Gibbs who has a good mind to report him to the police for attacking eleven girls with glue, Colpepper replies that there are higher courts than the local bench of magistrates. This cue points to the supra-human, the celestial “sphere” that the film attains when the angelic voices remind us of everyman’s end, as signified in the anonymous allegorical play *Everyman*.<sup>8</sup> In 1944 Kent some objects from remote times can still be found, reminiscent of England’s long and rich history. These material traces of the past can be equated to relics worshipped by medieval pilgrims, like those of Thomas of Canterbury.

At the “Hand of Glory” Inn, Alison’s attention is drawn to an ancient inscription on a stone. The innkeeper (a possible descendant of Harry Bailey, the Host in *The General Prologue*) explains that it was found on the Pilgrims’ Road. Alison remembers the bend “up there on the hill”, that hill where she will later experience an epiphany by Colpepper’s side on hearing Chaucer’s pilgrims’ light-hearted talk and laughter during their ride to Canterbury. The spot has been excavated. In other words, an attempt has been made to fathom the past but the latter has not disclosed its mysteries. This fragment of an old message engraved in stone recalls the medieval-like map and page of the *Canterbury Tales* manuscript seen in the film’s prologue. Both scenes actually show remnants of an entrancing

past, in which the streets were so narrow that people living in houses facing each other could shake hands at their windows.<sup>9</sup>

The delight with which GI Bob Johnson joins in the contemplative evocation of the lumbering craft with Jim Horton, the old wheelwright,<sup>10</sup> bespeaks a nostalgia for peace-time village life threatened by modern times' recent warfare trades. The bygone days' crafts enumerated by Colpepper during his conference suggest that even in the mid-20th century a technologically advanced country like Britain has kept carpenters, millers, reeves, manciples such as those pictured some six hundred years earlier by Chaucer in his satirical portrayal of the "estates" in late fourteenth-century English society. At an earlier point in the film, during the talk to his audience of soldiers, to whom he shows slides of Kentish locations in the hope of making them aware of their magic appeal on whomever strives to look at them carefully, Colpepper explains that the area is the ideal resting place for anyone, whatever their trade may be: "cook, clerk, doctor, lawyer, merchant (...)." The allusion to Chaucer's pilgrims is hardly veiled. The local magistrate announces he is going to show some slides of recent excavations made in the area, which implies that the past is showing through the surface of the present. Now it lies open, ready to be deciphered by anyone willing to discover the treasures that it has to offer to the gaze. In the dark room during the screening of the views of picturesque Kent, Colpepper's enraptured gaze is enhanced by the beam of light coming out of the projector right behind his head. He seems to be emerging from the past he is trying to bring back to life, looking like an apparition, reminiscent of the devil played by Jules Berry in Marcel Carné's 1942 "medieval" film, *Les Visiteurs du soir*. Except that Powell's character does not mean evil, nor does he seek to sow discord.

The spirit of *The Canterbury Tales* is also conjured up through the play motif that runs through the plot. Despite the apparently serious business of the unknown man who punishes flirtatious girls by ruining their hair with some "sticky stuff", as Sgt Johnson puts it (comically observing "Oh, this is England! Never a dull moment!"), there is monkey business in the sense of mischievous games going on at the same time in the village. Sgt Johnson witnesses a mock-war being waged by the local boys. He joins the battle, siding with a very young captain on a boat who starts weeping in panic. Funnily enough, a parody of warfare is being performed in a "why-we-fight" film. The author of *The Canterbury Tales* too relished in a game that consisted in resorting to a great variety of poetic genres and styles the better to pastiche, parody and even subvert them. The best-known example is the chivalric epic of *The Knight's Tale* mockingly recycled into the *Miller's* and *Reeve's Tales*, two bawdy stories inspired from the fabliau tradition.

The narrator's voice-over belongs to actor Edmond Knight –aptly named for a film with a medieval spirit to it. The latter also plays two minor parts in the diegesis: the village idiot, and at the Colpepper Institute the English soldier smoking a pipe who falls into conversation with Bob Johnson. He also lends his voice to the rhymed presentation of modern-day Kent with the new kind of pilgrim walking the Old Road. After the eighteen-line-long spring opening at the beginning of Chaucer's *General Prologue* has been read to us viewers, we are "blessed with" a pure cinematic treat, which is the visualization of the Canterbury pilgrims riding across rural Kent. The scene of the procession on horseback is suffused with bright sunlight and rings with the mirthful pilgrims' jokes and pranks. Erwin Hillier's radiant cinematography in black and white subtly renders the blithe medieval spirit of "disport"<sup>11</sup> and conviviality that presides over the pilgrimage, a communal experience shared in the enjoyment of a pastoral context. Closing on the often-quoted match-cut of the Squire's hawk that changes into a Spitfire as it soars up in the sky, the medieval

sequence shifts to 1944 Kent, where the landscape remains virtually unchanged but threatens to be marred by the tanks hurtling across the vales. The voice over launches into a second rhymed introduction, on the model of Chaucer's famous *reverdie* or spring opening, this time intended to present different pilgrims.

Six hundred years have passed.  
What would they see then,  
Chaucer and his goodly company today?  
The hills and valleys are the same.  
Gone are the forests since the enclosures came.  
Hedgerows have sprung.  
The land is on the plough,  
And orchards bloom with blossom on the bough.  
Sussex and Kent are like a garden fair.  
But sheep still graze upon the ridges there.  
The pilgrims' way still winds about the Weald  
Through wood and break and many a fertile field,  
But though so little's changed since Chaucer's day,  
Another kind of pilgrim walks the way.  
Alas, when on our pilgrimage we wend,  
We modern pilgrims see no journey's end.  
Gone are the ring of hooves like the creak of wheel.  
Down in the valley runs our road of steel.  
No genial host that sinking of the sun welcomes us in.  
Our journey's just begun!

The idea behind this double or bi-temporal incipit that draws a parallel between Chaucer's time and Southern England at the end of World War II is to have the spectator "get the picture". Powell and Pressburger infuse with medieval touches what is expected to be a mere propaganda wartime film exalting Englishness, national fortitude and resilience to blackouts, blitzes, rationing and requisition.

## **II ) Making up for war's destructive power**

The Kentish scenery, so quaint and exquisitely graphic, epitomizes the image of Deep England, some kind of a national myth designed to make up for the chaos of war. The poetic and visual celebration of the heart of England's fields, meadows, farms, and hills is attained through a deeply-felt depiction of a medieval past conceived as a glorious era dominated by the outstanding artistic achievement found in cathedrals. Eddie Sinclair explains that until the 16<sup>th</sup> century, English churches were painted not only inside but also outside. Nowadays there are but a few relics left of the elaborate outside polychromy of medieval churches.

It could be that elsewhere in Europe, such fragmentary testimony would be judged insignificant, but in England, these polychromic traces evoke a world that has been lost for centuries, has almost disappeared, and has certainly been forgotten.

*Il se peut qu'ailleurs en Europe, un témoignage aussi fragmentaire soit jugé insignifiant; en revanche, en Angleterre, ces traces ténues de polychromie nous renvoient à un monde*

*perdu depuis des siècles, presque disparu, et très certainement oublié.* (129)

This is precisely what Powell and Pressburger seek to convey through the magic filter of black and white film, which paradoxically highlights the appeal of the Middle Ages by rendering the radiance of a huge cathedral, whose monumental splendour can first be grasped in the bend on the old pilgrims' way to Canterbury. The cathedral stands out in the distance against a bright summer sky with its spire almost touching the sky in perfect cosmic unison. It is pictured as part and parcel of the little *teatrum mundi* of the diegesis that stages the encounter of the three pilgrims as they discover a lost medieval world, which first baffles them but for which they eventually fall. On the train, confronting Colpepper who admits to being the glue man, the sight of the cathedral suddenly revealed to their gaze confirms that this man-made construction partakes of the natural countryside, the beauty of which the glue man hoped to make people aware of.<sup>12</sup> Even Peter Gibbs is won over by the revelation of the communion between the local people and the site and its surroundings. A halo of light appears around his head when the train comes out of a tunnel, thus meaning that he gives up all belligerent intention and hostile feeling.

The film seems to point out that rusticity is irenic in that it brings peace of mind and invites to a communal life style reminiscent of the feudal social organization. Colpepper is a squire. He owns the biggest house in Chillingbourne and also enjoys the authority of a Justice of the Peace. The untarnished rural lifestyle that has been preserved since the Middle Ages is presented as a remedy to the barbarity of modern warfare and the ills of materialism. Founded in 1085, that is four hundred and seven years before America was discovered, the station master remarks when hurt in his national pride by G.I. Johnson's astonishment at the small size of the place, Chillingbourne is one of the towns supposed to have been located on the way to Canterbury, as documented by the "medieval" map in the prologue. Pressburger once described the film as a "crusade against materialism" (Aldgate and Richards 2002, 62). Ironically, the very word "crusade" refers to a time when a holy war was waged against non-believers in the name of God's love and peace.<sup>13</sup> The medieval notion of crusade highlights the antagonism between irenic purposes and human bloodshed.

The village is imbued with a magic aura. First encountered at night by the three strangers during the blackout, the place will gradually reveal to each of them what they are unconsciously seeking. On the hill where she remembers her holiday with her missing boyfriend, Alison hears the pilgrims' laughter, spellbound. There too, Bob Johnson eventually feels at peace with himself and with "the old Chillingbourne customs"—so he humorously calls the "glue-exercise" or "application" on the local girls' hair. As for Peter Gibbs, on the hill where he is enjoying a panoramic view of Canterbury with the GI, he confesses that he does not dislike the glue-man and almost understands and forgives his endeavour to draw people's attention to Kent's peacefulness, so close in spirit yet distant in time from Chaucer's world. These three revelations, which occur on the Bend in the Old Road, are the prerequisite for the final blessing obtained at the end of a cathartic pilgrimage.

Outside the cathedral, Bob Johnson receives from "a heavenly messenger" in uniform—his aptly named friend GI Mickey Roczinsky<sup>14</sup>—the blessing of news from his fiancée, he had not heard from in several months. After years of piano-playing at a West-End cinema, Peter Gibbs is offered the opportunity to play "Onward, Christian Soldiers" on the cathedral organ for his own battalion marching triumphantly out of the church into the Canterbury streets. Funnily enough, the old church organist who

lets Gibbs realize his dream used to play the harmonium in a circus. In the Middle Ages, the church, a symbol of the divine, was not seen as the opposite of the prosaic and worldly market square outside. Likewise, the movie theatre and the circus designate the mundane, the unholy. For both organists playing in Canterbury cathedral can be construed as the ultimate artistic fulfillment. Is this a way for Powell and Pressburger to suggest that film invites to contemplative spiritual elevation while providing popular entertainment? Like the cathedral, it allows for a close interaction of the sacred with the profane. The irenic message of the film also lies in the reconciliation of Alison, a working-class city girl with her socially prejudiced future father-in-law, who belongs to the middle class. She meets him inside the cathedral after hearing that her fiancé, a pilot in the R.A.F. whom she thought dead, is actually recovering in a Gibraltar hospital. Lastly, the stern and at times disquieting magistrate of Chillingbourne, Colpepper, has sworn he will cease to mete out justice by using punitive methods against the village girls. The glue he used to throw in their hair was meant to give a clue to the true, genuine charm of the Weald that they were too blind to see. The truth is his motto, his faith, as implied in the axiom carved in the girder in the town hall loft: "Honour the truth".

### **III ) Something of the puzzling modernity of *The Canterbury Tales***

*A Canterbury Tale* is a film that lays emphasis on the nation as a close-knit working unit, in which all the social categories are cemented together in the war effort. Even the magistrate does the fire watches. As part of the Women's Land Army, Alison is initiated to farming by Prudence Honeywood—a mannish spinster looking reminiscent of the Wife of Bath. The latter's presentation of the farm to the young newcomer from London reveals a sound knowledge of farming, which is as wide-ranging as a man's, as illustrated in her enumeration of various aspects of agricultural work to Alison.<sup>15</sup> Again, we can say that in time of war the country people feel an even stronger attachment to the old crafts and life style they have inherited from their medieval forefathers. Besides, the image of rural England working in concord is unambiguously positive, because it implies effort-building and collective labour for the benefit of all in an atmosphere of harmony and mutual help. Consequently, the film hardly shows any weapons being used apart from a few tanks lumbering across the Kentish vales. The engines of war are never shown firing at anything, although they do look threatening when they stand in the way of Alison in Prudence's horse-drawn cart, a reminder of a long-gone world which has survived through the ages despite the advent of the railway and mass-killing machines. As for the Bren-carriers, they are hardly ever seen with guns. Only their uniforms distinguish them from the civilians.

Not only is the agrarian setting with its medieval feel to it conducive to felicity but it also has a soothing, almost restorative effect on the strangers lacking something in their lives. On their arrival at Chillingbourne station, the protagonists are plunged in the blackout darkness in a comic, virtually burlesque six-minute-long sequence. On the metaphorical level, the transition from night to bright day light shots of the picturesque village and surrounding countryside in the next scene signals progress from bewilderment, disorder and incomprehension to final peace of mind, sympathy and unity, from disorientation and erratic comings and goings in the chase of the glue man to a "I-know-where-I'm-going"<sup>16</sup> type of desire to reach a goal. As explained before, the three "visitors", actually outsiders, find themselves on the pilgrims' way to redemption, in other words to the full realization of the truth; that of his ambition as an organist for Gibbs, that of her wish to find Geoffrey again for Alison, and lastly that of the constancy of Bob's fiancée's love for him even though

she is in Australia.<sup>17</sup> In addition to the irenic and regenerative influence of the charming little village situated on the Old Pilgrims' Road, the place can be viewed as the sign of the kinship between medieval and 1944 rural England<sup>18</sup>—epitomized by Kent, Powell's native county, which happens to be the setting of *The Canterbury Tales*.

From a formal point of view, we could say that there is a definitely original touch to the film, which makes it unique in British film production. The difficulty of classifying the film in one particular genre calls to mind the striking modernity and puzzling novelty of Chaucer's collection of stories. *A Canterbury Tale* has something of *The Canterbury Tales*' medieval modernity, if I may use this oxymoron. It possesses something of Chaucer's diversity of styles, the "stylistic hotchpot" Helen Cooper noted was justified by the social mixture of the pilgrim audience (22). Just as in the first group of Chaucer's tales (see Fragment I), the beginning of the film after the medieval incipit sends the viewer onto different tracks, soon to be abandoned; the whodunit, the melodrama, the romance and the war film. In a state similar to wide-eyed, somewhat confused GI Bob Johnson when arriving at night in Chillingbourne, which he mistakes for Canterbury, we are misdirected. We err and wander about until we finally realize that the very substance of the film is contained in the spell of the Pilgrims' Old Road and the bend, from which the secret of medieval England, embodied by Canterbury cathedral, can be momentarily disclosed. Along with the three modern pilgrims, we spectators are invited to travel on the true way, which is both spiritual as expressed in the sight of the lofty church, and artistic in the sense that we experience the revelation of Powell and Pressburger's pastoral aesthetic verging on the mystic—as implied in the singing of angelic voices.

In the final sequence of the film, the camera shows the wind blowing in the fields and trees around Canterbury and then looks up to the sky. It adopts a pantheistic perspective. The viewer's perception is transfigured through a cosmic shot. Then after rising to the heavenly sphere, the camera brings us back to the earthly, human world. The film closes on the village of Chillingbourne. We move from the celestial to the sub-lunar sphere where men and women alike converge on the Colpepper Institute to attend a lecture on that part of England's past and natural beauty. Then, in the very last shot the village boys are playing with a ball that they have bought with the money given by the American sergeant as a reward for their help in the investigation on the glue man's identity. War is "irenicized", "pacified", transcended into friendly meetings: the adults' attendance at Colpepper's lecture hall and the children's carefree and joyful game outside. Collective effort is shown aiming at peace-time and playful communion. In the preceding sequence inside Canterbury cathedral, Gibbs plays the organ to exalt his battalion's heroism as they are on their way out of town to victory over Nazi tyranny. Does this mean that the war fought by Britain is being celebrated as a crusade against evil? One should not rush to conclusions, especially when dealing with a Powell and Pressburger film. The closing shot actually gainsays what seems to be the final conclusion. It pictures civilians instead of soldiers, flowing into a different kind of cathedral where they are going to hear a hymn to Chaucer's rustic, Arcadian England.

How to interpret this film is the ultimate question. What is to be made of the cinematic allusion to *The Canterbury Tales*, the stylistic eclecticism which challenges generic classification? *A Canterbury Tale* is a meta-cinematic film in its homage to the magic of the film medium made possible by its montage effects, match-cuts, and what Gilles Deleuze called "*des situations optiques et sonores pures*" (17), namely essentially flitting poetic moments with no dramatic or narrative function whatsoever. This is a visual poem that reaches far beyond the limits of the war film

genre that extolled the values the British were fighting for in 1944. Such values, the film seemingly implies, have lived through the centuries and are still valid six centuries after Chaucer's death, thanks to the mirage and miracle of film.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Released in Britain in 1944, the film appeared five years later in the United States in a shorter version, with a different ending.

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<sup>2</sup> They made fourteen films together between 1942 and 1957: *One of our Aircraft is Missing* (1942), *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943), *A Canterbury Tale* (1944), *I Know Where I'm Going!* (1945), *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946), *Black Narcissus* (1947), *The Red Shoes* (1948), *The Small Back Room* (1949), *Gone to Earth* (1950), *The Elusive Pimpernel* (1950), *The Tales of Hoffmann* (1951), *Oh! Rosalinda!!* (1955), *The Battle of the River Plate* (1956), *Ill-met by Moonlight* (1957).

<sup>3</sup> However, the film's uncommon aesthetic achievement failed to be appreciated and was lost on the critics and audience alike.

<sup>4</sup> David Mellor, "The Editor's Preface", *A Paradise Lost: the Neo-Romantic Imagination in Britain (1935-55)* (Ed. David Mellor, London: Barbican Gallery, 1987) 9. "Unlike other styles, Neo-Romanticism was spread across the arts in Britain; it flourished, for example, in films directed and produced by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger". In "Introduction: the Prospect of Arcadia", one reads: "Neo-Romantic art of the 1940s fixed its gaze beyond Surrealism to the future, but it was often a future written in the British past. This was a projected past which found its myth of origins in the land of Britain itself", 16.

<sup>5</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Parson's Prologue* in *The Riverside Chaucer* (Oxford UP, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 1988) 287. L.48-51: "And Jhesu, for his grace, wit me sende / To shewe yow the wey, in this viage, / Of thilke parfit glorious pilgrymage / That highte *Jerusalem celestial*". Print. Italics mine.

<sup>6</sup> Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards, *Best of British: Cinema and Society from 1930 to the Present* (New ed., London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2002) 57. Print. The authors of the book remind the reader that Lord Macmillan, the first wartime Minister of Information, defined three distinct themes for propagandist feature films: 1) what Britain was fighting for, 2) how it was fighting and 3) the need for sacrifice. See also Scott Salwolke, *The Films of Michael Powell and the Archers*, (Filmmakers Series n° 52, London: The Scarecrow Press, 1997) 109. Print. Salwolke lays emphasis on the values that were being fought for in the wartime British film production and this is what he writes about this particular film: "With *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*, the Archers examined how the British fought; now they decided to explore the values they were fighting for with *A Canterbury Tale*. For Powell the film was to be 'an examination of materialism (in the form of the organist / soldier played by Dennis Price) against idealism (as exemplified by the young American soldier). That was really the reason for making the film, because we thought the moral issues of the war were almost as exciting as the war that was being fought. The whole idea was to examine the values for which we were fighting and to do it partly through the eyes of a young American who was training in England'."

<sup>7</sup> Once in Canterbury, Alison has difficulty finding her way. She asks a lady in the street if this is Canterbury Lane. She is actually in Rose Lane, but does not recognize the area because the hotel where she stayed in 1940 (with her fiancé, we guess) is not here anymore, though it used to be exactly where Alison is standing, the lady explains. Still, admitting "it is an awful mess", the latter adds: "I don't blame you for not knowing where you are, but you get a very good view of the cathedral now".

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<sup>8</sup> In this play written in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, the eponymous character's soul ascends to God, cleansed and absolved at the end.

<sup>9</sup> When he wakes up in the old Elizabethan bedroom at the Hands of Glory inn, Sergeant Johnson expresses his surprise at seeing such a narrow street from his window. This is due to the overhanging storey of the inn and the house opposite. The chambermaid explains : "They do say that two six-foot men can shake hands across the street, sir". Increasingly bewildered, he asks "why would they do that?" Amused at his naïve question, she replies in a laugh : "It's only what they say, sir!"

<sup>10</sup> The conversation between Jim Horton and Bob Johnson reveals that they actually speak the same "language" in the sense that they share the same love of woodwork, although they are from different continents. Both complain that capitalists "can't stand to see their money lie idle" in time of peace, and in wartime, "folks go mad" because 'they cut oak at mid-summer. Oak should be cut in winter or in the spring, and beech in the fall". In unison, they add that one should "plank it out at Christmas." Then the G.I. confesses that his dad was in the lumbering business. He was a cabinet-maker and his grand-dad had the first mill in their parts. "I cut my teeth on wood shavings!" His dad made him a cradle out of cedar of Lebanon, saying that what was good enough for Solomon was good enough for a Johnson in Johnson County. One more detail brings evidence of their common skill and knowledge of woodwork. When Jim Horton asks the young American how long they allow for seasoning timber in his country, the latter replies that it takes a whole year "for every inch of thickness". The old Englishman is delighted to say that they do exactly the same over here in Kent. Jim Horton, who used to work as a blacksmith before the war, nostalgically remarks that the age of Chaucer's pilgrims "were the days for wheelwrights". This is an example of a craft or know-how that has been outdated on account of the war. The feeling of irremediably leaving the past behind is confirmed in the next sequence, in which Sergeant Gibbs' Bren-carriers frighten Alison's horse as she is driving Miss Honeywood's cart back to the farm. As they come across with each other, she reproachfully observes: "Why don't you keep your beastly carriers off the pilgrims' road?" She is put out at his disregard for the old way(s).

<sup>11</sup> The word is used twice in *The Cook's Tale*, l.4382 and 4420. It is associated with "hopping", singing, gambling and reveling. It appears as early as *The General Prologue* in the Host's mouth, l.775-76: "And therefore wol I maken yow *disport*, / As I seyde erst, and doon yow som confort." Italics mine.

<sup>12</sup> To Alison who wants to make sure that the magistrate is "not going to defend pouring glue on people », Colpepper replies straightforwardly: "Certainly not. But I'm going to defend pouring knowledge into people's heads, by force if necessary". The knowledge he refers to is that "of our country, the love of its beauty". Sergeant Gibbs bluntly retorts: "Beauty of the countryside! Who cares about these things in wartime?" Gibbs judges Colpepper severely and just fails to see that after all the criminal meant well as Bob Johnson concludes, thus absolving him of his sin. When Canterbury station is in sight, the G.I. imitates the Chillingbourne station master in a humorous tone that alleviates the tension: "Pilgrims to Canterbury, all out to get your blessings!"

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<sup>13</sup> This is a paradox branded in Richard Fleischer's film *Robin and Marian*, starring Sean Connery and Audrey Hepburn. The film was made in 1976, only one year after the end of the Vietnam War.

<sup>14</sup> The metaphor of the heavenly messenger used by Mickey Roczinsky, the other G.I., comes from the fact that Bob Johnson compares him to a pilgrim, even though he is not aware he is one. Johnson tells him about the old pilgrims' road that finishes where they are standing, just outside the cathedral. Roczinski humorously teases his friend by saying he has a blessing for him, letters from Sydney written by Bob's girlfriend.

<sup>15</sup> Here is an extract from the conversation between Prudence Honeywood and Alison when they first meet:

"Not afraid of work, are you? -No."

"Tie sheaves? -Yes."

"Cart muck? -Yes".

"Lift potatoes? -Yes".

"Lead a harrow?- Not very straight".

"Neither can I. Can you spud wheat? -Yes".

"Spread lime? -If I have to".

"You'll have to. Know anything about hops? -Not a thing."

<sup>16</sup> A reference to *I Know Where I'm Going*, dir. Michael Powell, screenwriter: Emeric Pressburger, perf. Wendy Hiller, Roger Livesey, Pamela Brown... 1945, 92 mins, B&W.

<sup>17</sup> On seeing his girlfriend's letters sent from Sydney, Bob Johnson understands that the reason why he hasn't heard from her for weeks on end is that she enrolled in the WACs (the Women's Army Corps). In May 1944, the first contingent assigned to the Southwest Pacific arrived in Sidney.

<sup>18</sup> A closeness in space can also be identified between Chaucer's fictional Kentish little world and GI Johnson's native Oregon, a rural state where the first Baptist church in Johnson County was built by his own grand-father in 1887, a remote past for an American. What may be implied is the closeness in spirit between the recent American past with the time of the cathedral builders in Europe.

<sup>19</sup> The mirage/miracle of cinema probably lies in the film-maker's capacity to redeem his art. See Conrad, Peter. *To be Continued: Four Stories and their Survival*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995. 30. Print. As he puts it, Powell wished "to change film from a fickle mobile, inattentive substitute for seeing (which is how Roczinsky employs it at the cathedral) to an entranced meditation on images. 'I am', he later declared in his memoirs, 'a high priest of the mysteries'. For him, film is not a convenience for

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documentation but a means of engineering transcendence”. In the train sequence, when Colpepper accounts for his glue-attacks on girls, he confesses that he seized the opportunity of a *miracle*: that of the army’s decision to station soldiers just outside Chillingbourne. Young men then started to flow in from every part of the country and he could tell them about the magic of Kent’s beauty during his lectures. Alison gently chides him: “That’s the trouble, you believe in *miracles*!”

The Archers (Michael Powell Powell and Emeric Pressburger's production company) weren't given permission to film inside Canterbury Cathedral. In any case, the stained-glass windows had been taken out because of the air raids, the aisles were filled with sandbags and earth to fight fires and to provide a soft landing for any masonry or sculptures that fell there. So the interior of the Cathedral was rebuilt in Denham Studio. They recreated it so well that Cathedral guides have been heard telling people that the film was shot in there. 25 of 25 found this interesting Interesting? Of England they to Canterbury wend, The holy blessed martyr there to seek. Who helped them when they lay so ill and weak.Â Before yet farther in this tale I pace, It seems to me accordant with reason. To inform you of the state of every one. Of all of these, as it appeared to me, And who they were, and what was their degree Summary One spring day, the Narrator of The Canterbury Tales rents a room at the Tabard Inn before he recommences his journey to Canterbury. That even.Â The Host decides to accompany the pilgrims to Canterbury and serve as the judge of the tales. Analysis. The primary function of these opening lines is to provide a physical setting and the motivation for the Canterbury pilgrimage.Â None of them tell a tale. A middle-class group of pilgrims comprises the next lower position of social rank. First presented in this group is the Cook, whom we might consider out of place â€” ranked too high â€” but who, as a master of his trade, is greatly respected by his fellow travelers. The Canterbury Tales is the last of Geoffrey Chaucer's works, and he only finished 24 of an initially planned 100 tales. The Canterbury Tales study guide contains a biography of Geoffrey Chaucer, I...Â He is well-read in the standard medical authorities, from the Greeks right through to Chaucer's contemporary Gilbertus Anglicus. The Doctor, however, has not studied the Bible. The Wife of Bath was 'somedel deaf' (a little deaf, as her tale will later expand upon) and that was a shame. The Wife of Bath is so adept at making cloth that she surpasses even the cloth-making capitals of Chaucer's world, Ypres and Ghent, and she wears coverchiefs (linen coverings for the head) which must (the narrator assumes) have 'weyeden ten pound'.