

Canterbury sales: 'U' buys \$16,000

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COPY

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Detail from a reproduction of the Ellesmere Chaucer manuscript. Chaucer wrote his tales in the 14th century.

The Ellesmere manuscript

- **What:** A slide show and lecture on the University of Minnesota's copy of the most famous literary manuscript in English.
- **Where:** Special Collections, fourth floor, Wilson Library, the university's West Bank campus.
- **When:** 2:30 p.m. Wednesday.
- **Tickets:** Free. For more information call 624-3321.

Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims have inspired a lot of publishing in the past 600 years, most recently a lavish \$16,000 facsimile edition of an illuminated manuscript made around 1400.

At that price, the sumptuous new edition of "The Canterbury Tales" is too expensive for most colleges and libraries. Only 50 copies were made, and most have gone into private collections in Japan.

The University of Minnesota has purchased a copy, however — one of only four in the United States, and the sole public copy.

"To make something like this accessible to the community is very, very exciting," said Herbert Scherer, art librarian at the university. It's more valuable to scholars than a mass-produced edition because

it precisely copies the original source, and it carries the feeling of an authentic 15th-century hand-made book, he said.

The original Ellesmere manuscript of "The Canterbury Tales," completed shortly after Chaucer's death in 1400, has long been recognized as an important literary work. The rich images of medieval life in Chaucer's writing are mirrored by

artwork on its parchment pages. Seventy illustrations by three artists include portraits of the Canterbury pilgrims and of Chaucer, elaborate letters and decorative ornaments.

The borders writhe with interlaced geometrical knots, and tiny flowers climb the gilded margin lines like a trellis. The pilgrims are minutely detailed in 2-inch-square portraits that show them on horseback. Even in those tiny spaces, the pictures mirror Chaucer's descriptions precisely. The callow young Squire is foppishly overdressed in a scarlet-lined

cape; the vain Pardoner's flaxen hair cascades off his shoulders in Fabio rivulets. Chaucer even noted the tuft of hairs on the end of the Miller's warty nose.

For all its beauty, though, the Ellesmere manuscript hasn't been read much outside the circle of its aristocratic owners. For centuries it has been secreted away in private libraries. In 1917 it was bought by railroad heir H.E. Huntington and brought to this country on a boat that dodged German subs across the Atlantic. It's now displayed behind glass at the Huntington Library in San Marino, Calif. With the University of Minnesota's purchase of the accurate new facsimile, scholars in the Midwest will have easy access to one of the most famous literary manuscripts in English.

The new facsimile is far more faithful than the last edition, published in 1911. The previous edition had few color pages, and the illuminators' occasional slips were removed, giving the work a machinelike perfection. The new full-color facsimile has a much more human and authentic feel, according to Patricia Eldred, a graduate student and Chaucer scholar in the university's English Department, who will give a slide presentation on the library's new acquisition Wednesday.

Achieving that authenticity was a complex international project. The fragile original manuscript was painstakingly unbound under the direction of an Irish expert on book conservation and photographed in California. The copies were printed in Japan, on

paper manufactured in England, and boxed and hand-bound between calf-covered oak boards built in Texas.

The University of Minnesota is able to buy such opulent books at a time when faculty salaries are frozen thanks to a bequest from Francis Gorman of North Oaks. A

bachelor architect, Gorman left a fortune to the university's Art Library. His gift has paid for a \$13,000 edition of the Irish Book of Kells; a copy of the Marburger Index, a collection of more than a million medieval images at an archive in France, and now the Chaucer manuscript.

Chaucer's poetry as taught in high school and college English classes is the only collision with Middle English for most Americans. And for many of them, the archaic language was probably a migraine-provoking experience.

Here is an example from "The Canterbury Tales": "A good Wif was ther of biside Bath/But she was somdeel deef, and that was scathe."

Theodore Morrison translates this: "A worthy woman there was from near the city/ Of Bath, but somewhat deaf, and more's the pity."

But scholars who have mastered Chaucer's Middle English are already eagerly entering their requests to study the new facsimile. "The Canterbury Tales" is as important to English literature as the Magna Carta is to English history, Eldred observed. Chaucer was the first master of English literature, and a favorite of the ruling nobility in his time. He read his poems aloud to the royal court, and was buried in Westminster Abbey, a rare distinction for a commoner.

His home in Greenwich, England, was near the road that pilgrims traveled to visit the shrine of St. Thomas á Beckett in Canterbury. The pilgrims had a reputation for spinning tales, and observing the motley travelers probably gave Chaucer the idea for his most famous poem.

"We invite the public to discover the beauties of the manuscript," said Scherer. It is available to the public in the Wilson Library's Special Collections by request