

The Garden of Vanity in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales

Abstract of a thesis presented to the graduate faculty  
of Western Connecticut State University

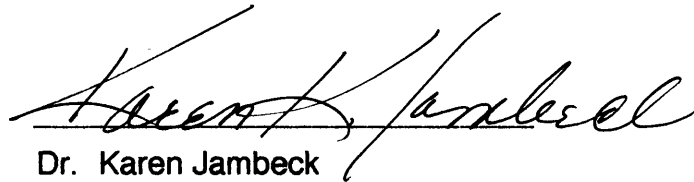
by

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements

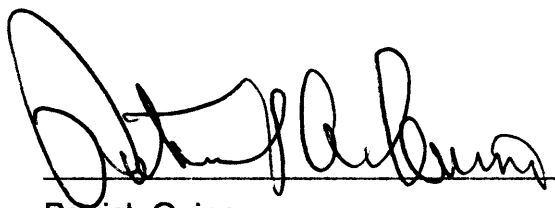
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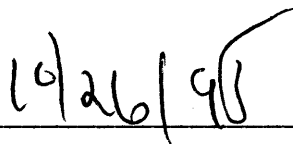
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## Abstract

This study examines Chaucer's use of the garden of vanity, a trope combining the traditional garden topos with vanitas elements that appear in visual arts and literature of the Middle Ages. In the Canterbury Tales the garden of vanity serves as a symbolic setting that functions as an index for determining characters' behavior, especially as this conduct can be situated within moral context.

The first chapter introduces the central concepts associated with the garden of vanity and provides necessary background for this study. The second chapter traces the rise of the garden image in classical writings and its development in medieval literature. Beginning with Homer and his Elysian Fields, the motif known as the locus amoenus occurs in works as disparate as Ovid's Metamorphoses and the Bible (for example, in Genesis and the Song of Songs), manifesting itself in variations such as Garden of Eden and the Hortus Conclusus. In medieval writings, the locus amoenus appears in both its secular and religious forms in works like the Romance of the Rose. Chapter three highlights the real garden of nature as it appears in everyday life and literature. Among these medieval gardens are the kitchen garden, the medicinal garden, and the orchard or flowery mede. This latter setting, imbued with symbolic significance, is especially favored by medieval authors. Chapter four introduces the vanitas genre, especially as it is illustrated in painting of the time, and investigates the vanitas elements and themes (e. g. , earthly existence and the transience of human life). Among the works that typify the characteristic vanitas genre are the paintings of Valdes Leal and Calderon de Barca. Chapter five examines

the gardens of vanity in Chaucer, defining characteristic elements and analyzing the function of each garden in the context of the tale. In particular, the analysis focuses on the construction of the garden of vanity and its function in the Canterbury Tales, and examines the gardens of vanity in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, including these gardens in the tales of the Knight, the Shipman, the Pardoner, the Nun's Priest, the Merchant, and the Franklin.

Among the questions explored in this thesis are the role of the established traditions of the garden topos and the vanitas genre in Chaucer's writing; his intentional combination of these established motifs to create a literary garden of vanity; and the use of such a setting to highlight the prevalent medieval issues of Christianity in contrast to materialism and caritas versus cupiditas. Two patterns in Chaucer's use of traditional garden materials are discernible. First, the combined garden and vanitas motifs underscore the desired tone or moral of each tale. In each narrative the apparently idyllic garden is in reality a dangerous setting where evil and death lurk in the shadows. Secondly, the behavior of the inhabitants in such gardens indicates that they repeatedly pursue cupiditas over caritas. Chaucer's gardens of vanity combine the vanitas elements to create a new setting, one that provides an index for interpreting character and action.