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Building Bridges to Canterbury

Sarah Breckenridge Wright

In 2015, the word *listicle* was added to OxfordDictionaries.com, defined as “an article on the Internet presented in the form of a numbered or bullet-pointed list.” By consulting a listicle, one can learn “16 Snapchats Only Hipsters Would Send” (all deeply ironic) and “25 Things You Should Learn To Do Before Turning 25” (including “say no sometimes” and “invert the color on your phone for reading at night”). While the listicle is a relatively new phenomenon, it belies humankind’s longstanding desire to classify and categorize the world around it. The hipsters, steam-punks, and rockabillies of the twenty-first century were born of the same categorizing impulse that generated the beasts, birds, and serpents of the medieval bestiary. While this impulse ostensibly helps us understand the world, it too often leads to dichotomies that fail to capture the dynamism of humankind and the world we inhabit.

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2 This medievalist, enamored by the materiality of books, takes issue with the latter.
3 One might recall the categorizing impulse that leads John Urry to render animals metaphoric vehicles rather than social agents in *Sociology beyond Societies*, discussed in Carolynn Van Dyke’s “Animal Vehicles: Mobility beyond Metaphor” in the present collection.
The current essay seeks to explore two dichotomies inimical to the fields of cultural geography and ecocriticism: nature vs. culture, and mobility vs. stasis. Specifically, I will present the medieval bridge as an icon of hybridity: a cultural artifact that commingles human/animal movement, architectural stasis, and the natural world (blood, stone, and water), and in so doing bears witness to the profound hybridity of the Middle Ages. I will then briefly explore how the underlying presence of medieval bridges in the frame narrative of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* suggests an emerging category of geographically-determined identity in the fourteenth century, one that lies somewhere between the early medieval dependence on the physical landscape and early modernity.4 These explorations will, I hope, serve as models for identifying hybrid spaces and identities—at once human and nonhuman, mobile and static—in literatures and landscapes in and beyond the medieval.

The first of the two dichotomies this essay explores—nature vs. culture—has long been the subject of ecocritical conversations. In its inception, ecocriticism sought to reclaim nature as something more than the backdrop for human action. Once reserved for texts explicitly about the nonhuman (e.g. nature writing), the field has begun to consider literature that is not consciously about nature, combining principles of literary theory and ecology to critique anthropocentric narratives. Michael McDowell observes that Bakhtinian dialogics, for example, “[help] first by placing an emphasis on contradictory voices, rather than focusing mainly upon the authoritative monologic voice of the narrator. We begin to hear characters and elements of the land-

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scape that have been marginalized.” Though McDowell speaks in large part of nature writing, Rebecca M. Douglass notes that his observations help us “imagine a dialogics that might recover the still more silent voice of the land in other texts as well.” Such imaginings have produced a plethora of helpful questions we can ask of the “other,” moving ecocriticism from the purview of Barbara Kingsolver to Henry James, modern to medieval.

Scholars of the Middle Ages in particular have made great strides in asking and answering such questions, moving ecocriticism beyond contemporary nature writing by considering how the field offers a new lens on medieval literature and culture. In his foundational essay “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” Lynn White Jr. suggests that the seventh-century scratch plow fundamentally changed humankind’s relationship to the earth, observing that “the distribution of land was based no longer on the needs of a family but, rather, on the capacity of

a power machine to till the earth [...]. Formerly man had been part of nature; now he was the exploiter of nature.” This observation justified and made necessary medieval ecocritique, locating the origin story of our ecological crisis in the Middle Ages, and tacitly encouraging literary critics to look for evidence of this crisis in the period’s literature. Douglass responded by providing a veritable “medieval ecocritic’s tool belt,” rethinking ecocritical terminology in the Middle Ages (“nature,” for example), and listing questions one might ask of a medieval text, while Lisa J. Kiser and Sarah Stanbury pose such questions of Chaucer, whose Canterbury Tales serves as the literary model of hybridity in the present essay. Each examination in its own way suggests that ecocriticism no longer belongs exclusively to the Muirs and Whitmans of our world.10

In all cases, medieval and modern, the challenge is to not ignore culture in the same way that ecocritics suggest extant criticism ignores nature; in other words, to not perpetuate the nature-culture dichotomy. This danger is acknowledged by Kathleen R. Wallace and Karla Ambruster in their collection Beyond Nature Writing, where they write, “we believe that a continued focus on nature and wilderness writing within ecocriticism might reinforce this same nature-culture dualism while, this time, privileging nature over culture.”11 Sven Birkirts echoes this sentiment, writing, “Nature and its preservation is what occupies most of the ecocritics. And this imposes a kind of programmatic simplicity upon the whole movement [...] . How much more interesting and controversial would be an ecocriticism pledging itself to the more inclusive idea of ‘environment.”12 So, reading anthropocentric narrative through an ecocritical lens is certainly a step in the right direction, but we might also rethink

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10 This is said, of course, with nothing but love for Muir and Whitman.
the terminology and theory that drives ecocriticism, adopting more holistic vocabulary and exploring systems/networks that more accurately represent our hybrid world. Even when re-claiming the nonhuman landscape’s marginalized voice in mon-ologic narrative, the ecocritic must be careful not to disallow the presence and impact of human culture. As William Howarth writes, “although we cast nature and culture as opposites, in fact they constantly mingle, like water and soil in a flowing stream.”

The current essay seeks to demonstrate the aptness of Howarth’s stream simile by turning to the structures that traverse and are embedded in streams: the inclusive ‘environments’ of medieval bridges. And while all bridges warrant ecocritique, I turn to those of the Middle Ages because the period’s hybridity reinforces the need to escape binaristic thought. In the late four-teenth century, conflicts of church and state, and demographic and economic flux destabilized national and regional identities defined by geographical fixity. The period is remarkable instead for its mobility. Faith, disease, and bourgeoning commercial exploits propelled bodies across the world, and literature recorded this movement, with Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales serving as an exemplary model of how medieval texts contended with hybrid understandings of space and identity. Like John and Aleyn in the Reeve’s Tale, who pass “a brook, and over that a brigge” in search of fruitful economic (and sexual) exchange (1.3922), real and imagined medieval bodies yielded to the ebbs and flows of

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13 William Howarth, “Some Principles of Ecocriticism,” in The Ecocriticism Reader, 69–91, at 69. As Vin Narduzzi notes in his review essay on medieval ecocriticism, Karl Steel advocates for this escape from binarism in his epilogue, wherein he suggests humans must “abandon themselves to relationships unavailable to mere animals or, for that matter, to mere humans, whether medieval or modern” (Steel, quoted in Vin Narduzzi, “Medieval ecocriticism,” postmedieval 4, no. 1 [2013]: 112–23, at 120).

14 One may recall that the fourteenth century saw the Hundred Years’ War, political strife that led to the War of the Roses, the Papal Schism, and the Black Death. As Paul Strohm notes in Chaucer's Tale: 1386 and the Road to Canterbury (New York: Viking, 2014), Chaucer’s refrain — “to maken virtue of necessitee” — was very likely a reaction to blows of fate that rendered his life/times a series of “crises.”
an increasingly mobile world, encountering bridges en route that were shaped in and from the natural world that they, in turn, transformed.\footnote{All quotations taken from \textit{The Riverside Chaucer}, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987). Quotations will be cited by fragment and line number.}

**Bridging Liquid Landscapes**

Bridges themselves, before we consider the more inclusive environment of which they are a part, are emblematic of hybridity, representing both site and transition. As such, they deconstruct the familiar geographical dichotomy that sets mobility against stasis, the second of two dichotomies that this essay explores. Since the introduction of the “new mobilities paradigm,” geographers have discussed mobility in opposition to sedentarism. Mimi Sheller and John Urry observe, “The emergent mobilities paradigm […] undermines sedentarist theories present in many studies in geography, anthropology, and sociology. Sedentarism treats as normal stability, meaning, and place, and treats as abnormal distance, change, and placelessness.”\footnote{See Mimi Sheller and John Urry, “The New Mobilities Paradigm,” \textit{Environment and Planning} 38 (2006): 207–26 at 208.} Movement is set against stasis, place against placelessness, and, in some criticism, illusion against reality (where “the stationary state is only fiction”).\footnote{Walter Christaller, \textit{Central Places in Southern Germany} (London: Prentice-Hall, 1966), 84. On the reality/fiction of movement/stasis, see also Henri Bergson, \textit{Matter and Memory} (New York: Macmillan, 1950).} Book-length considerations of mobility focus largely on transport or the socio-political implications of and impact on moving bodies/things, and the built environment (like “nature” in the nature-culture dichotomy) is rendered “backdrop.”\footnote{Some of the best studies on the subject include: Tim Cresswell, \textit{On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World} (New York: Routledge, 2006); \textit{Mobilities, Networks, Geographies}, eds. Jonas Larsen, John Urry, and Kay Axhausen (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006); Peter Adey, \textit{Mobility} (New York: Routledge, 2010); Margaret Greico and John Urry, eds., \textit{Mobilities: New Perspectives on Transport and Society} (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011); and Tim Cresswell and Peter Merriman, eds., \textit{Geographies of Mobilities: Practices},}
Strohmayer observes of existing mobility studies, “architecture forms at best an assumed and largely stable set of geographical nodes into which […] mobilities are thrust” (119). The problem that emerges is a consequent association of architecture with determination and mobility with personal agency, which renders the former adverse to a society that celebrates free will, and unattractive to scholars more excited by the enigmatic.

Yet there may be room for a geographical reality that is both stable and changing, especially in a period when geographically constructed identities were only just evolving from place-based understandings (i.e. the Middle Ages). Peter Adey allows for this possibility in his discussion of airport vectors. Rather than accepting airports as fixed entities or nodes through which bodies/things move, he argues that airports are made from lines of mobility. He writes, “Passenger mobilities are treated indivisibly. They are imagined as flows and rivers and, thus, modeled as vectors that eventually become real in the ‘real’ material environment of the terminal. Lines and flows materialise into the tube like structures of gates, tunnels, and corridors — the materialisation of what [Gilles] Deleuze and [Felix] Guattari would know as hydraulic science.” In this way, vectors are materialized, allowing for the physical manifestation of mobility in the

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Spaces, Subjects (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2013). Though I present a call for hybrid understanding here, I in no way mean to denigrate the very important work of these scholars.

19 Ulf Strohmayer, “Bridges: Different Conditions of Mobile Possibilities,” in Geographies of Mobilities: Practices, Spaces, Subjects, eds. Tim Cresswell and Peter Merriman, 119–35 (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2013), 119. Strohmayer follows this observation with a list of scholars who are taking steps toward theoretical and empirical appraisals of the built environment, including Peter Kraftl and Loretta Lees.


21 Peter Adey, “Airports: Terminal/Vector,” in Geographies of Mobilities, eds. Cresswell and Merriman, 140. (This is one of many essays in which Adey discusses the results of his research at Liverpool Airport.)
“real” landscape. Architecture becomes capricious, bending to the networks that move through and across it.

Because the construction of bridges is both literally and figuratively a consequence of hydraulics, we might think of bridges as vectors, “inseparable from flows [...] and heterogen[eous], as opposed to the stable, the eternal, the identical, the constant.”22 They are the architectural manifestation of movement, engendering and engendered by mobile practice. Indeed, bridges are more likely to fall into disrepair and collapse when bodies cease to move across them, and the temporary absence of a bridge that makes movement possible can be a remarkably disruptive event in the urban history of a city.23

The hybridity of the structure itself, at once static and mobile, is echoed by the bodies that occupy it. When standing on a bridge, one is “there” (i.e., emplaced) primarily because one is between places. This dynamism becomes particularly acute when we consider the living bridges of the Middle Ages. A body can loiter on a road, but it can live on a medieval bridge.24 In 1281 a royal writ concerning London Bridge mentions “almost innumerable people dwelling thereon,” and a rental survey of Bridge House properties in 1358 shows that there were 62 shops on the east side of the roadway and 69 on the west side.25 The bridge was therefore far more than a determining structure, facilitating or impeding river crossings; it was a place of residence and economic exchange, a microcosm of the city suspended over the

23 As a resident of Pittsburgh — the “City of Bridges” — the latter strikes especially close to home.
Thames. Beyond the momentous historical events played out thereupon (the Peasants’ Revolt, for example), daily life would have consisted of innumerable micro and macro movements: blood flowing in veins and in streets as fish were butchered, money being exchanged for goods, estranged hearts being exchanged to signify shifting allegiances, and bodies flocking toward the chapel of St Thomas the Martyr or a tableau vivant at the Southwark Bridge foot. In sum, the medieval bridge is a picture of post-modern consumption, a vector of mobility-supporting networks, producing and presupposing extensive new mobilities. Both the built structure and the bodies occupying it are therefore fundamentally hybrid: mobile and stable, emplaced and between places.

The way medieval bridges were built compounds their failure to preserve binary opposition. Extant records suggest that as early as the Anglo-Saxon period, bridge construction and maintenance was a common burden. This burden — originally one of Alfred’s trinoda necessitas — improved defense and communication, making bridges central to enabling (and disabling, in the case of invasion) the movement of bodies and ideas, the latter including a burgeoning sense of nationalism that came from early defensive efforts against the Vikings. In this way, the act of bridge construction united people across space and estate in a shared architectural project that enabled collective routines including trade, pilgrimage, and the performance of civic duties. In so doing, bridges produced and came to represent new itinerant identities, uprooting “Englishness” from the soil and locating it instead in mobile categories.

26 London Bridge as both connection and barrier (the latter as a consequence of the gates thereon: the Stonegate and the Drawbridge Gate), reveals yet another sense in which medieval bridges can be read as hybrid.
27 See Jennie Friedrich’s “Concordia Discors: The Traveling Heart as Foreign Object in Chaucer’s Troilus and Criseyde” in the present collection.
The Rochester Bridge was one of the most important bridge projects in all of England, carrying Watling Street over the Medway, and thereby linking London to both Canterbury and the Continent. After the original medieval bridge (constructed ca. 960 CE) succumbed to the force of ice melts in 1381, Sir Robert Knolles, Sir John Cobham, and architect Henry Yevele spearheaded the construction of a second bridge.30 The importance of this bridge to Rochester, and Southeast England, cannot be overstated. From its beginning, Rochester was defined by its proximity to and contention with the Medway, its Roman name being Durobrivis: a compound of two Celtic words meaning “walled town by the bridge.” The construction of the 560-foot 1391 bridge reinforced this link, serving as the most frequently used Medway crossing for nearly 500 years.31 Upon its completion, it was called “sumptuoissimus” (most magnificent) by Thomas of Walsingham, and as late as the eighteenth century, it was praised by Daniel Defoe as “the largest, highest, and the strongest built of all bridges in England, except London Bridge.”32 Throughout its literary record, the bridge’s place in southeast England was secured by superlatives.

Nonetheless, the Rochester Bridge, more than most pieces of architecture, was itself a body in motion. This essay has already explored the theoretical hybridity of bridges as vectors, and the extension of this hybridity to the bodies that occupy them, but a material turn reveals that bridges are anything but static architectural structures. This is in large part due to the rivers in which

30 The author of the Westminster Chronicle writes, “About the feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin this year a great part of Rochester Bridge was destroyed. Ice had formed in vast quantities, and when it broke up, with the onset of milder weather, the massive pressure of the flores [sic] which had composed it wrecked the bridge” (The Westminster Chronicle, 1381–1394, eds. L.C. Hector and B.F. Harvey [Oxford: Oxford Medieval Texts, 1982], 2–3).

31 It was replaced in 1856 with a bridge that better accommodated modern river traffic.

they are embedded and the raw materials with which they are made: a reminder that an understanding of bridges is incomplete without an analysis of the natural world, bringing Birkirt’s notion of inclusive environments to the fore and colliding the mobility-stasis and nature-culture dichotomies. In the case of Rochester Bridge, nature was commingled with culture from the bridge’s inception. Keeping the original medieval bridge’s collapse in mind, planners chose to locate the 1391 bridge one hundred feet further upriver, “both for the fastnes of the soile and for the breaking of the swiftness of the streame.”33 Already soil and water were implicated in Rochester Bridge’s construction: more secure soil would better hold the pilings, and a slower current would lessen the force of water on stone. Humankind’s capacity to impose its will on the natural world was therefore ruthlessly tempered by that world. A failure to accommodate environmental imperatives would almost certainly result in the catastrophic collapse of a cultural emblem.

Nature and culture also both impacted the construction itself. Wood, stone, chalk, and iron were molded by engineering principles and art to produce a bridge that stood for half a millennium. The process would have started with the construction of staddles.34 First, iron-tipped elm piles were driven into the riverbed, establishing a base about 45 feet long by 25 feet wide that was pointed at each end, allowing tides to run in and out with minimal resistance.35 The tops of these piles were then sawed off at the low-water mark and surrounded by a protective

34 In the Rochester Bridge accounts, the starling and staddle are referred to as one whole structure, though there is a functional difference between the two. Starlings are constructed to resist the force of a river, and staddles are built to bear the weight of the bridge. I choose to maintain the medieval terminology (“staddle” for the whole structure at the foot of each pier: starling and staddle) here.
barrier made of additional tied piles, like modern cofferdams. In Rochester, the resulting cavity was packed with chalk—an abundant commodity in Kent that substituted for loose stones and rubble—and finally, the top and sides of each staddle were boarded over with elm planks. In total, twelve of these staddles were built for the Rochester Bridge, resulting in eleven openings, all arched save the seventh opening from the Rochester bank, which was crossed by the royal drawbridge.36 The roadway and the piers built atop these staddles were then constructed with ragstone, much of it recycled from the previous bridge.

This alone was a feat of civil engineering, but the work was far from over. Maintenance following a “completed” bridge project was constant. As R.H. Britnell notes, “medieval bridges were vulnerable structures, especially when they were large and built over a tidal river, and Rochester Bridge must have been one of the most difficult in England to maintain.”37 In the ten years following the Rochester Bridge’s construction, an average of £25 per year was spent on maintenance work, including reinforcing the elm piles, repairing or renewing the wooden framing of the staddles, and packing hundreds of tons of chalk into eroded staddles and the riverbed itself. Careful records report the amount of money spent on bridgework, warden’s salaries, administration, upkeep of bridge trust property, rents and taxes, the bridge chapel (“newly erected” in January 1393), and other necessary expenses.38 All of this suggests a state of perpetual motion, deemed more natural than stasis by fourteenth-century philosopher William of Ockham in his Opera philosophica.39 Beyond being a product of human and hydraulic vectors, and bearing the weight of countless feet in motion (emplaced and between places), the bridge itself transformed in response to the Medway: chalk eroded, ragstone receded, and elm rotted. Most

37 Britnell, “Rochester Bridge, 1381–1530,” 47.
38 Becker, Rochester Bridge, 13.
39 See Thomas R. Schneider’s “Chaucer’s Physics: Motion in the House of Fame” in the present collection.
man-made structures deteriorate over time, of course, but the micro-movements of bridges are immediately and interminably sensed. Travelers can see foam building around the staddles, hear rushing water, and feel the spray of water on their faces, providing kinesthetic proof that a seemingly static bridge is perhaps better understood to be kinetic in place.

The spaces around Rochester Bridge also transformed as a consequence of construction and maintenance. The impact of both on the Kentish landscape was immense, affecting water, wood, and chalk in particular. The effect on the Medway was seen in the forceful current that rushed beneath the ragstone arches, a result of the staddles having substantially decreasing the width of the waterway, which—like at London Bridge—made “shooting the bridge” a favored activity among the daring (some would say reckless) youth. The need for wood, to fabricate piles and the planks that surrounded them, resulted in the deforestation of the downlands’ steep, forested slopes. When construction began, Richard II granted bridge contractors carte blanche to take any timber they required from all but the church’s land, resulting the felling of thousands of trees in the vicinity of the bridge. In fact, because local reserves were exhausted by the initial construction, wood for replacement piles and planks was shipped from areas as far upriver as Maidstone, with records from the early fifteenth century reporting as many as 200 elms used in a single year.40

Chalk, too, was mined at will, with around 100,000 tons of chalk consumed during the first 100 years of bridge maintenance, and as much as 2500 tons of chalk used in a single year.41 This reallocation of chalk supplies would have affected countless other vocations, including the growth of cherries, an important Kentish export that thrived on chalky soil. So, while the space of a bridge offers an escape from binarism, and therefore meets

40 Britnell, “Rochester Bridge, 1381–1530,” 63. This statistic reflects the number of elms used in 1444–45; exact information exists only for the years 1436–46.
41 Ibid., 65–66. In 1415 the commonality of the bridge acquired a quarry at Walshes to meet their demand.
the demands of a growing ecocritical field (one that is beginning to look beyond nature to the inclusive environments that more accurately represent our hybrid world), we would be remiss to ignore the impact that such a structure has on the ecosystem. It does function as one of the few architectural structures that exists coequal with — and not superior to — its immediate environment (i.e., the river), but it does not do so without affecting the surrounding, nonhuman ecosystem.

The effects of bridge construction were also felt by the hands, hooves, and bodies that worked the construction site. The manpower demanded by such a difficult project was extraordinary; hundreds of laborers would have to contend with the Medway’s current, men and their tools submerged in what must have at times seemed a futile attempt to harness the floods. A fifteenth-century poem appended by Thomas Hearne to his edition of Leland’s Itinerary narrates this venture for us, with direct reference to the construction of late medieval starling (staddle) bridges in the lowlands. The anonymous poet writes,

Then the strengethe of the streme astoned hem stronge,  
In labor and lavyng moche money was lore.  
Ther loved hem a ladde was a water man longe,  
He helpe stop the streme til the werke were afore. (39–42)

In this passage, instability reigns: the world is defined by a tumult of water, bodies, and money. Even the efforts of the water man are mitigated. Though he is praised for his work, he can only “helpe” stop the stream, and the poet’s use of the ambiguous “afore” reinforces the uncertain nature of the service the “ladde” provides. Is the work behind him, as the preposition “til” implies? Or is it still ahead of him, as the aforementioned records of costly bridge maintenance suggest? The latter is

43 The MED allows for both readings. See Middle English Dictionary Online, s.v. “afore, adv., prep., conj.,” http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/.
more likely, given that the poet takes pains to remind his reader, “Thus they were cesed and set all in oon assent / That all the brekynges of the brige the towne bere schulde” (81–2). It is according to Parliamentary procedure, in fact, that the town will be responsible for repairs: “This was preved acte also in the Per-lement” (83). Such lines lead a reader to believe that the water man works to “stop the streme” only to have to do so again and again, evoking an infinite regression of pilings, and in so doing reinforcing an understanding of bridges—like their environments and the bodies that bring them into being—as hybrid. Money, labor, raw materials, and rivers circulate in perpetuity, while the bridge itself projects architectural stability.

This poem also advances our thinking about the nature-culture dialectic. The laborers are identified not simply as working-men, but as “water men.” It is as though their skin is permeated by the water in which they are submerged, natural and human fluids comingling to produce a hybrid species that warrants distinction from “land men.” One can imagine children on the banks of the Medway marveling at men plunging into the river to tie planks around pilings, breathing as though through gills. A similar appellation occurring regularly in extant records is “tide men,” so called because they were paid not by the day, but by the tide. These men worked the gin and the ram to drive piles into the riverbed, work that was restricted to certain states of the tide. Perhaps even more than Hearne’s water men, the tide men worked to the rhythms of tidal rivers, their culturally-ingrained patterns of labor forced into alignment with nature’s patterns, dictated by the moon rather than the sun.

These processes and the phenomena they engender reveal the degree to which matter and humankind intermingle in the construction of a bridge. The properties and availability of natural resources defined Rochester Bridge’s structure, and carefully engineered plans ultimately gave way to natural anomalies. Irregularities in the Medway riverbed, for example, rendered the arches and piers asymmetrical, and the Medway’s heavy tides prevented the construction of buildings atop the bridge. Moreover, unlike the spaces surrounding extant transport systems, the
fields bordering roads, for example, rivers could not be easily developed. On a bridge, therefore, culture could not fully domesticate and obscure the natural world in/out of which it is built. Yet bridges are always fundamentally cultural, standing in place for centuries as testimony to humankind’s manipulation of the landscape. Such concessions—humankind to nature and nature to humankind—render Rochester Bridge fundamentally hybrid, built from and embedded in a natural world that reminds passersby of its presence in the sound of water rushing against man-made staddle and cultivated stone.

**Bridging Literary Landscapes**

As for the place of Rochester Bridge in the Canterbury pilgrimage, we might begin by considering Architect Henry Yevele, who designed Rochester Bridge, the nave of Canterbury Cathedral, and the nave of Westminster, while also serving as the warden of London Bridge and caretaker of its chapel. As a consequence of this one man’s work, London, Rochester, and Canterbury become an amalgam of architectural continuity: Westminster’s nave resembles the arches of Rochester Bridge, which in turn resemble Canterbury Cathedral’s nave. Church, state, and civic-mindedness also converge, each manifest in the hybrid structure of the bridge, which mobilized religious, monarchical, and local endeavors alike. These movements were not without regulation, though. As James Smith observes, unregulated movement—characterized by “fluidity” in his work—was a source of anxiety for many medieval writers.44 Bernard of Cluny, for example, wrote in *De Contemptu Mundi*, “[the world’s] position is unfixed, its status is unstable. It goes and it returns, like the sea, now bad and tomorrow even worse.”45 Instability, repre-

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45 Ronald E. Pepin, trans., *Scorn for the World: Bernard of Cluny’s De Contemptu Mundi: The Latin Text with English Translation and an Introduction*
sented here by going and returning, threatened human existence by gesturing toward an apocalyptic chaos, but the mobility played out across Rochester Bridge was not apocalyptic. Instead, mimicking its own simultaneity — representing both nature and culture, movement and stasis — the Rochester Bridge presupposed only regulated mobilities, containing what was traditionally understood to be unrestrained kinesis. Indeed, unlike the ferries that could traverse rivers in a multitude of ways, bridges offered mobile bodies only one option. As a consequence, they helped to standardize routes, distilling variable movement toward a given destination into routinized itineraries, and thereby producing a mobile practice best characterized as structured mobility: a fettered qualification of a traditionally unfettered term. Such mobilities came to define England and its people, locating medieval identities (like the bridges across which they were played out) in a hybrid category that at once represented humankind’s freedom to move, and the strictures placed upon that movement.

In the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer depicts one of the most popular structured mobilities of the Middle Ages: pilgrimage. He celebrates the movement of medieval bodies while demonstrating how their perceived “instability” (per Bernard of Cluny) can be regulated by human systems and the built environments in which they take place. In so doing, he finds a middle ground between spatial fixity and the placeless potential of mobility, represented by the spaces between the pilgrims’ points of departure and destination. First, Chaucer removes London and Canterbury from the *Canterbury Tales*: the pilgrims begin in Southwark, and they never arrive at their destination. This

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46 Unless, of course, those bodies were blown off of the bridge and forced to swim to the nearest refuge, an event not unheard of in the Middle Ages. See James M. Gibson, *The Rochester Bridge Trust* (Rochester, Kent: AntidoteFM, 2005)

47 This conceit also evokes Urry’s “gamekeeper state,” explored by Van Dyke in the present collection, and thereby implicates animal movement as well in a discussion of England’s mobilities.
suspends the pilgrims in a state of perpetual motion, and erases religio-political centers and landscape features that would un-
questionably ground the text. Thomas Becket’s tomb, in par-
ticular, would have stabilized the pilgrims’ journey, its static permanence overshadowing the pilgrims’ rich movement. By
removing this locus from his frame, Chaucer renders tombs and destinations inconsequential, making the *Canterbury Tales*
 pilgrimage one that exists almost entirely on the road: an interim
space defined by mobility.

He then structures this mobility by locating the pilgrims
in Rochester, Sittingbourne, and Harbledown (at 7.1924–6, 3.844–9, and 9.1–4 respectively)—waypoints for travelers in
South East England with economies that flourished as a con-
sequence of movement toward Canterbury. Beyond being a
religious vocation, pilgrimage was travel, and as such became
entwined with economic systems that anticipated today’s
tourism industry. Many pilgrims purchased *ampullae*
filled with
well water from holy places (a practice that linked England’s
liquid landscape with structured mobilities), and relics/souven-
irs multiplied as travelers demanded physical evidence of their
successful journeys.48 Markets grew to accommodate the sale
of these souvenirs, and hostels were built to house the weary
travelers purchasing them. Pilgrimage thus became a market of
sorts, with the loci of circulation and exchange being towns like
Rochester: places “by the weye” that grew to accommodate the
movement of bodies and material goods. In the frame of the
*Canterbury Tales*, it is these places that are prioritized, rendering
Southeast England a space defined not by the Tower of London
or the Canterbury Cathedral, but by mobile bodies practicing
routinized movements in environments defined by (often eco-
nomically motivated) vectors. Chaucer may not say much about
the landscapes through which his pilgrims move, but what he

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48 See Rosalind and Christopher Brooke, *Popular Religion in the Middle
Ages: Western Europe 1000–1300* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), and
Patrick Geary, *Furta Sacra: The Theft of Relics in the Central Middle Ages*
This macrocosmic structuring of movement in the Canterbury Tales— which stipulates that bodies pass through Rochester, Sittingbourne, and Harbledown en route to Canterbury— would then be replicated within each of the three towns Chaucer mentions. Movement through Rochester, for example, would be syphoned across Rochester Bridge: the one available route over the Medway. Given the 1381 collapse of the old medieval bridge, this river crossing could not have been far from Chaucer’s mind, especially given his work as Clerk of the King’s Works, a job that made him responsible for the construction and maintenance of royal buildings (including bridges). He writes, in the voice of the Host, “‘My lord, the Monk […] be myrie of cheere, / For ye shul telle a tale trewely. / Loo Rochestre stant heer faste by!’” (7.1924–6). Here Chaucer offers Rochester as a defining locale in the pilgrims’ journey, yet his language unsurprisingly complicates an otherwise straightforward statement, directing our attention beyond the city itself to the more inclusive environment that defines it. Rochester “stands,” but more than that, it “stands fast.” This suggests stasis, like the (albeit illusory) stasis of the stone bridge that carried pilgrims to Rochester’s bank. At the same time, though, “faste” evokes an image of speed, like the rush of the Medway between the bridge’s stad­dles. Chaucer’s use of such a multivalent word therefore directs readers to consider both the static city and the movement that defines it, the latter manifest in both the built and liquid landscapes (i.e., the bridge and the river). After drawing his readers’ attention to an interim space, he foregrounds the hybridity of this space as both static and mobile, “faste” and “faste.”

His embrace of such dynamism extends to the nature-culture dialectic represented by bridges’ inclusive environments. We needn’t look far to see that Chaucer was intrigued by the world around him. Parliament of Fowls describes a meeting between

49 Middle English Dictionary Online, s.v. “faste, adv.” def. 2.
50 Middle English Dictionary Online, s.v. “faste, adv.” def. 10.
birds, and the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* challenges the boundaries that distinguish animal from human.\(^5\) He also dedicates space to a discussion of deforestation in the *Knight’s Tale*, and meditates on the sometimes-unpredictable liquid landscape of the *Franklin’s Tale*.\(^5\) These literary moments have been explored in extant scholarship, and there is certainly more to say about how the pilgrims’ tales embrace amalgams of nature and culture. A glance at the frame alone, though, reveals Chaucer’s attention to the natural environment, perhaps most readily in the familiar opening lines of the *General Prologue*:

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Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heath
The tendre croppes, and the yonge soone
Hath in the Ram his half cours yronne,
And smale foweles maken melodye,
That slepen al the nyght with open ye
(So Priketh hem Nature in hir corages),
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages. (1.1–12)
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Here both nature and Nature are shown to influence humankind. The wind and rain, personified as Nature in line 11, each inspire “folk” to go on pilgrimage. As Sarah Stanbury writes, “Nature is extrinsic but becomes instrinsic, a force out there in the world as well as within the body; similar to Aristotelian and Platonic concepts of nature, its essence is movement.”\(^5\) Like water permeating the skin of water men, Nature permeates (“pricks”) humankind’s heart, moving us to move. By beginning

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\(^5\) For an ecocritical reading of *Parliament of Fowls*, see Kiser’s “Chaucer and the Politics of Nature.”


the Tales with this musing, Chaucer prepares his readers for a hybrid understanding of space that is compounded by the absence of London and Canterbury, and celebrated in the cities he calls to mind. The world represented in the frame of the Canterbury Tales is finally both human and nonhuman (with categorical distinctions between the two collapsing from the very start), moving in structured ways to accommodate built environments and natural rhythms alike.

**Conclusion: Confluences of Liquid and Literary Landscapes**

To close, we might think of the frame as a poetic bridge. It is a space occupied by bodies practicing routinized movement in an environment that is equally natural, “bathed [...] in swich licour / Of which vertu engendred is the flour” (1.3–4), and built, like the “[wyde] chambres and stables” of the Tabard (1.28). But it is also itself hybrid, bridging the poetry of Chaucer’s pen (as author), Chaucer’s voice (as pilgrim), and the voices of Chaucer’s characters. This polyvocality alerts us to how easily categorical distinctions collapse. Yet far from destroying the integrity of Chaucer’s project, the collapse of Chaucerian voices produces a harmony that sounds long after a new pilgrim’s tale begins. The space of the frame also manifests the building and breaking of metaphorical bridges. Characters erect (albeit often unstable) bridges between disparate genres and themes, and reconcile collapsing collegiality (one may recall the knight who famously instructs the Host to “kisse the Pardoner” [6.965]). In all cases, the interstitial spaces that connect human to inhuman, movement to stasis, and pen to polyphony bear meaning, amplified by the hybrid forms they assume.

Like the bridges it implicitly evokes, then, the frame insists on and celebrates dialectical understanding. The pilgrims themselves are implicated in multiplicities of meaning, and upon reaching Rochester they and the horses on which they ride are both emplaced and between places, producing and presupposing networks of movement and exchange by their being in transit. Moreover, they move through and across spaces that cannot
be clearly delineated as either architectural (cultural) or natural; each environment, and especially that of Rochester Bridge, is both. Like the world it represents, then, Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* is fundamentally hybrid, exemplified by the literal and metaphorical bridges that define it. In the end, these bridges disintegrate categories and enrich our understanding of worlds current and past, lived and literary. We stand to benefit from seeking such bridges in real and imagined landscapes, and embracing the dynamic implications of what lies in the middle.