

# Alfred Chester:

## An Inventory of His Papers at the Harry Ransom Center

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### Descriptive Summary

<b>Creator</b>	Chester, Alfred, 1928-1971
<b>Title</b>	Alfred Chester Papers
<b>Dates:</b>	1950-1966
<b>Extent</b>	2 boxes (1 linear foot)
<b>Abstract</b>	Alfred Chester's papers consist of holograph manuscripts, a bound galley proof, holograph and typewritten correspondence, telegrams, and printed materials. The collection includes manuscripts of three unpublished and eight published short stories, collected in <i>Behold Goliath</i> and <i>Here Be Dragons</i> , and provides documentation of Chester's literary relationships and struggles with the publishing industry in the late 1950s-early 1960s. Chester's early work, his personal life and accomplishments in the area of literary criticism are unrepresented.
<b>Call Number:</b>	Manuscript Collection MS-00766
<b>Language:</b>	English.
<b>Access</b>	Open for research.

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### Administrative Information

<b>Acquisition</b>	Purchase, 1967 (R3860)
<b>Processed by</b>	Michele Shukers, 1994.
<b>Repository:</b>	<a href="#">Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin</a>

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## Biographical Sketch

Alfred Chester, the youngest of three children, was born on September 7, 1928, in Brooklyn, New York. His father, Jake, a Jewish furrier and proprietor of the Alfred Fur Company, came to the United States as a child from Romania, his family name Americanized from Chesta-Polchak or Chestya-Pelski by immigration authorities. His mother, Anna Chester, was born in Odessa. Chester is reported to have had a comfortable childhood, despite the Great Depression and his status as the son of an immigrant.

Chester's central literary theme, of otherness or isolation, is thought to have been fostered by an illness which struck him in his seventh year, resulting in hair loss. Lack of eyelashes, eyebrows, head and body hair created an awkward appearance which Chester refused to publicly acknowledge, even to close friends. Although his Jewish background did not seem to create personal conflict, his artistic sensibility, homosexuality, and appearance did. The orange, bedraggled wig coupled with denial of his physical condition that persisted until the age of 36, made him feel and look the part of the outsider.

In 1945, Chester enrolled in Washington Square College of the New York University, contributing to *Compass*, "Varieties," and *Apprentice* (all NYU publications), and took his B.A. in English in 1949. He attempted graduate study at Columbia University, but abandoned it in 1950 and began travelling, first with a short visit in Mexico. Then, armed with a collection of completed short stories, he moved on to France, and eventually to Morocco. His French foray lasted the better part of the 1950s--and established Chester as a familiar cafe presence, providing him the opportunity to discover and shape his style and craft, and to meet with publishers and other literary minds including Carson McCullers, Mary Louise Aswell, James Baldwin, Richard Seaver, Robert Silvers, and Princess Marguerite Caetani.

Chester's association and extensive correspondence with Princess Caetani resulted in publication of his essay "Silence in Heaven" in *Botteghe Oscure* in 1952, followed in that same year by publication of the Southern-Gothic short story "Dance for Dead Lovers" in *Merlin*. Chester's eccentric, existential works, a popular style in the mid-50s, attracted attention. The publication of a collection of short stories, sold by subscription by the Silver's Editions Finisterre in Paris, garnered him the recognition of V.S. Pritchett of the BBC who called Chester "an exciting talent: original, fearless and very capable." The Paris publishing house, Editions du Seuil and soon afterwards, Andre Deutch Limited of London, published Chester's first novel, *Jamie Is My Heart's Desire*, in French and English respectively. The novel, introduced in New York by The Vanguard Press in 1957, created little fanfare in America as the public's current taste favored a more realistic writing style. However, his somewhat lackluster American debut was offset by a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1957 and publication of the short story, "As I Was Going Up the Stair," which received the honor of inclusion in *The Best American Short Stories*.

In 1959 the *New Yorker* purchased his short story, "A War on Salamis," which financed Chester's return to the United States. In 1961 Chester's short story "Cradle Song" was published in *Esquire* magazine and printed in *The Best American Short Stories, '61*. Chester finally began to enjoy a measure of popularity, and was published in the *Transatlantic Review* and *Provincetown Review*. However it was not for his fiction that Chester would be recognized.

Alfred Chester ultimately gained notoriety in America for literary criticism. His critical works, published in the *New York Review of Books*, *Partisan Review*, and *Commentary*, along with a regular column in *Book Week*, established his reputation, and he was hailed for his authoritative voice and clear literary vision by popular figures such as Gore Vidal. Although he reluctantly continued his critical writing for financial reasons, Chester returned to Morocco in June 1963 to remove himself from the New York literary scene and concentrate on writing fiction. The publication of *Behold Goliath* (1964) and *The Exquisite Corpse* (an experimental novel eventually published in 1967), generally disappointed and confused reviewers and the literary public.

Coinciding with the pervasive influence of Paul and Jane Bowles during Chester's Moroccan years (1963-1965), Chester's productivity dropped and his mental health suffered. His forced expulsion by Moroccan authorities in 1965, due to his extremely erratic behavior, landed him back in New York. His remaining literary contributions, written during a period characterized by increasing dementia and geographical wandering until his death in 1971, consisted of a few short stories, semi-autobiographical essays, and fiction collected in "The Foot," and the clearly autobiographical "Letter from Wandering Jew," an account of his travels to Israel (collected in *Looking for Genet*).

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## Scope and Contents

Alfred Chester's papers consist of holograph manuscripts, a bound galley proof, holograph and typewritten correspondence, telegrams, a review clipping, and printed materials ranging in date from 1950 to 1966. The material is arranged in two series: Works (1964, nd, 1.5 boxes), and Correspondence (1950-1966,.5 box).

The collection includes manuscripts of a number of Chester's published and unpublished short stories, and provides documentation of Chester's literary relationships and struggles with the publishing industry in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Chester's early work, his personal life, and accomplishments in the area of literary criticism are unrepresented.

Material in the first series, Works, is arranged alphabetically by title. The series includes holograph manuscripts of eight short stories, published and collected in *Behold Goliath* and *Here Be Dragons*, and also represented in the HRHRC collection by printed materials accompanying the Chester collection. The series also includes three unpublished short stories, a bound advance uncorrected galley proof of *Behold Goliath*, a folder containing printed ephemera and an autograph manuscript of "Chariot of Flesh," revised by the author.

The second series, Correspondence, is grouped into two subseries, Incoming and Outgoing. Incoming Correspondence (1950-1966, bulk 1952-1954) is arranged alphabetically by correspondent. The series offers an incomplete picture of Chester's most prolific years of fiction writing, focusing primarily on his attempts to publish his works and garner support from literary contemporaries for the Guggenheim fellowship. Of particular interest is a group of 32 letters (1952-1954) from Marguerite Caetani discussing publication, finances, and writers associated with *Botteghe Oscure*. Two letters from Thornton Wilder (1956) examine the literary form and philosophy of Chester's work. Six letters from William Maxwell, editor of the *New Yorker*, discuss several pieces submitted by Chester, including financial arrangements. Maxwell's letters include a discussion of what makes material appropriate for publication in the *New Yorker*. Other correspondents include Christopher Isherwood, Alfred Kazin, Norman Mailer, Carson McCullers, Ezra Pound, and Lionel Trilling.

Outgoing Correspondence (1955-1966) is arranged chronologically. Two letters to Andreas Brown document Chester's financial distress, and discuss the contents and sale of the manuscripts and correspondence in the collection. This subseries also includes letters to Eugene Walter.

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## Related Material

The HRHRC holds a number of published works by Alfred Chester which can be found by referring to the book card catalog. Three items of Chester's correspondence are located in the Harpers collection.

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## Index Terms

### Correspondents

Brown, Andreas  
Caetani, Marguerite  
Isherwood, Christopher, 1904-  
Kazin, Alfred, 1915-  
McCullers, Carson, 1917-1967  
Mailer, Norman  
Maxwell, William, 1908-  
Pound, Ezra, 1885-1972  
Trilling, Lionel, 1905-1975  
Walter, Eugene, 1921-

Wilder, Thornton, 1897-1975

**Subjects**

Authors, American

Social Isolation

**Document Types**

Galley proof

Ephemera

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**Series I: Works, 1964, nd.**

"As I Was Going Up The Stair" [short story collected in <i>Behold Goliath</i> , nd]	<b>box 1 folder 1</b>
"Behold Goliath" [short story collected in <i>Behold Goliath</i> , nd]	<b>folder 2</b>
<i>Behold Goliath</i> [uncorrected galley proof of collection of short stories including "Cradle Song," "As I as Going Up the Stair," "Behold Goliath," "From the Phoenix," "Rapunzel, Rapunzel," "Two Fables," "Ismael," "In Praise of Vespasian," "Beds and Boards," "The Head of a Sad Angel," 1964]	<b>folder 3</b>
"Berceuse (Cradle Story)" [short story collected in <i>Behold Goliath</i> , nd]	<b>folder 4</b>
<i>Chariot of Flesh</i> [novel, nd]	<b>folder 5-7</b>
"A Dance for Dead Lovers" [short story collected in <i>The Head of a Sad Angel</i> , nd]	<b>box 2 folder 1</b>
Glammi and His Ambitious Wife; a Fairy Tale	<b>folder 2</b>
"The Head of a Sad Angel" [short story collected in <i>The Head of a Sad Angel</i> , nd]	<b>folder 3</b>
"Here Be Dragons" [short story collected in <i>Here Be Dragons</i> , nd]	<b>folder 4</b>
The Princess' Vanity; a Fairy Tale [bound with The Unhappy Giantess]	<b>folder 5</b>
"Rapunzel, Rapunzel" [previous title, "Eyes, Scatched Out"; short story collected in <i>Behold Goliath</i> and <i>Here Be Dragons</i> , nd]	<b>folder 6</b>
Timothy and the King of Roses; a Fairy Tale [see folder 2.5]	
The Unhappy Giantess [see folder 2.5]	
Printed ephemera, includes review clipping and program from a symposium <i>On Pornography and Literature</i>	<b>box 2 folder 7</b>



**Series II: Correspondence, 1950-1966**

Incoming Correspondence, 1950-1966

**box 2 folder**  
8

Outgoing Correspondence, 1955-1966

**folder**  
9



### **Alfred Chester Papers--Index of Correspondents**

- Caetani, Marguerite--2.8
- Isherwood, Christopher, 1904- --2.8
- Kazin, Alfred, 1915- --2.8
- McCullers, Carson, 1917-1967--2.8
- Mailer, Norman--2.8
- Maxwell, William, 1908- ( *The New Yorker*)--2.8
- Pound, Ezra, 1885-1972--2.8
- Trilling, Lionel, 1905-1975 (Columbia University of New York, Department of English and Comparative Literature)--2.8
- Wilder, Thornton, 1897-1975--2.8