

Geoffrey Chaucer and
The Canterbury Tales

Chaucer and his Life

- Born in the early 1340s to a middle-class family in London
 - Father, John Chaucer, was a vintner (winemaker)
- Died October 25, 1400

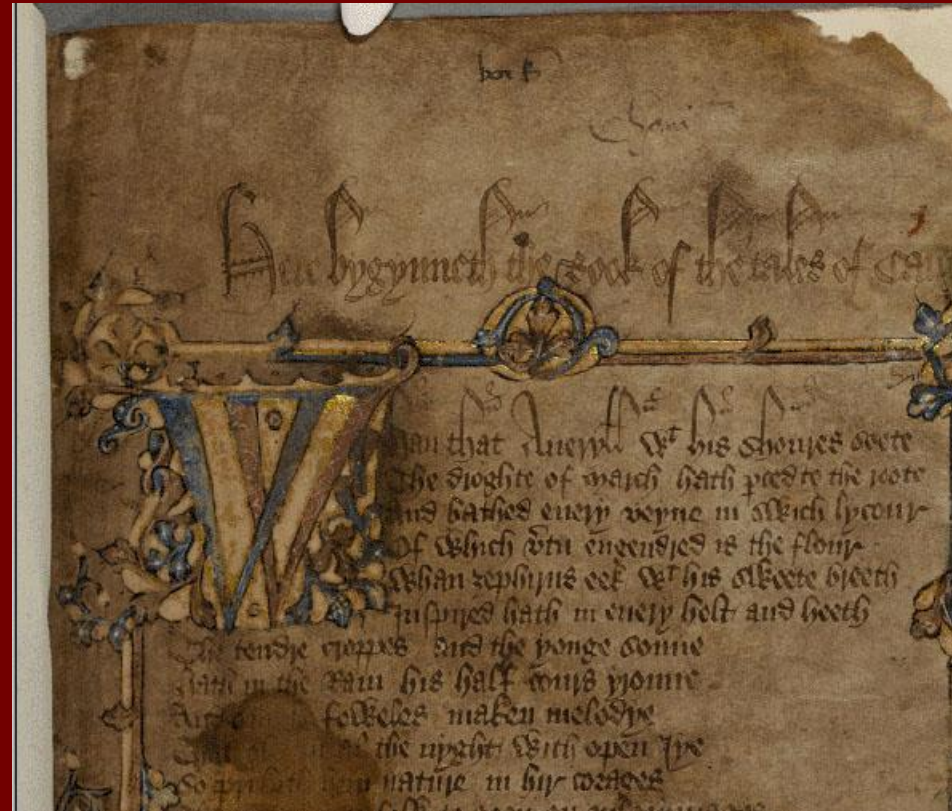


Events During Chaucer's Life

- **Black Plague killed nearly half the population of England**
- **100 Years War with France**
- **Peasants' Rebellion (remember Robin Hood)**
- **Corruption in the Church (Catholic)**
- **Power struggle between Pope and King**

Chaucer and his Language

- Father of English Poetry
- *The Canterbury Tales* is considered Chaucer's masterpiece
 - Chaucer was the first writer to use English in a major literary work
 - He spoke Middle English
 - A mixture of Old English (Anglo-Saxons) and Old French (Normans)
 - Middle English differs from Modern English in the pronunciation of the words



The Great Vowel Shift

- A massive sound change affecting the long vowels
- Vowels shifted upwards; vowel that was pronounced in one place in the mouth would be pronounced higher up in the mouth
- People used to spell words how they sounded, but now they had a more standardized written/spoken language

Position		Middle English	Modern English
FRONT VOWELS	HIGH	/i:/	---> /ai/
	MID (closed)	/e:/	---> /i:/
	LOW (open)	/æ:/	---> /e:/ (later --> /i:/)
CENTRAL VOWEL	LOW	/a:/	---> /e:/
BACK VOWELS	HIGH	/u:/	---> /au/
	MID (closed)	/o:/	---> /u:/
	LOW (open)	"au"	---> /o:/

The Great Vowel Shift

Middle English	Sounds like Modern
y, i "myne, sight"	"meet"
e, ee "me, meet, mete" (close e)	"mate"
e "begge, rede" (open e)	"bag"
a, aa "mate, maat"	"father"
u, ou "hus, hous"	"boot"
o, oo "bote, boot" (close o)	"oak"
o "lof, ok" (open o)	"bought"

Chaucer's Language Continued

- Other writers chose to either write in French (government) or Latin (church)
- It gives a lifelike and engaging picture of a cross section of society during the 1300s
- Outstanding literary achievement
 - 17,000 vivid lines of poetry



Portrait of Chaucer as a Canterbury pilgrim, from the Ellesmere manuscript of The Canterbury Tales.

The Canterbury Tales

- Chaucer write the tales around 1386
- There are two key literary techniques Chaucer incorporates
 - **A Frame Tale** – a story that provides a vehicle, or frame, for telling other stories
 - The voice of the poet-pilgrim himself, Chaucer – introduces us to other pilgrims
 - The person of the Host of the Tabard Inn
 - The conversations that occur between the tales, among the Host and the pilgrims, and the pilgrims themselves



The Canterbury Tales

- **An Estate Satire** – a literary technique used to highlight the foibles of a society and its particular people in the hopes of exacting some sort of change; it is sarcastic and sometimes often biting
 - Prioress, Monk, Friar, Clerk, Parson, Summoner and Pardoner (with the Clerk and Parson being exceptions) have lives that seem to be very removed from what might be expected in people of their calling
 - Chaucer's commentary on how he views the religious system of the medieval time period

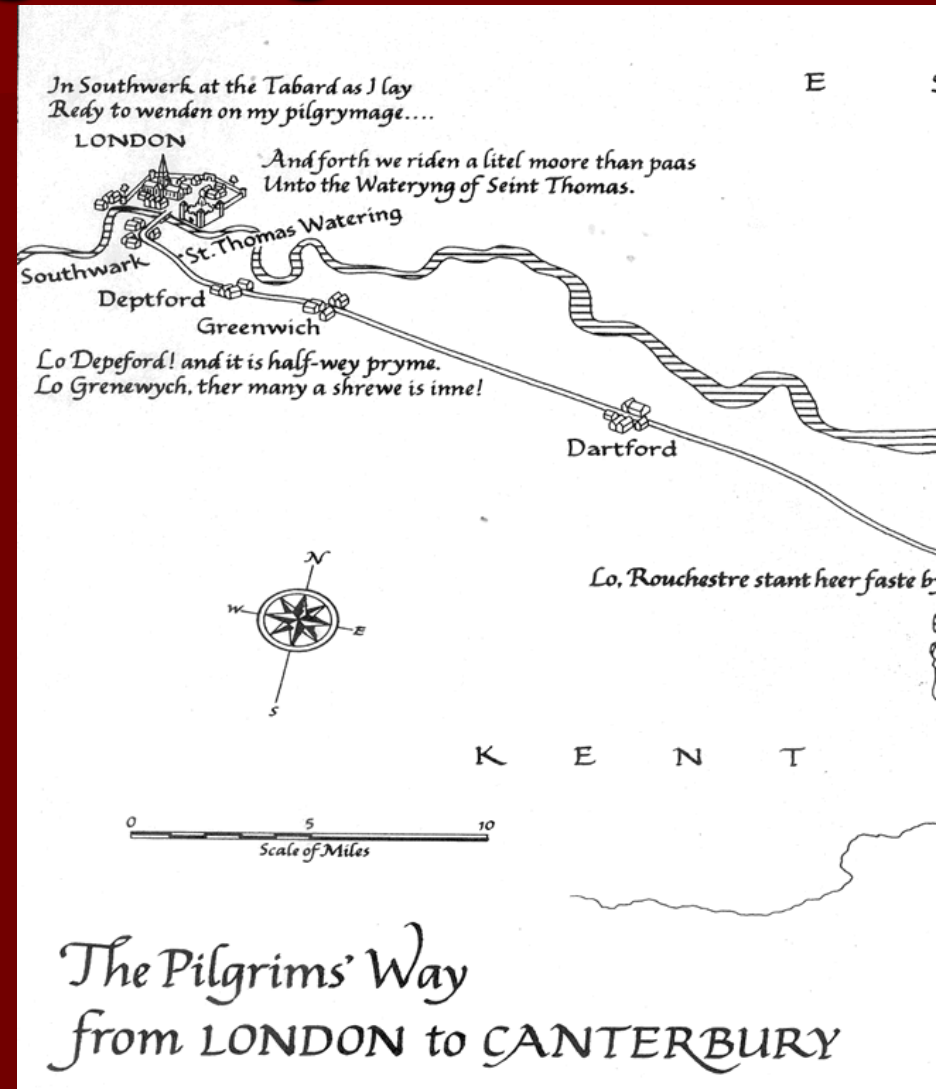
The Pilgrimage

■ Pilgrimage, a trip made to a holy place for religious reasons or just for fun and adventure

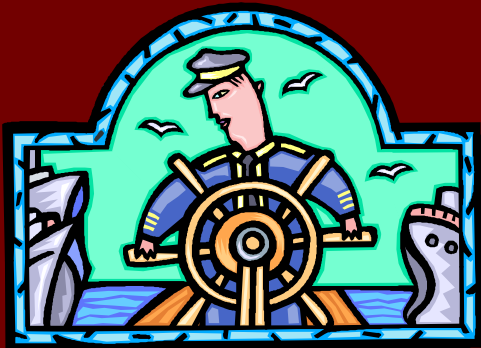
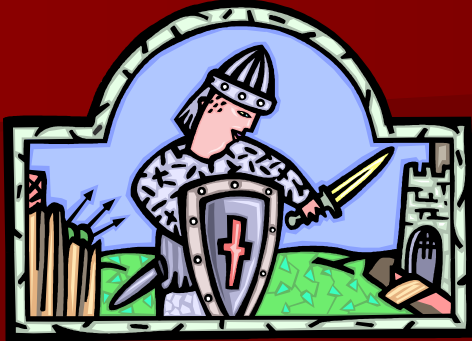
- People would journey to Sir Thomas Becket's shrine in Canterbury to pay homage to the martyr (killed by King Henry's men...but supposedly he knew nothing about it)
 - Spring is a time for religious renewal
 - Spring is also a time to get outside, have fun, take a trip, be glad you are alive. Plants grow, trees bloom, animals make babies.
- 30 Pilgrims traveled to Canterbury to see Becket's shrine at the Canterbury Cathedral in London
- While on their journey they told stories to pass the time

■ Meet at the Tabard Inn

■ Chaucer intended the pilgrims to tell four tales each (two up and two back), but he died before they were written. 24 tales in all.



The Pilgrims and Medieval Society



- The pilgrim's occupations reflect different aspects of the 14th century society
 - Feudal System
 - Knight, Squire, Yeoman, Franklin, Plowman, Miller, Reeve
 - Religious Life
 - Prioress (Nun), Monk, Friar, Clerk, Parson, Summoner, Pardoner
 - Trades and Professions
 - Merchant, Sergeant of Law, Five Tradesmen, Cook, Skipper, Doctor, Wife of Bath, Manciple, Host

Literary Terms to Know

- Fable – teaches by providing a moral at the end
- Parable – a brief story that parallels a more general moral lesson
- Exemplum – a specific example of a general rule: it is supposed to prove a point by showing the truth of some moral rule
- Verbal Irony – exists when a person says one thing while meaning another
- Situational Irony – exists when the outcome of a situation is opposite of what someone expected
- Dramatic Irony – occurs when the audience or reader is aware of something that the character does not know
- Direct Characterization – writer telling the reader what the character is like (i.e., stupid, silly, kind)
- Indirect Characterization – writer shows the reader what the character does, says, thinks, or feels and allows the reader to draw their own conclusions about what the character is like

The General Prologue 1-34

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 heeth
The tendre croppes, and the yonge
sonne
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,
And palmeres for to seken straunge
strondes,
To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry
londes;
And specially from every shires ende
Of Engelond to Caunterbury they
wende,
The hooly blisful martir for to seke,

That hem hath holpen whan that they
were seeke.
Bifil that in that seson on a day,
In Southwerk at the Tabard as I lay
Redy to wenden on my pilgrymage
To Caunterbury with ful devout
corage,
At nyght was come into that hostelrye
Wel nyne and twenty in a compaignye
Of sondry folk, by aventure yfalle
In felawshipe, and pilgrimes were
they alle,
That toward Caunterbury wolden ryde.
The chambres and the stables weren
wyde,
And wel we weren esed atte beste.
And shortly, whan the sonne was to
reste,
So hadde I spoken with hem everichon
That I was of hir felawshipe anon,
And made forward erly for to ryse,
To takeoure wey ther as I yow
devyse.