



Geoffrey Chaucer

Canterbury Tales

A Pictorial Introduction

Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-1400)



Canterbury Cathedral

The received idea of Chaucer is that he was the first English poet to use the vernacular in England after the Norman Invasion. Given the work of William Langland (“The Ploughman”), this is certainly wrong but it remains true that Chaucer produced the most extended body of work in the language formed by the merging of Saxon and French-Norman strands in English culture. Nor is it true that he was the first writer of Courtly Love in England. What distinguishes Chaucer is, in fact, the scale of his achievement – embracing major romantic narratives (*Troilus and Cressyde*, *Dream of Fair Women*), a verse-study of astronomy (*The Astrolabe*), graceful *chansons* and *ballades*, and finally *The Canterbury Tales*, a story-cycle in verse which has the monumental standing of a great cathedral though filled with very recognisable types and individuals of actual social experience. In this way the *Tales* is equally literature and documentary but also – as many readers would happily add – great poetry.

Recommended website: <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/geoffrey-chaucer>



Chaucer's England

Chaucer's England was a place of highly organised church and state institutions in which a wide space had been created for the arts and – as an extension of these – for art itself.

He himself was the son of a wine-merchant who acted as the king's butler (that is, supplied of wines). Hence Chaucer was born to court life in a servitor relation and quickly advanced to ambassadorial rank while holding high office in the medieval civil service. Ultimately he was 'Keeper of the King's Buildings' – a position of high responsibility in relation to the material capital of the realm and no sinecure. A brief look at the cathedrals of the period will serve to show the scale of contemporary imagination and ambitions.

Salisbury



York



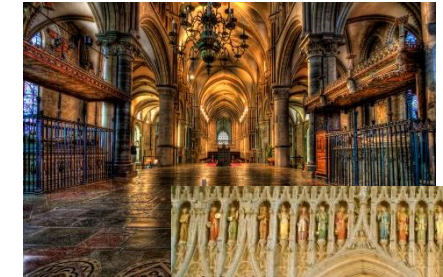
Wells Cathedral (above) was built over 75 years – from 1175 to 1250 – and provided the standard of English Gothic for hundreds of years to come.

Within a hundred years of the Norman Invasion of 1066, most of the great cathedrals of England were begun – many replacing earlier Romanesque buildings of the Anglo-Saxon period. English Gothic architecture – often called 'perpendicular' – is distinguished by its use of lancet windows, its relative freedom from decoration. Though at first a form of economy, this was arguably a mark of national temperament combining the pragmatic mentality of the Saxons and the idealistic tendency of the French.



< The gallery of Gloucester Cathedral – familiar from Harry Potter – is something of an exception.

Interiors



Gloucester



'The life so short, the craft so long to learn' (*Parlement of Fowles*), is no throwaway line in Chaucer. It typifies his commitment to poetry as a central part in civilised existence during the early-English Renaissance and also reflects his intense awareness of the material aspect of the culture growing up all around him.

Lincoln Cathedral – Imagining Social Space

Lincoln cathedral was commissioned by William the Conqueror in 1092. Over the ensuing two centuries it had an eventful history – including destruction by earthquake, the collapse of the great spire which made it for some time the tallest building in the world in 1237, and the now-infamous story of ‘Little Hugh’ dating from 1255.



Lincoln Cathedral



Modern seating in Lincoln Cathedral belies the fact that such buildings were conceived as symbols of ‘the Body of Christ’ in which the King, nobles, commoners (merchants and free-holders) and peasants formed the head, arms, hands, legs and feet of the entire realm. In this symbolic space, the entire nation could see itself as a unity of parts in which very individual had a equal spiritual nature but a very different social status.



The Lincoln Imp

“Little Saint Hugh”

In 1255, when the body of a missing boy of eight was found in a well in Lincoln, the Jews of the town were accused of torture and murder – an imagined crime for which eighteen were hanged. Hugh was seen as a martyr and the Cathedral was thus turned into a place of pilgrimage. Chaucer tells the story in “The Prioress's Tale”. Today, the shrine of Hugh in Lincoln Cathedral has an additional plaque decrying the ‘trumped up’ charges against English Jews – placed there in the centenary year 1955.

Canterbury Cathedral



Canterbury, near London, is the seat of the Primate of the Anglican Church – that is, the English Episcopalian ('Catholic') Church whose Head is the ruling Monarch. It's place in the *Canterbury Tales* is due to the reverence paid to St Thomas à Becket, the archbishop who was assassinated there apparently on the instructions of Henry II (Edward the Confessor) in 1170.

His killers, who attacked him the Cathedral where he held the office of Archbishop, believed themselves to have been given the task by the King who notoriously declared, 'Who will rid me of this troublesome priest?' – but later professed that it was said in irritation and not with the intent of causing his death. As a loyal adherent of the Vatican Papacy, he was canonised shortly after his death.

The growing veneration of Thomas's memory led to the establishment of a pilgrimage to Canterbury in the century after his death. Canterbury was extended and then rebuilt to accommodate the pilgrims, and after the Reformation it became the centre of the Anglican Church – that is, the Reformed Episcopalian Church of England whose head is the ruling monarch and whose religious tradition is a modified version of Roman Catholicism – adapted to suit the Lutheran theology of its leaders and the newly-national function bestowed on it by Henry VIII.

Thomas a Becket came from a Norman English background not unlike Chaucer's. His father, though connected with a noble family in Normandy, made his fortune as a London merchant and property-owner. Thomas was educated in a London grammar school, later in Paris and finally in Pisa. He was appointed Lord Chancellor by Edward II in 1155 and ordained Archbishop of Catherbury in 1162. Up to then he had been an unswerving servnt of the King and even acted as foster-father to the young Prince Harry (Henry) who declared that he received more love from him that from his own father.

Once he became Archbishop, however, Thomas began to defend the power of the Church against that of the Crown. After a public confrontation in 1167 Court he fled to France but returned in 1170 to participate in a supposed reconciliation. Henry's infamous remark caused the knight Reginald FitzUrse and others to assassinate him and he was afterwards canonised by Pope Alexander III. Henry was compelled to humble himself at his tomb. After some time in hiding, the knights travelled to Rome and were sent on to the Holy Land as Crusaders by Alexander III, to remain there for 13 years. During the Reformation, Henry VIII ordered the destruction of the shrine to St Thomas and official veneration ceased.

The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer

The lyfe so short, the craft so long to lerne"

b. London c.1343, son of John Chaucer, a wine merchant and deputy to the king's butler, his wife being Agnes Copton, a commercial heiress in London.

1340s – Chaucer's education included French, Latin, and possibly Italian - all suited to his court occupations and diplomacy abroad.

1359 - taken prisoner at siege of Rheims in Normandy and ransomed by King Edward III, 1360.

1366 - married Philipa de Roet, lady-in-waiting to Edward III's wife.

1367 - received life pension ('a gallon of wine' per diem) and began diplomatic travels for the king.

1370 - read or heard recited the *Le roman de la rose* by Guillaume de Lorris – the 13th-century masterpiece of Courtly Love.

1373 – probably met Boccaccio and Petrarch on official travels in Italy.

1374 - appointed Controller of Customs in London.

1377 – Richard II succeeds Edward III; Chaucer remains in court.

1379-85: worked on *Anelida and Arcite* (c.1379), *Parlement of Foules* (c.1382), and *Troilus and Criseyde* (c.1385).



Chaucer's Monument
Westminster Abbey

1386 - elected Justice of the Peace and Member of Parliament for Kent.

1387 - suffered the loss of his wife.

1388 onwards - wrote *The Canterbury Tales* commencing with Prologue which promised 120 stories of which 29 were completed.

1389 - appointed Clerk of Works at Palace of Westminster.

1399 – Richard II deposed and killed; Chaucer no longer appears in court records.

1400 - died 25 Oct. in Kent; buried in Westminster Abbey.



17th century portrait of Chaucer

The Renaissance background

While Chaucer can well be viewed as an English writer working in an insular tradition, he is also a European writer who was alert to intellectual developments on the continent – particularly in Italy, where his travels put him in contact with such leading figures of the Early Italian Renaissance as Petrarch and Boccaccio.

In 1342 he undertook a diplomatic mission to Italy of behalf of Edward III - who had earlier defaulted on his massive debts to Italian bankers including Boccaccio's father's company, the Bardi, when financing his war against France which went so badly wrong. It was probably in this period that Chaucer met Boccaccio, then living in Florence [Firenze].

Central to the humanist impulse of the Italian Renaissance was the revelation of the expressive power of Italian vernacular literature – called the *lingua volgare* by Dante - and the discovery of naturalistic portraiture by Fra Angelico, Fra Lippo Lippi , and others engaged in painting frescoes (using egg-tempora on plaster) in the 'convents' or monasteries of Florence.

It is this naturalism which informs Chaucer's portraits of typical 'pilgrims' in the Canterbury Tales where, for the first time in English literature, the characters of ordinary people take precedence over heroes and saints and the common stock of literary composition.

The background image shows the Duomo – Florence's great cathedral designed by Arnolfo di Cambio and Filippo Brunelleschi – from the veranda of the European University Institute (EUI) located in a great villa outside that city which purportedly still holds a tree under which Dante liked to sit.

Boccaccio & the Early Italian Renaissance

Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-75) was intended for banking by his father, a successful member of that profession, but chose law instead. In that capacity he served as a counsellor to princes and princesses of the Neapolitan nobility and it was in Naples that he began his career as a poet with *Il Teseide* (1339-40) and *Il Filostrato* (1340) – a love-story later used by Chaucer. Boccaccio returned to his native Florence in 1341 and was present during the outbreak of the plague that provided the context for his *Decameron* - a cycle of stories which is taken to be the primary influence on Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

Boccaccio wrote verse and prose in the Italian vernacular rather than scholarly Latin and, in this, he followed Dante who adopted the “*lingua volgare*”, replacing Latin as a literary language. (The dialect of choice was Florentine.) In October 1350, when Boccaccio was asked to host Francesco Petrarch on his arrival in Florence, there sprang up a strong friendship between the younger and the older man.

An illustration for the *Decameron* in which young nobles of Florence retire to the country during the plague of 1340. Boccaccio began the book in 1349.

Boccaccio called Petrarch his teacher and 'magister' and followed his advice in beginning a serious study of Classical Greek and Latin Literature. Later in 1351, Boccaccio was sent to Padua to invite Petrarch to take a chair Florence University - an invitation which was kindly refused. Petrarch's influence led Boccaccio to write *Genealogia deorum gentilium* (1360) – a 'genealogy of the pagan gods' - an essential reference work of the Renaissance prefaced by an extended defense of ancient literature and thought against its Christian critics. It appears that Petrarch also turned Boccaccio from the liberal humanism of the *Decameron* to a more ascetic frame of mind reflected in his later works such as *De casibus virorum illustrium* (1355–74) and *De mulieribus claris* (1361–1375). In 1359 Boccaccio met Pope Innocent VI and appears to have taken holy orders. He died in 1375 in Certaldo, the town near Florence where he had been born, apparently of obesity-related disorders.

Recommended: https://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/dweb/boccaccio/life1_en.php



Boccaccio (Uffizi Gallery)



“Banquet in the Pine Forest” (from *The Decameron*) by Sandro Botticelli, c.1482.

Character Portraits of the Early Renaissance: Fra Filippo Lippi (1406-69)

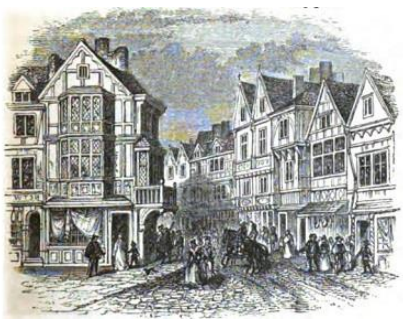


Along with Fra Angelico, Fra Lippo Lippo was active in the Convent of San Marco (Florence) painting the astonishing frescos which epitomise the new figural humanism of the Italian Renaissance in the age of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio. Unrivalled delicacy of touch gave his images of Christian saints and contemporaries – including fellow monks - a sense of intimate understanding of their feelings not seen in art before.

Imagining the Pilgrims



The figure of a pilgrim in the Ellesmere Manuscript is usually thought to be a portrait of Chaucer.



Southwark in a Victorian engraving

Contemporary and later version of the pilgrims invariably show them in conversational mode – and, while the stories are told by each in turn with only occasional interruptions, it is the image of the loquacious travellers which sticks in the reader's mind.



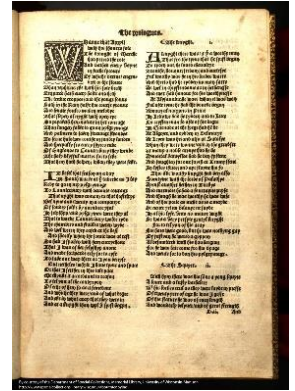
Similarly, the identity of the pilgrims – knight and squire, monk, pardoner, summoner, merchant, shipman, Wife of Bath and many more including the Host of the inn at Southwark to which the pilgrims wend on their return are all minutely known to readers and have passed into national lore.



The Canterbury Tales – Text and Context



Chaucer's own manuscript of the *Tales* no longer exists but several copies were made in the years shortly after his death, often giving the tale-groups in a different order. Of these the Ellesmere Manuscript, written and illustrated for the Earl of Oxford between 1400-1404, is by far the most elaborate, being heavily ornamented [as below]. For four centuries it belonged to the family of Thomas Egerton (Lord Ellesmere) before being sold to the Huntington Library in California, in 1917. The Ellesmere MS contains all of the extant fragments in the order usually followed by modern editions.



Caxton's edition of 1475

Ellesmere codex with illuminated calf-skin pages: Knight and Monk



A Complete Translation into Modern English

by Ronald L. Ecker and Eugene J. Crook

<http://english.fsu.edu/canterbury/general.html>

Here bygynneth the Book of the Tales of Caunterbury

Whan that April, 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 breath 5
 Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
 The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
 Hath in the Ram his halfe cours yronne,
 And smale foweles maken melodie,
 That slepen al the nyght with open eye- 10
 (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; 15
 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.

GEOFFREY CHAUCER

from *Troilus and Criseyde* (Book One, lines 1–42)

The double sorwe of Troilus to tellen,
That was the kyng Priamus sone of Troye,
In lovyng, how his adventures fellen
Fro wo to wele, and after out of joie,
My purpos is, er that I parte fro ye.
Thesiphone, thou help me for 'tendite
This woful vers, that wepen as I write.

To thee clepe I, thou goddesse of torment,
Thou cruwel Furie, sorwyng evere in peyne;
Help me, that am the sorwful instrument
That helpeth loveres; as I kan, to pleyne.
For wel sit it, the sothe for to seyne,
A woful wight to han a drery feere,
And, to a sorwful tale, a sory chere.

For I, that God of Loves servantz serve,
Ne dar to Love, for myn unliklynesse,
Preyen for speed, al sholde I therefore sterve,
So fer am I from his help in derknesse.
But natheles, if this may don gladnesse
To any lovere, and his cause availle,
Have he my thonk, and myn be this travaille!

But ye loveres, that bathen in gladnesse,
If any drope of pyte in yow be,
Remembreth yow on passed hevynesse

“... Before I part from you, my purpose is to [...] endite* this sorrowful tale – I who am weeping even as I write.”



The 12th-c. poet Chretien de Troye founded the tradition of Courtly Love as a subject of poetry based on Celtic legends of King Arthur's Court.

Typically, the stories of the genre concern young lovers who cannot marry under the prevailing social conditions and whose love is therefore *idealised*.

Whether the troubadours who sang these songs were 'wicked' or 'inspiring' fuelled a social debate that lasted many generations but, whatever their moral state, respectable authors such as Chaucer caught the romantic 'bug' from them.

*to endite = to write. This should read *t'endite*

That ye han felt, and on the adversite
Of othere folk, and thynketh how that ye
Han felt that Love dorste yow displese,
Or ye han wonne hym with to gret an ese.

And preieth for hem that ben in the cas
Of Troilus, as ye may after here,
That Love hem bryng in hevne to solas,
And ek for me preieth to God so dere
That I have myght to shewe, in som manere,
Swich peyne and wo as Loves folk endure,
In Troilus unsely aventure.

And biddeth ek for hem that ben despeired
In love that nevere nyl recovered be,
And ek for hem that falsly been apeired
Thorough wikked tonges, be it he or she;
Thus biddeth God, for his benignite,
So graunte hem sone owt of this world to pace,
That ben despeired out of Loves grace.

Mark Strand & Eavan Boland, *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms* (NY: Norton 2000), p.141 [Chap.: "The Stanza"].

“Troilus & Criseyde” by Geoffrey Chaucer
Trans. into modern English

Book 1: Opening

To tell the double sorrow in his love that Troilus, Son of King Priam of Troy, had, how his lot passed from woe to joy and afterwards to woe again, this is my purpose before I part from you. Tisiphone, help me to compose these dolorous verses, that drop like tears from my pen.

To you I call, goddess of anguish, cruel Fury, ever sorrowing in pain; help me, the sorrowful instrument, that as well as I can help lovers to wail. For a dreary comrade is fitting to a woeful creature; and a sorry manner, to a sorrowful history.

For I, the servant of Love's servants, dare not beg Love to assist me, though I may die, so unpleasing am I, so far in the dark distance from him. But if my verse may bring gladness to any lover and assist him with his lady, may the labor go to me and the thanks to Love.

But you lovers who bathe in bliss, if there is any drop of pity in you, remember your own past heaviness, and other people's adversity, and think how you too have felt Love's displeasure (or you have won him too easily).

And pray for those who are in the case of Troilus, as you shall hear, that Love may bring them to the heaven of fruition; and pray also for me to dear God that I may have strength to show in Troilus' luckless lot some of the pain and woe as Love's people endure.

And pray also for those who are in despair and may never be healed, and for those who are hurt by slanderous tongues, pray God of His mercy to grant them soon to pass out of this world that are in despair of Love's grace.

And pray also for those in joy, that God may grant them always good continuance and might do so to please their ladies that it may be honor and pleasure to Love's deity.

For so I hope best to profit my soul, praying for Love's servants, writing their woe and living in charity, and having pity of them as if I were their own brother. Now listen with good will, for now I go straight to my matter, where you may hear the double sorrows of Troilus' love for Criseyde, and how she forsook him before she died.

[...]

Troilus and Cressyde

Criseyde, a young widow in the Trojan War, is wooed by Troilus and they fall madly in love. When Criseyde's father Calchas changes sides and calls her to join him in the Greek camp she finds that she cannot get back to Troy as she promised Troilus she would. After a time she gives up hope and marries a Greek who woos her. On learning of her betrayal, Troilus dies of a broken heart.

The poem is unambiguous about her betrayal and her father's treacherous behaviour while, in addition, it is made clear that she was procured for Troilus by Pandarus, a kind of society pimp - hence the word 'to pander'. In this it is distinct from *Romeo and Juliet* or any story of the type in which the woman in the love-affair is above reproach. It is solely the fickleness of women – a common theme - which leads to Troilus's demise.

“Troilus and Criseyde” – which occupying two full books - is set against the backdrop of Homer's *Iliad* and has something of its epic scale. It differs in its close attention to the characters' inner worlds of thought and feeling and was the first work of any length in English to take this "inside-out" approach - though it had Boccaccio's *Filostrato* as a model.

The poem is written in Rime Royal* – a stately metre that serves ideally to convey both the events of a protracted narrative together with the sentiments of the characters and the poet himself.

*Rime Royal was widely used in Renaissance England and sometimes elsewhere. It is probably so-named because it was employed by the literary king, James I of Scotland in his Chaucerian poem *The Kingis Quhair* [i.e., *Choir*]. It is Sir Thomas Wyatt's stanza in “They flee from me who sometime did me seek”.

The Characters of the Canterbury Tales

The narrator

It is a natural assumption that Chaucer is the narrator of the *Tales* though, in fact, the narrator is himself a character whose attitude to the others may not be identical with the poet's. Larry Benson's appraisal [below] can act as a useful guide to this question of the identity of the author of the greatest story-book in the English language. Notice that the Chaucer is praised by the Man of Law in the prologue to his tale, where he says:



Chaucer the Pilgrim
(Ellesmere MS)

I kan right now no thrifty tale seyn
That Chaucer, thogh he kan but lewdedly
On metres and on ryming craftily,
Has seyde hem in swich Englissh as he kan
Of olde tye, as knoweth many a man;
And if he have noght seyde him, leve brother,
In o book, he hath seyde hem in another.
For he hath toold of loveris up and doun
Mo than Ovide made of mencion
In his Epistoles, that been full olde.
What sholde I tellen hem, syn they been tolde?

I can't recall a pithy tale just now
But Chaucer, clumsy as he is at times
In metre and in cunning use of rhymes,
Has told them in such English, I suppose,
As he commands; for everybody knows
That if has not told them, my dear brother,
In one book, he has told them in another.
He has told more of lovers up and down
Than even Ovid, honoured with renown
In his Epistles, which are very old.
Why tell them all again since they've been told?

Trans. by Neville Coghill (Penguin, 1951; 2003)

Critical commentary

The most fascinating of the pilgrims is Geoffrey Chaucer himself. He is never described, and we come to know him only indirectly from the tone of his voice, his words and actions, and the comments of others. We know him thus only as a literary character – the pilgrim-narrator of the *Tales*, a cheerful and self-effacing fellow, filled with admiration for the others in his company. This is not necessarily a faithful self-portrait, and critics, disturbed by the apparent naïveté of a narrator who ignores the most obvious faults of most of the pilgrims, customarily distinguish between Chaucer the pilgrim and Chaucer the man. The pilgrim accepts the Prioress on her own terms and even admires her; the man could not have ignored her serious violations of religious rules. The pilgrim seems amused by the Shipman's villainies; the man would have condemned him them as crimes.

The distinction is useful, though Chaucer the man may have been more complex than this formulation makes him seem. Chaucer the man, the successful courtier and busy government official could not have been naïve; George Lyman Kittredge long ago observed that a naïve controller of Customs would have been "monstrous". But a rigidly moralizing Controller of Customs, who had to deal every day with cunning merchants and thieving shipmen, would have been impossible, and a courtier unable to wink at others' faults would not have lasted long in a court less embroiled in intrigues and jealousies than the one that Chaucer knew. Perhaps Chaucer the pilgrim – cheerful, tolerant, but no fool – is closer than has been thought to Chaucer the man, who may have even relished an occasional rascal.

Chaucer, however, eludes even such a simple critical formulation as that. As both a pilgrim and a writer he remains discreetly in the background, allowing his characters to speak for themselves. [...]

The Characters of the Canterbury Tales

The knight

Ful worthy was he in his lordes were, / And thereto hadde he riden, no man ferre, / As wel as Christendom as in hethenesse, / And ever honoured for his worthinesse. [...] He never yet no vileyne ne sayde / In all his lyf unto no maner wight. / He was a verray, parfit gentil knight.

The squire

Al ful of fresshe floures, whyte and reede; / Syngynge he was, or floytynge, al the day, / He was as fressh as is the monthe of May. [...] So noote he lovede, that my nyghtyrtale / He slepte namoore than dooth a nyghtyngale.

The prioress

Ful weel she soong the service dyvyne, / Entuned in hir nose ful seemly, / And French she spake ful faire and fetishly, / After the schole of Stratford-atte-Bowe, / For Frenssh of Parys was to hir unknowe. [...] In curtesie was set ful mucho her list.

The monk

What sholde he studie, and make hymselfen wood, / Upon a book in cloystre alwey to poure, / Or swynken with his hands and laboure, / As Austyn bit? How shal the world be served? Lat Austyn have his swynk to hym reserved!

The clerk

For he hadde geten hym yet no benefice, / Ne was so wordly for to have office. / For hym was levere have at his beddes heed / Twenty books, clad blak or reed, / Of Aristotle and philosophie, / Than robes riche [...] But al that he was a philosopher, / Yet hadde he but litel gold in coffer[.]

The lawyer

For his science, and his heigh renown, / Of fees and robes hadde he many oon. / So greet a purchasour was nowhere noon: / Al was fee simple to hym in effect, [...] Nowher so bisy a man as he there nas, / And yet he semed bisier than he was.

The franklin

An householdere, and a greet, was he; / Seint Julian was he in his countree. / His breed, his ale, was always after oon, / A better envyned man was nowhere noon. / [...] It snewed in his hous with mete and drynke, / Of alle deyntees that men koude thynke. [...] Wo was his cook, but if his sauce were poynaunt and sharp[.]

The Characters of the Canterbury Tales

- The shipman** Ful many a draughte of wyn had he ydrawe / Fro Bordeaux-ward, whil that the chapman sleep. / Of nyce conscience took he no keep. / If he faught, and hadde the hyder hond, / By water he sent hem hoom to every lond. / [...] Hardy he was, and wys to undertake; / With manya tempest hadde his berd been shake.
- The physician** He knew the cause of everich maladie, / Were it hoot, or coold, or moste, or drye, / And where they engendred, and of what humour. / [...] Ful redy hadde he hise apothecaries / To sende hym drogges and his letuaries, / For ech of hem made oother for to wynne/ Hir friendship nas nat new to bigynne.
- The wife of Bath** Boold was hir face, and fair, and reed of hewe. / She was a worthy womman al hir lyve: / Housbondes at chirche dore she hadde five, / Withouthen oother compaignye in youthe - / But thereof nedeth not to speke nowthe. [...] Gat-tothed was she, smoothly for to saye.
- The parson** This noble ensample to his sheep he yaf, / That first he wroghte, and afterward he taught. / Out of the gospel he tho wordes caught, / And this figure he added eek thereto, / That if gold ruste, what shal iren do? [...] And shame it is, if a prest take keep, / A shiten shepherde and a clene sheep.
- The miller** He was short-sholdred, brood, a thikke knarre, / There was no dore he nolde heve of hare, / Or breke it at a rennyng with his heed. [...] He was a janglere and a goliardeys, / And that was moost of synne and harlotries. / Well could he stelen corn, and tollen tries; And yet he had a thombe of gold, pardee.
- The pardoner** That straight was comen fro the court of Rome [...] Ne was there swich another pardoner; / For in his male he had a pilwe-beer, / Which he seye was Our Lady veyl: He seyde he hadde a gobet of the seyl / That Seint Peter hadde, when that he wente / Upon the see, til Jesus Crist hym hente [...]
- The host** Greet chiere made oure Hoost us everichon, / And to the soper sette he us anon. / He served us with vitaille at the beste; / Strong was the wyn, and wel to drynke us leste. [...] Amorwe whan that day bigan to sprynge, / Up roos oure Hoost, and was our aller cok, / And gadreded us to gidre in a flok, / And worth we riden [..] And there oure Hoose bigan his horse areste / And seyde, "Lordynges, herketh if you leste.["]

The Knight's Tale

The Knight tells a tale of Palamon and Arcite from Boccaccio's version of the story of Theseus's daughter Emilia (*Teseida delle Nozze d'Emilia*) based on Greek myth. The story concerns two young knights who are captured by Theseus during his war against Creon and held in a tower from which they can see the princess Emilia in her garden – with whom they both fall in love and over whom they quarrel.

Theseus stops them fighting and puts them in charge of a troop of 100 soldiers each to conduct joust or 'tourney' to decide who will have her as a bride. Palamon is wounded in the joust and Arcite therefore wins, but Arcite is then thrown from his horse and – dying – he tells Emilia that Palamon will make a perfect chivalrous husband.

Chaucer's treatment gives little of the classical epic war chronicle and concentrates on the personal and romantic relations between the brother-knights and the princess Emily. The Knight who tells the tale interpolates his own ideas about chivalry – a cultural idea which began with horsemanship (Fr. *cheval*, 'horse') and graduated to romantic love – and his wider ideas about the Christian ideals that sustain us in our earthly life. This is very much what we might expect from a 'perfect, gentle knight', as he called in the Prologue of the *Tales*.

Less expected is his account of King Theseus's speech about the nature of the universe considered as a celestial system in which the "First Mover" is represented as the source of all order which individuals on earth must honour and obey.

In Aristotle's philosophy – especially the *Metaphysics (De Anima)* – the First Mover is an Aristotelian concept which, in Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, became identical with the Christian deity. Chaucer translated Boethius in verse and the Knight's preface is sometimes taken as an expression of his own philosophy, though the limited vision of the Knight suggests that there might be an element of self-parody in Chaucer's redaction of Boethius in this place.



*And in a tower, in anguish and distress,
Palamon and Arcita, day and night,
Dwelt whence no gold might help them to take
flight.**

*Thus passed by year by year and day by day,
Till it fell out, upon a morn in May,
That Emily, far fairer to be seen
Than is the lily on its stalk of green,
And fresher than is May with flowers new
(For with the rose's colour strove her hue,
I know not which was fairer of the two),
Before the dawn, as was her wont to do,
She rose and dressed her body for delight;
For May will have no sluggards of the night.*

*They are hostages but cannot afford a ransom.

Recommended websites

http://www.canterburytales.org/canterbury_tales.html

This is a full internet edition of the Canterbury Tales which gives you an opportunity to explore the whole poem. The website is controlled by a drop down menu giving access to each Prologue and each tale and the Modern Translation is the American classic of 1934 by J. U. Nicholson.

<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/geoffrey-chaucer>

A good general introduction to the life of the poet from the reputable Poets.org website. There is a link to a copy of the General Prologue in the original Middle English with modern literation (i.e., letters th for þ [thorn]).

<http://english.fsu.edu/canterbury/>

The Canterbury Tales translated into Modern English by Ronald Ecker and Eugene Crook . The General Prologue in this version is the text which we are using in class. It can be found at ../General.html.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Canterbury_Tales

Wikipedia's pages on the Canterbury Tales – marked by good scholarship and an accessible style. You can reach articles on the individual tales by each character in the Prologue from this page, with excellent summaries and commentaries on each.

http://www.canterburytales.org/canterbury_tales.html

Here is a database that allows you to read the Prologue and the Tales either in the original Middle English or in Modern English. There is a lively modern translation – “So Nature pricks them on to ramp and rage” – I don't know who by.

<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=cme;idno=CT>

F. N. Robinson's 1957 edition - Michigan online [of private use of scholars]. Robinson's great edition is the basis of the Riverside Chaucer, ed. Larry D. Benson (1987) which is the standard textbook for Chaucer studies today.

<http://englishcomplit.unc.edu/chaucer/chttexts.htm>

Further Listing of Chaucer's Works Online at Univ. of North Carolina

Recommended websites (cont.)

Further Listing of Chaucer's Works Online at Univ. of North Carolina

<http://englishcomplit.unc.edu/chaucer/chttexts.htm>

Michigan University Library – A Digital Collection of Middle English Texts

<http://www.hti.umich.edu/c/cme/>

<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/c/cme/ASH2689.0001.001/1:3.1?rgn=div2;view=toc>

Chaucer Society Edition of Petworth MS (ed. Frederick Furnivall, 1896)