

**Chaucer and the Canterbury Tales**  
**Dr. Brian McFadden**  
**British Literature I**  
**ENGL 2323**

**Chaucer's life**

- c. 1342?-1400
- family were vintners; well-to-do commoners
- well-educated - good background in classics, theology, music, languages and lit

**Chaucer and royalty**

- minor retainer, perhaps page, in household of Elizabeth Countess of Ulster (1357 record)
- 1359 - soldier with Prince Lionel vs. France - captured, ransomed for £16
- 1366 Charles of Navarre - safe-conduct pass
- also marries Philippa de Roet, lady-in-waiting to mistress of John of Gaunt, the Duke of Lancaster
- 1367 C. and Philippa listed as members of royal household; may have studied law at Lincoln's Inn
- 1368 - passport - sent overseas as messenger

**Chaucer's diplomatic career**

- 1369 - overseas as soldier w/Gaunt in Picardy
- 1370 passport overseas - mission unclear
- 1372-73 Genoa to negotiate trade openings
- 1374 Edward III grants him a gallon of wine per day until his death in 1377; Richard II lets it become a £20 annuity
- 1376-77 sent abroad for "secret business of the king"
- 1378 - sent to Milan to maintain ties w/England
- 1380 - accused of "raptus" - £10 settlement

**Chaucer's domestic career**

- 1374 - named comptroller of the customs for wool imports
- 1382 - customs responsibility expanded to wine imports
- 1385 - appoints a permanent deputy and moves to Kent (mention of his poetry in contemporary lit)
- 1386 Knight of the Shire (MP) for Kent; probably starts *Canterbury Tales* about this time
- 1389 Clerk of the King's Works
- 1391 Forester at North Petherton

**Historical Context**

- Several flareups of the Hundred Years' War
- 1348-49 - outbreak of bubonic plague
- 1351 Statute of Laborers - froze wages and restricted movement to other manors
- 1376 Good Parliament - attempt to restrain royal power and clean up corruption in Edward's court

- 1377 Edward dies; succession of Richard II
- 1381 - Peasant's Revolt
- 1380's - John Wycliffe - popular heresies, reforms in church
- 1388 Lords Appellant execute some royal officials and take effective control of England
- 1399 John of Gaunt dies; Richard seizes property and is deposed by Henry of Lancaster (Henry IV)
  - Sets off the War of the Roses

### **The Canterbury Tales**

- c. 1386-1400; never completed
- 24 tales of possible 124, plus General Prologue
- 83 MSS either partial or complete
  - 10 complete or fragmentary in the US
  - Austin, UT Library 143 and 46 (partial)
- Ellesmere MS is perhaps the most famous - Huntington Library in San Marino, CA

### **The General Prologue**

- Estates satire
  - comments on the nobility, the clergy, and the commons, the three estates
  - reflection of social changes and rise of “middle class”
- Types of people Chaucer had probably met in his different jobs over his career

### **The Nobility**

- The Knight
- The Squire
- The Yeoman - a commoner, but in the service of the Knight and the Squire

### **The Clergy**

- The Prioress
  - three priests with her and a nun for a secretary
- The Monk
- The Friar

### **The Commons**

- Merchant
- Clerk
- Man of Law
- Franklin
- Five Guildsmen
  - The Cook
- Shipman
- Physician
- Wife of Bath
- Parson
- Plowman

- Miller
- Manciple
- Reeve
- Summoner
- Pardoner
- Harry Bailly, the host