

**Geoffrey Chaucer
and
The Canterbury Tales**

Early Life

- Born c. 1340
- Son of a prosperous wine merchant
- In mid teens, he was placed in the service of the Countess of Ulster so he could obtain more education and be schooled in court and society life
- Thus, he would have learned Latin and some Greek as well as perhaps some French and Italian



Early Life (cont.)

- In, 1359 he was captured by the French at the seige of Reims during the Hundred Years' War while serving in English army; ransomed by King Edward III a year later
- Chaucer joined the royal household and became a trusted messenger and minor diplomat



As a Royal Messenger

- Chaucer was frequently sent to the continent on secret business for the King.
- Some of these trips were to Italy where he became acquainted with the works of the great Italian authors: Boccaccio, Dante, Petrarch
 - These 3 were the greatest Italian writers of the early Renaissance period
- More about these 3 important authors a bit later!

Other Jobs Chaucer Held...and Learned From...

- Controller of Customs on Wools, Skins and Hides for the Port of London
 - Here he would meet many types of businessmen, sailors, travelers city folk and common laborers
- Clerk of the King's Works
 - In charge of construction and repairs affecting the royal residences; here he would meet many guildsmen as well as court officials
- Deputy Forester of the King's Forests
 - Away from the city, he met peasants, foresters, local clergy and other country folk
- Representative of the Shire of Kent in Parliament
 - Here he met the rich, the influential and the upper middle class as well as the higher ranking church officials



In *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer wrote about the people he had met along the way. If you were doing the same thing today, think about the variety of types of people you know and have encountered.

Describe them by:

- Their job
- The type and color of their clothing
- Their “accessories” (jewelry, pets, other portables)
- The way they act
- Their income
- Their “secrets”
- Their status in society as a whole
- The way they speak / their slang or accent
- Their mode of transportation
- **This is called characterization!**

Chaucer's Plan ...

- A Prologue followed by a series of stories and linking dialogues and commentaries
- Each character would tell 2 stories going and 2 stories coming home (making this what kind of story?)
 - uh... coming home from WHERE?
- Canterbury of course. After all, his work IS called : *The Canterbury Tales*





London

**Edenbridge
(Hever Castle)**

Canterbury

Dover

Brighton

But why go to Canterbury?



One Answer: Religion



- Canterbury has always been an important religious center in England.
- St. Augustine (seen in stained glass from the Canterbury Cathedral) was sent by Pope Gregory the Great to establish the Catholic faith in the country
- Religion played an important part in medieval life.

Why was religion important?

- It's the Middle Ages
 - Plague
 - Warfare
 - High Infant Mortality Rate
 - Short Life Expectancy
 - ...and if you were a peasant, you lived your whole life in harsh conditions
- About the best thing that you had to look forward to was dying and going to heaven

**England was divided among very
strict class/economic lines**



**Thus, heaven was often described as
a white shining castle in the sky.**

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Also, Canterbury was a Pilgrimage Site

People of all classes went on pilgrimages to holy sites to ask for help with medical, financial or other problems.



The Shrine of St. Thomas à Becket



Becket was a trusted adviser and friend of King Henry II. Henry named Becket Archbishop of Canterbury.





Becket's outspoken style angered the King. One day, Henry complained, "Will no one rid me of this meddlesome priest?" Three knights rode to Canterbury where they found Becket at the altar of Canterbury Cathedral.

Becket was murdered at the altar.



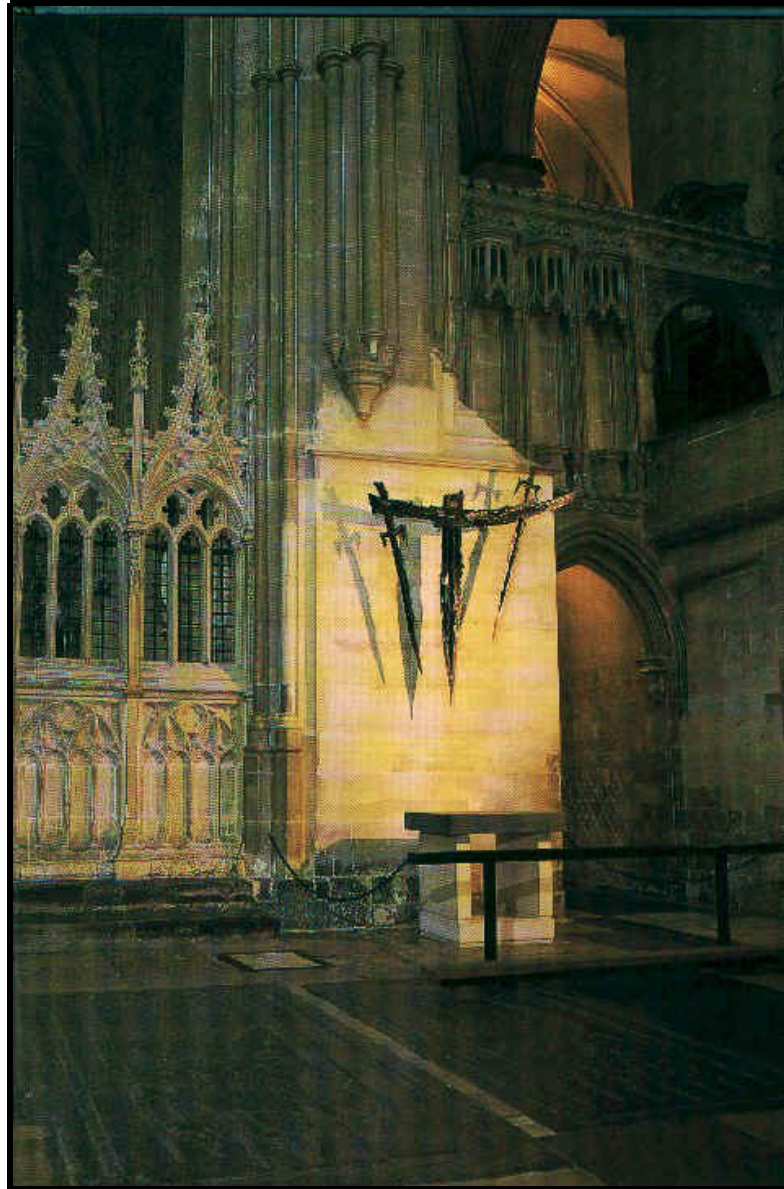


The death of Becket
angered the peasants
who felt his Saxon
heritage made him one
of them.

Canterbury Cathedral became a site for pilgrims to offer prayers to St. Thomas.



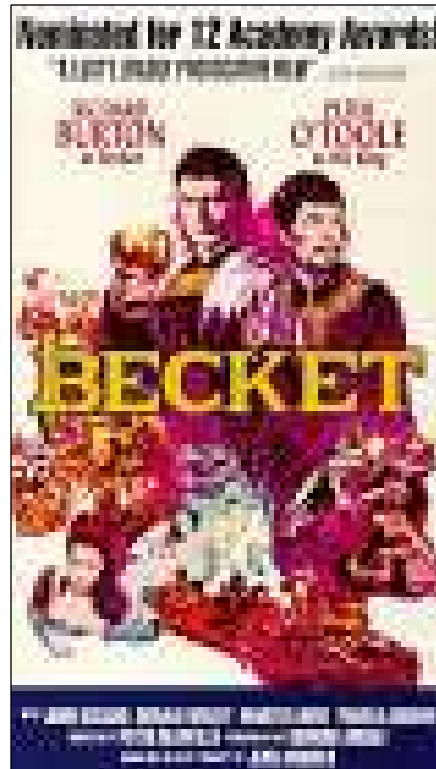
Today, a modern cross made from swords marks the site of the martyrdom.





*A close-up
of the altar.*

For more, check out this film.



**Chaucer
surrounded
by his
characters.**



The late fourteenth century world was still very much one of the spoken word. Books were copied out by hand and were a rare luxury till the advent of the printing press 70 years later. The educated elite could read, but they preferred to hear texts read out loud for entertainment. **The Canterbury Tales**, with their earthy humor and and vivid dialogue, were a runaway success.

So, let's travel back to London, to the area called Southward, and stop at the Tabard Inn.



We'll meet the characters and hear their stories.



The story begins...

