THE CANTERBURY TALES
BACKGROUND ON AUTHOR, CONTEXT, AND CHARACTERS
GEOFFREY CHAUCER
(1342-1400)

- “The FATHER of English Literature”
- Son of a London shoemaker
- Grew up middle to upper class
- Well-traveled and knowledgeable about all aspects of life and types of people
- A man of the WORLD
CHAUCER’S LIFE

- Page in the household connected to KING EDWARD III
- Married a lady-in-waiting of the queen named Philippa de Rout
- Had three (maybe four) children
- Fought in the HUNDRED YEARS WAR
  - Captured by the enemy and ransomed by the king
- King Edward awarded him “A GALLON OF WINE DAILY” for life for an unspecified task, and Chaucer collected it the rest of his life, even after Edward was no longer king
CHAUCER’S LIFE, CONT...

- Customs Controller
- Justice of the Peace
- Member of PARLIAMENT
- Diplomat to FRANCE and ITALY
  - Secret dispatch to Sir John Hawkwood, British knight in Milan (possible inspiration for the Knight in the Canterbury Tales)
- Supervised construction of WESTMINSTER ABBEY and the TOWER OF LONDON
- Deputy FORESTER of the Royal Forest of North Petherton
- Died of unknown causes around 1400; first writer to be buried in the POET’S CORNER of Westminster Abbey
WESTMINSTER ABBEY
POET’S CORNER

Chaucer’s Tomb→
THE CANTERBURY TALES: CHAUCER’S MASTERPIECE (MAGNUM OPUS)

- First writer to use ENGLISH in a major literary work
- Assortment of people thrown together on a JOURNEY
- Lifelike CROSS-SECTION of medieval society; show almost all professions of 14th century and people’s characteristics from folly to wisdom
- Outstanding literary achievement: 17,000 LINES OF POETRY
“Although Chaucer’s invented personages are now six hundred years old, they are flesh and blood today; they are, in fact, the people whom we have known all our lives.”—Louis Untermeyer
NOTES ON THE TALES

- FRAME TALE: a story that provides a vehicle or frame for telling other stories (a story within a story)
- 29 pilgrims are traveling to the SHRINE OF ST. THOMAS OF BECKET (who was brutally murdered after quarreling with the king)
- The Prologue introduces the pilgrims, and they proceed to have a story-telling contest
- It is speculated that the Tales are INCOMPLETE, as not all pilgrims have a story
THE OCCUPATIONS OF THE PILGRIMS REFLECT THE THREE MAIN AREAS OF MEDIEVAL ENGLISH SOCIETY

- They represent a CROSS-SECTION of medieval society: a small, random selection that represents the larger whole
- The COURT: Knight, Squire, Yeoman, Franklin, Plowman, Miller, Reeve
- The CHURCH: Nun, Monk, Friar, Cleric, Parson, Summoner, Pardoner
- The COMMONERS: Merchant, Sergeant of the Law, Five Tradesmen, Cook, Skipper, Doctor, Wife of Bath, Manciple, Host
The tales are written in MIDDLE ENGLISH

Here is a sample of the Lord’s Prayer in Middle English:

(From MS. at Oxford.)

Oure Fadir that art in hevenes,
Halewid be thi name,
Thi kingdom come to thee,
Be thi will don in eerthe as in hevene.
Give to us this day our breed over othre substance,
And forgive to us our dettis as we forgiven our dettours.
And lede us not into temptation,
But deliver us from ivel.
OTHER IMPORTANT NOTES

- **SETTING:** Springtime—represents fertility, re-birth, Spring Fever

- **THEMES:**
  - Corruption of the Church: major issue—too much power (no separation of CHURCH AND STATE)
  - The COMPLEXITY OF HUMAN NATURE: very few characters are all good or all bad; we all have our virtues and flaws

- **IRONY:** Often the characters typically valued by society are the most despicable, while the poor and “lowly” are the more noble

- **HUMOR:** The descriptions, bickering between characters, and the irony in the tales are meant to be funny!
MEDIEVAL OCCUPATIONS EXPLAINED

- Squire- an apprentice to a knight
- Yeoman- a member of the royal court
- Cleric (Clerk)- works for the Church, transcribing important documents
- Sergeant of the Law- lawyer
- Friar- priest who pledged to a life of poverty
- Reeve- manager of someone’s estate or farm
- Manciple- buys supplies for institutions like churches and schools
- Pardoner: grant “pardons” to criminals; sell Christian relics and certificates blessed by the Pope

  • Remember, criminals could be tried in the Church or Royal Court; the Church tended to be more lenient!
MORE OCCUPATIONS:

- Summoner: bring accused criminals before the church’s court

- Nun (Prioress)/Monk: devote lives to work, charity, and prayer; take vows of poverty, silence, chastity, etc.
  
  - Often, becoming a monk was an option for second sons of nobility who could not inherit the family fortune
DURING THIS TIME (LIKE TODAY), CERTAIN PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS WERE ASSOCIATED WITH PERSONALITY:

- GAP TEETH: considered “cute”
- Curly hair—very FASHIONABLE
- RED face—lusty
- Red hair—SNEAKY (like a fox)
- WIDE forehead—beautiful
- LONG hair on a man—weak, undesirable
- BEARDLESS man—weak, immature
- Sores, carbuncles (large pimples or cysts)—suggest VENEREAL DISEASE or general nastiness