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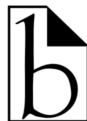
GEOFFREY CHAUCER

THE CANTERBURY TALES

SECOND EDITION

EDITED BY ROBERT BOENIG & ANDREW TAYLOR



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The first page of Chaucer's *Tale of Melibee*, from *The Canterbury Tales*. The figure on horseback is generally taken to be a representation of Chaucer. The actual size of pages in the Ellesmere manuscript is approximately 15¾ x 11⅛″. Ellesmere Manuscript EL 26 C9 f. 153v. Reprinted by permission of The Huntington Library.

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INTRODUCTION

Chaucer's Life and Times

Chaucer's biographers reckon the approximate date of his birth by testimony Chaucer himself gave in October 1386 during a legal proceeding to determine which of two families, the Scropes or the Grosvenors, had the right to bear a certain coat of arms. Chaucer then claimed to be "forty years old and more." He adds that he had been "armed for twenty-seven years," a reference to his participation in a campaign of the Hundred Years' War in 1359, when King Edward III besieged the French city of Rheims. If we assume that when Chaucer was first armed in 1359 he was nineteen (which, as far as we can tell from the dates given by his fellow witness in the Scrope-Grosvenor inquiry, was the average age at which men of his class entered military service), 1340 is a good year to nominate as that of Chaucer's birth, though a year or two later is possible.

Chaucer was born to a family that eventually rose from the peasantry to the nobility. His great-grandfather Andrew de Dynyngton (d. 1288), also known as Andrew de Ipswich or Andrew le Taverner, was by evidence of his various names an itinerant tavern-keeper who migrated from a small village to the larger town of Ipswich in East Anglia, on the east coast of England. Andrew's son Robert (c. 1288–1314) moved to London and was apprenticed to a man named John le Chaucer. "Chaucer," like "Taverner," was a name drawn from an occupation. In French a "chaucier" was a maker of shoes and boots. When John le Chaucer was killed in a brawl, Robert, who was a beneficiary in his will, adopted his name as a mark of respect. Robert's son John (1312–66) took a further step up the social ladder, making his mark as a vintner, one who imported wine from abroad; in 1347 he became deputy in the important port of Southampton to John de Wesenham, who was in charge of the king's wine cellar. This position meant that John was in the royal service, just as his son Geoffrey would be in due course. In Southampton, John, his second wife Agnes, and the young Geoffrey weathered the Great Plague of 1348–49, the epidemic that killed somewhere between a quarter and a half of England's population. John survived and found himself heir to the estates of many relatives who were the plague's victims. Now quite a wealthy man, he moved back to London with his family, where he continued to procure wine for the royal court. Chaucer was probably between seven and nine years old when he found himself back in London. His family's home was on Thames Street close to St. Paul's Cathedral, where there was a celebrated school run by the almoner (the official responsible for distributing the cathedral's charity). Chaucer may have begun his education at this school, although there is no hard evidence of this. He certainly would have attended some kind of grammar school, however, where he would have learned to read and write Latin, using as textbooks works such as Aesop's *Fables* and the *Distich*, a collection of moral sayings attributed in the Middle Ages to the Roman senator Cato.

John Chaucer's connections at the court allowed him to place his son in one of the royal households, probably as a page. By 1357, the teenage Geoffrey had become a member of the household of Elizabeth, Countess of Ulster, who was married to the king's second surviving son, Lionel. It was normal for married couples in the upper nobility to maintain separate households. As a page, Chaucer would have run errands, helped at meals, performed a fair number of menial tasks, and made himself generally useful. In exchange, he would have had an opportunity to familiarize himself with the ways of the court, to make influential connections, and also to acquire a considerable education. Over the years, Chaucer was to work for several of these households. He moved from Elizabeth's service to that of her husband when the two households were merged in 1359, the same year that he was armed, and it was probably at this point he was promoted to "valettus," one step below a squire. By 1367 he had been transferred into the household of Edward III and granted an annuity of 20 marks for life. Chaucer remained in the royal service until the king's death ten years later, and by 1372 the king had made him a squire. By 1374, however, Chaucer was no longer a member of the royal household but was instead living in his own quarters in London and working for the king in the custom's house in the port of London, a job he continued to perform for Richard II.

From the perspective of later decades, the late 1350s seemed the heyday of English chivalry. Edward III, born in 1312, was still vigorous, and his queen, Philippa of Hainault, was a generous patron, whose court included the poet and chronicler Jean Froissart. The Hundred Years' War, begun in the late 1330s, was at its most successful stage from the English point-of-view. The king's stirring victory at Crecy in 1346, when he had been greatly outnumbered, had improbably been surpassed by the victory of his eldest son, Edward the Black Prince, in 1356 at the battle of Poitiers. Outnumbered but supported by the formidable English

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longbow, the prince captured the French king, John the Good, bringing him home to England to await what was both literally and figuratively a king's ransom, three million golden crowns. King John's "prison" was the great Palace of Savoy in London, and there he was allowed to bring all the courtiers, servants, and entertainers he might need. The musicians, poets, and composers attending him helped set English artistic taste, and French music and literature became all the rage. In particular, the French courtiers shared with their captors their admiration for the work of Guillaume de Machaut, not only one of the greatest musical composers of his day but also the author of elaborate poems on courtly love that were to provide Chaucer with some of his early models. At the end of his life, in his Retractions, Chaucer claimed to have written "many a song and many a lecherous lay," that is, many a love poem. If he did so, which seems likely, he would probably have written them in French, the court language of the day. Some of them may even survive. A collection of medieval French court lyrics from this period in a manuscript that is now in Philadelphia contains a number of pieces by an author identified only as "Ch."[1] There is no evidence of who this "Ch" might be, but Chaucer is certainly a possible candidate.

In 1359 Chaucer followed Edward III over to France on the military expedition he mentioned in his testimony at the Scrope-Grosvenor inquiry. Edward III's objective was to besiege Rheims, where the French traditionally held their coronations, and have himself crowned King of France. English military luck, though, was beginning to run out. It rained heavily, and the countryside around Rheims had been stripped bare, making it hard to feed the besieging army. During the campaign, Chaucer was captured by the French and quickly ransomed by the king for £16—as much as Chaucer's salary for a year when he was a royal bureaucrat. Chaucer tells us nothing about his experiences as a prisoner of war. Although Rheims eventually surrendered, Edward had already pressed on to Paris, which he besieged unsuccessfully for several weeks, and then to Chartres. Here a hail storm so violent that it killed some of their troops persuaded the English to accept a compromise treaty, bringing Chaucer's brief military career to an end.

Events in Chaucer's life are deduced from a series of documents, usually referred to as the Chaucer Life Records, that have survived over the years; they mostly involve monetary or legal transactions and contain not a single reference to Chaucer's activities as a poet. For the six or seven years after Chaucer's military experience, the records fall silent. According to Thomas Speght, who wrote a life of Chaucer for his edition of 1598, a certain "Master Buckley" claimed to have seen a document in the Inner Temple that recorded Chaucer being fined two shillings for beating a Franciscan friar in Fleet Street. The Inner Temple was one of the four so-called Inns of Court, which provided housing for law students, and Speght's claim has led to much speculation that Chaucer returned from the army to be educated as a lawyer. There was indeed a William Buckley in the Inner Temple in the sixteenth century, and he was in charge of its records. Unfortunately neither he nor Speght is an entirely reliable witness: Speght, a staunch Protestant, was keen to show that Chaucer was a harsh opponent of the friars, while Buckley might have wanted to claim a distinguished alumnus for his institution. There is no evidence that Chaucer attended either Oxford or Cambridge Universities, although both possibilities have sometimes been suggested. Chaucer was extremely well read, but he could easily have picked up his education while serving in the royal households.[2]

By 1366 Chaucer had married. His wife was the daughter of Gilles de Roet (also known as Paon de Roet), a nobleman from the Duchy of Hainault, about one hundred miles north of Paris, the homeland of Edward III's wife Philippa. Chaucer's new wife was named Philippa after the Queen. Philippa Chaucer's sister Katherine is better known by her married name, Katherine Swynford. In 1368 she married a minor knight, Sir Hugh Swynford, who died fighting in the south of France four years later. At some point, possibly even before Hugh's death, Katherine became the mistress of John of Gaunt, third son of the King, and three years before his death in 1399, John of Gaunt—to much scandal—married her. These loose connections to the royal family, his administrative abilities, or even his growing reputation as a poet may explain Chaucer's numerous political and admin-

1 The poems have been edited by James I. Wimsatt in *Chaucer and the Poems of "Ch" in University of Pennsylvania MS French 15* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1982).

2 The view that Chaucer would have needed to go to university or the Inns of Court to acquire his education is sharply criticized by T.F. Tout, "Literature and Learning in the English Civil Service in the Fourteenth Century," *Speculum* 4 (1929), 365–89. The kind of literary education that would have been available to Chaucer in one of the royal households is described by Richard Firth Green, *Poets and Princepleasers: Literature and the English Court in the Late Middle Ages* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1980), chap. 3.

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istrative appointments. Philippa Chaucer was a lady-in-waiting to the royal family, including John of Gaunt's second wife, Costanza of Castile, and Chaucer had increasing duties outside the court, so they were often separated. Philippa died in 1387. We know they had had two sons, Thomas, born in 1367, and Lewis, born in 1380, and there is some ambiguous evidence of a daughter as well. Chaucer composed his *Treatise on the Astrolabe* (an astronomical instrument) for Lewis, who seems to have died young. Thomas, however, survived to become a powerful courtier for the Lancastrian kings Henry IV and Henry V in the early fifteenth century. Thomas's daughter Alice married the Duke of Suffolk, completing both the family's return to East Anglia and its rapid rise up the ladder of social, political, and economic success.

In the late 1360s, Chaucer began his career as a diplomat. In the spring of 1366 he was in the Spanish kingdom of Navarre on a diplomatic mission evidently related to English intervention in the disputed succession of the Kingdom of Castile. In the summer of 1368 he again was out of the country on the King's business, probably in France. In both 1369 and 1370 he was part of John of Gaunt's military entourage in France; no major action occurred, however, in either year. At this stage Chaucer seems to have been working largely for Gaunt rather than for the king. This great prince was the richest man in England, and as his father grew older and his elder brother, the Black Prince, devoted himself to wars in France, Gaunt became the center of English court culture. He was also for a time a strong supporter of the reformer John Wycliffe. Gaunt granted Chaucer an annuity of £10 in 1374, and Chaucer wrote his first major poem, *The Book of the Duchess*, as an elegy for Blanche, Gaunt's first wife, who had died in 1368. This provides one of the very few reasonably firm dates for one of Chaucer's poems (and even in this case there is some debate about how long after Blanche's death the poem was composed). It is possible to work out a rough chronology of Chaucer's works, however, and we know that at about this time he also translated into English some portions of the enormously popular French allegorical dream vision, *The Romance of the Rose*.

Chaucer soon shifted from military to more generally diplomatic matters, undertaking a mission to Genoa from December 1372 to the following May, as part of a delegation to discuss trade. Most of his biographers speak of this mission as the first of two journeys to Italy (the second coming in 1378) and date his exposure to the Italian literature that was soon to influence him heavily. Though this is likely the case, there remains the possibility that he had traveled to Milan back in 1367 when Prince Lionel (who had been widowed in 1363), married his second wife, Violante Visconti, daughter of the Duke of Milan. The wedding had been lavish, and the guests included the great poet Petrarch, to whom Chaucer pays tribute in the Clerk's Tale. It is tempting to place the young English poet in his proximity there and then, but there is no evidence that he had made the trip, though he had been in service to Lionel's first wife.

In June 1374, Chaucer was appointed to an administrative position that would occupy him for approximately the next dozen years. He became Controller of Customs for wool (and related commodities like hides and skins) for the port of London, and also (although he seems only to have held the position briefly) for the Petty Custom, which controlled wine and cloth. Chaucer's appointment is a good example of the way in which England was beginning to develop a professional bureaucracy staffed by men who were not necessarily clerics. As Derek Pearsall observes in his biography of Chaucer, "the royal household was becoming the civil service and the armed retainer was giving way to the bureaucratic official."[1]

As Controller, Chaucer received an annual salary of nearly £17. He was not the Customs Collector, a position which was usually given to a wealthy London merchant. Chaucer's task was instead to audit the accounts, making sure that the collector did not profit too outrageously and that the king received his due. The sums at stake were enormous: in the 1370s, the annual revenue generated for the king was normally about £70,000.[2] Chaucer was instructed to keep the accounts in his own hand, but this instruction was not taken literally. Chaucer had the assistance of various clerks and scribes to do much of the actual writing, including Adam Pinkhurst, the scribe who copied the Ellesmere manuscript. Chaucer did, however, have to go to work in the customs' house most days. To make this attendance easier, Chaucer was given the lease of a "house" (we would now call it a "flat" or "apartment") above one of the seven gates in the wall to the old city—Aldgate, about ten minutes' walk north of the Tower of London. It was during his time auditing the accounts and living over Aldgate that Chaucer found firm footing as a

1 *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 146.

2 W.M. Ormrod, *The Reign of Edward III: Crown and Political Society in England, 1327–1377* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1990), 207.

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writer. Apparently he was good at his job, for in 1382 he was reappointed Controller of the Petty Custom.[1] Customs Controller Chaucer must have been markedly different from the genial and naïve narrator we see in the General Prologue. As George Lyman Kittredge observed, Chaucer was a professional tax collector and "a naïf Collector of Customs would be a paradoxical monster."[2]

The House of Fame, *The Parliament of Fowls*, and *Troilus and Criseyde* were all written when Chaucer lived over Aldgate. The first two of these were, like his earlier *Book of the Duchess*, dream visions in the French style, in which the poem's speaker falls asleep and dreams the events recounted in the poem. *The House of Fame* describes how the poet, buried in his books, is borne aloft by an eagle to hear news about love; it turns into a reflection on fame (including literary fame) and rumor. The basic framework of the journey owes a debt to Dante's *Divine Comedy*: the timorous narrator and pedantic eagle are comic counterparts of Dante and his guide to Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven, Virgil. *The Parliament of Fowls* recounts the efforts of birds to find mates at a meeting held on St. Valentine's Day. It was likely written in about 1380 as an allegory of the efforts to find a wife for the young King Richard II, for the details of the marriage negotiations match well with the events of the poem, and there is evidence that Chaucer himself took part in the negotiations. In a moment that anticipates some of those in *The Canterbury Tales*, the debate over which of the three aristocratic male eagles should marry the beautiful female eagle degenerates into a squabble when the lower-class birds burst in impatiently. *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer's longest finished poem, is based on Giovanni Boccaccio's *Filostrato*, the story of a tragic love affair between the Trojan Prince Troilus and the court lady Criseyde, who eventually abandons him. Their affair, which follows many of the elaborate conventions of courtly love also seen in the Knight's Tale, becomes an occasion for more general reflections on human existence, for which Chaucer draws heavily from the famous *Consolation of Philosophy* of the late Roman statesman Boethius, which he had translated not long before.

In 1380 according to a document in the court of Chancery, Chaucer was released from legal action relating to the *raptus* of Cecily Champain or Chaumpaigne, the daughter of a London baker. Since it was first discovered by F.J. Furnivall in 1871, this document has provoked unease and disagreement among Chaucerians.[3] The Latin term *raptus* could mean either "rape" or "abduction." Chaucer's own father, John, had been abducted by an aunt when a child for the purpose of forcibly marrying him off to her daughter and thus procuring his inheritance, and the legal document says that she and her helpers "rapuerunt et abduxerunt" (raped and abducted) him. Christopher Cannon has argued that when the term *raptus* is used alone in fourteenth-century English legal documents, it usually means rape in the modern sense of forced coitus, but has also acknowledged that medieval English law was "hopelessly confused" about the distinction between rape and abduction.[4] Of course, Chaucer was only *accused* of *raptus* and the action was dropped, but there is some evidence that Chaucer made at least one payment of £10 to Cecily through intermediaries, a sum equal to over half his yearly salary as Controller (although he had other sources of income). Pearsall, for one, argues "[that] Chaucer was guilty of *something* is clear from the care he took to secure immunity from prosecution, but it need not have been rape."[5] They could, for example, have been having an affair.[6] It is hard to tell what light (if any) the affair sheds on Chaucer's character, but one thing it does make clear is how well connected he was. The five men he called as witnesses to the document of release were, in addition to Richard Morel (a prosperous grocer), Sir William Beauchamp, who was king Richard's chamberlain (the officer responsible for the day-to-day management of his personal household), Sir John Clan-

1 Exactly when Chaucer first held the position of Controller of the Petty Custom is somewhat difficult to determine. See Samuel Moore, "New Life-Records of Chaucer," *Modern Philology* 16 (1918), 49–52 and John Manly, "Chaucer as Controller," *Modern Philology* 25 (1927), 123.

2 G.L. Kittredge, *Chaucer and His Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1915), 45. Kittredge gets Chaucer's title wrong.

3 Furnivall, *Parallel-Text Edition of Chaucer's Minor Poems* (London, 1871), 136–44.

4 Compare "*Raptus* in the Chaumpaigne Release and a Newly Discovered Document Concerning the Life of Geoffrey Chaucer," *Speculum* 68 (1993), 74–94, esp. 92, to the more complex position Cannon takes in "Chaucer and Rape: Uncertainty's Certainties," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 22 (2000), 67–92. Cannon notes in the later article that because medieval English law was concerned to protect male property rights, it considered the woman's consent irrelevant, so that the term *raptus* might also cover what we would now consider elopement (76).

5 *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 137.

6 A further complication is the possibility suggested by Haldeen Braddy, in "Chaucer, Alice Perrers, and Cecily Chaumpaigne," *Speculum* 5 (1977), 906–11, that Cecily Champain can be identified as the step-daughter of Alice Perrers, the king's mistress. This view has gained some currency but is convincingly refuted by Marta Powell Harley, "Geoffrey Chaucer, Cecilia Chaumpaigne, and Alice Perrers: A Closer Look," *Chaucer Review* 28 (1993), 78–82.

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vowe and Sir William Neville, who were both chamber knights (that is, members of the king's inner circle who served him personally), and John Philpot, a wealthy London merchant who was Collector of Customs while Chaucer was Controller and later became Lord Mayor of London.

In June 1381 the famous Peasants' Revolt took place, during which farmers and tradespeople in Kent and East Anglia marched on London. Their demands were no less than a revision of the economic and social order in which everything would be held in common and all men would be equal—a form of what we would now call communism, although still under the head of the king. The rebels entered London on 14 June, many of them through Chaucer's own Aldgate, and together with poorer Londoners, burned the Palace of Savoy (then owned by John of Gaunt), and hunted down and killed a number of wealthy citizens, lawyers, and Flemish weavers (who were resented by English weavers). The fourteen-year-old king met with the rebels the following day and promised them some concessions, but in a moment of anger or fear the mayor of London struck down their leader, Wat Tyler. The crowds were dispersed and many members of the rising subsequently executed. Chaucer mentions the turmoil in the Nun's Priest's Tale, when he says the noise made by the rebels when they were chasing down Flemings to kill them was not half as loud as the noise made chasing the fox who has stolen Chauntecleer.

About this time, Chaucer was working on another retelling of a work by Boccaccio—this time the Italian poet's epic poem about Duke Theseus of Athens, the *Teseida*, which recounts the rivalry of two captured Theban knights for the hand of the Duke's sister-in-law. Though there is no evidence that Chaucer had yet conceived of *The Canterbury Tales*, this work later became incorporated into it as the first tale, the Knight's Tale. At this time also, Chaucer was translating a theological treatise by the early thirteenth-century Pope Innocent III, which is usually known as *The Miserable Condition of Mankind*. This work does not survive—except in some versified excerpts that Chaucer incorporated into the Man of Law's Tale.

Beginning in 1386, some major changes happened in Chaucer's circumstances. He gave up his controllership and his house over Aldgate and became one of the Justices of Peace for the county of Kent (of which Canterbury was the main city) and served as Member of Parliament for Kent in the autumn of that year. Paul Strohm suggests that Chaucer's move from the court and the city to the country, together with his giving up his annuities in 1388, was a deliberate effort on his part to keep a lower profile.[1] If so, Chaucer was very wise. There was mounting hostility among the great lords to the alleged abuses of the king's favorites, and in 1388 a group of five great lords, led by Thomas Woodstock, Duke of Gloucester (Edward III's youngest son and Richard's uncle), launched a coup d'état. The Lords Appellant, so-called because they had "appealed" against the king's counselors in Parliament, defeated the royal army near Oxford and effectively took over control of the country. They forced the king, who had holed up in the tower of London, to agree to the execution of many of his closest advisors, including Simon Burley, his former tutor who had become one of his chamber knights, and to the exile of many others. The young Richard, still only 22, would reassert himself the following year, throwing off the counsel that had been set up to watch over him. Nearly ten years later, in 1397, he finally secured his revenge, arresting Gloucester—who then mysteriously died in prison—and two of the other leading Appellants, Richard, Earl of Arundel, who was executed, and Thomas Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick, who was sentenced to life imprisonment after begging for his life. Chaucer must have been canny to keep out of trouble during these shifts in power and to maintain ties to both sides (for he managed to develop a connection to the Lancastrians even before the future Henry IV seized power from Richard in 1399). A number of Chaucerians have suggested possible parallels between these professional skills and Chaucer's literary attitudes, some condemning, most praising his prudence, moderation, and openness to conflicting views.

In 1387 Chaucer's wife Philippa died. At this time he was working on *The Legend of Good Women*, a collection of stories about good women that was allegedly written to make amends to Queen Anne for his depiction of Criseyde's betrayal of Troilus. The prologue to the *Legend* begins like a traditional French dream vision, but its structure signaled greater things to come, for, like *The Canterbury Tales*, it is a framework collection of what we would now call "short stories"—but one that does not yet show the marvelous variety of the later collection. Its theme is that of good women betrayed in various ways by bad men. As far as we know, Chaucer did not finish the collection, but it may have suggested the framework of *The Canterbury Tales* to him, although Boccaccio's great prose masterpiece *The Decameron* might have done so as well. About this time (1387), Chaucer began work on

1 *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989), 36–41.

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the great poem that would occupy the rest of his life. He incorporated some earlier works, like the reworking of Boccaccio's *Teseida*, which became the Knight's Tale, and also his translation into verse of the Life of St. Cecilia, which became the Second Nun's Tale. But most of the stories that became *The Canterbury Tales* were new works showing an independence from the French and Italian genres that had so enthralled him in the past. Over the next thirteen years he occasionally put *The Canterbury Tales* project aside to work on other things—short poems and, in 1391, the scientific *Treatise on the Astrolabe*. Another scientific work that may be his—though many scholars dispute this—is *The Equatorie of the Planets*, written in 1392. After the death of Richard's beloved queen, Anne of Bohemia, in 1394, Chaucer revised the Prologue of *The Legend of Good Women*, although he seems not to have finished the work as a whole.

In 1389 Chaucer had taken up another administrative post in Richard II's government, becoming Clerk of the King's Works. This was an influential position full of responsibility, and it represents the pinnacle of Chaucer's career as a civil servant. His duties included hiring and paying workers on the many building projects undertaken by the government and overseeing the procurement of materials. He worked with the king's master mason, Henry Yevele (whose role was rather like that of a modern architect) on projects including work on the Tower of London and the construction of lists for a court tournament—this last a kind of fourteenth-century sports stadium. Chaucer also planned renovations to St. George's Chapel in Windsor Castle, though these were never begun. His tenure in this position, however, only lasted two years, till June 1391. The previous September he was robbed and beaten twice in one week while carrying his payroll, and this violence may have contributed in some way to his resignation.

Then Chaucer seems to have been retired for a while, living off some pensions and annuities he had gathered during his career as a civil servant. Perhaps the lion's share of *The Canterbury Tales* was written during this period of relative freedom from the hustle and bustle of administrative life. There is evidence that he took up residence in Greenwich at this time. In the mid-1390s, though, he took on one last job—that of deputy forester for the forest of North Petherton in Somerset, a hunting preserve belonging to the Mortimers, cousins to the King. Roger Mortimer was heir presumptive to the throne, since Richard II had no children. This was an administrative post of lesser importance than his customs controllership and his clerkship of the King's works.

By the late 1390s Chaucer was back in London, and late in 1399 he took out a lease on a house within the precincts of Westminster Abbey. This was an even more turbulent year politically than 1386. Though still young, King Richard had been declining mentally—falling into episodes of paranoia and megalomania, devising violent revenge on those he considered his enemies. He had exiled John of Gaunt's eldest son Henry, his first cousin, and on Gaunt's death in 1399—while Richard was away on an expedition to Ireland—Henry came back to claim his inheritance as Duke of Lancaster. Tired of Richard's excesses, the nobility welcomed Henry, and Henry realized he could claim more than just his heritage. He deposed his cousin, imprisoning him, and proclaimed himself king. Richard soon died in prison. Thus began the dynasty of the Lancastrians. One of Chaucer's last poems was an ironically humorous "Complaint to his Purse," praising Henry as the rightful king and requesting the continuation of Chaucer's pensions and annuities—a request the new king granted to the man who had always known how to make himself useful and whose literary works were already becoming a source of national pride.

Chaucer spent what was to be the last year of his life at Westminster Abbey, in a small house looking over the garden of the Lady Chapel. Medieval monasteries often functioned as what we would now term as "rest homes" for retired civil servants, so there is nothing particularly surprising in this arrangement. In October 1400, aged somewhere in the vicinity of sixty, Chaucer died. He was buried inside the abbey, which, from the time of Edward the Confessor (d. 1066), had been the burial place of kings and dignitaries. Originally his grave was at the entrance to St. Benedict's chapel, where the monks would have crossed it on their way from the dormitory to prayer. In 1556 his remains were reinterred in a sarcophagus against the east wall of the Abbey's south transept, where it remains until this day.

The Construction of *The Canterbury Tales*

Chaucer was a poet rich in inventive genius, but he did not invent the genre of *The Canterbury Tales*. His great work is a framework-collection of stories in which there is a main story (the framework) whose characters themselves narrate other, smaller stories. There are a number of earlier classical and medieval works that—with greater or lesser flexibility—can also be considered works of this type. Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a massive collection of stories of mythological transformations, is one example, as is, surprisingly, Dante's *Divine Comedy* (because various souls in the