

Geoffrey Chaucer

and

The Canterbury Tales

Early Life

- Born c. 1340
- Son of a prosperous wine merchant
- Father received an inheritance
- In mid teens, he was placed in the service of Prince Lionel, son of King Edward III 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.)

- While working for Prince Lionel 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

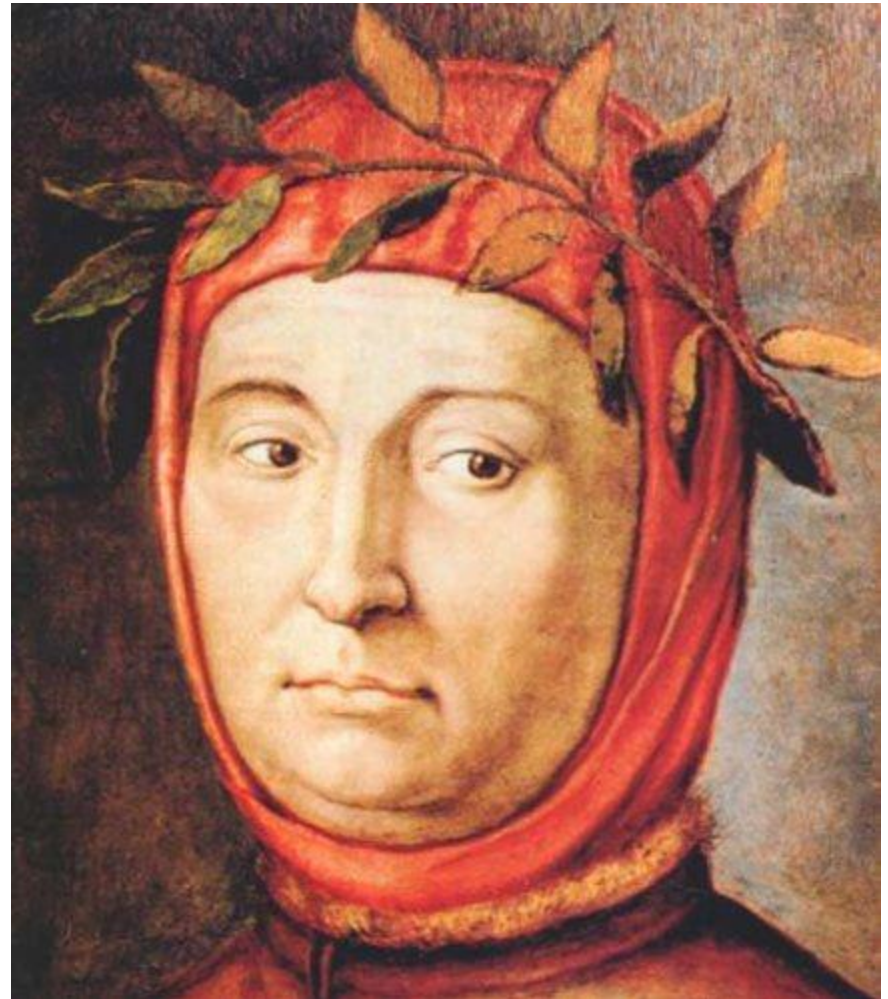


As a Royal Messenger

- 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

Italian Influence

- Boccaccio
 - *The Decameron*
 - Collection of stories
 - Source material
 - Wrote in common Italian
- Dante and Petrarch
 - Also wrote in common Italian



Marriage and Later Years

- Married Phillipa Roet (daughter of a knight) in late 1360's.
 - 3-6 children
 - Granddaughter married a Duke
 - Great-Great Grandson was heir to Richard III's throne.
 - Bridged gap between commoners and aristocrats.
- Died October 25th, 1400
- Still writing *Canterbury Tales* when he died.

Writing Style

- Father of English Literature
- Wrote in Middle English
- Satire, Moral Tales, Wit



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
 - Original plan for 120 stories (Boccaccio wrote 100), but ended with 24.



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

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



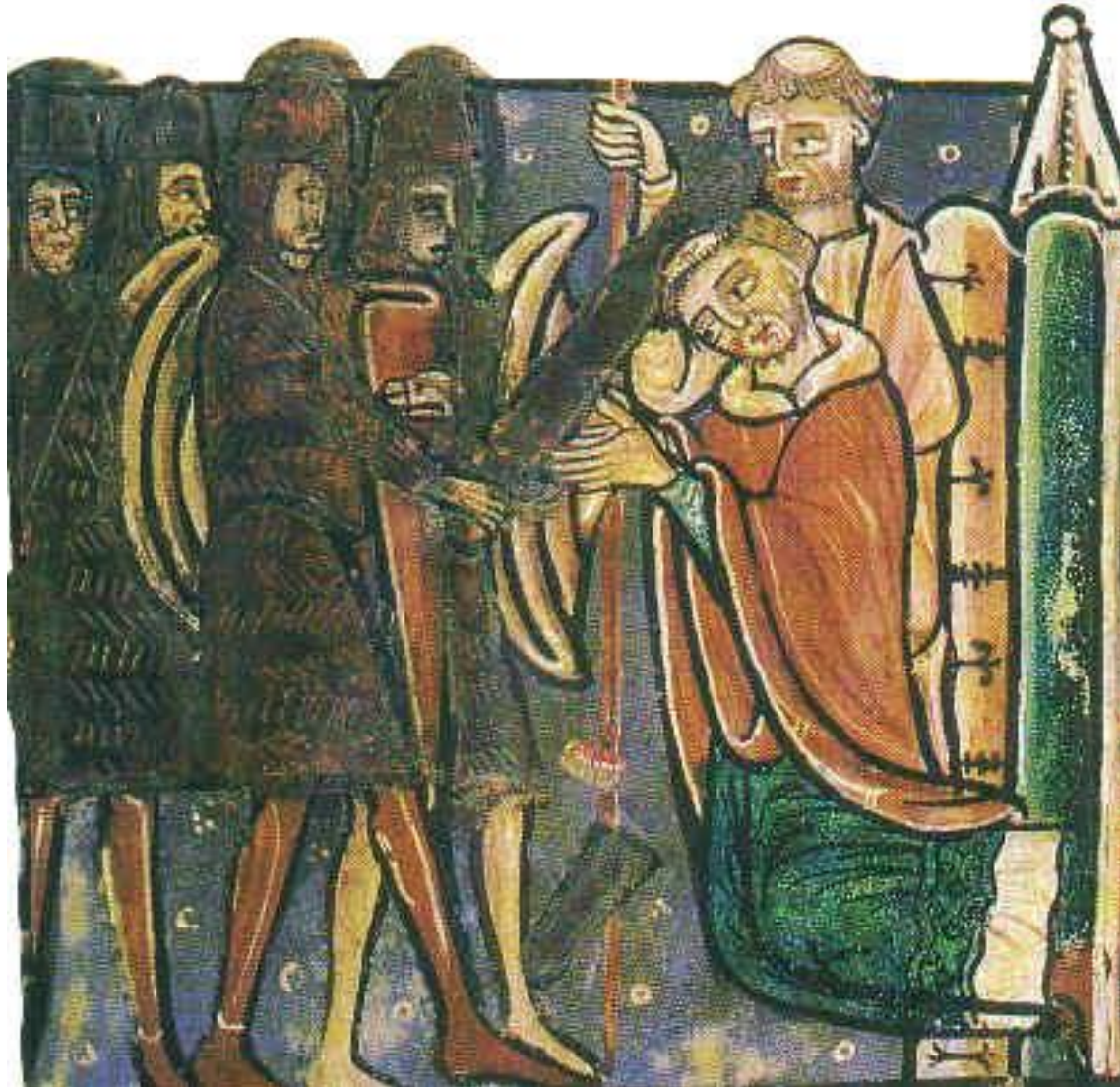
Becket was a trusted adviser and friend of King Henry II. Henry named Becket Archbishop of Canterbury.

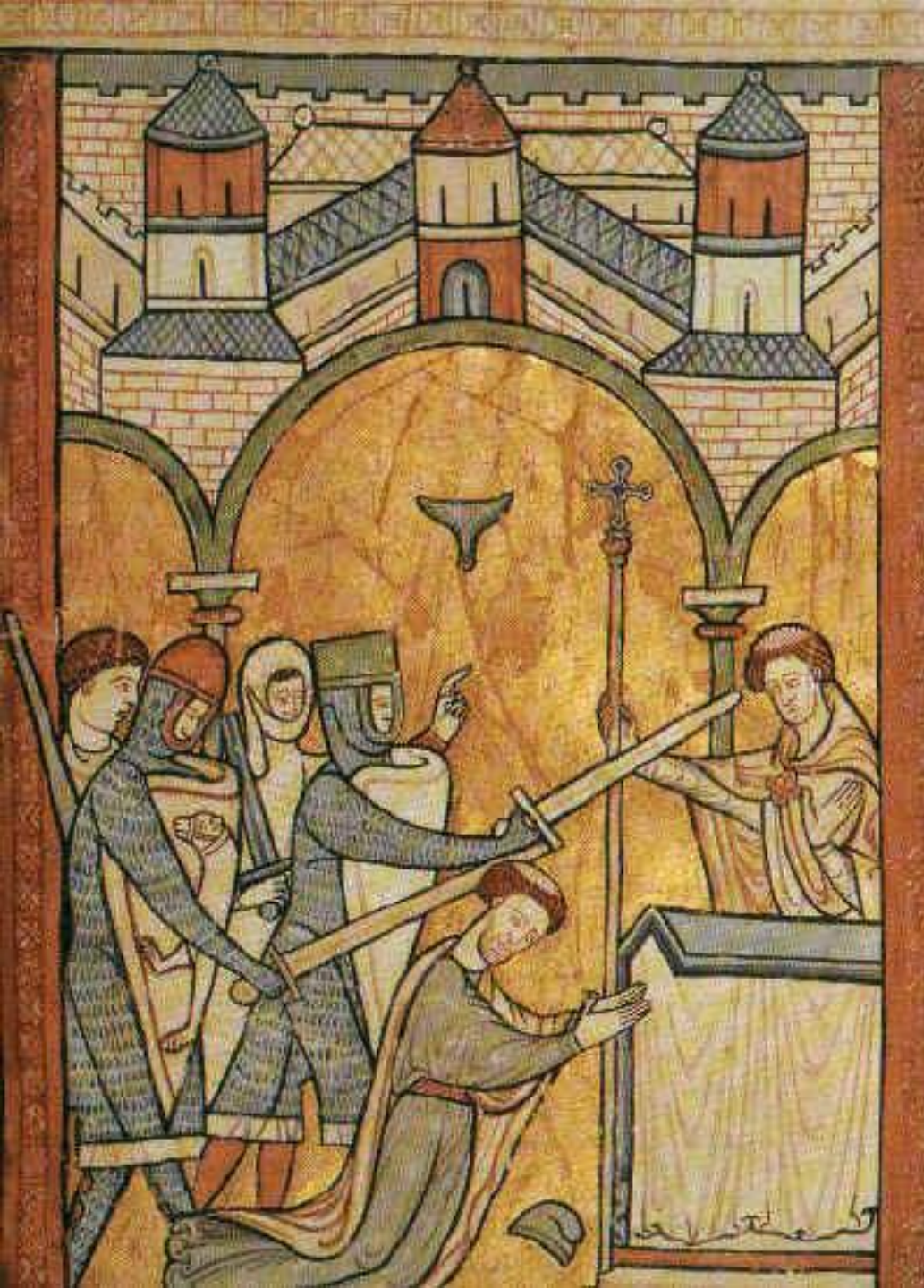




Becket's outspoken style angered the King. One day, Henry complained, "Will no one rid me of this meddlesome priest?" Three knights rode to Canterbury where they found Becket at the altar of Canterbury Cathedral.

Becket was murdered at the altar.



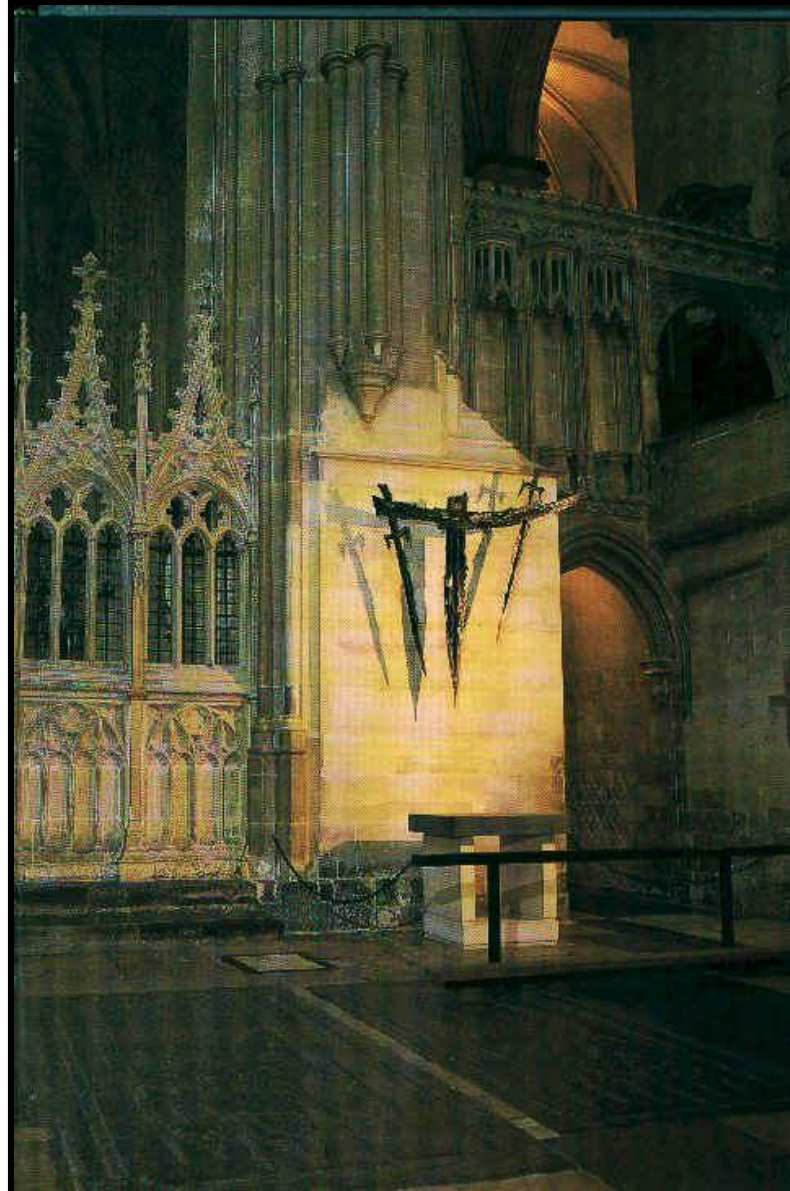


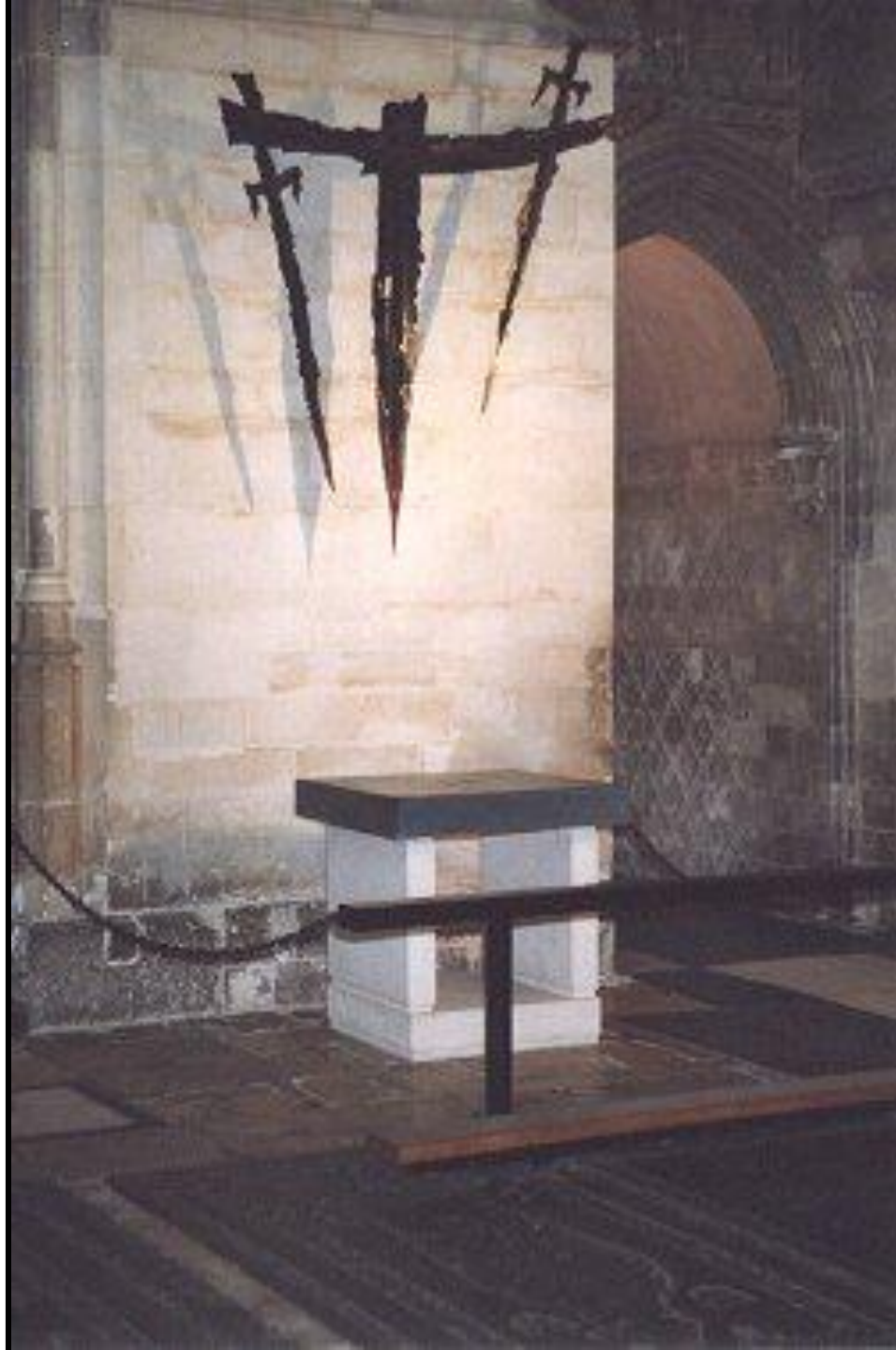
The death of Becket
angered the peasants
who felt his Saxon
heritage made him one
of them.

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



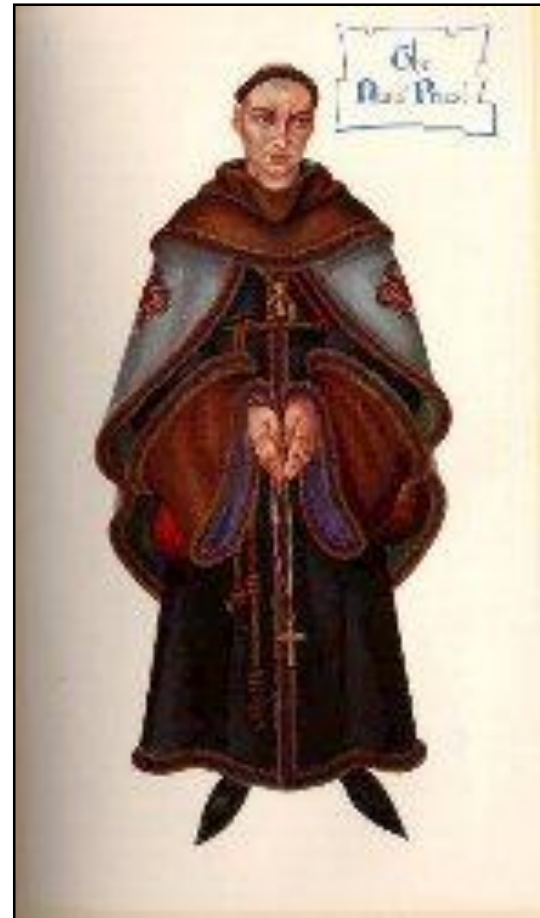
Today, a modern cross made from swords marks the site of the martyrdom.





*A close-up
of the altar.*

The fact that Chaucer wrote in English (*Middle English*), rather than French or Latin like many of his fellow writers, meant that ordinary folk could enjoy The Canterbury Tales and their vivid characters.



**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.

