



## Paper, Pens, & Prose: Discovering Early Manuscripts

# A CHANGING SOCIETY

Chaucer and the Medieval World



Grade 7

World History and Geography

*The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens*

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### I. Introduction

The Ellesmere Chaucer is a book of stunning beauty and at the same time a work that allows the modern reader to grasp some of the fascinating social and language changes of an era once wrongly called the Dark Ages.

### II. Objective

- ◆ Students will draw conclusions about Medieval English society using Chaucer's masterwork.

### III. History-Social Science Standards Addressed

7.6 Students analyze the . . . religious and social structures of the civilizations of Medieval Europe.

### IV. Background

Geoffrey Chaucer (ca. 1343–1400) lived and wrote at a time of great change in England. Had he worked a century earlier, there would have been little market for his incomplete poem of thirty travelers telling tales while on a pilgrimage to Canterbury. The purchase of books written in the vernacular (local language rather than the French or Latin of the educated upper-class and the clergy) was dependent on the wealth of a slowly growing middle class. Chaucer gives us access to a time of change.

## V. Materials needed

- A copy of the opening lines of the Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* from the Ellesmere Chaucer (**Document 1**). (A color transparency would be helpful.)
- Copies of the four versions of “The Lord's Prayer” [from *The Language Instinct*, Steven Pinker], cut apart (**Document 2**).
- Copies of the opening of the Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* in the original Middle English (**Document 3**) and contemporary English. [The Bantam Classic paperback is inexpensive and has the modern version on the facing page.]
- Description of the knight from the Prologue in contemporary English.
- *Across the Centuries* (Beverly J. Armento, et. al.; Houghton Mifflin, 1991)
- Student version of the *Canterbury Tales* [The Oxford University Press edition, as retold by Geraldine McCaughrean, handles the bawdy parts well without leaching the life from them.]

## VI. Lesson Activities

1. Pass out copies of the Prologue page of the Ellesmere Chaucer and display the color transparency (if available). Tell the class that the book was made before printing presses existed in Europe so the book was copied and illustrated by hand. Ask for whom such a book would have been made.
2. Tell the class that the barbarian invasions of the early Middle Ages had ended, so trade and travel were again possible. This meant that there was an English-speaking middle class with the time and resources for education. They would have relished Chaucer's lively tales but would not have been able to afford so luxurious a copy, which was probably a special commission. Have the students draw logical conclusions about how such a book could have been made—preparation of the parchment, materials and organization of the writing and correcting of the book, its binding, why it is rectangular, etc. Compare their conclusions to descriptions of the process in a reference such as Christopher de Hamel's *Scribes and Illuminators*.
3. Pass out the Old English version of “The Lord's Prayer” from **Document 2**. Ask if anyone knows what it is. If not, pass out the Middle English version and, if necessary, the Early Modern English version. Chaucer wrote 600 years ago in Middle English, which is difficult for us to understand, but it is readable with some help. *Beowulf*, another famous Medieval poem, was written in Old English only 300 years before Chaucer, but Chaucer would not have been able to read it. We can see that English in the time of Chaucer was approaching its modern form. Ask the students why linguists would consider the Bible such a valuable resource.

[Since it has been published over such a long period of time, it serves as a sort of “Rosetta Stone” for English.]

Give the students the Contemporary English version of “The Lord's Prayer.” Which of the versions do they prefer? Why?

4. Have the students read the prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* in Middle English from **Document 3** and attempt to rewrite it in Modern English. Compare their efforts to the contemporary version. How much were they able to “translate”?
5. Using a student version of the *Canterbury Tales*, assign selected tales to small groups. They can retell the stories to the class, just as a troubadour from an earlier period would have done.
6. Pass out the description of the knight from the modern version (**Document 3**). Compare it to Mallory's description of a knight in Lesson 3, Chapter 10, in *Across the Centuries*. Which seems to have been written by someone who was actually familiar with knights?

[Mallory wrote almost 100 years after Chaucer. He was looking back on an already fabled time.]

Discuss the technological and political changes that made knights obsolete.

7. Ask the students to imagine what kind of modern activity would replicate the pilgrim's travels (perhaps a bus tour). Do they think the modern travelers would pass the time telling tales? Might that vary with age? What modern inventions might isolate a traveler from others? [headphones, cameras. . . .]
8. Language is never static. Have the students interview their parents and grandparents or other older members of the community about the slang of their childhoods. For example, what is/was the equivalent of “That's cool!” or “Oh, darn!”? How many of the old terms are still, or again, in use? Can the students still understand all the words? Are there terms the students used in elementary school that are already out of favor?

## VII. Extension Activities

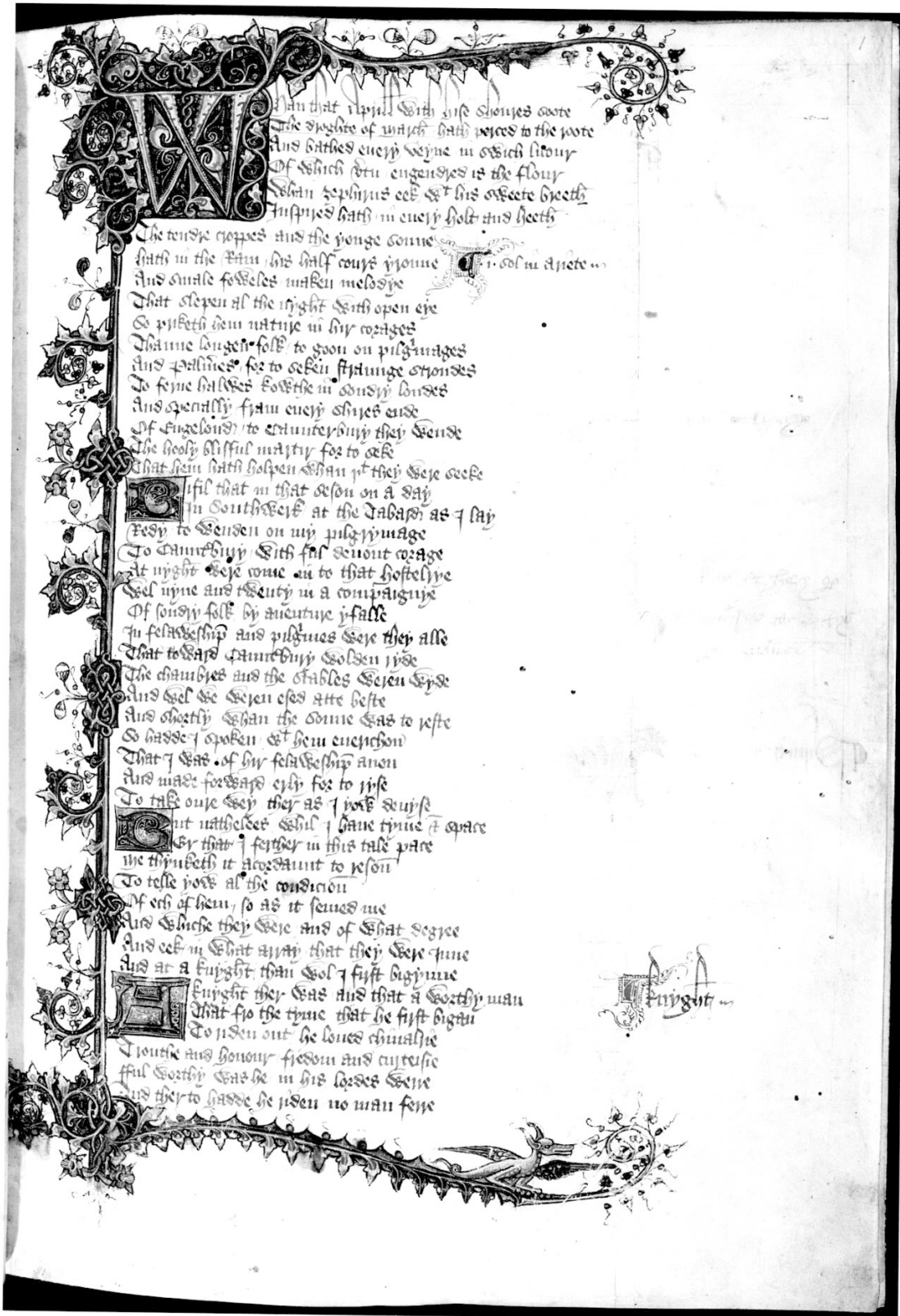
1. Have the students research Thomas à Becket so they know why Canterbury Cathedral was a pilgrimage site.
2. Illustrate two of the languages spoken in Medieval England by playing Gregorian chants and English ballads. What kind of song is sung in Latin? in English?

## VIII. Vocabulary

- parchment* prepared animal skin (most commonly from sheep or cows) used for writing
- prologue* an introductory statement to a poem or other writing

## Document 1

The opening lines of the Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* from the Ellesmere Chaucer.



## Document 2

OLD ENGLISH (ca. 1000): Faeder ure thu the eart on heofonum, si thin mana gehalgod. Tobecume thin rice. Gewurthe in willa on eorthan swa swa on heofonum. Urne gedaeghwamlican hlaf syle us to daeg. And forgyf us ure gyltas, swa swa we forgyfath urum gyltedum. And ne gelaed thu us on contnungen ac alys us of yfele. Sothlice.

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MIDDLE ENGLISH (ca. 1400): Oure fadir that art in heuenes halowid be thi name, thi kingdom come to, be thi wille don in erthe es in heuene, yeue to us this day oure bread our other substance, & foryeue to us oure dettis, as we forgeuen to oure dettouris, & lede us not in to temptacion: but delyuer us from yuel, amen.

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EARLY MODERN ENGLISH (ca. 1600): Our father which art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever, amen.

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CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH: Our father who is in heaven, may your name be kept holy. May your kingdom come into being. May your will be followed on earth, just as it is in heaven. Give us this day our food for the day. And forgive us our offenses, just as we forgive those who have offended us. And do not bring us to the test. But free us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours forever. Amen.

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Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc, 1994). Courtesy of HarperCollins

## Document 3

Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*

*Here biginneth the Book of the Tales of Caunterbury*

WHAN that Aprill with his shoures sote  
The droghte of Marche hath perced to the rote,  
And bathed every veyne in swich licour  
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;  
Whan Zephirus eek with his swete breeth  
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth  
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne  
Hath in the Ram his halfe cours y-ronne,  
And smale fowles maken melodye,  
That slepen al the night with open yë  
(So priketh hem Nature in hir corages):  
Than longen folk to goon on pilgrimages  
And palmers for to seken straunge strondes,  
To fern halwes, couth in sondry londes;  
And specially, from every shires ende  
Of Engelond, to Caunterbury the wende,  
The holy blisful martir for to seke  
That hem hath holpen, whan that they were seke