



# THE CANTERBURY TALES

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*Geoffrey Chaucer*

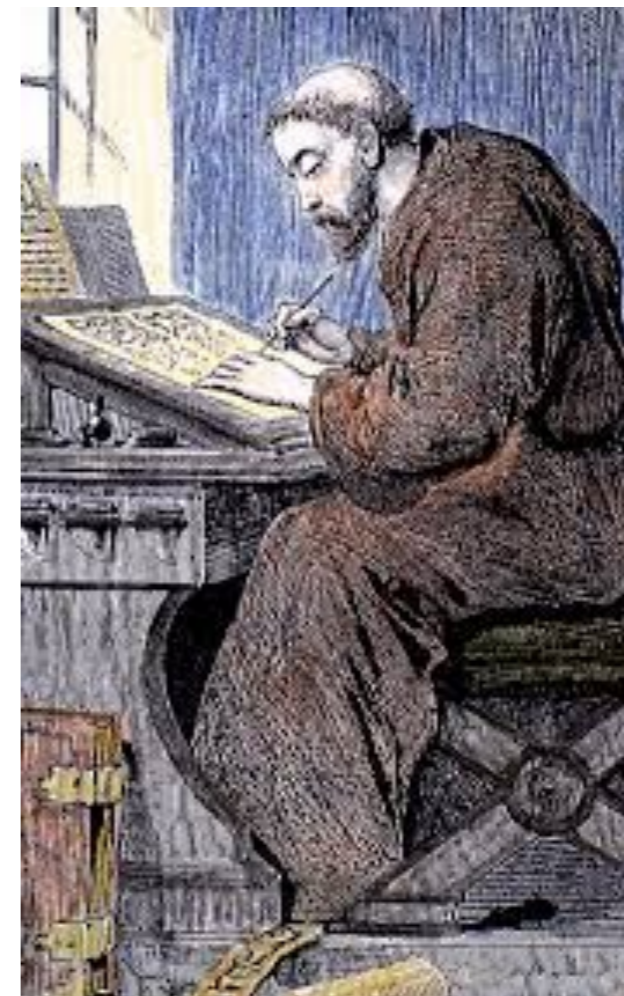




# TIMELINE

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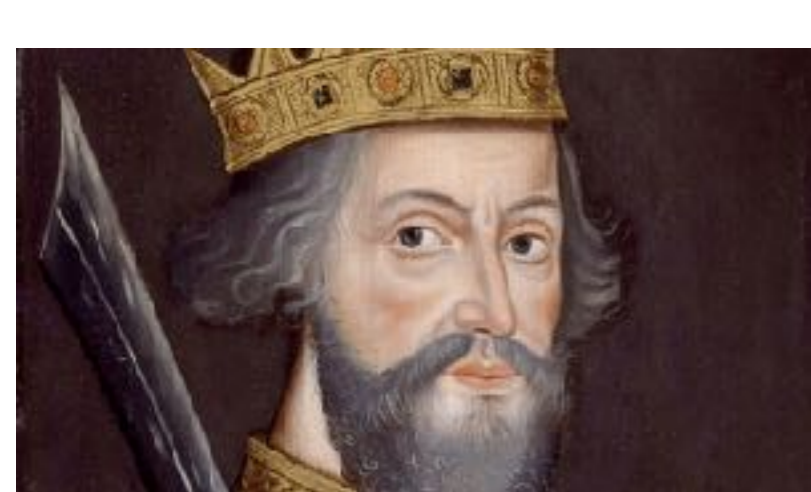
- 400s-500s Events of *Beowulf* take place
- 450-900s Anglo-Saxon society rules in England
- 600-1000s Monks spread Christianity in England
- 1000s Christians in England record Anglo-Saxon stories



# THE MIDDLE AGES

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- 1066 William the Conqueror, a French king, invades England
- 1095 The Catholic Church calls for the first holy war known as the First Crusade
- 1337 The Hundred Years' War begins
- 1347 The Black Death reaches Europe, beginning in Italy and spreading throughout the continent
- 1387 Geoffrey Chaucer begins writing *The Canterbury Tales*



# HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

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- Chaucer lived during an age of transition and change in England.
- Literacy spread- works were written in English for the first time.
- The Hundred Years' War and the Black Death (plague) upended the old social norms and lead to new English rulers and a new way of life (spread of reforms- Magna Carta)

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- *The Canterbury Tales* was unique. It marked the beginning of an age of literature about every different class of people...not just upper class kings and warriors (& dragons).
  - Features members of 3 major social classes:

*The Merchant Class-peasants, workers, traders, etc.*

*The Ecclesiastical Class- members of the church (nuns, monks, etc.)*

*The Nobility Class- knights, squires, dukes, etc.*

# THE LANGUAGE

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- Stories were written in Middle English, which bears a close resemblance to the English we speak today.
- The book was so important that the King of England started speaking English more than French (and the upper class followed suit), which was a really big deal since the upper class had been speaking French since the Norman Conquest (remember William the Conqueror?) in 1066.

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- The story is about a religious pilgrimage to the Canterbury Cathedral, the most popular pilgrimage spot in England due to a murder that took place there.
  - Thomas Becket, a friend of King Henry II, was the archbishop of Canterbury, and was killed by political enemies. The church named him a saint after his death.
  - Pilgrimages were very important in medieval culture.
  - All social classes—nobility and peasants—were expected to complete religious pilgrimages (to fight, to honor, to pay tribute to God)



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- It is literally the story of the world's weirdest road trip.
  - It begins at the Tabard Inn, where the narrator meets up with all classes of people he will be traveling with on the road to the Canterbury Cathedral to receive blessings from the martyred Saint Becket.
  - The host of the inn, Harry Bailey, suggests that, to make the trip to Canterbury pass faster (rather than singing annoying car songs), each member of the party tell tales on the journey. The person who tells the best story will be rewarded with a sumptuous dinner paid for by the other members of the party. Bailey decides to accompany the group to serve as judge of the tales.

# THE PROLOGUE

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- Depicts the beginning of the pilgrimage
- Told from Chaucer's POV (The earliest example of a 1st-person narrative)
- Offers social commentary- opinions and moral judgements of the different people and classes



# THE PROLOGUE (CONT)

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He uses both direct and indirect characterization to introduce the different pilgrims

- **Direct-** direct information about the character- looks, personality, beliefs, motivations, etc
- **Indirect-** descriptions and details about the character that reveals something about his/her personality and motivations
- For example, the Knight is directly characterized as “honorable” and “chivalrous.” He is indirectly characterized as humble, as Chaucer points out that he “is not gaily dressed.”