

Middle English Literature and
Chaucer's *The Canterbury
Tales*



Part I: The Anglo-Norman Period: 1066-1350 A.D.

- The Norman Conquest of Britain took place on October 14, 1066 (The Battle of Hastings).
- 1066 also marks the end of Old English and the beginning of Middle English.



Language in Britain

- Majority of the population spoke Old English, but the clergy and the rulers spoke French.



French Influence on English Language and Literature

- Heavy consonants of Anglo-Saxon was changed to softer French.
- English begins to become standardized.
- Lines of communication are opened throughout the country
- Alliteration and Caesura are replaced with rhyme and meter, Iambic Pentameter, and Rhymed Couplet.



French Influence on English Language and Literature (cont.)

- French culture influenced Anglo-Saxon “mindset”. (Arthurian Legend and Courtly Love).
- Feudalism is introduced to England.
- Strong influence of the church.



Part II: History of the Age of Chaucer

- No known year of Chaucer's birth, but it is supposed to be near 1345-1350.



Chaucer (cont.)



- He was a public servant (Kent).
- His jobs included the following:
soldier, controller of customs, justice of the peace as well as a forest official.



Etymology of the Name: *Chaucer*



- *Chaucer* comes from the French and means “the maker of shoes or hose.”
- However, none of Chaucer’s relatives were shoemakers or hosiers.



Chaucer's Times

- English society was evolving from medievalism to modernism.
- Age of Skepticism and satire: faith and authority were losing hold on the people.
- The Black Plague struck three times in the 14th century.
- Social structure became unstable.



Chaucer's Times

- Church was full of abuses—popes, friars, and summoners blackmailed people.
- 100 years war ended in 1453.
- Henry VII brought peace and stability in 1485.



Part III: Why We Study Chaucer

- Chaucer was the Father of English Poetry.
- He ranks with other great poets such as Milton and Shakespeare.
- He is the Master of the short tale and of literary achievement in the Middle Ages.
- In *The Canterbury Tales*, each pilgrim stands out distinctly. Each remains for all time as a “type.”
- Each tale represents a plethora of thematic perspectives.



Some of Chaucer's Themes:

- Satire of the aristocratic hero figure.
- Comic revelation of the foibles of love.
- Models of marriage relationships.
- Ideals of love and sacrifice.

