

Five British Writers

Here we are again...



What are your goals?

- To gain a better or broader or more well-rounded view of British literature, especially of never-read authors
- To gain analytical skills in reading
- To become a better writer
- To be able to read early literature more easily/in the original
- To fulfill English major/degree requirements
- To get an A+
- To be delightfully surprised...

What are your concerns?

- “Chaucer scares me”
- “I am not computer-friendly”/websites are useless if not updated frequently
- I am balancing the course with a heavy workload
- X type of writing is difficult/Margins, coversheets, and footnotes do not interest me
- I am shy
- My mind tends to wander
- I can't make your office hours

What are your tastes?

- Everything! journals, short stories, poetry, drama, non-fiction, memoirs, American contemporary writers, fiction, non-fiction, beat poetry, neuroscience...
- “Poetry is definitely the best” / **“Poetry is difficult”**
- **“I struggle with filling the blank page”** /
“Long composition—I like to take an idea and run with it”
- **“I hate/despise/loathe formal research papers”** /
“Research papers are easier to write and I enjoy researching topics and putting it together”

Ellesmere Manuscript

How medieval readers read
the *Canterbury Tales*...



Pilgrim Portraits



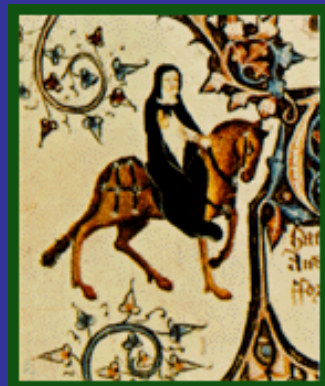
Chaucer



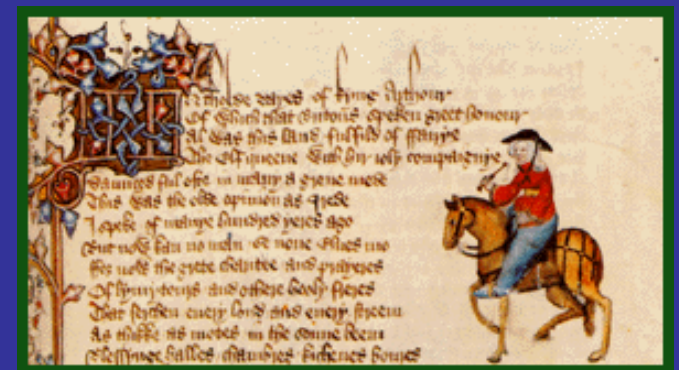
Franklin



Pardoner



Prioress



Wife of Bath

Pilgrim Portraits

Group 1: Knight, lines 43-78

Read through the selected passage again. Working together, write down answers the following questions on one sheet:

Group 2: Prioress, 118-162

1. What are the most striking features of this pilgrim?
2. What opinion does narrator express about this pilgrim and how exactly is the opinion conveyed (descriptive adjectives, asides, similes, etc..)?
3. Is there a significant difference between the narrator's expressed opinion and the impression of the pilgrim you get from reading the description?

Group 3: Monk, 165-207

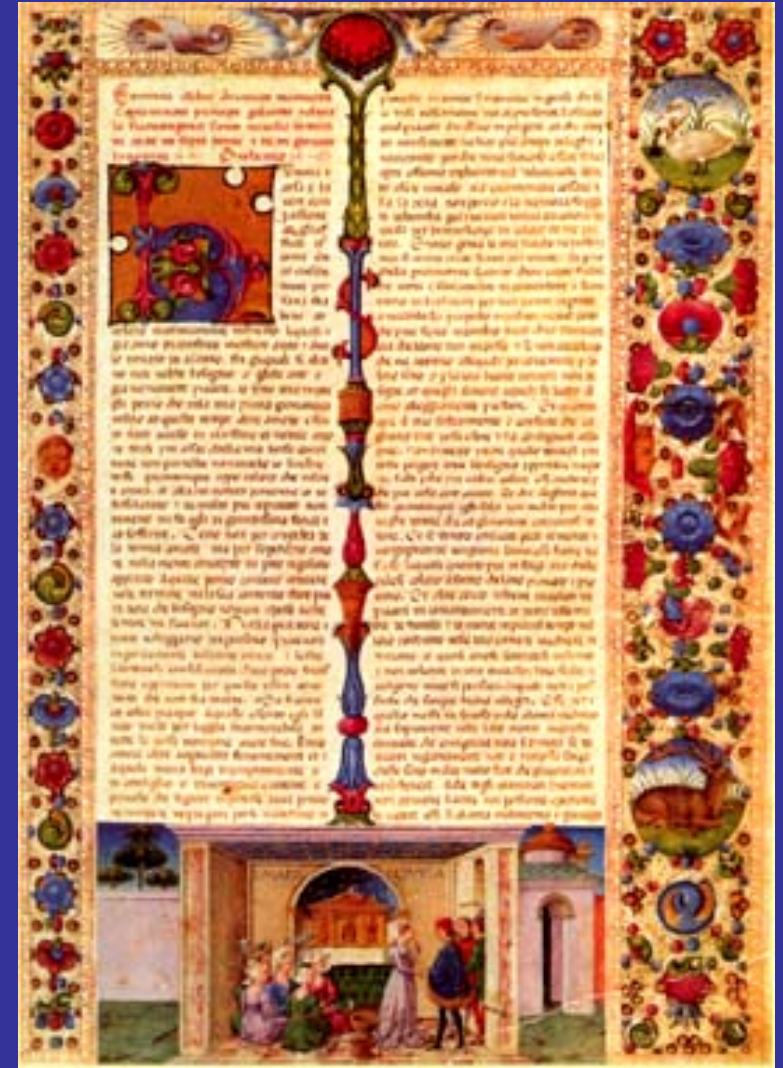
Group 4: Shipman, 388-410

Group 5: Miller, 542-566

In your group, pick out 3-5 lines that seem particularly important, puzzling, or interesting—and get ready to recite them (ask me for pronunciation coaching, if desired). You will recite these lines and present your analysis of the pilgrim portrait to the rest of the class. Make sure each person has a chance to speak—and that each person's name appears on the written group sheet (which you'll give to me).

Il Decameron

A contemporary contrast to the *Canterbury Tales*?



Giovanni Boccaccio, 1313-1375

- Chaucer rewrites a number of the stories found Boccaccio's Latin and Italian poems.
- One of these poems, the *Decameron* [a name coined from Greek meaning 'ten days'], is most like the *Canterbury Tales* in being a tale collection.
- But there are significant differences...

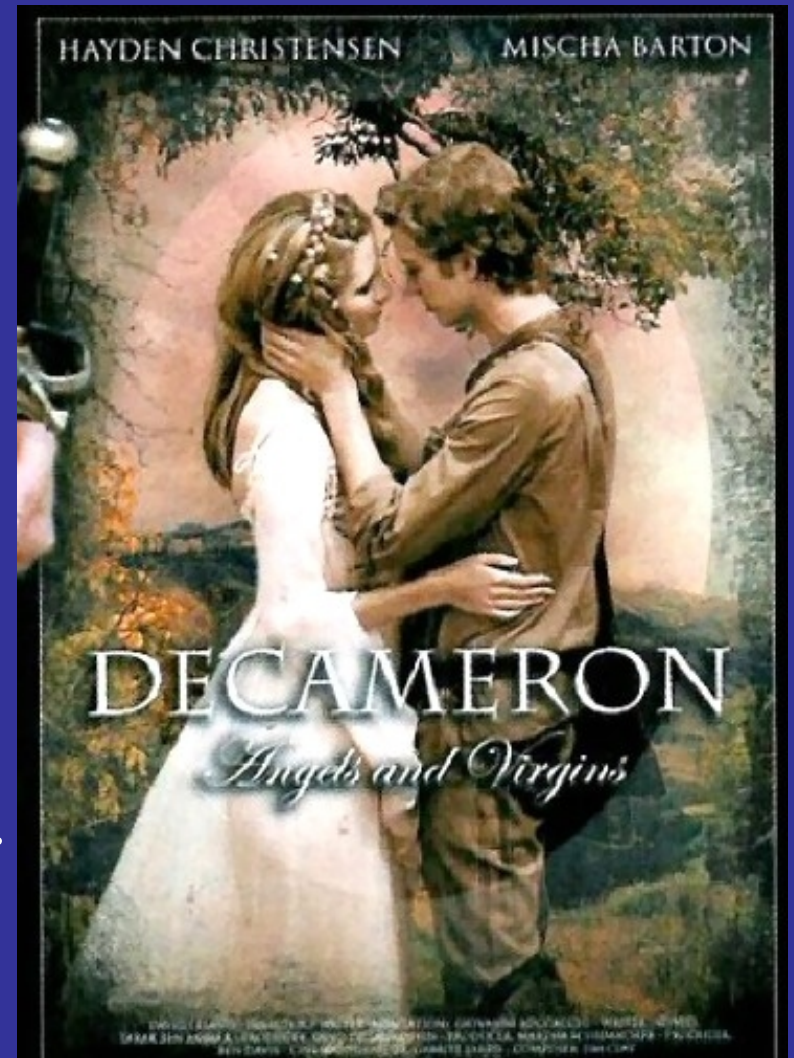
- Boccaccio's 10 tale-telling characters are all young, aristocratic, beautiful, and in love.
- The setting is not a pilgrimage but a plague refuge.
- There is a stricter ordering of the tales.
- The reason for the tale-telling is pleasure and ease.
- The relation of the author to the characters in introducing their story is different.

Il Decameron: Guilty Pleasures (2007)



Mischa Barton and Hayden Christensen
star in a new film based on the *Decameron*.
Coming Soon...

American Title: *Angels and Virgins*



- Boccaccio's 10 tale-telling characters are all young, aristocratic, beautiful, and in love.
- The setting is not a pilgrimage but a plague refuge.
- There is a stricter ordering of the tales.
- The reason for the tale-telling is pleasure and ease.
- The relation of the author to the characters in introducing their story is different.

Reason for Tale-Telling

“If you were to follow my advice, this hotter part of the day would be spent, not in playing games (which inevitably bring anxiety to one of the players, without offering very much pleasure either to his opponent or to the spectators), but in telling stories—an activity that may afford some amusement both to the narrator and to the company at large. By the time each one of you has narrated a little tale of his own or her own, the sun will be setting, the heat will have abated, and we shall be able to go and amuse ourselves wherever you choose. Let us then if the idea appeals to you, carry this proposal of mine into effect. But I am willing to follow your own wishes in this matter, and if you disagree with my suggestion, let us all go and occupy our time in whatever way we please until the hours of vespers” [trans. G. H. Williams, 23]

Author introduces Characters

“One Tuesday morning (or so I was told by a person whose word can be trusted) seven young ladies... I could tell you their actual names, but refrain from doing so for a good reason, namely that I would not want any of them to feel embarrassed, at any time in the future, on account of the ensuing stories, all of which they either listened to or narrated themselves...”
[trans. G. H. McWilliam, 13]

The Ending... *according to the characters*

“lest aught conducive to tedium should arise from a custom too long established, and lest, by protracting our stay, we should cause evil tongues to start wagging, I now think it proper since we have all in turn had our share of the honour still invested in me, that with your consent we should return whence we came. If, moreover, you consider the matter carefully, our company being known to various others hereabouts, our numbers could increase in a such a way as to destroy all our pleasure. And so, if my advice should command your approval...”

[trans. G. H. McWilliam, 796]

The Ending... *according to the author*

“Noble young ladies, for whose solace I undertook this protracted labor, I believe...those objectives which I set forth at the beginning of the present work have now been fully achieved... the time has come for me to rest my pen and weary hand. Before conceding this repose, however, since I am fully aware that these tales of mine are no less immune from criticism than any of the other things in this world...I propose briefly to reply to certain trifling objections which...may have possibly arisen in the minds of my readers, including one or two of yourselves...”

[trans. G. H. McWilliam, 796]

The Ending of the *Canterbury Tales*... according to you, Du Boulay, and Donaldson

- Question 1: Based on reading the *General Prologue* (without any other knowledge of the *Tales*), is the *Parson's Tale* and the *Retraction* what you would have expected as a conclusion? Why or why not?
- Question 2: Du Boulay identifies himself as a medieval historian and speaks of the historian as “fiction's enemy” (492). Donaldson opens his essay by claiming the need for Chaucer the pilgrim to be “rescued from the comparatively dull record of history” (503). Are the arguments of these two essays, the historical and the literary, really irreconcilable? Are there any ways in which the two arguments intersect productively?
- Question 3: Both Du Boulay and Donaldson cite another one of Chaucer's poems, the *Troilus and Criseide*, in making their arguments about Chaucer's work (491-2, 509). What is the point of each scholar's citation? Do you find one reference more convincing than another?