

Five British Writers

Day 3



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?

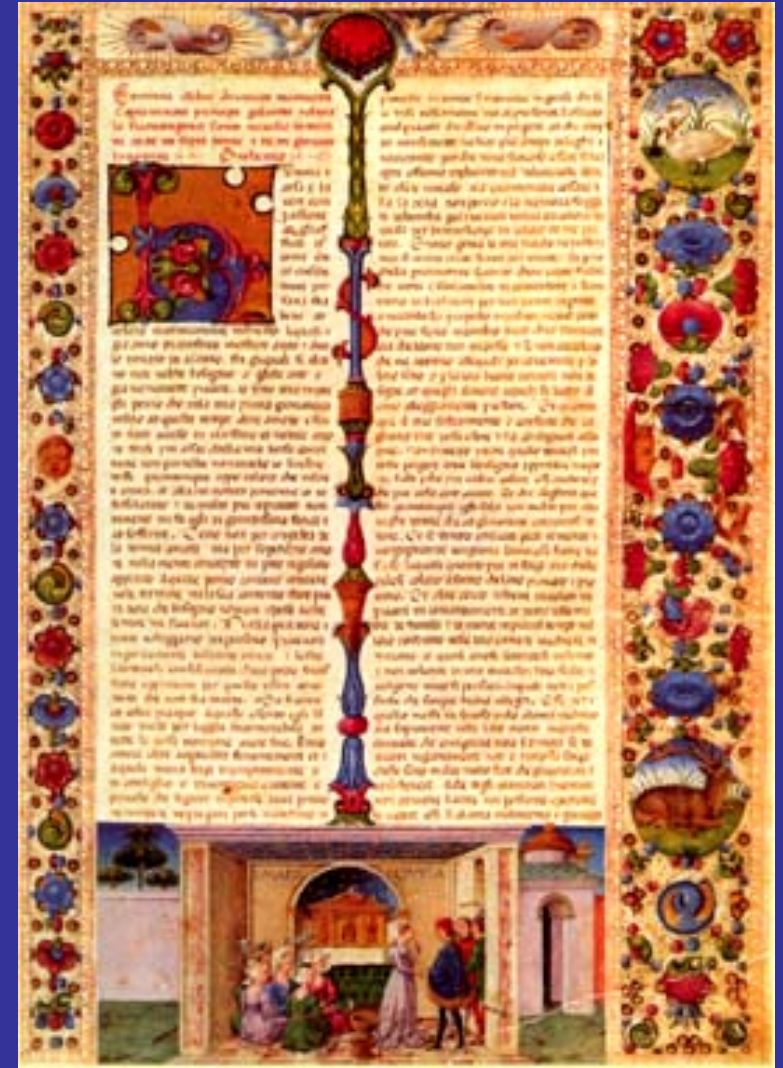
The Ending of the Canterbury Tales... *according to you, Du Boulay, and Donaldson*

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[Say your name when making a response]

Il Decameron

How does its ending
compare to the *Canterbury
Tales*?



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 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?

[What are the arguments of the essays? What information does each provide?]

What are the major historical events mentioned by Du Boulay?

Religious

- Pope in Avignon from 1305; Papal Schism, 1378 – 1409. There are two rival Popes: Pope Urban in Rome, and Pope Clement in Avignon.
- Lollardy, a heresy condemned in the late 14th and early 15th centuries.

Economic

- Black (Bubonic) Plague, 1348-9
- 1381 Uprising

Political

- Growing use of English at court from the 1360s
- Hundred Years War, 1337-1453
- Reigning monarchs:
Edward III (1327-77),
Richard II (1377-1399)
Usurpation!
Henry IV (1399-1413)

Chaucer Chronology

- c. 1340 – 1345 Geoffrey Chaucer is born to John and Agnes Chaucer.
- 1357 Chaucer enters into service as a page in the household of Elizabeth, Countess of Ulster.
- 1359-60 Chaucer serves in a military expedition under Prince Lionel (son of King Edward III of England) in France. Chaucer is captured in France. King Edward III pays a ransom of 16 pounds for Chaucer's release.
- 1360 In October, Prince Lionel pays Chaucer for running diplomatic missions between Calais and England.
- 1366 Chaucer marries Philippa Roet. John Chaucer (Geoffrey's father) dies. Geoffrey's mother Agnes later remarries Bartholomew Chappel. Chaucer travels to Spain. The King grants Chaucer's wife Philippa an annuity of 10 marks for life for her service in the Queen's household.
- 1367 Chaucer enters service as a valet and later a squire in the household of King Edward III. On June 20, the King grants Chaucer a lifetime annuity of 20 pounds. Chaucer's son, Thomas, is also born in this year.
- c. 1368 – 1370 Chaucer travels to the Continent (France?) "on the King's service."
- 1369 Chaucer receives mourning clothes following the death of Queen Philippa, wife of King Edward III. Chaucer serves in John of Gaunt's army in France.
- 1370 Chaucer serves in the army (once again) in France.
- 1372 Chaucer travels to Italy (Genoa and Florence) on a diplomatic mission. In Genoa, he establishes a English port for trade. In Florence, he negotiates a loan for the King. Chaucer's wife Philippa enters into service in the household of John of Gaunt's new wife Constance.
- c. 1372 – 1377 Chaucer (possibly) writes the parts of the poems that later become known as the Monk's Tale and the Second Nun's Tale.
- 1373 In August, Chaucer is sent to Dartmouth to deliver a Genoese tarit (ship) back to its master, a Genoese merchant.
- 1374 Chaucer is appointed the Controller of Customs (hides, skins, and wool) for the Port of London. He is also granted a lease to a residence in Aldgate, London. The King grants Chaucer pitcher of wine daily. John of Gaunt grants Chaucer a lifetime annuity of 10 pounds.
- 1375 John of Gaunt gives grants to Chaucer and to French knight/poet Otho de Graunson.
- 1377 – 1381 Chaucer makes several trips to the Continent (France and Flanders) to negotiate peace and a marriage between Richard II and a French princess.
- 1378 Chaucer leaves on a diplomatic mission to Lombardy (in Italy), where he meets with the Milan tyrant Bernabo Visconti and the English captain of mercenaries operating in Italy, Sir John Hawkwood.
- 1378 Richard II confirms the 20 pound annuity granted to Chaucer by Edward III. Richard also establishes an additional 20 pound annuity.
- 1380 The parents of Cecily Chaumpaigne release Chaucer from all actions in the case of her raptus. Chaucer's second son, Lewis, is born.
- 1381 Chaucer's mother Agnes dies. Chaucer's daughter Elizabeth becomes a nun of Barking Abbey, London.
- 1382 The King renews Chaucer's position as Controller of Customs and gives him permission to have a deputy.
- 1385 The King grants Chaucer a permanent deputy in the Customs. Chaucer receives mourning clothing upon the death of the King's mother, Joan of Kent.
- 1385 – 1389 Chaucer serves as Justice of the Peace for Kent.
- 1386 Chaucer gives a deposition in the Court of Chivalry regarding the Scrope-Grosvenor controversy (a dispute between two gentlemen over the right to use a certain coat of arms).
- 1386 Chaucer gives up his residence in Aldgate and resigns from Customs (and possibly moves to Kent).
- 1386 Chaucer serves as a Member of Parliament for Kent.
- c. 1387 – 1392 Chaucer begins *The Canterbury Tales*.
- 1389 On July 12, the King appoints Chaucer Clerk of the King's Works. In this position, Chaucer is in charge of large construction projects, including works at Westminster, the Tower of London, and other royal estates.
- 1390 As Clerk of the King's Works, Chaucer oversees the building of scaffolds for jousts in Smithfield.
- 1391 Chaucer retires from his position as the Clerk of the King's Works. In June, he becomes the Deputy Forester of the Royal Forest of North Petherton, Somerset.
- c. 1392 – 1395 Chaucer writes most of *The Canterbury Tales*.
- 1393 The King awards Chaucer 10 pounds for "services rendered."
- 1394 The King grants Chaucer an annuity of 20 pounds for life.
- c. 1396 – 1400 Chaucer writes the latest of *The Canterbury Tales*, including (probably) the Nun's Priest's Tale, the Canon's Yeoman's Tale, the Parson's Tale, and other short poems.
- 1398 King Richard II grants Chaucer a tun (252 gallons) of wine a year.
- 1399 King Henry IV confirms and increases Chaucer's royal annuities.
- 1400 Chaucer writes "The Complaint of Chaucer to his Purse," which makes an appeal to the new King Henry. On October 25 (according to tradition), Chaucer dies. He is buried in Westminster Abbey.

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

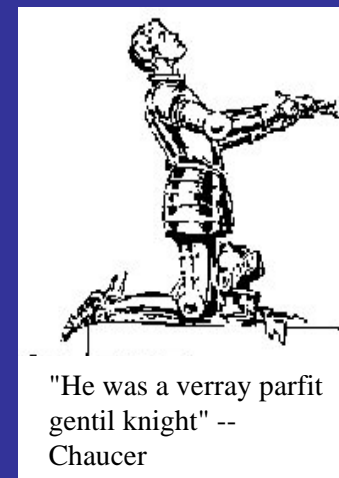
In your group, pick out 3-5 lines that seem particularly important, puzzling, or interesting—and get ready to recite them (ask me for pronunciation coaching, if desired). You will recite these lines and present your analysis of the pilgrim portrait to the rest of the class. Make sure each person has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

Chaucer's Knight, early 20th c.

“...the Romance of the knights of the Middle Ages has its attraction for all boys and has its appeal to their moral sense. Their Code of Chivalry included Honour, Self-discipline, Courtesy, Courage, Selfless sense of Duty and Service, and the guidance of Religion. These and other good attributes would be readily accepted if embodied in a Law for Scouts.”

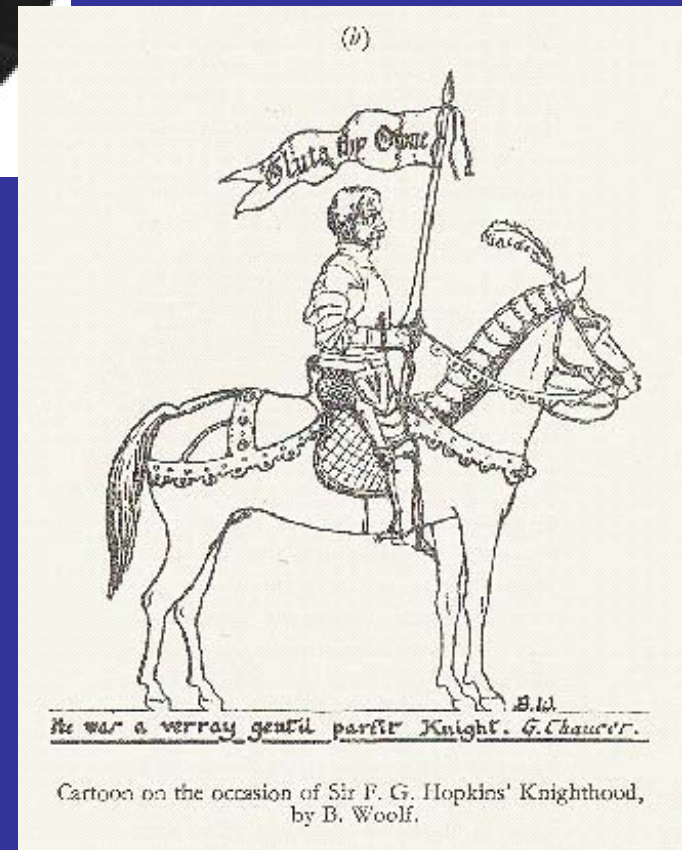
— Lord Baden-Powell, *Lessons from the Varsity of Life* (1933)
Chapter 10, part 1.

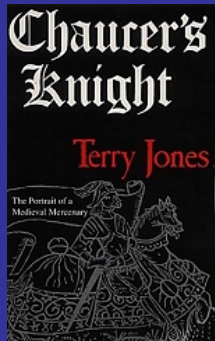
Baden-Powell at the second Boy Scout Camp meeting, 1909



Chaucer's Knight, mid-20th c.

- Frederick Gowland Hopkins (1861-1947) discovered and proved the existence of 'accessory food factors' (now known as vitamins), and advocated biochemistry as an academic discipline
- When Hopkins was knighted in 1925, *Brighter Biochemistry* magazine recognized the occasion by depicting him as Chaucer's "verray gentil parfit Knight"; his banner, "Gluta thy owne", gestured to his work on the functions of glutathione.





Chaucer's Knight, late 20th/early 21st c.

Terry Jones argues “it would not be surprising . . . if Chaucer had chosen the portrait of such a knight as the centre-pin for his satire on the society of his day” (33-37).

- Notes that Chaucer's Knight “is not endowed with any physical beauty or grace; there is no mention of any family background, no coat-of-arms, no shield, no belt, no manorial estates” (2-4).
- Argues for negative connotations of “ryden out”(45) and “prys”(67)
- Argues for a negative medieval view of Christian in-fighting, and the named battles, especially the siege of Alexandria.

—*Chaucer's Knight: A Portrait of a Medieval Mercenary*. London: Weidenfeld, 1980.



“Every age sort of has its own history. History is really the stories that we retell to ourselves to make them relevant to every age. So we put our own values and our own spin on it.”

—“An Interview with Terry Jones,” *IGN* (2004) 2.

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Reading Chaucer's character(s)

- How does our view of historical Chaucer affect the way we read the fictional Chaucer character?
- How do our readings of historical/fictional Chaucer affect the way we read other characters in the text?
- What role does our own history play in our reading of Chaucer and his text?

Next Week: Knight and Miller

- As you read the Knight's and Miller's Tales for Thursday, think about the difference that style/voice makes. Nolan's article tries to analyze voice and style apart from a concern with Chaucer's character—do her conclusions apply well to the tales you read?
- The theoretical readings (extracts from Augustine and Saussure) will no longer be required reading, but I will make them available on our website.