VOLUME **1**

LISTER M. MATHESON, EDITOR

ICONS

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MIDDLE AGES

RULERS, WRITERS, REBELS, AND SAINTS

ICONS OF THE MIDDLE AGES

Rulers, Writers, Rebels, and Saints

Volume 1

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Contents

Series Foreword

Worshipped and cursed. Loved and loathed. Obsessed about the world over. What does it take to become an icon? Regardless of subject, culture, or era, the requisite qualifications are the same: (1) challenge the status quo, (2) influence millions, and (3) impact history.

Using these criteria, ABC-Clio/Greenwood introduces a new reference format and approach to popular culture. Spanning a wide range of subjects, volumes in the Greenwood Icons series provide students and general readers a port of entry into the most fascinating and influential topics of the day. Every title offers an in-depth look at up to 24 iconic figures, each of which captures the essence of a broad subject. These icons typically embody a group of values, elicit strong reactions, reflect the essence of a particular time and place, and link different traditions and periods. Among those featured are artists and activists, superheroes and spies, inventors and athletes, the legends and mythmakers of entire generations. Yet icons can also come from unexpected places: as the heroine who transcends the pages of a novel or as the revolutionary idea that shatters our previously held beliefs. Whether people, places, or things, such icons serve as a bridge between the past and the present, the canonical and the contemporary. By focusing on icons central to popular culture, this series encourages students to appreciate cultural diversity and critically analyze issues of enduring significance.

Most importantly, these books are as entertaining as they are provocative. Is Disneyland a more influential icon of the American West than Las Vegas? How do ghosts and ghouls reflect our collective psyche? Is Barry Bonds an inspiring or deplorable icon of baseball?

Designed to foster debate, the series serves as a unique resource that is ideal for paper writing or report purposes. Insightful, in-depth entries provide far more information than conventional reference articles but are less intimidating and more accessible than a book-length biography. The most revered and reviled icons of American and world history are brought to life with related sidebars, timelines, fact boxes, and quotations. Authoritative entries are

Sypeck, Jeff. *Becoming Charlemagne: Europe, Baghdad, and the Empires of A.D. 800.* New York: Ecco/HarperCollins, 2006.

Wilson, Derek. *Charlemagne: The Great Adventure.* London: Hutchinson, 2005.

APPENDIX: THE CAROLINGIAN DYNASTY

Pippinids

Pippin (or Pepin) the Elder (ca. 580–640)

Grimoald (616–656)

Childebert the Adopted (d. 662)

Arnulfings

Arnulf of Metz (582–640)

Chlodulf of Metz (d. 696 or 697)

Ansegisel (ca. 602–before 679)

Pepin II "the Middle" (ca. 635–714)

Grimoald II (d. 714)

Drogo of Champagne (670–708)

Theudoald (d. 714)

Carolingians

Charles Martel (686–741)

Carloman (d. 754)

Pepin the Short (714–768)

Carloman I (751–771)

Charlemagne (ca. 742–814)

Louis the Pious (778–840)

Carolingians after the Treaty of Verdun (843)

Lothair I, Holy Roman Emperor (795–855) (Middle Francia)

Charles the Bald (823–877) (Western Francia)

Louis the German (804–876) (Eastern Francia)

Portrait of Geoffrey Chaucer, from the poem *Regiment of Princes* by Thomas Hoccleve, fifteenth century. (British Library/Stockphoto-Pro)

Geoffrey Chaucer (ca. 1340–1400)

Louise M. Bishop

INTRODUCTION

The major Hollywood movie *A Knight's Tale* (2001, written and directed by Brian Helgeland) follows the adventures of William Turner (played by Heath Ledger), a common page to a recently deceased noble. The peasant Turner, disguised in his late master's armor, seeks the rewards of knighthood, despite the supposed dangers of his impersonation. In addition to Ledger and his motley crew who quest for tournament prizes, the film features a thin, sprightly, bigheaded (in more ways than one) Geoffrey Chaucer (played by Paul Bettany). Chaucer introduces himself with "Geoffrey Chaucer's the name, writing's the game." He's a down-and-out writer, addicted to gambling and stuck making his living as a scribe. Poetry plays second fiddle to his other interests like wenches and gambling (he suffers from a modern-flavored addiction, without benefit of a 12-step program), but he nevertheless expects his fame to have preceded him. Having lost his clothes in a card game, and standing naked before Turner, Chaucer attempts to jog Turner's memory: "You've probably read my book?" (Beat) "Book of the Duchess?" Turner just looks on, puzzled. The poet's wit glistens only in comparison to the film's generally insipid dialogue as Chaucer, like Turner, pulls a number of fast ones in his attempts to score with damsels as well as dice.

A Knight's Tale is a pretty uninspired movie, but at least it doesn't try to be more than it is: an entertaining teen flick. It reveals a popular culture that has lost touch with its medieval past as well as the figure of Geoffrey Chaucer, except in the most bowdlerized of forms. The film's opening tournament shows its grandstands rocking to Queen's "We Will Rock You"; the film's villain, Count Adhemar of Anjou (played by Rufus Sewell), loses a polite challenge once Turner and company dance enthusiastically, if not brilliantly, to David Bowie's "The Golden Years." It's clear that Helgeland can't trust an audience to find humor in an *authentic* representation of the Middle Ages.

But what Helgeland's movie reveals is that, in the midst of perhaps the most high-stakes commercial enterprise in the United States—filmmaking—even an audience of teenagers intrigued by things labeled "medieval" will recognize Geoffrey Chaucer as an icon of the Middle Ages. Indeed, a YouTube search for "Chaucer" returns hundreds of hits, primarily videos of high school class projects. There are live-action re-creations, energetic cartoons, and Lego-based narratives. Even the video game *World of Warcraft* has been used to bring a version of Geoffrey Chaucer to the home computer screen. Some of these amateur productions take authenticity more seriously than does *A Knight's Tale,* with occasionally accurate Middle English renditions of one or another of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales.* As for choice of tale, a tally of a sampling of these videos shows that "The Pardoner's Tale," with its challenging combination of moral lesson and scurrilous character, wins the popularity contest, hands down.

Evidently Americans aged 15 to 24 have enough familiarity with Geoffrey Chaucer for Hollywood's money machine, which squarely targets this demographic, to front a major production that features the poet prominently, if not at the film's center. But what about the real Geoffrey Chaucer and his legacy? What has made him available, some six centuries after his death, as an icon viable for commercial use? Is there more to Chaucer than a simple sound bite or a moniker that says "medieval"? Where does his iconic status come from, and how has it changed? What has kept Geoffrey Chaucer alive?

The following essay will treat Chaucer's biography, the creation of his iconic status, and the ways his icon has inhabited English literary culture for more than six hundred years. Here you will find some reasons for his durability, continued importance in literary circles, and commercial viability. We will see why Chaucer endures.

BIOGRAPHY

Birth and Early Life

As with many medieval persons of common stock, the day and even the year of Chaucer's birth are unknown. He is thought to have been born in London sometime around 1340, and we do know he died in 1400. The year of his death is a matter of public record because, by the time of his death, Chaucer had spent most of his adult life in the orbit of the royal family and its prestigious courts. He wasn't necessarily destined to end up at court, but his family was wealthy and well enough placed, both geographically and socioeconomically, to give him a good start. His father, Thomas Chaucer, was a prosperous wine merchant. London was then a burgeoning commercial hub—arguably the most active in Europe—and its power was great enough to necessitate royalty's accession to the city's wishes: London's mayor rivaled the king in political and economic sway.

Among the ironically lucky events early in Chaucer's lifetime was his father's decision, in 1347, to relocate his family, including the young Geoffrey, outside of the city. Their move fortuitously took them out of London, and harm's way, just before the Black Death—bubonic plague—struck. Contemporary chronicles and modern research put the plague's devastating death toll between one-third and one-half of Britain's population. As for London itself, a 2005 article in the journal *Human Biology* puts the population of London at 100,000 before the first wave of plague (1348–51) and 50,000 after the plague (*Human Biology* 77.3 (2005) 291–303). Although calculations vary, it is clear from many remnants of fourteenth-century material culture, such as manuscript illuminations, tombs, and currently excavated burial grounds, that the plague wreaked havoc on London. But the city's importance as commercial center for Britain and Europe remained, and after the plague the Chaucer family returned to the metropolis to augment their fortunes and play a role in local politics.

Chaucer the Page

Family connections got teenaged Geoffrey preferred to court as page, the first step for a royal servant being educated in the ways of aristocratic life. Chaucer first entered court service during the reign of King Edward III (1312–1377, r. 1327–77), but did not serve immediately at any of that king's domiciles. Instead, Geoffrey was "preferred" to the court of the second of Edward's five sons, Lionel (1338–1368). Chaucer took part in the consolidation of the prince's court with that of his wife, the princess Elizabeth. As Chaucer became more accomplished in the courtly arts, he moved among princely venues, including the magnificent courts of the third of Edward's sons, John of Gaunt (1340–1399), a powerful noble and father to the usurping king Henry IV (1366–1413, reigned 1399–1413). This Henry is the one who attained the throne of England, as William Shakespeare's (1564–1616) second tetrology of history plays dramatizes, after forcing the abdication of Richard II (1367–1399) at the end of the fourteenth century, a year before Chaucer's death. In the course of his work life, Chaucer served, and was recognized with substantial rewards from, all three of these kings: the aged Edward, the young Richard, and the usurping Henry.

Diplomat and Soldier

It did not take long for young Geoffrey to move up in responsibilities at Prince Lionel's court. From page he became yeoman; from yeoman, esquire and that rank's foreign service in international diplomacy. The traveling he did in his diplomatic role—he visited Italy, Spain, and France—immersed him in late medieval urbanity. The poetic sophistication upon which Chaucer's iconic status rests derives in no small part from these travels as a young man on royal business. In his youth he saw the French city of Reims, near which he was captured and ransomed after four months of imprisonment. Such ransoming was a common practice among noble courts in the fourteenth century and, because their captors hoped to attain considerable sums in ransom, prisoners were well treated and not abused. Besides Reims and Paris, the increasingly urbane Geoffrey saw the major Italian cities of Genoa and Florence during the 1360s and traveled to Pavia and Milan in the 1370s. These cities exposed Chaucer to the rich international commerce and diplomacy, not to mention the aesthetic pleasures, the burgeoning Renaissance fostered there.

Poet

Chaucer's success as diplomat paralleled his growth as poet. Influenced by the writings of Dante (1265–1321), Petrarch (1304–1374), and Boccaccio (1313–1375), whose works he could acquire as manuscripts through his travels,

Chaucer also found inspiration in the French poets Guillaume de Machaut (ca. 1300–1377) and Eustache Deschamps (1346–1406), the latter of whom wrote to Chaucer letters that survive to this day. Following the styles of these accomplished men of letters, Chaucer wrote ballads attuned to the devices and conventions of courtly love and short poems touched with courtly pretensions, from love-longing to knightly endeavors. His greatest innovation, while prompted in part by his French and Italian literary influences, made him different from them: he wrote in his native, vernacular English.

Chaucer's choice to write in English parallels Dante's decision to write his major work, *The Divine Comedy*, not in Latin, despite its subject matter, but in his vernacular Tuscan Italian, the reasons for which he presents in his Latin work, *De vulgari eloquentia* ("On the eloquence of the vernacular"). Still, Chaucer's choice of English over French went against tradition in England at that time. The business of England had been conducted in French since the Norman conquest of 1066; although "Saxon" survived, it was not the status language of commerce, the royal court, or even law. But Chaucer was no apologist for Saxon, either. He did not take up models available to him outside the court. English verse had relied on alliteration, rather than end-rhyme, for its meter and rhythm in the Anglo-Saxon period (fifth century–eleventh century), but Chaucer's poetry, from his earlier works to his last, *The Canterbury Tales*, use end-rhyme and the syllabic count that governs poetry composed in the Romance languages. Why did Chaucer write in English? Perhaps he was moved by Dante's arguments in *De vulgari eloquentia*; perhaps, court creature and diplomatic voyager that he was, he wanted to explore national identity produced through language. The reasons for his choice are both obscure and manifold, but the choice of English marks Chaucer's iconic status. The creation and continuity of Chaucer's iconic presence in later centuries depends, as did his initial choice of English, on intersections among monarchic power, national identity, aesthetic judgment, and the pleasures of English poetry.

The sweet courtly poems Chaucer composed—in English, of course—during his residency in the courts of Prince Lionel and John of Gaunt were practice runs for his longer dream visions. The dream-vision form was popularized by French poets, but its roots run deep in classical and biblical culture. Chaucer modeled his dream visions on those of his favorite French writer, Guillaume de Machaut, the previous generation's most courtly exemplar and a favorite of Anglo-Norman nobility. Chaucer's dream-vision poems situate him in the literary mainstream of his courtly circles. Most critics agree that Chaucer's first dream-vision poem—the one that Paul Bettany's Chaucer in *A Knight's Tale* erroneously thinks William Turner will recognize—is *The Book of the Duchess*. Most consider the poem a commission from John of Gaunt to honor his late wife Blanche. Blanche had died in 1369, but Chaucer composed the poem, it is argued, for a later ceremony on the anniversary of her death.

William Turner's ignorance of *The Book of the Duchess* in *A Knight's Tale* may match the present audience's: there are no YouTube *Book of the Duchess* videos. Chaucer's current fame rests on his *Canterbury Tales*: 24 tales stitched

together with a "frame narrative" of a pilgrimage and a tale-telling contest, the unfinished last of his poetic works in a career that spanned three decades. But Chaucer's signature poetic traits, the ones current fans recognize in *The Canterbury Tales,* also appear in his earliest work. One feature of his early poetry well-attested in his later work is a spark of what moderns would call "realism" as well as an understanding of human psychology. In *The Book of the Duchess,* the grieving Man in Black is brought around to a confession of what his fulsome praise seemed to deny, that his love is dead; his admission brings a kind of relief. There's an insistent dog leading the dreamer around, and even his nightclothes—actually, his lack thereof—are described in the poem. Although allegory was a preeminent mode in the literature Chaucer read, his own work plays with the tension between the real and the allegorical, making his poetry continually enigmatic but eminently re-readable. In addition, Chaucer's early poetry features one of his literature's most recognized traits: a kind of ironic distance, caught in a web of emotion, yet knowing and self-aware. Even in the midst of the conventions of love's tribulations or Fortune's turning wheel, the narrator in Chaucer's poetry seems to have a tongue poised firmly within his cheek. This attitude on the part of a narrator marks all of Chaucer's poetry; it's the attitude for which today, from college classrooms to YouTube, Chaucer is justly celebrated. Not everyone reads such ironic distance the same way. This quality of Chaucer's poetry—and maybe its positive critical reception by twentieth-century critics in particular—prompted critic Camille Paglia to denounce Chaucer's chumminess of the "wink, wink, nudge, nudge" sort: she detests Chaucer's enjoyment of the "in joke." But there is no end of enjoyment to be taken in analyzing the connection between self and words parallel to the vagaries of court life that Chaucer's poetry places in imaginative landscapes poised between fantasy and dreadful reality. The pleasures of such a stance involve readers today and may have been even more attractive to those embroiled daily in the tumultuous years, the 1370s, of one old king's late reign and his grandson successor's early years.

Service under King Richard II

Edward III had groomed his eldest son, Edward the Black Prince (1330–1376) to succeed him, but the prince predeceased his father following a long illness. Upon Edward III's death in 1377, the Black Prince's son Richard, at the tender age of 10, assumed the throne. Due to his youth it was suggested that Richard be ruled by a regency made up of his uncles, but fear of their power—especially that of the exceedingly wealthy and powerful John of Gaunt (Chaucer's patron since Prince Lionel's death in 1368)—was substantial enough to produce a unique configuration of councils, rather than uncles, exercising consultancy. But the uncles—John of Gaunt, Edmund of York (1341–1402), and Thomas of Woodstock (1355–1397)—still exerted the kind of influence that comes with wealth and position.

Chaucer initially served his new king through these avuncular branches of the powerful Plantagenet family. In 1378 he participated in diplomatic efforts to broker a marriage between England's royal interests and the despotic Visconti family in Milan: the goal was to engage a Visconti daughter, Catarina, to the newly crowned young Richard. It's hard to know how surprised Chaucer might have been when, in 1379, Richard II was affianced to Anne of Bohemia, daughter of the Holy Roman Emperor. A choice marriage, but not one with which Chaucer had been involved: we can only guess at his reaction to the engagement. He was, however, undoubtedly present at Richard and Anne's marriage ceremonies in 1382.

Until his participation in marriage negotiations for the young king—Chaucer had accompanied an embassy to Paris in 1377 to explore marital options there as well as in Italy—his travels had been curtailed since 1374, when he was named controller of the "wool custom" and the "petty custom," posts he held for some 12 years. While Chaucer kept books, per se, for both posts, he was not the actual collector of funds. Rather, he was the crown's agent, assuring reliability, accuracy, and the king's interests. Both customs positions required moral probity as well as commercial cognizance, and Chaucer's designation for the posts demonstrates his utter immersion in the mercantile, political, and international issues of his day. Whether his new duties resulted from the king's—or the king's uncles'—desires to reward prior service or were a way to keep him in town, Chaucer's day job resulted in continued connection to royal administration as courtly and commercial patrons gained their footing in a burgeoning economy. These commercial vagaries as crucible of character capture the poet's attention, adding to his inspired explorations of the real in the allegorical and the allegorical in the real.

The Aldgate Years

To satisfy the needs of his new position as customs officer, Chaucer leased a dwelling above one of London's city gates, called in its time Aldgate (now a London Tube stop). This situation, along with the access his administrative post necessitated, afforded Chaucer a front-row seat for the last events of Edward III's reign and the earliest ones of Richard II's, letting him follow the political machinations that accompanied this troubled succession of a preteen king.

Two more dream vision poems date from these years: *The House of Fame* and *The Parliament of Fowls.* The first allows us another glimpse of Chaucer's constructed persona accosted by an eagle that grips him with its talons and flies away, only to engage the narrator in conversation about poetic fame. The bird-motif continues in the second dream vision, which, mimicking Chaucer's diplomatic efforts, treats marriage and the making of a good union. Perhaps predictably, considering the failure of Chaucer's marriage negotiations with the Visconti, the union of the male eagle and female tercelet, the poem's ostensible goal, is deferred at the tercelet's insistence. Chaucer's marriage-themed dream

vision, peopled with creatures, counterpoises the seemingly forced marriages in the final acts of Shakespeare's comedies like *Measure for Measure*. Instead, the *Parliament of Fowls* puts off what had seemed the perfect pairing and ends inconclusively. Undoubtedly a finished work, the *Parliament* anticipates the unfinished nature of some of Chaucer's later work, specifically the *Legend of Good Women* and *The Canterbury Tales*. In those instances Chaucer has left his audience with enduring mysteries, and speculation continues about his motives for writing what he did, how he did. Such inconclusiveness has added to his iconic status, just as indecision has assured Hamlet's fame.

But the Aldgate years also saw the beginning of the poem on which Chaucer thought his legacy would rest. *Troilus and Criseyde* is a long epic poem retelling Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*, which is itself a treatment of the further adventures of the Trojan War as amplified by late classical and medieval poets' many additional stories. Again we meet Chaucer's created persona, a narrator both inquisitive yet bumbling, much like the narrator of the dream visions but wrapped into a narrative at once historical (the Trojan War), courtly (love achieved and frustrated anchors the plot), and philosophical. Many critics suggest that Chaucer had other reasons for injecting a philosophical strain into *Troilus and Criseyde*. One of his shorter poems suggests that Chaucer was at the time translating the late classical *Consolation of Philosophy*, a bellwether Late Latin text (ca. 521) that was adopted by Christianity for its messages about fortune's seductive blandishments and free will's Christian centrality. A good deal of the *Consolation*'s power derives from its dramatic situation. Its eponymous narrator sits in prison, undeservedly condemned to capital punishment. His capacious vision attempts to answer why bad things happen to good people. Chaucer's translation hasn't earned high marks on its own, but some think he translated the text as part of a drive to educate the young king Richard. Although Chaucer's Boethius translation may not sing, his *Troilus and Criseyde* is a compelling masterpiece written in the stateliest English. Its accomplishments include Chaucer's invention of a rhymed, metered poetic form, the diction of which is at once both English and classical. Chaucer had no English-language models for what he did with *Troilus and Criseyde*. But the poem reveals poetic achievement beyond vernacular linguistic invention. Chaucer imbues the poem with equal measures of insouciance—the narrator retains his admiration for Criseyde almost despite himself—and the gravitas of martial realities. *Troilus and Criseyde* is a poem even undergraduates can't stop reading. Its enigmatic ending—Troilus, betrayed by Criseyde and now perched in the spherical heavens, looks down at the piddling earth and laughs—continues to provoke readers and evoke commentary.

The Rising of 1381

In typical Chaucerian fashion, however—meaning that neither motives nor outcome is unambiguous—Chaucer's Aldgate years are known for a staggering event that makes virtually no appearance in his poetry. In June 1381 an

enormous confederacy—variously called "rebels," "lollards," and "peasants"—surrounded the metropolitan city of London to press their claims against royal taxes and decrees that were the result of the Black Death. The taxation the rebels resisted included a poll tax of three pence per head—"poll"—payable to the royal coffers. The decrees, called the Statutes of Laborers, had frozen wages in favor of the nobility, to the detriment of landless peasants selling their ability to work in a market straitened by the enormous manpower losses of the plague.

For one warm summer week, London (pop. 50,000) was besieged by a rebel tumult: 10,000 people surrounded the city and milled about below the gate in which Chaucer lived. The rebels meant business: they executed the archbishop of Canterbury and burned the Savoy palace of Chaucer's patron John of Gaunt. The shockwave of the Rising or, as it was called prior to 1968, the Peasants' Revolt, reverberated in contemporary chronicles, which, to please royal masters, took pains to paint the rebels as dastardly and the nobles as wise. As it happened, the 14-year-old king Richard II rode out to meet the rebel leaders in Smithfield, outside Aldgate, and gave assurances, soon to be rescinded, of meeting the leaders' demands. Once the crowds dispersed, the remaining rebel leaders were taken and executed, and a terrifying week in London's history moved into legend. But, remarkably to modern ears accustomed to the concept of "newsworthy," these events did not move into Chaucer's poetry, with the sole exception of a glance at the perhaps legendary rebel leader Jack Straw, whose raucous voice is named and parodied in "The Nun's Priest's Tale," one of the *Canterbury Tales*. If we see Chaucer as primarily caring for his legacy as a poet, guided by Petrarch, Dante, Machaut, and Deschamps, and understanding literature as different from "the news," then we might appreciate the subtlety he brings to his opinions, couched in his signature ironic distance. Our age of surveillance might suggest that Chaucer avoided "the news" because to engage with headlines posed a danger. But Chaucer's poetic choices were, first and foremost, *poetic* ones, designed to engage his audience on every level, not just the most sensational.

None of this detracts from the simmering politics that animated Chaucer's courts and inhabited London's streets. There were those who attributed to the Rising's rebel leadership an affiliation with a contemporary religious reform movement whose adherents were maligned by the obscure term "Lollard." These social critics followed the reformist Oxford theologian John Wyclif (ca. 1325–1384), a prolific scourge of church leadership, especially the papacy, who voiced his disappointment at what he considered the Christian church's failure to adhere solely to biblical traditions. Wyclif was no wild-eyed reformer: rather, during the heyday of his campaign in the 1370s he earned the protection of none other than John of Gaunt, Richard II's uncle and, we should remember, an important patron of Chaucer's. Gaunt's role in Wyclif's career resulted from the main political rationale of Wyclif's reforms: to limit the role of clergy and church administration in the secular courts' affairs. Canterbury Cathedral's martyr Thomas Becket (ca. 1118–1170) had met his end defending the church's prerogatives against those of the English king

Henry II (r. 1154–1189); the popular pilgrimage to Canterbury that frames Chaucer's *Tales* commemorated this check on royal power (see the chapter on Thomas Becket). Wyclif, two centuries later, concentrated not on the Christian church's triumphs but on its abuses. He targeted not only the papacy but the monasteries, the former looking rather bad in light of multiple popes, the latter evidently rich in land and other wealth that rivaled princely holdings. Although the rebels likely were supporters of Wyclif and familiar with his calls to reform, they burned the London palace of Wyclif's protector Gaunt, probably because Gaunt's wealth made him a target analogous to the rich monastic foundations Wyclif denounced. Gaunt himself was not harmed, but the rebels beheaded the politically powerful and perhaps rivalrous archbishop of Canterbury: the besieged nobles, cravenly but accurately, figured that the archbishop would serve to sate the rebels' demand for a sacrificial victim. Although Gaunt lost his palace, he kept his head, and he remained one of the most powerful nobles in England—a fact not lost on his son Henry who, less than 20 years later, ascended the throne as Henry IV after forcing Richard II to abdicate.

Chaucer and Lollardy

Just as Chaucer's attitudes to court intrigue seem to be—and not to be—written into his poetry, so his relationship to Lollardy's theology and ideology has inspired enormous debate. In *The Canterbury Tales,* the pilgrimage's Host, Harry Bailey, explicitly labels the Parson a Lollard. Critics have traced a fair amount of Lollard attitude in the sermon delivered by the Parson in his tale. But the Parson is no supporter of royal prerogative. The pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales* travel to the tomb of Thomas Becket, defender of the Christian church's prerogatives against royal administration. A pilgrimage to Canterbury thus memorializes the only check available on runaway kingly power and seems to support the Christian church. Yet the pilgrims with whom the narrator (Chaucer) travels, like the secular Lawyer and the religious Prioress, exemplify paradox and, frequently, irreverence, especially when the narrator lauds their character. We can ask, "Who exactly are the targets of Chaucer's satire?" but then we have to question whether the label of *satire* fits at all. The Parson has the last word of *The Canterbury Tales*: is that also Chaucer's last word, or does the unfinished nature of the *Tales* suggest otherwise? One of Chaucer's patrons was John of Gaunt, both supporter of Wyclif and victim of the Rising's fury. Like the ambivalences surrounding the Rising as far as leadership and rationale go, and the ironic distance Chaucer builds into his poetry, Chaucer's nearly total neglect in his poetry of both the Rising and Lollardy—at least, in an overt fashion—reflects the perspicacity, position, and subtlety with which he, perhaps characterologically, endowed his work. The depth of daily life tinged with ideological controversy and the apparently dangerous nature of what may appear to a modern audience as

theological niceties may go a long way to explain Chaucer's decision to create and recreate a bumbling and obtuse caricature of himself as narrator for his dream visions, his epic poem *Troilus and Criseyde*, and his last great work, the *Canterbury Tales*. How interesting, in light of Chaucer's iconic status, is the fact that we identify ironic distance as the signature trait not only of Chaucer but of an English literary mentality.

Chaucer in Kent

Like his father's moving his family out of London just before the Black Plague hit, Chaucer's decision to leave his positions with the wool and petty customs, as well as his rooms above Aldgate, was fortunately timed. Richard II's powerful uncles asserted their power over him between 1386 and 1387, citing Richard's tendency to pick bad favorites and his inability to heed good counsel. They had parliamentary help securing their sway over the king just before Richard achieved his majority at age 21. To hamper the king's power, they dismissed his favorites from office, even executing a number of them. Perhaps through reading Chaucer's translation of *The Consolation of Philosophy,* Richard had learned patience—but not a rejection of the blandishments of worldly power. Richard waited 10 years before taking his revenge and regaining his royal clout. Part of his patient plan included Chaucer. In 1389, Richard II appointed Chaucer clerk of the king's works, a post he held for three years. Whether Chaucer left that post because of Richard's dissatisfaction or because of his own worries about Richard's increasingly autocratic behavior (Richard had a famous row with the City of London in 1392) isn't easy to discern. But leave it he did. After his stint as clerk of the works, Chaucer moved to Kent, most likely to Greenwich, seemingly out of kingly purview and in retirement, although he retained old and obtained new sinecures at the hands of both John of Gaunt and King Richard. These gifts and annuities, monetary and sustaining (one was a yearly tun, or large cask, of wine), seem to have been bestowed to reward Chaucer for his good labors. They also demonstrate that Chaucer remained in the good graces of seemingly rival parties.

Greenwich proved fertile for Chaucer's imagination: it was here that Chaucer composed the poetry that for the twenty-first century, from YouTube to Canterbury animatronics (see "Chaucer and the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries," below), replays his fame. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* are the poetry on which his modern iconic status rests. Yet *The Canterbury Tales,* like Chaucer's other poetry, remain distant in action and import from the intrigue and revenge that closed the reign of Richard II. Between 1397 and 1399 Richard took his revenge on those who, in 1387, had hampered his power. He swept in to clean house, even imprisoning one of the uncles, Thomas duke of Gloucester, who died in captivity: his death can be laid at Richard's doorstep. When Richard's cousin Henry, son of John of Gaunt, challenged the noble who had imprisoned Gloucester and under whose "protection" Gloucester

had been murdered—likely at Richard's behest—the king banished cousin Henry. It seemed a prudent decision: banishment falls short of murder—killing John of Gaunt's son would exact a price—and truncates a potential problem's power. In this case, the banished cousin is the Henry who, at his father Gaunt's death and Richard's seizure of Gaunt's fortune, returned to England despite his sentence of banishment (suddenly made permanent, rather than for a term of years, as Richard had originally decided), to rally disaffected nobles to his side in a bid to claim his father's wealth.

Some historians lament Richard's turn to autocracy—his choice to change a temporary sentence to a permanent one, solely on his say-so—and cite it as reason for his downfall; others note Gaunt's son Henry's only partially concealed aim for the throne. Richard's abilities as monarch were debated in contemporary chronicles; the historians that Shakespeare read used Henry-friendly chronicles for their prose histories, and their opinions shape the playwright's history plays. While these chronicles lament Richard's increasing autocratic behavior and his reliance on poor counselors, Terry Jones of Monty Python fame has come to Richard's defense, citing the powerful Henrician propaganda machine working overtime after the fact to paint Richard's foibles and Henry's nobility. According to Jones, today's historians fall prey to Henry's effective propaganda and continue to portray Richard undeservedly in a negative light. In any case, Richard's fall from power was a cataclysmic event in aristocratic circles that dated their chronicles according to the year of a king's reign.

During these controversies in the 1390s, Chaucer lived in Greenwich, remote from these tribulations as the different factions of Edward III's progeny wrestled for power. But events like Gloucester's arrest and death, the passing of John of Gaunt, and his son's attempt to reclaim his inheritance swirled ever closer and with increasing political challenge as the decade wore on.

Return to London

Chaucer moved back to London in 1398 and formulated a long-term lease the following year for a residence within the precincts of Westminster Abbey. Terry Jones, Alan Fletcher, Robert Yeager, Juliette Dor, and Terry Dolan make much of this move to the abbey in their book *Who Murdered Chaucer?* (2004). They detect in this relocation Chaucer's anxieties about the machinations of the resurgent Lancasters and Henry's henchmen. Chaucer had been identified with Richard II, and the new Lancastrian monarch demanded fealty to Henry's dynastic cause, despite the ambiguous grounds—other than force—he used for taking the crown. Chaucer's move to London and then to church precincts at the height of these troubles indicates his desire for sanctuary in light of his former faithful service to Richard. As it happened, after Chaucer's death in 1400, Richard II continued to plague Henry IV. Richard's death was announced in 1400, but the ex-king's "unquiet body,"

as the Chaucerian scholar Paul Strohm calls it, served as a rallying point for anti-Henry, anti-Lancastrian forces. Only when Henry IV's son Henry V (1386–1422, r. 1413–22) ascended the throne and, in the first year of his reign, ostentatiously put Richard's body into a magnificent newly built tomb did rumors of Richard's continuing existence evaporate.

CHAUCER AND LANCASTRIAN AND YORKIST PROPAGANDA

This story of Richard's unquiet body indicates the difficulties the new Lancastrian dynasty had solidifying its position. Interestingly enough, the new court pressed into service Chaucer's legacy following the poet's death (possibly murder). The Lancasters needed strategies to legitimate their rule. Perhaps Chaucer's prior royal connections made him the right choice for the Lancastrian court's desire for connection with its predecessor; perhaps personalizing an English poetic sensibility in terms of progeny—"Father Chaucer"—could by analogy solidify the progeny of Lancastrian succession; perhaps the first two scions of the usurping Lancastrian line, Henry IV and Henry V, presciently figured that national poetic identity could soothe rebellious spirits or combat them with an ideological effectiveness newly suitable for written vernacular English's growing promulgation. Fifteenth-century followers of Chaucer, Lancastrian apologists to the core, proclaimed Chaucer's preeminence as England's poet. It is not at all surprising that the poets who took up Chaucer's mantle were Lancastrian supporters, allied to a political power structure, albeit an embattled one.

Thomas Hoccleve

The first of these Chaucerian disciples, Thomas Hoccleve (1368–1426), who was personally acquainted with Chaucer, began to frame the elder poet's work, if not with tropes of overt English nationalism, then with covert national sentiment woven in his praise of Chaucer's English writing. He calls Chaucer "England's treasure and riches," but more importantly he deems Chaucer his poetic father. He chose the metaphor of poetic paternity for his relationship to Chaucer's work because paternity and legitimacy shaped every aspect of Lancastrian rule and propaganda. Chaucer's Englishness, forged in linguistic, geographical, and genealogical terms, remains to this day the foundation of his iconic status.

Chaucer may have considered *Troilus and Criseyde* his poetic genius's greatest accomplishment, yet even the manuscript record—copies of Chaucer's works that predate the emergence of the printing press in the late fifteenth century—provide some 80 copies of *Canterbury Tales* but only some 20 of *Troilus and Criseyde*, whole or part. In the Ellesmere manuscript, the most deluxe of fifteenth-century manuscripts of *The Canterbury Tales,* we

find a portrait of Chaucer affixed in the margin of the tale the pilgrim Chaucer tells—the prose *Tale of Melibee.* Although we know that the portrait was produced after Chaucer's death, it does include seemingly identifying features— forked beard, slight pudginess, hooded eyes. These same features also appear in another manuscript portrait of Chaucer from the early fifteenth century. London, British Library, Harley MS 4866, folio 88, includes an image of Chaucer very much like the Ellesmere's—some have argued for tracing and copying work between the two manuscripts. But the Harley manuscript's text is not by Chaucer: it is Thomas Hoccleve's *Regiment of Princes,* wherein Hoccleve notes Chaucer's paternity of Hoccleve's poetic vocation. The torso portrait points at lines about this "fresh likeness," calling it a copy of Chaucer's image in Hoccleve's mind. It is reproduced on the page, the lines aver, as a way for readers to find Chaucer in their own "thoughts and mind." These two images in two fifteenth-century manuscripts, one of Chaucer's work and one of the work of one of his fans, are our initial literal "icons" of Chaucer. Surprisingly, his portraiture remained remarkably consistent through the centuries in beard, eyes, and size—until we come to *A Knight's Tale,* with its rangy blond Chaucer. Hoccleve's own desire for preferment may have added to his adoration of Chaucer, whose courtly successes far outweighed Hoccleve's own. But, more importantly, we detect a will to make Chaucer into England's poetic icon within scant years of his death.

John Lydgate

Another of Chaucer's Lancastrian promoters, John Lydgate (ca. 1370–ca. 1451), provides no portrait, but his paeans to Chaucer as "flower of English poetry" sound much like Hoccleve's and reverberate throughout Lydgate's voluminous corpus. Lydgate was a monk, but one who was supported by, and given to pleasing, noble patrons. Unstinting in his praise of Chaucer, he accords him the title "master" and reckons as immeasurable his debt to Chaucer as England's poet. He considers Chaucer "peerless," lauding his ability to made rude English beautiful: this judgment continued to be expressed throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Lydgate was a friend to Chaucer's son Thomas (ca. 1367–1434), and the monk's poetic ambitions perhaps got a boost from Thomas's court and political connections: Thomas Chaucer served as chief butler of England and also Speaker of the House. Geoffrey Chaucer, like William Turner, could never claim nobility, but his son Thomas certainly rose up the food chain. Nor did the Chaucer family's ascent stop there: Thomas's daughter Alice (1404–1475) married William de la Pole, first duke of Suffolk.

Here, then, are the beginnings of Chaucer's iconic status. Hoccleve and Lydgate recognize him for his stately poetry as well as his political connections— connections upon which Lydgate, for one, traded. Their invocation of their poetic father and master demonstrates the almost instant nature of Chaucer's celebrity and the inextricable intertwining of his poetry with politics. Chaucer

as icon served a legitimating purpose for a power structure newly cognizant of English literature's nation-building potential—the poet's inscrutability and irony notwithstanding.

Lydgate and Hoccleve's praise of their master-father Chaucer and their shared English identity boosted Lancastrian egos and intertwined politics and poetry. But conflict and threat to Lancastrian hegemony followed the death of Henry V. Chaucer was used as icon not only by Lancastrian sympathizers but by the opposing Yorkist side in the bloody Wars of the Roses, England's internecine conflict between the supporters of Lancastrian claims to the throne and those who supported the claims of the duke of York, one of John of Gaunt's rival brothers, whose progeny contested the legitimacy of the original Lancastrian Henry. The divided loyalties that followed for aristocratic families well intermarried between Yorks and Lancasters, whose political alliances shifted with time and advantage, are not limited to polite arm-twisting. It has been estimated that, by the end of the fifteenth century, half of England's male nobility had succumbed to battle, duel, or judicial execution. The end of the Wars of the Roses also saw the end of Chaucer's literal progeny. Great-granddaughter Alice's son John de la Pole, second duke of Suffolk (1442–1492) married the sister of Richard III (1452–1485, r. 1483–85), making Alice's son brother-in-law to the eventual king. But John had been earlier affianced, as a child, to Margaret Beaufort (1443–1509). That arrangement was annulled in 1453, but Margaret went on to marry Edmund Tudor and gave birth, after Edmund's death (ending a very brief marriage), to Henry Tudor, eventually King Henry VII (1457–1509, r. 1485–1509), scion of the regnant Tudors following Richard III's defeat at the battle of Bosworth field. Ironically, John de la Pole, Chaucer's great-great-grandson, had been named heir to the ill-fated Richard III. Neither Richard III nor John de la Pole ended up having children; Chaucer's bloodline ran out at the same time that the new Tudor dynasty, with Henry VII as its progenitor, was minted. Richard III, like his distant relative Richard II, has been the subject of revisionist history to rehabilitate his reputation and kingly success (see the chapter on Richard III). But, in light of the vagaries of royal power-grabs epitomized by the Wars of the Roses and Chaucer's iconic role in these conflicts, Sir John Harington's epigraph seems as apt today as it was when printed in 1615:

Treason never prospers: what's the reason?
If treason prosper, none dare call it treason.

CHAUCER AND TUDOR PROPAGANDA

Of course, in order to call something patriotic or someone a traitor, the past must be made to fit, and its characters—its icons—pressed into service. The reputation of Geoffrey Chaucer as master English writer who brought rhetorical

eloquence to the English language (this is the opinion of George Ashby, ca. 1470) prevailed through the tumult of the fifteenth century and trumped any Yorkist stain sullying his literal progeny's reputation. At the demise of Richard III, Henry VII and the Tudor propaganda machine he invented took hold of Chaucer's English-identified legacy. Not only had Chaucer's iconic reputation survived, but the Tudor monarchy, much in need of good press, took advantage of a new method to promulgate Tudor Chaucer's icon in Britain. The printing press made its debut at the same time that Henry VII, first Tudor king and initial Tudor apologist, defeated Richard III at Bosworth. This coincidence augmented the royal treatment Chaucer's icon received as England's national poet. The press's arrival happily coincided with, and abetted, the spectacular growth of royal administration: courts had grown since the royal functionary Thomas Hoccleve invoked Chaucer's fatherhood of English poetry. Thus the politics and iconic status of Chaucer were shaped to coincide with newly active imperial attitudes and the grandiose visions of the English Tudor monarchy, culminating in the grand success of Elizabeth I (1533–1603, r. 1558–1603).

CHAUCER'S WORKS IN PRINT

The first of Chaucer's works to be printed appeared from the press of England's first printer, William Caxton, who published *The Canterbury Tales* circa 1478. It was, according to some bibliographers, the first book that Caxton printed in England after his return from Bruges in 1476. He reprinted *The Canterbury Tales* in 1483 and also printed, at about the same time, Chaucer's translation of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* (1478), *Troilus and Criseyde,* and Chaucer's dream vision *House of Fame* (both 1483). Caxton's successor, Wynken de Worde, a younger man whom Caxton brought to England from Bruges to help him with his press, also printed the *Tales,* as did, it seems, rival printer Richard Pynson. De Worde's 1517 edition, "newly corrected," became the property of Pynson, who after de Worde's death virtually simultaneously (circa 1526) printed the *Tales, House of Fame,* and *Troilus and Criseyde.* The printer John Rastell published the *Tales* simultaneously with Pynson. Is this evidence of a Chaucer industry? Maybe. Rastell had gotten caught up through marriage (he was married to Sir Thomas More's sister) and public prominence in debates about the "Great Matter" of King Henry VIII (1491–1547, r. 1509–47). From Henry's first attempts (1525) to divorce Catherine of Aragon, his wife of 16 years, claiming that the marriage was incestuous (she was his brother Henry's widow), to Henry's final severance of church ties to Rome (1533), a public and private debate raged, the victims of which were not only Catherine and her daughter Mary, declared illegitimate once Henry married Anne Boleyn, mother of Elizabeth I, but also Sir Thomas More, who, like Becket before him, was martyred on the altar of church prerogative. Perhaps Rastell, concerned with the chill his association with More might bring,

thought Chaucer's work and status as national icon could salvage his reputation. But in the greater scheme of things, these editions of Chaucer were a drop in the bucket. Early English printers published many, many titles (de Worde's output is estimated at 400 titles in 800 editions), and the best seller to roll off the presses, in de Worde's case, wasn't Chaucer but a Latin grammar. Still, the rapidity and consistency with which these printers produced early editions of his poetry testify to Chaucer's continuing iconic status.

Pynson's edition of *The Canterbury Tales* provides a nice example of Chaucer as icon for sixteenth-century readers. Woodcut illustrations grace the title pages for various *Tales*—his pilgrims have also become icons—and his "proheme," instructing a reader how to understand and appreciate Chaucer, touts the felicity of *The Canterbury Tales:*

> Great thanks, laud, and honor ought to be given unto the clerk, poets, and historiographers that have written many noble books of wisdom of the lives, passions, and miracles of holy saints and histories of noble and famous acts and faits [deeds] and of the chronicles since the beginning of the creation of the world unto this present time by which we are daily informed and have knowledge of many things of whom we should not have known if that had not left to us their monuments written. Among whom and in especial tofore [before] all other[s] we ought to give a singular laud unto the noble and great philosopher Geffrey Chaucer, the which for his ornate writing in our tongue may well have the name of a laureate poet, for tofore that he by his labor embellished, ornated and made fair our English in this realm was had rude speech and incongruous as yet it appeareth by old books, which at this day ought not to have place nor be compared among, nor to his beauteous volumes and ornate writings, of whom he made diverse books and treatises of many a noble history, as well in meter as in rhyme and prose. And them so craftily made that he comprehended his matters in short, quick, and high sentences, eschewing prolixity, casting away the chaff of superfluity, and showing the picked grain of sentence uttered by crafty and sugared eloquence. Of whom among all other of his books I purpose to imprint by the grace of Jesus the book of the tales of Canterbury in which I find many a noble history of every state and degree.

Chaucer's identity with the English language and England, with poetry, with nobility, with philosophy, as well as with the "old," uses the frame that fifteenth-century poets and their noble patrons had already provided for Father Chaucer. But perhaps the most noteworthy feature, in this cascade of clauses, is Chaucer's reputation for "eschewing prolixity" and "eschewing the chaff of superfluity." These factors remain the centerpiece of English's best prose style. The value of direct and unaffected prose continues to ring in the modern political sphere's reliance on simplicity—to a fault, perhaps.

Notice that it is not Chaucer's ambiguous persona that Pynson lauds: an appreciation for indeterminacy is a trademark of twentieth-century literary studies.

Following the resolution of the Great Matter, the 1530s mark Chaucer's remarkable entry, in a manner of speaking, into the coffee-table book market of the Tudor court. Beginning with William Thynne's edition in 1532, printers produced large and expensive black-letter folio editions of Chaucer's complete works. The handsome and heavy volumes, with illustrations, leather binding, high-quality paper, and voluminous dedications, put together in one book all of Chaucer's works. Chaucer would have been pleased that a movement begun a bit earlier in Italy to preserve the corpus of famous poets like Dante, whose civic and national identity provided a model, had spread west and caught the English poet in its fashionable hold.

Like Chaucer's earlier proponents and printers, folio producer William Thynne (d. 1546), the first in a series of Renaissance collectors and publishers presenting a Chaucerian oeuvre, had royal connections. He was educated at Oxford and attained a prominent position, clerk of the kitchen, in Henry VIII's court. In his Chaucer folio's dedication to Henry VIII, Thynne frames his activities on Chaucer's behalf with the same kind of nationalistic fervor as did Pynson. But his identification of King Henry's brilliance as poet and historian allies antique Chaucer with Tudor royalty. Again publishers deploy Chaucer's fatherhood of English poetry to recertify English nationalism. The point isn't Chaucer's political leanings; rather, the import is Chaucer's embodiment of a burgeoning national consciousness that needs its king to be lettered as much as it needs its venerable poet's Englishness. The folio editions begin their sequential march through the sixteenth century at the same time that Henry, successful in his break with Rome, begins to tangle with challenges from Martin Luther and a diverse Protestant critique, as well as his own problems concerning progeny, legitimacy, inheritance, the crown, and authority. One could suggest that Chaucer's iconic status as England's poet is pressed into the service of Henry's severely challenged court, the survival of which depends on ever more authoritarian methods of retaining control over recalcitrant subjects.

The question of authority, for better or worse, and even to this day, is wrapped up with the presence—or absence—of authors and authenticity. Chaucer's iconic status served to expand his authority. The strength of Thynne's attributions allowed his canon of Chaucer's works to be reproduced in every Chaucer edition for two centuries. But modern scholarship contests some of Thynne's attribution to Chaucer of a number of the folio's poems. On the face of it, a larger canon—a weightier canon—suggests a more prolific poet. Moreover, the idea of collecting an author's works in one large volume imitates the burgeoning idea of "bigger is better" in the first flush of colonial expansionism. Thus Thynne's folio edition includes a number of poems not previously printed under Chaucer's name to augment Chaucer's status, while his gravitational pull as national poet drew recognizably antique texts into

his orbit. Piling works on Chaucer's shoulders augmented his reputation, honored his unique status, and affirmed his iconic position.

Thynne's successors reprinted his edition during the short reign of Edward VI (1537–1553, r. 1547–53), Henry's sickly youngest child. Once on the throne, Edward's youth made him an easy mark for the more rabid Protestant counselors kept under wraps during Henry's reign. At Edward's precipitous death, his Catholic sister Mary (1516–1558, r. 1553–58), Henry VIII's eldest daughter, assumed the throne, despite some last-minute efforts to name the Protestant Lady Jane Gray (1536–1554), great-great-niece of Henry VIII, as queen. Queen Mary's successor after her short reign was Henry's second child, Elizabeth I, daughter of Anne Boleyn, who eventually proved an extraordinarily adroit and gifted leader. In the reigns of all three of Henry VIII's Tudor progeny, folio editions of Chaucer's works were printed and reprinted. Chaucer continued to be lauded as England's primordial poet. Ironically, however, because of language shifts in the sixteenth century, Chaucer's poetry, though lionized, had become difficult to read. Moreover, the appearance of the poetry itself became iconic: while for "modern" texts the book trade began to use roman typefaces, Chaucer was kept in recognizably antique black letter.

More than Chaucer's words added to his iconic reputation. In the heat of Queen Mary's Catholic resurgence, Nicholas Brigham erected a canopied tomb for Chaucer's remains. The tomb, founded in 1556, became the cornerstone of Westminster Abbey's eventual "Poet's Corner." This tomb both represents, and solidifies, quite literally, Chaucer's iconic status. The tomb includes a portrait much like that found in the Hoccleve manuscript—could it have been copied?—and verses pertaining to Chaucer's origination of English poetry. Its position in London's parliamentary abbey and its laureation of Chaucer as England's poet parallels the religious iconography affixed in Catholic times to saints and prelates: could it have been an answer to resurgent Catholicism? The similarity of the likeness the tomb displays to those of the Hoccleve and Ellesmere manuscripts demonstrates the durability of Chaucer's iconic image begun with those fifteenth-century manuscript portraits. By the late sixteenth century, portraits of Chaucer were hanging in noble houses, and this practice continued well into the late seventeenth century. Chaucer's aspirations to noble status find their reward in these iconographic renderings, his image occupying both secular and sacred spaces, the cultural weight of which was changing in response to modernity's ascendancy.

Chaucer's next editor, John Stow (ca. 1525–1605), produced not only a fat folio Chaucer edition (1561, over 600 pages) but also a series of history books compiled from his extensive personal collection and exhaustive labors in private archives. Finding unused archives and reestablishing them for antiquarian research were new pastimes for writers and publishers engaged in the process of modernization, which also meant putting the past in its place. After his Chaucer edition, Stow published a *Summarie of Englyshe Chronicles* (1565, over 1200 pages), *Chronicles from Brute to unto the present year* (1560; later *Annales*, 1592, over 1300 pages), and a comprehensive and best-selling *Survey*

of London (1598, about 500 pages) that continued to be printed, used, and revised by others into the eighteenth century. In its attachment to English history and archival research, Stow's work exemplifies antiquarian re-creation of "Englishness," verifying its pedigree in a remote, classical (not medieval) past identified with Troy and, later, Rome, while simultaneously creating its English moment as "new." One anonymous 1518 history, printed by Richard Pynson, Caxton's rival and early printer of Chaucer, locates England's ancient history in relation not only to Greece and Rome, but also to Israel: "Brute came after the making of the world into the land of Albion in the time that Eli the priest of the law was in the land of Israel. New Troy (that is now called London) was founded by the making of Brute after the making of the world. Rome was founded by Remus and Romulus. Jesus Christ was conceived by the holy ghost in the maid Mary on a Friday." Chaucer is thus one point on an iconic scale begun with the ancient Brutus. But Chaucer's icon, identified specifically with English's original poetic language, shimmers with "Englishness." Chaucer is, for Edmund Spenser (1552–1599), "the well of English undefil'd."

Unlike their successors intent on defining modernity and cordoning off the past, people in the "Middle Ages" (a term introduced in 1616) did not see themselves as between eras, bounded on either side by the classical era and the Renaissance. Rather, their self-image was one of continuity with a Trojan and Roman past (even Charlemagne, crowned Holy Roman Emperor in 800, wore a toga to the ceremony) and of membership in a universal Christian church. The social, political, and economic changes for which we use the term "Renaissance" reflect the term's coinage in the mid-sixteenth century by the Italian artist George Vasari (1511–1574) to break with an ostensibly stultifying past. "Classic," which entered the English language in the seventeenth century, in its original use meant only "best"; its application to Greece and Rome, and to literature, became exclusive only in the eighteenth century. The popular vigor of the term "Renaissance" rises in the nineteenth century, spurred by the work of German historian Jacob Burckhardt (1818–1897) and responding to the pressure of modernity—in science, art, medicine, technology, and Western expansion—to reassert divisions between eras and deny other than quaint antiquarian interest in a medieval past. Like the term "Enlightenment," "Renaissance" paints its own era positively and its medieval antecedent negatively. The use of words like "Renaissance" and "classics" *creates* that break between epochs because it serves the "new" era's need to make itself distinct. Such a need was not a feature of medieval thought: instead, an era's diminution in light of a Golden Past, and a recognition that there was "nothing new under the sun," epitomizes what we would call medieval ideology. For Karl Marx, modernity's rage for the new supports a capital economy. Asserting modernity's superiority over the past assures capitalism's success.

Nevertheless, individuals like Stow and his work in literature (Chaucer), history (annals), and geography (London) enabled adoration of the ancient and remote in England's language and politics. Those who identified, gathered, and then made available antiquarian researches on English history produced editions of Chaucer's works that were keen to solidify an economically, politically, and literarily apt identity for the English nation. The same antiquarianism and obsessive scholarship characterize the next edition of Chaucer's works, produced at the end of the sixteenth century during the reign of Elizabeth I. The folio Thomas Speght published in 1598 and amplified in 1602 ratifies Chaucer's iconic status in a fashion especially sympathetic to modern tastes: Speght provides a biography for Chaucer with the help of antiquarian records and manuscript documents, since personal knowledge like Hoccleve's was no longer available.

Biography did not have the cultural weight in the medieval era that it began to have in the Renaissance. Medieval manuscript books frequently list no authors' names, let alone any information about them. Much that we know about named authors comes from research into legal documents rather than by consulting autobiographies, which essentially did not exist as a specific genre until later. Chaucer's first readers who encountered his name and work in Hoccleve or even Stow expressed no need for biographical information about the poet, perhaps because it was assumed they already knew him: at least, that's how Chaucer's contemporary Hoccleve expresses it. The original assumption of personal knowledge isn't so far-fetched: considering the limited literate audience and scarce production of manuscripts, an early fifteenth-century lay reader would likely move in court circles.

To identify text with biography in post-medieval books shapes the taste of a readership newly broadened by the printing press. Modern readers take for granted the way a life informs a work, and vice versa. In the opening years of the seventeenth century, the expectations of authorship changed, and the habits of print that include biography certify firmer identity between an individual's creative work and life story. Perhaps Chaucer's biography was thought to make up for his poor readability. Through the seventeenth century, the disused rules of the English language that governed pronunciation of Chaucer's over 200-year-old verse continued to fade from collective memory. Thus, while the volumes gather hundreds of pages of English poetry, they were little read. Chaucer's iconic status rested on affirmation of his ancient English character and reputation rather than on appreciation of his verse.

THE RIVAL POPULARITIES OF CHAUCER AND GOWER

But, even granting a dearth of real readers, Chaucer was not universally admired in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. His *Canterbury Tales* became, for some, a signal of moral degradation. From the middle of the sixteenth century and to its end, Chaucer's rival for affection and adulation as England's premiere national poet was his contemporary John Gower (ca. 1330–1408). The historical Chaucer and Gower knew each other in their lifetimes; they refer to each other in their poetry. Both Chaucer and Gower were printed by Caxton: Gower's long English poem, *Confessio*

amantis, appeared in 1483, the same year Caxton printed Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus and Criseyde*. Thomas Berthelet, the self-proclaimed King's Printer, brought out the *Confessio* in 1532, the same year that Thynne brought out his works of Chaucer—printed by Berthelet. The *Confessio* was reprinted, perhaps by other hands, in 1554, as Thynne's Chaucer edition was reprinted two more times before Stow's version appeared in 1561. The editions of Gower's *Confessio* do not have the weight of contemporary Chaucer folios: with about 190 leaves, or about 400 pages, they do not have the heft of Chaucer's well over 500 pages. But despite a reduced number of editions and copies, and despite the fifteenth century's identification of Chaucer as England's literary icon, sixteenth-century Gower gave sixteenth-century Chaucer a run for his money. Gower's tomb, in London's Southwark Cathedral, predates Chaucer's in Westminster, but Southwark was smaller than Westminster and was identified with the monastic Augustinians rather than having the political foundation Westminster enjoyed: Southwark earned its designation as cathedral in 1905. Gower had a hand in his tomb's design, although its modern version is in large part a reconstruction. Perhaps Gower's interest in a permanent chantry for his remains says more about his self-opinion and attempts to foster his reputation than it does about his piety. But it is for his piety, especially as foil to Chaucer, that Gower was known in the sixteenth century.

In the complicated religious politics of the successive reigns of Henry VIII's three children, Gower possessed the epithet "moral Gower." The phrase was used not only to tout his work but to distinguish it from Chaucer's. In an era riven by sectarian politics and religious foment, reformist mentalities preferred "moral Gower" to his opposing number's racy *Canterbury Tales*. Truth be told, a fair number of *The Canterbury Tales* are naughty: "The Miller's Tale" is the best-told dirty joke in the English language. YouTube versions of it run a close second to "Pardoner's Tale" videos. As for the sixteenth century, some writers use the phrase "Canterbury Tale" as a code for scurrility. One dramatist, Robert Greene (1558–1592), actually constructs a prose dream vision in which Chaucer and Gower visit him as he struggles with his legacy and the immoral books he has produced. The dream's Chaucer supports Green's less-than-pious collection of stories as an excellent legacy, but "moral Gower" lectures Green on the error of his ways (with not a joke in sight). Through the intercession of a biblical *deus ex machina,* King Solomon advises Greene that wisdom and theology should be his only study. Greene credits Gower with showing him the way to repent of his works and immoral behavior, and, when the vision ends, Greene promises to leave all thoughts of love, instead devoting himself to produce fruit of better labors.

Besides moral Gower in Greene's book, other sixteenth- and seventeenth-century references to Chaucer and Gower show that Greene's opinion had traction. For instance, Sir Philip Sydney's *Apologie for Poetry* notes Chaucer's "great wants." But in the number of sixteenth-century editions published, Chaucer outshone Gower brightly. Gower's work saw printing only once in

the sixteenth century, in 1554, in contrast to the many printings of Chaucer's works. No seventeenth-century Gower edition exists. Indeed, Gower's work wasn't republished until the nineteenth century. Perhaps fame needs a racy edge to reach the height of iconic status. Chaucer's work, though little read, inhabited sixteenth-century literary history and nationalist narratives and found printers for editions in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries.

The world of narrative literature itself changed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and not just because of the availability of books. Perhaps it was Roger Ascham, Queen Elizabeth I's tutor, who praised Chaucer as the English Homer to keep alive Chaucer's reputation as excellent versifier and epic poet. The attribution seems somewhat forced in light of the difficulty readers had with Chaucer's Middle English, pronounced and poetically scanned differently from modern English. Perhaps this difficulty prompted Sir Philip Sydney in his classic *Apologie for Poetry* (1581) to forgive Chaucer his "great wants," his deficiencies, because he had in the main "beautified our mother tongue."

CHAUCER AND THE ENLIGHTENMENT

By the eighteenth century, the winds of taste blew away the ostensible messes Chaucer (and Shakespeare) had made of English literature in order to install a new English classicism. As already noted, "classicism" as both concept and word took off in the eighteenth century. Enlightenment poets concentrated on reviving not English classics but Greek and Latin classics translated into English. Chaucer's legacy eventually fell into the hands of Alexander Pope and other poets of England's Enlightenment era. These Augustan poets professed disdain for the quaint relics of the past. They nevertheless paid obeisance to Chaucer's Ghost, as one work (1672) termed it. But that reverence did not include new editions, only reprints of his work. Speght's edition was reprinted in 1672, and no new Chaucer edition appeared, nor were old ones reprinted again, before two decades of the eighteenth century had already passed. The seventeenth century transformed Chaucer from an important and original antique voice whose poetry was little read, and even then with difficulty, to a quaint curiosity unenlightened and unadmired but for his (accidental) Englishness. In his *God's Plenty* (1700), John Dryden labels Chaucer "a rough diamond" who "mingles trivial things with those of greater moment." The icon kept standing almost as a curiosity.

Still, Pope admired Chaucer's storytelling ability despite the contemporary taste for Latin- and Greek-sounding poetry. Perhaps it was Pope's Catholicism that allowed him to admire Chaucer's works. The historical Chaucer was, of course, Catholic insofar as any fourteenth-century Christian was "catholic." Perhaps Chaucer's sixteenth-century Protestant editors had amplified the non-Chaucerian works in their editions in order to remove the poet's Catholic taint. Certainly their addition of anti-Catholic polemics under Chaucer's

name was meant to recoup Chaucer as an English Protestant *avant la lettre*. But despite the need to recreate Chaucer as English Protestant, and also to situate him in the thick of English literary history, not very many readers were doing more than handling Chaucer's texts in old editions. While Chaucer continued to be referred to as the "father of English poetry," as he had been for quite some time, his works themselves had little purchase on the reading classes of eighteenth-century England. Schooling may have been slightly more available in the eighteenth century, but higher education concentrated on the Greek and Roman classics and left English literature out in the cold. And, beside the near unreadability of Chaucer's texts, self-professed English writers like Daniel Defoe thought Chaucer's lewdness explained the justifiable burial of his works.

Support for Chaucer's poetry and iconic status in spite of his supposed scurrility and difficult language found one interested party at the beginning of the eighteenth century, and a new edition of Chaucer's works finally caught up with this new appreciation. Unlike Speght, who merely included a glossary of "hard words explained," John Urry in his 1721 edition modernized Chaucer's language and made his verse widely readable. At least now Chaucer's metrics had been codified and the pronunciation of his verse was better understood. Not that Urry neglects a glossary, a feature included in all Chaucer editions to this day. Urry's readable Chaucer still retains the poet's original flavor and touts his paternity of English letters. The edition's biography calls Chaucer "a great scholar, a pleasant wit, a candid critic, a sociable companion, a steadfast friend, a grave philosopher, a temperate economist [!] and a pious Christian." A witty economist Chaucer given to friendship and conviviality reflects the values of eighteenth-century society: protean Chaucer, retaining his iconic status, acquires an eighteenth-century impress that makes him simultaneously venerably revered and contemporarily recognizable. The impulse, if not the exact fashion, of modernization persists in YouTube productions of Chaucer.

Even when his poetry was little read, Chaucer's iconic status is verified by the fact that admirers and detractors alike had to reckon with his reputation as Father of English Poetry. Even those who lament his lack of decorum—a signal eighteenth-century literary value—still recognized his poetic virtuosity or, as one critic labeled it (Joseph Warton, 1782), "a mine of gold." Surely eighteenth-century England's ambivalent attitude toward its poetic icon comes from efforts of poets like Pope not only to find their poetic voices in classical antecedents but to denigrate as "barbarous" the inescapable Middle English in which Chaucer wrote. But the attraction of Chaucer's "barbarous" voice and his identity with England's Celtic and Saxon past gained a foothold in the mid-eighteenth century. A Gothic impulse, still familiar today in the television horror series *Tales from the Crypt* (1989–96) gave new inspiration to English novels like Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*. An antiquarian interest in and general revival of Scots bards and Welsh poets, even in patent forgeries like the Ossian poems, makes Chaucer look downright modern even as

burgeoning Romantic attitudes began to celebrate the awesome and antique as essential and authentic.

CHAUCER IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

William Godwin (1756–1836), father of *Frankenstein*'s author, Mary Shelley, reflected this new adoration of the Gothic allied with Romantic heroism in his biography of Chaucer (1803). Moving his reader's imagination further back in time, past the already remote sixteenth century, Godwin pointed to the "times of Chaucer" as more obviously and unquestionably barbaric than the times of that other English barbarian, Shakespeare. Chaucer, unlike Shakespeare, had the "single mind" to effect a restoration of poetry and the Muses to England's rocky shore by "fix[ing] and naturalis[ing] the genuine art of poetry in our island." Chaucer thus became the uniquely rugged and effective individual, the man of genius every Romantic heart claimed for its own. In the hands of William Blake, in his engraving of the *Canterbury Tales* pilgrims, Chaucer becomes the "great poetical observer of men," as well as master, father, and superior. Chaucer caught the sacred inspiration, according to Shelley. Adoration of Chaucer's realism, aided and abetted by widely readable editions of his work, made him into a figure of his time who was ironically not only capable of transcending it but friendly to his readers in the bargain. What better definition of iconic status?

Mass production in the nineteenth century enabled an enormous monumentalizing of Chaucer's iconic status. His cause was taken up by the Arts and Crafts movement and William Morris, whose Kelmscott Press produced an illustrated *Canterbury Tales* of enormous popularity. The signal temperament of English nostalgia can be summed up in the phrase "Merrie Olde England," and Chaucer was made to stand at the head of this nostalgic attitude's parade. Not unlike the Romantic gestures that certified Chaucer's individual genius in the early part of the nineteenth century, the mid-nineteenth century identified him with the beginnings of English literary enterprise in relation to moral truth. John Ruskin, prolific Victorian critic, teacher, and moralizer, considered Chaucer for the English the equal of Virgil for the Latins, teaching the purest theology. This feat could be accomplished, of course, only by leaving *The Canterbury Tales* out of the curriculum. Be that as it may, Chaucer's iconic identity with the English mind was a mainstay of nineteenth-century appreciations of the poet. Other assessments followed the changing currents of nineteenth-century literary aspirations, such that the literary aesthetics of Chaucer's poetry began to take primary position.

The nineteenth century saw another change in its intellectual landscape that affected the way Chaucer was read and understood. Nineteenth-century philology and linguistics made the recognition and description of a language's predictable changes in sound a scientific enterprise. Moreover, manuscript studies in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century professionalized

the reading of Chaucer's poetry and led to a disconnect between those who read Chaucer for pleasure and those who studied his poetry in the academy. The Modern Language Association fought for the reading of the "modern languages," such as English and French, alongside classical Greek and Latin, which were the stuff of a college education (in 1900 only 10 percent of the American population pursued a high school education, let alone attended college). Although a nostalgia for "Merrie Olde England" kept a mostly modernized form of Chaucer in the public eye, including in children's books, in the first part of the twentieth century the professionalization of literary criticism began to take hold.

CHAUCER AND THE TWENTIETH AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURIES

Some twentieth-century poets found themselves in Chaucer. Yeats praised Chaucer for his masculinity and vitality. Others praised his refinement; still others, his earthy physicality. His cheerfulness did not match modernism's seriousness, but among Chaucer's best twentieth-century readers was Virginia Woolf. She tangled with an iconic Chaucer in her *Common Reader*, and she discerns Chaucer's interest in nature (like a Romantic poet) coupled with a keen, realistic eye (like a modern novelist) that helps readers "make out a meaning for ourselves." This liberal tendency, coupled with an admiration for realism, brought Chaucer's iconic status into the twentieth century, where, through the wonders of cinema and YouTube, he has persisted in the modern imagination. Even as the Academy claims expertise in Chaucer's language and tends to denigrate popular culture's regard for the poet, a healthy cadre of lay readers continue to enjoy Chaucer's poetry.

Perhaps not all contemporary medieval-themed enterprises that employ the icon of Geoffrey Chaucer cave as blatantly to modernization as *A Knight's Tale,* but many do. A very funny Chaucer comes to life in the visitor attraction "The Canterbury Tales: Medieval Misadventures," just minutes from Canterbury Cathedral in historic Kent (see www.canterburytales.org.uk/home.htm). In the attraction, life-sized figures move à la Disney to enact five of the *Tales,* not surprisingly the five most frequently anthologized: "The Knight's Tale," "The Miller's Tale," "The Wife of Bath's Tale," "The Nun's Priest's Tale," and "The Pardoner's Tale." A sound system carries the walk-through narrative and a mostly Modern English reading of selected passages from the *Tales.* Multilingual audio guides can be had for a price. Still, like all things coded "medieval," the animatronics remain in semi-darkness, a subtle coding of the earlier "Dark Ages." Although it's a stretch to find anything remotely sublime about the poetic icon in the tourist attraction, "The Canterbury Tales" re-certifies for twenty-first-century tourists not Chaucer's attachment to the cathedral but the creative engine of his imagination tangling the medieval literal—the pilgrimage and its trudging steps—with the medieval virtual—tale-telling and an infinite variety of stories. Chaucer's identity as both poet and pilgrim, his seemingly bumbling narrator persona, and his constant attempts to blur the line between reality and fiction serve as continuous features of an iconic Chaucer.

YouTube Chaucer videos are amateurish and short. On the other hand, British novelist and screenwriter Jonathan Myerson has written and directed a very slick three-part version of *The Canterbury Tales* (1998 and 2000) that employs Claymation and other techniques of animation. Joining twentieth-century professionalism with good old-fashioned business sense, Myerson consulted academic Chaucerians for details of his production while also signing up the BBC and HBO as distributors. Several teams of animators, using visually different styles, produced 10 tales in nine episodes (The tales of the Miller and the Reeve are combined). Myerson's series also includes the frame story of the pilgrimage to Canterbury and a set of links between the tales, and his Chaucer looks as an iconic Chaucer should: hooded eyes, pointed beard, slight paunch. Even Alexander Pope would recognize him. Just like the portraits in the Hoccleve manuscript and everywhere else, though produced with the wonders of animated plasticene, the forked beard, slight pot belly, and hooded eyes are paired with a gentle demeanor that strongly contrasts with the wild and wooly Miller. Myerson originally provided two soundtracks for his videos: one in Middle English, the other modernized. In this, Myerson harks back to a sensibility born in the eighteenth century that, through modernization, encouraged the reading of the *Tales,* instead of antiquarian or purely iconic admiration.

A network television phenomenon that has kept iconic Chaucer in the public eye is a live-action series made for the BBC of six updated *Canterbury Tales* (2003). Sally Wainwright adapted "The Wife of Bath's Tale" and set it on and behind the stage of a soap opera; Peter Bowker's "The Miller's Tale" updates the funniest narrative in English with a pub, karaoke night, and false promises of fame; "The Knight's Tale," adapted by Tony Marchant, begins with jail and two prisoners falling in love with their teacher; Avie Luthra's "The Sea Captain's [Shipman's] Tale" concerns a love triangle in an Asian community in Gravesend, Kent, outside London and on the Thames; Rochester, east of Gravesend, is the setting for the three drunken rioters of "The Pardoner's Tale," adapted by Tony Grounds; and Olivia Hetreed sets her adaptation of "The Man of Law's Tale" in Chatham, just down the road from Gravesend, with an amnesiac yet pious Nigerian filling in for the Christian Constance.

The problem with adaptations like this high-budget BBC effort is the relentless normalizing of Chaucer's social world, not to mention his language. The commercial structures of London, Gravesend, Rochester, and Chatham may arguably have their roots in the late Middle Ages, but the triumph of commercialism that controls the modern imagination could not have been envisioned in Chaucer's time. In addition, regularization and familiarization rob *The Canterbury Tales* of their alterity and shortchange the audience of an opportunity to grapple with that alterity. Of course, such adaptations of

Chaucer fit the long history of his iconic status: reshaped, refolded to fit alternately others' Protestant and Catholic, national and provincial, sublime and scurrilous agendas. Can we ever define a "real" Geoffrey Chaucer?

CONCLUSIONS

What is the future of Geoffrey Chaucer? Although in the United States the College Board no longer requires students to recognize Chaucer's poetry, the number of *Canterbury Tales* projects on YouTube indicates that Chaucer remains protean, funny, rhymed, and mischievously attractive for the twenty-first century. It's easy to consider Chaucer's icon as eternal, having lasted for six hundred years through adaptation, manipulation, and commercial viability. Chaucer became very quickly a totem for Englishness, at once linguistic, national, and personal. His poetry's ambiguities in voice, character, plot, and interpretation make his work stand the test of time. But Chaucer's iconic status is not all about Chaucer, nor is it under Chaucer's control. We see in our icons what we project onto them, even as the icons themselves must have a protean nature to survive that amount of projection. The past speaks to us through these icons, and we can get over our obsession with one kind of authenticity if we can accept an icon's fame as dynamic, rather than static. Moreover, in Chaucer's case (and maybe that of other poets too, but not other Fathers of English Poetry, for only one exists), the continuity of his iconic status is assured by the pleasing proliferation of YouTube Chaucers. Icons are more than images, and the ease with which Chaucer has entered the Internet age (how many YouTube William Wordsworths are there?) bodes well for his continued iconic presence as England's medieval poet *par excellence*.

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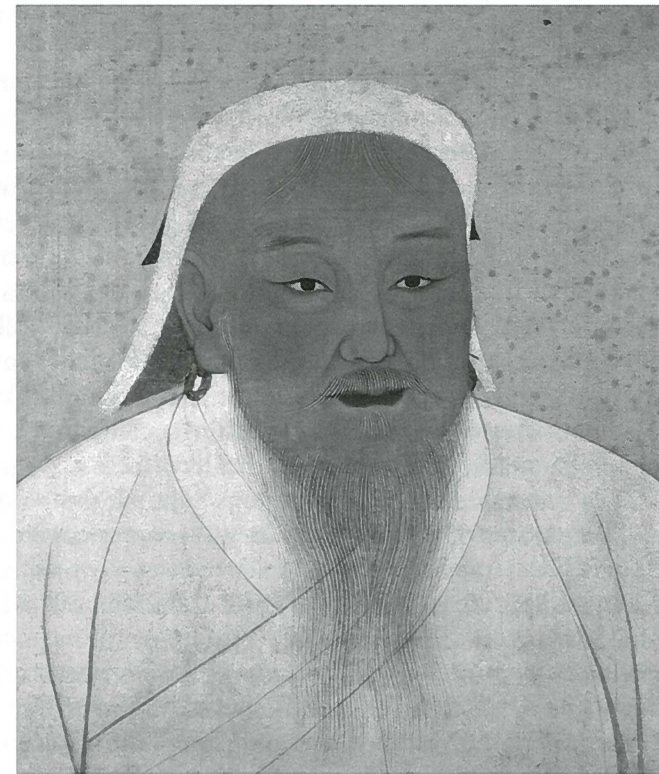
Portrait of Chinggis Khan (ink and watercolor on silk), date unknown, Chinese. (National Palace Museum, Taipei, Taiwan/The Bridgeman Art Library)

Chinggis Khan (ca. 1167–1227)

George Lane