

Name:

Date:

Chaucer
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I want to start with a methodological remark about this lecture, so you will know the kind of lecture you're going to be listening to and the reasons why I'm giving this kind of lecture rather than some other kind. For the next forty minutes or so I will be discussing the economic, the social, and the political conditions of the last half of the fourteenth century in England, Chaucer's place in this world, and the relation of this to Chaucer's poetry. I will be offering, in other words, what is known in literary criticism as an historicist account. By this I mean not simply an account that seeks to understand Chaucer's poetry in terms of history per se, since there are many kinds of history. I will not talk, for example, about literary history, the kinds of sources that Chaucer used, the writers who provided him with inspiration, and so on. I also won't talk -- except in passing -- about cultural history. This would include the kind of art that was produced during his time, the kinds of books that were read, the forms by which the religious feelings of the time were expressed, the kinds of public rituals that were practiced, and so on. Instead, I will discuss what could be called the material conditions of Chaucer's world. With this phrase -- material conditions -- I mean to designate all of those elements of life that determine people's economic, social, and physical situation. These elements include, for example, the economic conditions of the time, the social structure, the political practices, the vocational opportunities or lack of them -- in other words, all of those elements of life that condition -- condition, not determine -- a person's place in the world and his or her life choices.

As you probably know, this form of literary analysis is deeply antipathetic to the Anglo-American tradition of literary criticism. The reason is because this tradition has always privileged the individual over history: the record of English and American literature is typically thought of as a sequence of geniuses, one remarkable man (or, occasionally, woman) followed by another. This kind of understanding is usually called humanist, or liberal humanist: it places the individual above history, and esteems the human capacity not to be made by but to make history. An excellent example of this way of thinking is this very course, English 125, which traces the route marked out by great geniuses: Chaucer, Spenser, Donne, Milton, Pope, Wordsworth, Eliot. It is not an accident that this course has been a cornerstone of the English Department curriculum since the 1920s. Because it is a this course celebrates, by its very nature, something that is at the very heart of American life, and that is individualism. By this I mean the transcendence of the individual -- and especially the remarkable individual -- over historical circumstances. For Americans, success or failure in life is characteristically understood as a matter of individual choice. For instance, this individualism tends to dominate our political discourse, in which social problems are typically understood in terms of individual choices. We have a drug problem because individual teenagers just won't say no; we have a crime problem because individual wrongdoers are not being incarcerated often enough or long enough; we have a welfare problem because individuals behave irresponsibly and have children they cannot support. And so on.

My point is not to make a political speech but simply to indicate to you that (1) the natural way we think of human life is in terms of individuals who stand apart from the material conditions of their lives; and (2) that English 125 is a course that is structured in terms of this natural way of thinking. Now there is a third point that is relevant. The reason we start this course with Chaucer is because he is the most readable of medieval English poets -- by which we mean the most like us, the most modern and the least medieval. His contemporaries -- Langland, Gower, the so-called Pearl-poet, Lydgate, Hoccleve, and others -- are didactic, moralistic, pious, and intensely interested in local political questions. Chaucer is none of these things, and what's more -- what makes him not just the initial figure for this course but for the whole of English literature, so that in 1700 Dryden called him the Father of English Poetry, a title he has never lost -- what's more is that Chaucer is not only not interested in the drearily medieval topics of his contemporaries but he is interested in the topic that has become, for us, the quintessential and defining mark of the modern. In literary terms we call this topic character; philosophically and politically we call it individualism. It is important to stress just how profound is Chaucer's focus on the individual. The great innovation of the *Canterbury Tales* is that our attention in reading the tales is always drawn to the tellers: the meaning of each tale cannot only not be divorced from the teller but is both initially and finally referred back to him or her. It is fair to say, then, that none of the tales (with the exception of the Parson's Tale) can stand alone from its teller -- it must be read as told, in the light of the consciousness that creates it and that it creates. In a very real sense, the subject of the *Canterbury Tales* is the subject -- by which I mean subjectivity itself. Or think of the General Prologue. There Chaucer defines each pilgrim in terms of his estate, by which he means his social role: we have a knight, a squire, a prioress, a friar, a merchant -- and so on. But in virtually every instance his focus in the descriptions is not upon the pilgrim's social role -- his or her function in society -- but upon the character -- the individualism -- that inhabits, often uncomfortably, that role. So, for instance, the Monk's passion for hunting, and the erotic energy that drives it, may make him a poor monk, but his failure as a monk, and any social consequences that it might have, is given very little attention.

Now it would be wrong to say that Chaucer is the first person in the Middle Ages to attend above all to character. But the precedents for his interest are really quite limited. The fact is that Chaucer's innovation is truly innovative. He is an original, and so is rightly taken as an origin -- the Father of English Poetry. And the fact that his originality consists in celebrating the individual makes him the perfect origin for a critical and political tradition that celebrates individualism.

So to conclude this methodological introduction, this lecture is going to be go against the grain of both this course and this poet. I am going to offer you a social analysis of Chaucer's interest in individualism. I won't pretend that this analysis will explain that interest, but I can hope that it can clarify the conditions that made it possible. And if you want a label to identify the kind of literary criticism I'm going to practice, perhaps the most accurate is to call it materialist, in that it focuses on the material conditions within which art emerges.

Now: let me sketch very briefly the economic, social, and political conditions of Chaucer's world, and then describe his relation to them. Chaucer was born in 1340 or so, and the most important event that occurred during his lifetime was the plague of 1348-50. Known

as the Black Death or just "the Death," this was the highly infectious disease now known as the bubonic plague; it's caused by a bacillus carried by fleas which infest certain kinds of rodents -- including the prairie dogs of the American southwest. In its first pass through Europe it killed about one-third of the population -- and in some places as much as one-half; it returned to England, albeit in much less devastating fashion, two or three other times in the fourteenth century, and didn't finally disappear until after the so-called Great Plague that devastated London in 1665. The demographic effects of the plague were tremendous. Although exactness is difficult to achieve in this area, it is generally agreed that England did not return to its pre-plague population level until around the seventeenth century. The cultural effects of the plague are much more very difficult to determine -- there is little in English artistic or literary production of the second half of the century that can be attributed with any confidence to the plague. There seems to have been nothing like the immense psychic disruption that accompanied the two great plagues of our century, the First and Second World Wars -- and especially the First, which transformed the way in which Europeans thought about themselves and their collective future.

But the economic and social consequences of the fourteenth-century plague were enormous and well documented. Prior to 1348 medieval Europe was beginning to suffer from a Malthusian crisis -- an imbalance, that is, between population and food production. There were recurrent famines in the first half of the century, especially in 1314-1320, there was little land available for new cultivation, and the traditional feudal structures of lordship and obedience were under strain. The plague shifted the balance of power dramatically and hastened the end of feudalism as a social and economic system. Before the plague land and food were scarce while labor was abundant and demand was voracious; after the plague the situation was exactly the opposite: there was lots of land, far fewer mouths to feed with a now plentiful agricultural crop, and a severe shortage of labor. This situation empowered both the unlanded laborer and the tenant, both of whom could now negotiate with their landlords for better terms; and it threatened the incomes of those landlords, who were of course the ruling class of medieval England.

Their response was to pass restrictive legislation. As early as 1349 Parliament enacted the Ordinance of Labourers, and followed it up in 1351 with the Statute of Labourers. This legislation restricted the right of a tenant to leave his manor, compelled him to accept work when it was offered to him, forbade employers from offering wages higher than those in force before the plague, codified the wages of artisans in the towns, and fixed the prices of agricultural goods. It is a matter of dispute among historians whether these laws achieved their purpose; but everybody agrees that the effort to enforce them resulted in exacerbating the social friction -- or let's be blunt and call it by its rightful name, class warfare -- that had always marked the relation of landlord to tenant under feudalism. Perhaps the best way to describe the situation in England is like this: the plague was a demographic catastrophe but for the vast majority an economic bonanza; it created bright prospects and rising expectations among the poorer and especially middling members of society; the repressive legislation passed by the ruling classes frustrated those expectations; and the result was an explosion. This explosion occurred in 1381 with the so-called Peasants' Revolt, better known as the Rising of 1381 -- an extraordinary event that had little lasting political effect but that traumatized the ruling class. The Rising had a short but complex history. Its most intense moments were a march into London by rebels

from Essex and Kent on June 13 (which was, not coincidentally, Corpus Christi Day -- a day usually set aside for processions and rituals organized by the town's most powerful members in order to celebrate the order of the community), the burning of the London palace of the Duke of Lancaster, John of Gaunt; and the beheading of (among others) the Archbishop of Canterbury. The rebels were also particularly concerned to burn legal records that could be used to enforce serfdom and, where possible, to kill lawyers. The best illustration I can give of the flavor and meaning of this extraordinary event is a very brief account of the events of the rising in St. Albans, a huge and very prosperous manor just northwest of London owned by the Benedictine abbey there. The relations between the monks and the tenants of St. Albans had always been fractious, to say the least. One of the tenants' most bitter grievances had to do with milling: like all feudal landlords, the Abbot of St. Albans required his tenants to have their grain ground at large mills owned by the abbey -- and to pay for the privilege (multure). The tenants periodically circumvented this requirement by building their own handmills and hiding them in their houses. At least as early as 1274 there are records of the Abbot seizing handmills. About fifty years later, in 1327, the tenants laid siege to the Abbey and won the concession to have their own mills. But over the next ten years this concession was canceled, and the people were forced to surrender their millstones. The Abbot -- a man named Richard -- then had these millstones cemented into the floor of his parlor -- a peculiarly uncharitable and taunting way of commemorating his victory. But this isn't the end of the story. For during the rising of 1381 -- in other words, another fifty years later, which says something about the persistence of their sense of grievance -- the tenants again laid siege to the Abbey and actually broke in. What they then did was described by the abbey chronicler:

Some ribald people [he says], breaking their way into the Abbey cloisters, took up from the floor of the parlour doorway the millstones which had been put there in the time of Abbot Richard as a remembrance and memorial of the ancient dispute between the Abbey and the townsmen. They took the stones outside and handed them over to the commons, breaking them into little pieces and giving a piece to each person, just as the consecrated bread used to be broken and distributed on Sundays in the parish churches, so that the people, seeing these pieces, would know themselves avenged against the Abbey in that cause.

In this extraordinary scene the peasants create a political ritual that replaces and parodies the central religious ritual -- the Mass -- enacted by the ecclesiastical establishment that had so oppressed them. It is also relevant to note that the leader of the rebels at St. Albans was a man named William Grindcobbe, a name that implies -- even if it cannot be used to prove -- that he was himself a miller. The chronicler also records Grindcobbe's moving words when he was under indictment for his part in the Rising:

Fellow citizens [he said], for whom a little liberty has now relieved the long years of oppression, stand firm while you can and do not be afraid because of my persecution. For if it should happen that I die in the cause of seeking to acquire liberty, I will count myself happy to end my life as such as such a martyr.

The use of the religious word "martyr" to describe a political rebel is surely significant. Grindcobbe was indeed executed; as a contemporary verse put it, "The stool was hard, the ax was scharp / The iiii yere of kyng Richard."

What has this to do with Chaucer? Probably nothing personally: he was living in London at the time, and doubtless witnessed the invasion of the city by the rebels -- an event to which he refers in the Nun's Priest's Tale in a tone that is pretty much unreadable. But much more important is the role that he grants to his miller in the Canterbury Tales. For Chaucer's Miller is not only allowed to interrupt a monk without retribution -- unlike the martyred William Grindcobbe -- but is also allowed to tell a tale that is a scathing and very funny parody of the Knight's Tale. In other words, the Canterbury Tales seems to begin with a kind of literary Rising -- and it would be nice to know what this might mean. But before I offer you one possible answer to that question I must first say a few more things about the historical situation and Chaucer's place in it. The Rising of 1381 was part of what we can appropriately call a crisis of governance that afflicted England in the late fourteenth century. The trauma of the Rising made visible even to the most complacent observer that profound changes were transforming English society, but there are other dimensions to the crisis as well. One was the dramatic decline in England's fortunes in the war with France, the so-called Hundred Years War. This war began in 1337 when Edward III asserted a claim to the throne of France -- a highly dubious claim, incidentally. The early decades of the war went brilliantly for the English: in 1346 Edward won a decisive victory over the French at Crecy; then in 1356 his son, Edward, the Black Prince, won an even more spectacular victory at Poitiers, capturing not only many French nobles but even King John of France himself. Apart from making the knighthood of England feel good about itself, the effect of these successes was to provide them with very valuable hostages. When King John was finally ransomed by his fellow citizens, it was for the immense sum of 3,000,000 gold crowns.

The French war, in other words, was in its early years an economic success for the ruling class, and tended to compensate them for the loss of revenues from their estates due to the shift in economic power accomplished by the plague. But of course these successes didn't continue. In 1367 the Black Prince invaded Spain and won a victory over the French at Najera that was all too costly. For the campaign ruined his health, he fell into a slow, agonizing decline and died in 1376. Meanwhile his father, Edward III, had also fallen into his dotage, and the French took advantage of this lack of leadership to reconquer virtually all the territory they had originally lost. So when Edward III died in 1377, the great victories in France were already long past; and he was succeeded not by his heroic son the Black Prince, who was by then dead, but by his grandson, Richard II, a boy of ten years old.

There is a biblical verse that medieval political theorists were fond of quoting: "Woe to the land that has a child as king." Certainly the truth of this warning was demonstrated in England. For four years the government was controlled by Richard's uncle, John of Gaunt, the Duke of Lancaster, who was immensely unpopular and did nothing to revive English fortunes in the war. Then when Richard himself took over -- right after the Rising of 1381, when he was 15 -- he demonstrated even less capacity for the chivalric leadership and military success that were so important to legitimizing the authority of the medieval monarchy.

We come now to a third aspect of the crisis of governance, and the one that most affected Chaucer personally. This was the struggle that went on from 1384 to 1389 between Richard and the most powerful members of the English nobility. It is important to realize that a medieval monarch, and especially in England, could not rule without the support of the most powerful magnates of his country. This fact had been vividly demonstrated in England a half century earlier, in 1327, when Edward II had been deposed and murdered. For a variety of reasons -- which I'm going to have skip over -- Richard quickly lost the support of the magnates: in 1387 he was virtually deposed from the throne (with a warning that what had happened to his great-grandfather Edward II was about to happen to him), and in 1388 several of his servants and supporters were executed by what came to be known as the Merciless Parliament. Due to its own ineptness, however, the cabal of nobles who led this revolt (a cabal known as the Lords Appellant, and including Henry Bolingbroke) fell apart in 1389, and Richard regained power. Apparently peace was made among the feuding parties, but in 1397 Richard struck back at his old enemies, executing and murdering several of them -- with the ultimate result that in 1399 John of Gaunt's son, Henry Bolingbroke, deposed and murdered Richard and became Henry IV. These Mafia-like machinations were immediately relevant to Chaucer. What was Chaucer's place in this world? He was the son of a vintner, a wealthy wholesaler of wine in London. Like many wealthy merchants, Chaucer's father sent his son to be brought up in a noble household -- a kind of prep-school, a medieval version of Eton or Harrow. Chaucer was first a page in the household of the countess of Ulster, and was then in the service of Edward III, John of Gaunt, and finally Richard II. It is not easy to know exactly what Chaucer's social position was, a social undefinability that is itself interesting. He would certainly not have been considered a member of the nobility, although he does seem to have had a coat of arms. In 1374 Edward appointed him Controller of the Customs. This was an important job: he had to make sure that the huge customs duties levied on the export of wool and cloth were accurately computed and honestly collected. This was money that was crucial to the king, and that he could not afford to be siphoned off in corruption. But important as the job may have been, it was not of a high status: Chaucer was required to keep the records in his own hand, and any form of manual labor was considered demeaning -- and certainly beneath the dignity of an aristocrat. Indeed, prior to Chaucer all the holders of this office had been clerics: he was the first layman to hold the job. But it was, as one historian of the customs has rather woundingly put it, a "modest office for modest men." Moreover, Chaucer lacked the wealth -- and especially the landed wealth -- to be considered a member of the ruling class. He married one of the queen's ladies-in-waiting, who was a foreigner and brought with her no significant dowry. Finally, the various other tasks he performed for Edward and Richard, while by no means unimportant, were exactly comparable to those provided by other merchant sons who entered noble service; and his remuneration from the monarch -- the various grants and annuities -- was also entirely typical for a person of his background. In other words, there is no evidence that Chaucer was particularly close to the centers of power, and -- more striking -- no evidence that he was ever rewarded or even recognized by the king for his literary work. We have about 100 documents that pertain to Chaucer's official life -- a very large number -- and not one of them mentions the fact that he was a poet. Having said this, there is one moment when Chaucer's service to Richard was of special importance. This was in 1386, when he was selected to represent Kent in Parliament. This

was a crucial Parliament, in which Richard was trying to head off the magnates who were out to get him. Chaucer was almost certainly present in this Parliament as an agent of the king: Richard was later accused of having tried to pack this Parliament, and Chaucer seems to have been one of the men he shoe-horned in. But Richard's strategy failed, his noble opponents took control of the government and then instituted a purge. It was at this point that Chaucer resigned from the Controllershship -- and again, there is considerable evidence to suggest that he resigned before he was fired, or perhaps even that he was fired. There is also evidence that at this time Chaucer was also engaged in diplomatic work for Richard -- specifically, initiating secret peace negotiations with the French -- that would have made him highly vulnerable to the king's opponents.

Let me sum this up and try to draw some conclusions. The first is about Chaucer's social position. He was the son of a merchant, lived most of his life in London, and as Controller of Customs dealt with merchants and trade every day. He was also, however, a royal servant, a member of the households of Edward III and Richard II (although he seems not to have lived for any extended period in the household), was entrusted with important diplomatic missions and put himself in danger to serve the king in the prominent position of a member of Parliament. Finally, he was a layman who nonetheless was capable of performing tasks usually assigned to clerics, he knew Latin, French, and Italian well, and he was widely if not very deeply read -- in fourteenth-century terms, he would certainly have been considered as learned as many clerks. This is what I mean by Chaucer's social undefinability: to specify his social identity -- his precise status and role -- seems impossible. For what the evidence reveals is a Chaucer on the boundary between several distinctive social formations. He's not bourgeois, he's not noble, and he's not clerical -- yet he participates in all three of these groupings. Perhaps this lack of precise social definition can help us to understand -- although of course it cannot be said to cause -- Chaucer's interest in individuality -- an interest in what I would call a socially undetermined subjectivity, a concern with psychological specificity and inwardness, that is everywhere present in his poetry.

My second conclusion is about the genesis and meaning of the *Canterbury Tales*. Prior to the writing of the *Canterbury Tales*, all of Chaucer's poetry -- with one possible exception, the strange and brilliant poem called the *House of Fame* -- all of Chaucer's poetry can be accurately characterized as courtly. This is not to say that it was written for the court, since we really know very little about his audience. But it is certainly written within the ideological and cultural context of the aristocratic world. This is, however, not true of the *Canterbury Tales*: in fact, the only one of the 24 tales that is without question aristocratic is the *Knight's Tale*. Now: what is interesting about the *Knight's Tale* is its context. First, by being placed in the *Canterbury Tales* at all it is defined not as a work by Geoffrey Chaucer but explicitly as a tale told by a knight. Unlike all of his previous poetry, this poem is presented not as Chaucer's view of the world but rather as that of a typical member of the ruling class of fourteenth-century England. Second, the theme of the *Knight's Tale* is precisely a crisis in governance: it tells the story of how the Athenian man of reason -- Theseus -- tries to control and discipline -- to govern -- two Theban men of blood, Arcite and Palamon. More than this, however, the *Knight's Tale* bespeaks a crisis of governance in the way it is told: the Knight is continually anxious about organizing, controlling, structuring, and disciplining -- about governing -- his own narrative. In my view, both Theseus and the Knight fail in their efforts: the tale does not in fact describe a

world governed by a benign rationality but one tormented by random accident and malignant vengefulness. Third, as soon as the Knight tells his tale he is immediately challenged -- as I've already said -- by a drunken Miller, who has a very different view of the world and insists that it be given attention.

What does this mean? Does it mean that the events of the late 1380s turned Chaucer into a political radical? I don't think so, and the fact that the Miller's Tale opens the door to the embittered and dangerous Reeve and then the disgusting Cook suggests that Chaucer had second thoughts -- or at least that he wants us to. But I do think that the events of the 1380s shook Chaucer loose from an aristocratic culture that he was already finding less and less satisfactory as a context for both artistic production and for life. And the result -- to our great benefit -- was the *Canterbury Tales*. But the *Canterbury Tales* are not a radical political document; they promote no consistent political position, nor do they comment in any direct way on any contemporary problems. Certainly they are non-aristocratic, but they do not propose any alternative social vision to that of the aristocratic world. On the contrary, they escape from politics entirely by focusing their attention upon individuals, upon character. The *Canterbury Tales*, in other words, respond to their time largely by withdrawing from it. Whether this represents political cowardice or simple prudence on Chaucer's part is an open question. But what cannot be disputed is that Chaucer's response to the material conditions of his life resulted in a work that twentieth-century Americans have found both politically congenial and aesthetically irresistible.