Chaucer and *The Canterbury Tales*

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CHAUCER and THE CANTERBURY TALES

Main Lobby
Thomas Cooper Library
University of South Carolina
January 2003
The Canterbury Tales, written more than six hundred years ago, remains one of the most influential poems in the English language. It was circulated in Chaucer's own time in beautifully illuminated manuscript copies, and it was among the first works of English poetry to reach printed form, in Caxton's edition of 1478. Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1340-1400) was a courtier and civil servant as well as a poet, and his work provides a lively panorama of contemporary medieval society.

This exhibit puts on display, alongside some original material, modern high-quality reproductions of the most important of the Chaucer manuscripts and of the early printed editions of his work.

1: BACKGROUND
Chaucer's poem describes a group of medieval pilgrims, gathering at the Tabard just south of the river Thames, in London, to set out on the road to Canterbury, where the "holy blisful martyr" St Thomas a Becket was buried in the cathedral.
* an original medieval illuminated manuscript book, a psalter or book of psalms, dating from the early 15th century, shortly after Chaucer's death.
* reproduction of the frontispiece portrait of Chaucer, from Thomas Speght's edition of 1598, based on the near-contemporary Hoccleve portrait.
* a 1588 map of the walled city of Canterbury, still looking much as it would have appeared to medieval pilgrims (Osman Collection of Braun &
Hogenberg City Maps).
* portrait of Chaucer from the Ellesmere manuscript.

2: THE ELLESMERE MANUSCRIPT
Though many manuscript versions of The Canterbury Tales survive, one of the most authoritative and most handsomely-illuminated manuscripts remained unknown till the mid-nineteenth-century. The Ellesmere manuscript, at that time owned by the Marquis of Stafford, was first printed in F.J. Furnivall's Chaucer edition in 1868. In 1917, it was purchased by the America railroad baron Henry E. Huntington and is now the centrepiece of the library he founded in southern California. The Ellesmere manuscript dates from c. 1405, within a few years after Chaucer's lifetime. The pages displayed here are from the facsimile produced for the Huntington Library in 1995.

* Opening to The General Prologue
  Whan that April with his showres soote
  The drougthe of March hath perced to the roote . . .
  Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages.

* The Knight
  He was a verry parfit gentil knight.

* The Squire
  A loverre and a lusty bachelere,

* The Manciple
  A gentle Manicle was ther of a temple.

3: CHAUCER & THE CHURCH
* The Prioress
  And she was deped Madame Eglantine.

* The Monk
  A manly man, to been an abbot able.
* The Pardoner
* Ful loude he soong, "Com hider, love, to me."

* The Clerk of Oxford
* But al that he mighte of his freends hente,
  On bookes and on lerning he it spent.

4: CHAUCER & THE LAITY

* The Wife of Bath
* Bold was hir face and fair and reed of heuwe.

* The Merchant
* His resouns he spak ful solemnely,
  Souning alway the encrees of his winning.

* The Miller
* Ful big he was of brawn and eek of bones.

* The Canon's Yeoman
* It seemed that he carried lite array.

5: FROM CAXTON TO SPEGHT

* Caxton & the first printed Chaucer
* Shown are a reproduction of one sheet from William Caxton's edition of The Canterbury Tales (1476) and a reproduction of his second edition (1484), both illustrated with woodcuts.

* Thynne's Chaucer
* Thynne, William, d. 1546, ed.

* Speght's Chaucer (1598)
* Speght, Thomas, fl. 1600, ed.
* The workes of our antient and lerned English poet, Geoffrey Chaucer, newly printed.
* Londini: G. Bishop, 1598.
6: LATER CHAUCER EDITIONS

* Urry's Chaucer (1721)
Urry, John, 1666-1715, ed.
The works of Geoffrey Chaucer: compared with the former editions, and many valuable mss. out of which, three tales are added which were never before printed. London: Lintot, 1721.

* Tyrwhitt and Stothard
Tyrwhitt, Thomas, 1730-1786, ed.
-Tyrwhitt's edition was first published in 1775-1778. The frontispiece shows Thomas Stothard's 1807 painting The Canterbury Pilgrims.

* Researching Chaucer's Life
Sir Samuel Egerton Brydges, 1762-1837, ed.
-Brydges's interleaved copy with MS addenda for the 1824 revision.

* Morris and the Kelmscott Chaucer

This exhibit was originally curated by Patrick Scott for students in ENGL 288.
RARE BOOKS
& SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

Location and hours
The Department is located on the mezzanine level of Thomas Cooper Library. The Graniteville Reading Room is open for research use on weekdays, Monday through Friday, from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. (except major holidays).

Catalogue and web-pages
Special Collections holdings are cataloged into the library’s on-line catalogue USCAN, and descriptions or exhibits for many of the major collections are also available through the department’s home page at: http://www.sc.edu/library/spcoll/rarebook.html

Other services and activities
In addition to support of research and teaching, through courses and class visits, the Department provides specialized bibliographical reference services and mounts a regular program of exhibits and events, in cooperation with the library’s friends group, The Thomas Cooper Society.

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