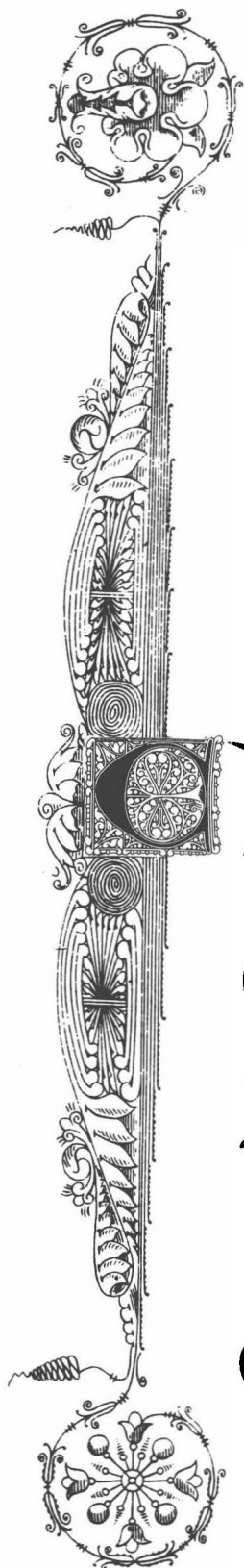


# **C**haucer and his world



Derek Brewer



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Eyre Methuen

For Adrian

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## COLOUR PLATES

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## ABBREVIATIONS

- BD *The Book of the Duchess*  
CT *The Canterbury Tales* (the roman numeral  
following CT signifies the number of the  
Fragment in accordance with Robinson's edition)  
HF *The House of Fame*  
LGW *The Legend of Good Women* (Pro F=Prologue F; so for G)  
PF *The Parliament of Fowls*  
TC *Troilus and Criseyde*

## PREFACE

The aim of this book is to give as vivid an impression as possible of Chaucer's life and historical circumstances. No literary criticism is attempted, but the work depends on the premise that he is one of the very greatest English writers, and I have written for a wider audience than specialists.

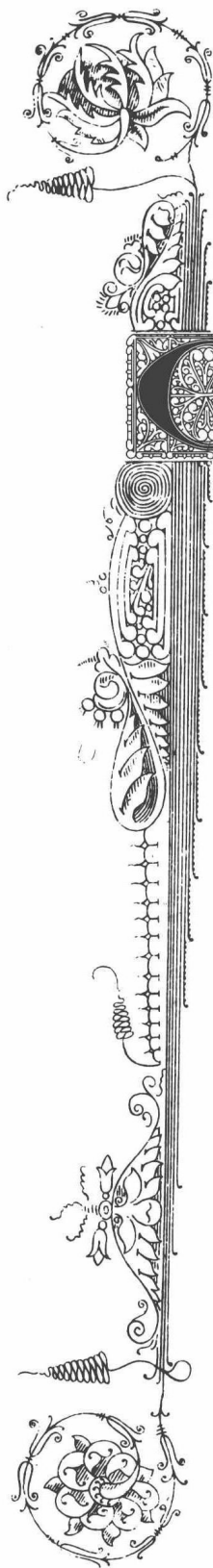
A list of books consulted is given at the end, and there are notes (easily ignored) to specific points in the text, but I should particularly mark my debt to the edition of Chaucer's *Works* by F. N. Robinson (from which quotations are made); to *Chaucer Life-Records* edited by C. C. Olson and M. M. Crow, which must be the foundation of any discussion of Chaucer's life; and to *The Fourteenth Century* by May McKisack. While I have drawn with great benefit on a variety of other books these fundamental works of scholarship give us the great commonplaces of the subject.

I am as always indebted to the patience of my long-suffering family, and especially to my wife. I am also grateful to Mrs P. Hancock who deciphered and typed some very foul papers.

DEREK BREWER



## INTRODUCTION



Geoffrey Chaucer is the first literary personality in English, and we know more about the outline of his life than we do about Shakespeare's. His inner life is recorded in his poems, and he liked to put himself as a character into them. He was an extraordinary man, a great poet who was courtier, soldier, learned man, much-travelled minor diplomat. The range of his experience and interests is amazing, from common life and bawdy tales to puritanical religion; from passionate love to an equally obsessive interest in philosophy and science. He knew all sorts of people, not only English but French, Italian, Flemish, German courtiers, soldiers, scholars, merchant-financiers, monks, priests, ladies, servant girls, from the highest in the kingdom down to all except the poor. Yet to judge from what he himself says, what he most liked to do was to read in solitude. His attitudes ranged from a sentimental feeling for small children, a deep interest in love, to a sardonic cynicism. Pity is the feeling he most often consciously expresses, yet he can never keep flippancy out of his treatment of the most serious matters.

He was fat, he tells us, and not talkative. People felt they could condescend to him. But he was a wonderful mimic, and in his own way very self-assured. There was a touch of the devil in this quiet, kindly man that occasionally broke out in escapades he may have regretted. He was at the centre of English society, yet also by temperament one who sought the margins and gaps; an official, he was intensely interested in the unofficial.

England, and Europe, was in his day very different from our urbanized industrial world, and I devote the rest of this Introduction to an impressionistic description of Chaucer's England. Like all countries it was entirely dependent on agriculture. Oats, barley, rye and wheat, cabbages and roots, were cultivated in large open fields composed of strips held by different tenants, and with far fewer hedges. Sheep, cows, goats were pastured in commons and wastelands; fuel, timber and game came from the woods. There were great forests, and broadly scattered woodlands almost everywhere apart from the moors on the higher uplands, and the heather-covered sandy tracts of Norfolk, now paradoxically covered with conifers.

Townsmen were almost as close to the countryside as were villagers and peasants. Chaucer's poetry is full of country images. He travelled constantly on horseback, exposed to all weathers and seasons, on muddy tracks, meeting all the variety of medieval travellers, part of the landscape and of the turning world, as

OPPOSITE *The basis of all life was farming work*



all medieval men had to be. The great opening of *The Canterbury Tales* is the immortal expression of that sense of relief and release when winter's sharpness has worn away. Heavens and winds and earth and people are all linked in the spring surge, bird song, animal movement, that includes new life, sexual energies, gratitude, religious devotion, social enjoyment, all together in one overriding image – not mere image, but actual fact – of the English countryside. Something like this appears in dozens of English poems:

The mirth of all this land  
 Maketh the good husband      [farmer]  
 With labouring of his plough.  
 I – blessed be Christés sand      [message]  
 That hath us sent in hand  
 Mirth and joy enough.

The plough goes early and late, through the clay, that makes men sweat, to get barley and wheat.

You cannot enjoy summer if you do not know in Chaucerian phraseology 'the sword of winter, keen and cold', its 'cold mornings', 'wet rains', its dry death of 'woods and hedges'. There was a bitter side to the ploughman's toil, as a fourteenth-century alliterative poet describes it. As he went by the way he saw a man hanging on the plough. His coat was of coarse cloth, his hood torn, his shoes broken, his mittens only rags, and his hands muddy. His four heifers pulled the plough feebly and his wife walked by him with a long goad. She was ill-clad and the ice cut her bare feet, while at the furrow's end was a cradle with a baby wrapped in rags, two more children two years old by its side, and all wailing in misery, while the poor ploughman sighed and said 'Children, be quiet!' Chaucer never shows the plight of the poor so pathetically, though the poor are for him, as for so many medieval poets, the generalized image of humanity. Yet he also portrayed with half-amused realistic sympathy such poor cottages as that of the old widow who owned Chanticleer the cock. She lived a simple life, beside a wood in a valley, with her two daughters, three pigs, three cows, a sheep (all of whom no doubt inhabited the same sooty 'hall' and 'bower'), and had a yard with a cock and seven hens. Milk and brown bread, grilled bacon, and occasionally an egg or two, with no wine, was her diet – a very healthy one, too, as the overweight Chaucer wryly points out. Chaucer does not sentimentalize this, any more than he does the exemplary shepherdess Griselda in *The Clerk's Tale*, with her tangled hair and dirty clothes. It seems to have been natural for him to accept both the squalor and the spiritual dimension. There was no separation between the fact and the symbolic power that gave it value, when Chaucer saw the countryside. And this was because he knew it so well, felt it in his bones, and yet as a courtier and townsman was detached from its miseries and injustices. He felt differently about things he was closer to.

Towns and villages were scattered all over England, and the nucleus of almost every town and village now in England had been established by Chaucer's day – indeed, long before. Before the Black Death of 1348–9, the population may have



ABOVE *Medieval fields  
(ridge and furrow ploughing)  
northeast of Padbury,  
Buckinghamshire*

been as much as three million. Since only five per cent of the population lived in towns, of which only London, and possibly York, had more than 10,000 inhabitants, most of the population were scattered about in villages, hamlets, isolated houses. After the Black Death the population may have been reduced to two million. There were less severe but still terrible visitations of plague in 1361-2 and 1369, and the population by 1400 may have been half of what it was in 1340, which was about the time when Chaucer was born. So riding about the country Chaucer would have seen deserted fields, houses, even villages. All the same in *cultivated* parts there would not necessarily have been even so much solitude as in country parts in England and Europe today. Everywhere there were people working on the land.

Quite other were the great tracts of forest and woodland. The roads skirted these, for nearly all the forest was protected by savage game laws, and pursuit of their rich wildlife was restricted to the king or gentry who owned the forest. Hunting was the constant occupation and recreation of all the gentry. Everything eatable was game, from the little hunted hare, rabbit, to the deer and the mighty, dangerous boar. There were still wolves in the forest, but those were not hunted. Chaucer knew the hare with its staring eyes and expresses the traditional pity for its fear, as it lies weary in its form, pursued by hounds great and small. Generally speaking, though, hunting was loved by all classes. The sport caught the imagination. It was fierce and hot in pursuit, bursting with hope, exulting in the kill, in the bloody disembowelment, the triumphant return home with horns blowing and the carcass on a pole to be roasted at the feast.

There was a hunt of love too, with a triumphant consummation and ambivalent death. This is what interests Chaucer more. The actual hunting of animals is for Chaucer only a part of the background of the courtly life, in contrast with the fourteenth-century poet of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, for whom its actual and symbolic realities are much more central. Chaucer was never interested in food, fat as he was. In *The Book of the Duchess* he is, in a dream, called out to hunt the deer, and we feel the stir and excitement of beginning the chase, but he soon strays away from the hunt and is led to hear the lament of the Man in Black. The hunt is a significant but remote background to the pursuit of love, more tender, equally carnal; and each ends in a death. Chaucer's interest was in the personal feeling, not the physical excitement. For the natural and

BELOW *A hare for supper.*  
For the poor, hunting was  
part of the grim business of  
survival



vigorous fun of the hunt itself, as well as its symbolic force, we must go to the equally courtly, but provincial, northern poem, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Like the hunt, the forest as well as being a constant real presence is also a profoundly symbolic, even sacred place, where we lose and find ourselves. This is a little more to Chaucer's taste, as, in *The Book of the Duchess*, he wanders down grassy drives in a well-managed forest, to find the mourning Knight in the depths. For the poets in general the forest is the place of adventure, of meeting the wonderful girl, the golden-haired, fresh beauty who lightens a man's life.

When spring comes, birds sing, blossoms flourish, all the world is gay. But if the beloved is cruel, or, as in *The Book of the Duchess*, dead, the forest is a place of loss and confusion. All creatures make love, says a poet; women become marvellously proud, and well it suits them: but if I lack my will of that one, I must abandon all this wealth of joys and be a lost man in the wood. As another poet puts it, in a line that echoes Chaucer, 'I must go walk the wood so wild'.

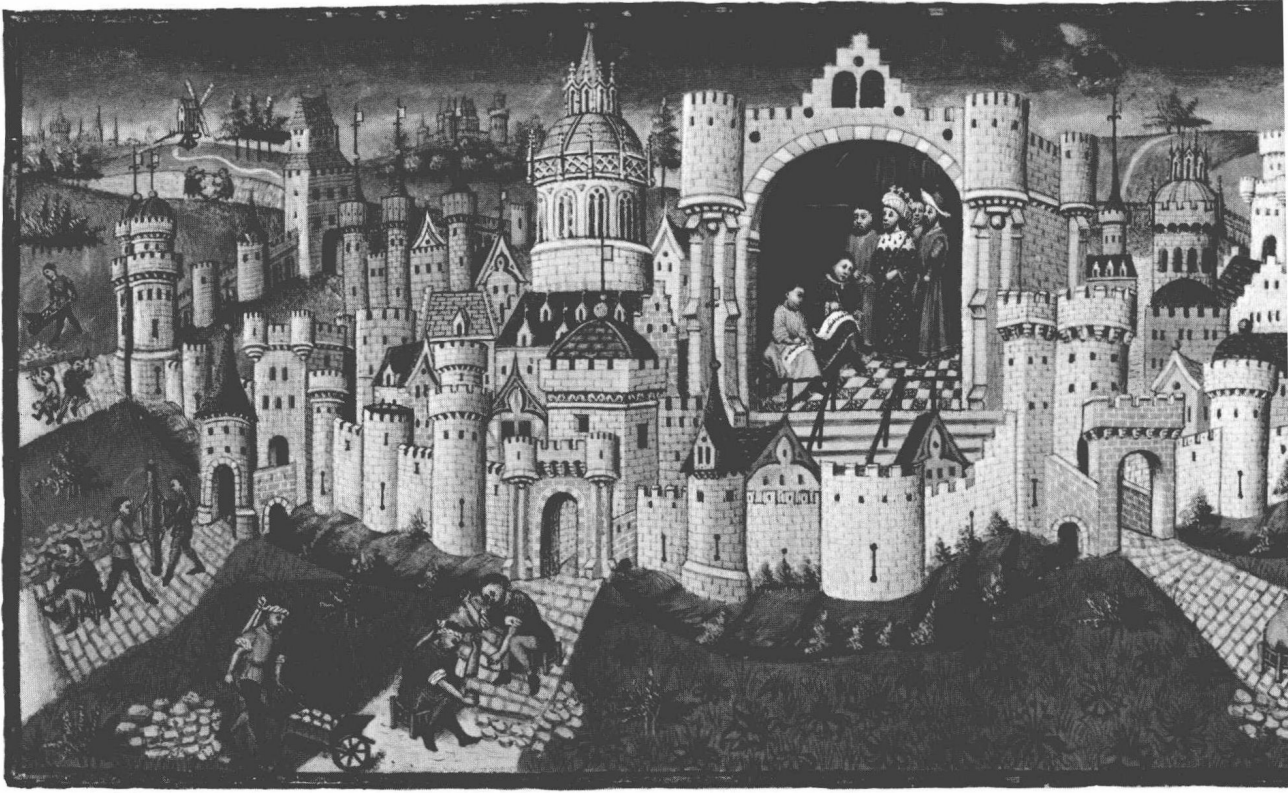
The forest was a place of joy and excitement as well as loss and confusion – legal records are full of men punished because they would not keep out of the forest. And some men had to keep inside it; the outlaws, robber bands, real-life equivalents of Robin Hood (first heard of as a folk hero in Chaucer's time), living 'in hazel-wood, where jolly Robin played', as Chaucer says.

An outlaw had a 'wolf's head', which might be cut off by anyone who could. The female equivalent was a *weyve*, abandoned without protection of law to any fate – poor Maid Marian. Outlaws and *weyves* had no property, no rights. It was such men, members of a gang working in several counties, who robbed Chaucer

RIGHT A French ivory mirror case shows the hunt as part of the pursuit of love





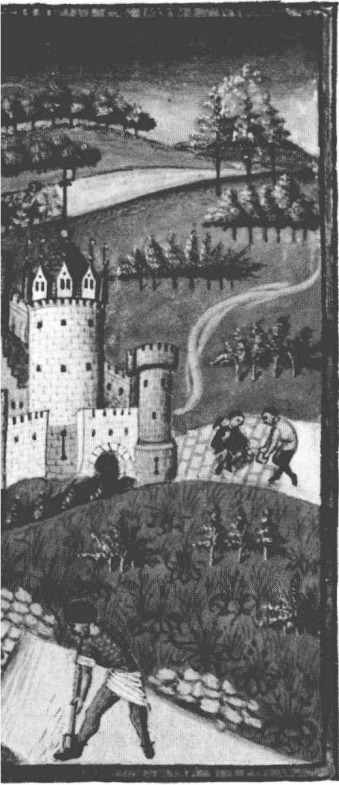


on 3 September 1390, at or near 'The Foul Oak' in the parish of Deptford, Kent, only five miles from the walls of the City of London, when he was on one of his innumerable journeys on horseback.

The roads over which Chaucer passed were rarely paved. The usual reference made by the Canterbury pilgrims to the road is as 'the slough', the mud, and so it must have been, in a rainy April, with horses and carts constantly churning it up. Even in modern times I have seen a road in mountains rendered waist-deep in mud from the passage of mules. In the fourteenth century (and as late as the nineteenth) even the nobility might find it impossible to travel because the weather made the roads impassable. In 1339 Parliament had to be postponed because bad weather prevented the barons from arriving on the proper day. Yet there *were* roads, and even in England it does not rain all the time, so except in really bad weather it was normally possible to travel with some hope of arriving.

In some towns (for example, Southampton and Lincoln) roads were paved, though flint (in Winchester) or gravel (in Oxford) were used, and there were even relics of Roman roads, in England and Europe, whose firm base had wonderfully endured ten centuries' wear or more. Paris was paved, and so were some London streets. One paved road that Chaucer knew very well, the Strand and its extension from Temple Bar, the western edge of the City of London, to Westminster, had become in 1353 so full of holes and quagmires, and the pavement so broken, that it was very dangerous. Each proprietor on either side

*In this rather idealized picture, no less than seven roads are being built simultaneously, and into an idyllically ordered countryside*



was ordered by the King to make a seven-foot footway on the edge of the paved centre of the roadway. In 1356 the City imposed a road tax to pay for repairs, because the roads were so bad. A French ordinance referring to Paris, a bigger, richer town than London, in 1388, shows how bad things might be. In the suburbs, roads, lanes and bridges were damaged or destroyed by watercourses, big stones, and by hedges, brambles and trees, so that some had to be quite abandoned. In many English towns the level of the road rose steadily with the accumulated rubbish. Fourteenth-century legislation at least shows that someone was trying to improve matters. But nature is strong. In modern England and Europe, many centuries-old lanes and paths have been lost, despite modern technology. In the fourteenth century, with only hands and simple tools, the physical effort needed to keep civilization afloat was enormous. A constant battle had to be waged to keep ways passable, by men who were less utilitarian, far less well fed and well clothed than we are.

Means of transport were limited. The poor, both the actual and the professional, such as friars, walked. Most regular travellers rode, on horses good or bad. You judged a man by the horse he rode, as some people do nowadays by cars. Chaucer's Knight in *The Canterbury Tales* has good horses, though he himself is not flashy in dress. The Monk, on the other hand, is richly dressed and has many a fine horse in his stable – and we draw the appropriate conclusion, that he has what in modern terms would be a very lush expense account, though vowed to poverty. The admirable Clerk, ideal university professor, does not go out for the money and rides a horse as lean as a rake. The equally ideal, humble, hardworking Ploughman rides a poor mare. We are not told what the Ploughman's brother, the Parson, rides, but in his remote parish where the houses are far apart he goes on foot, with a staff. Women normally rode on horseback and astride, though riding side-saddle began to come in during Chaucer's lifetime.

Most goods also went by horseback, but there were carts. They were used for farming – there is a dung cart in *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, and in *The Friar's Tale* a cart full of hay is caught in a deep narrow track. The word 'cart' was also used for 'war chariot' in poetry, but the medieval painters thought of the war chariot as a simple farm cart. Chaucer also mentions a *fare-cart*, one that carried provisions. The great armies and the continuously travelling king's court had large clumsy baggage wagons. When Chaucer was an esquire at the king's court he would have become familiar with the arrangements. Ladies might even have carriages. They had four wheels. Solid beams rested directly on the axles without springs. On these was raised a long semicircular structure like a tunnel. Four or five horses in line pulled them, urged on by a postilion seated on one with a whip. Jarring and inefficient, they were vividly carved and painted outside, with tapestries and embroidered cushions inside, and windows with curtains. Elizabeth de Burgh, Lady Clare, in her will of 25 September 1355, endowed her eldest daughter with her 'great carriage with the couvertures, carpets and cushions'. Chaucer must have seen this when he was page to her daughter Lady Elizabeth, Countess of Ulster, in 1359. The gypsy wagon that survived in England till this century, gaudily painted and often not dissimilar in shape,



LEFT *A great lady travels in her chariot with her damoiselles and retinue*

OPPOSITE *The Pilgrim's Way above Trottisccliffe, Kent*

though lighter, was a direct descendant, still touched with some of the romance of the road, though the medieval carriage lacked the comfort of the gypsy's stove and stovepipe. The covered wagon of the great American treks to the West was probably even closer in design. Medieval carriages were very expensive. Richard II paid £400 for a carriage made for his second queen, the child Isabella, and Edward III had paid £1000 for one for his sister – a truly staggering sum. No wonder they were rare. There were also horse litters, like stretchers between two horses, but again infrequent.

Speeds over roads varied enormously, as today. The two-and-a-half-day pilgrimage from London to Canterbury made by a group of thirty pilgrims, over a distance of fifty-seven miles, could be travelled in one day by a king's messenger using pre-arranged changes of horse. It can be done nowadays, even in dense motor traffic, in three hours or less. That is the measure of a different feel about time and space. England in the fourteenth century was much bigger, in terms of how long it took to get anywhere at any possible speed. It was quieter, except for birds, which were not decimated by pesticides. There were many more wild animals, big and small, than now. It was far more dangerous and uncomfortable.

Chaucer stopped at inns when he travelled, as did almost all but the very highest and lowest. He had to sleep in a room in which there were a number of beds, if he was lucky; if he was unlucky, he had to share a bed, with one or more others. There is a gruesomely comic Italian anecdote written by a contemporary





of Chaucer's, Francesco Sacchetti, about a man who came late to a crowded inn. There were a lot of beds with two men in a bed, all in the same room. Only one had a single sleeper. And he had died the day before. The latecomer, who had a superstitious horror of corpses, did not realize this and got in beside him. Later in the night he thought his bedfellow was taking up too much room, became enraged, kicked him out of bed, found he was dead, and added to the horror of the corpse the thought that he had himself killed him. There are no anecdotes or records that I know about the difficulties of women travellers. (What brave man shared a bed with the Wife of Bath? How did the Prioress keep herself to herself?) Some taverns, especially in London, were brothels, and by a natural conjunction also harboured violent criminals. Chaucer on his journeys probably sent a servant on ahead to book accommodation. Are there bugs or fleas, asked the servant? No, said the host, quite untruly, though there are mice and rats (quite true). On entering the inn Chaucer probably bargained with the innkeeper or his wife – have you a room for me and my men? How much do you charge? People, as always, complained about prices, and laws were promulgated to keep them down, with the usual lack of success. Travellers fed in the common eating room, where, if it was a popular place, would be others, eating, drinking, talking, singing, telling stories, gambling, like the 'rioters' in *The Pardoner's Tale*. The Warden and two fellows of Merton College, Oxford, with four servants, travelled from Oxford to Newcastle in winter in 1331. Their bill for one representative day was as follows: Bread, 4d.; Beer, 2d.; Wine, 1½d.; Meat, 5½d.; Soup, ¼d.; Candles, ¼d.; Fuel, 2d.; Beds, 2d.; Fodder for Horses, 10d. Occasionally they added eggs or vegetables for a farthing. These men lived very simply, but in winter fruit, for example, was not available, and no doubt cheese was scarce.

In the morning the traveller had a drink of beer, perhaps with bread, or if indulging himself, had cake and spices soaked in wine, and settled the bill, more or less amicably. It was prudent to ask the way, for there were no signposts. Are there any robbers ahead? (And is the innkeeper in league with them?)

The day's travel would in populated parts, like the way to Canterbury, take people past humble alehouses recognized by a bush above the door and perhaps the alewife standing outside to inveigle passers-by inside, as used to happen in Japan until very recently, and must be a widespread ancient custom. John Skelton (1460?–1529) has an amusing poem about such a woman, Elynour Rummyng: her loathly complexion is nothing clear but ugly to see, droopy and drowsy, scurvy and boozy, comely crinkled, wonderfully wrinkled, etc. She caters for tinkers and tailors, for Kate, Cissy, Sarah, with their legs bare and feet very unsweet, their clothes in tatters, bringing dishes and platters, to fill up with beer. William Langland (1330?–1400?) has a wonderful pub scene in London, with Cissy (again), Wat the warrener (though he is with his wife), Tim the tinker, Hick the hackney man, Clarice of Cock's Lane (the local prostitute), Sir Peter of Priedieu (one of the local clergy), their counterparts still to be seen in much the same places today, though rather better behaved. At such a pub, an 'ale-stake', Chaucer's Pardoner in *The Canterbury Tales* insists on stopping for a drink and a bite of bread before he tells his tale. It is all a curious

'So was hir [their] joly  
whistle wel ywet.' A  
fourteenth-century tavern  
scene