



# HISTORY OF ENGLAND, FALL QUARTER WEEK TEN Geoffrey Chaucer

Institute for the Study of Western Civilization





Geoffrey Chaucer 1343-1400

# Geoffrey Chaucer

1343-1400



Londoner  
Commerce-father, vintner  
Export-Import  
Courtier: Page  
Soldier: off to war  
France as warrior  
Prisoner  
Navy: admin  
Agriculture: Forests -admin  
Architecture  
Law: Inns at Court  
Member of Parliament  
Court Admin  
Chancery  
Shire admin Justice of Peace  
Diplomacy Fr, Sp, Italy  
friend of powerful (John of G)  
husband, father



# Geoffrey Chaucer

1343-1400



## AUTHOR:

1. widest experience of other lit traditions languages  
Eng, Fr, Flemish, Italian, Latin.
2. first writer to view Eng as a whole, a unity, nation.

## NATIONALISM

PATRIOTISM Eng unique not Fr.

3. first writer to use the newly formed English (Anglo-Sax + French+Latin+) in great work of lit.
4. first Eng writer to write about all social classes (Pilgrimage)
5. first writer to write as people spoke-dialects-and low class words: piss, shit, turd.



# YOUTH: 1343-1366

## St Paul's School, Page at Court, Soldier, France

1343 Chaucer Born i London

GC is born to upper-middle class London parents, John and Agnes Copton Chaucer. Schol

1348 BLACK DEATH ALL THROUGH EUROPE

1353 student: Chaucer attended the St. Paul's Cathedral School, where he probably first became acquainted with the writing of Virgil and Ovid.

1357 Becomes a Page: A teenage Chaucer gets a job as a page to the Countess of Ulster.

1359 Joins the Army: Edward III invades France during the Hundred Years' War between France and England. Chaucer fights in the English Army. The teenage Chaucer went off to fight in the Hundred Years' War in France, and at Rethel he was captured for ransom.

|1360 Captured: Chaucer is captured during the Seige of Rheims in northeastern France. He is ransomed for sixteen pounds money from Royal coffers (ED III)



# 1348 The Black Death





## Fourteenth Century Background

1. Universal chronology breaks down into “ages.”
2. Church breaks down into schism and heresy.
3. Empire breaks down, thanks to collapse of Pope-Emperor partnership.
4. Christendom breaks down into “Europe.”
5. Europe breaks down into nation-states.
6. Italy breaks down into communes.
7. France breaks down into the Hundred Years War. (1337)
8. International language of Latin breaks down into vernaculars.
9. Literatures break down into national/vernacular works.
10. Art breaks down into personal point of view (Giotto).
11. Traditional religion of church breaks down into personal piety, personal inspiration, personal secret religious communication, and mysticism.
12. Christian confidence, piety breaks down under burden of Black Death.
13. Philosophy breaks down into subjectivism, intuition (Ockham).
14. Social cohesion, labor cooperation, entrepreneurial/labor unity breaks down under the impact of Black Death. End of “happy” family manor, beginning of modern labor, unions vs. owners (example: Ciompi Rebellion in Florence, 1381)
15. Agriculture breaks down under over-extension, famine, drought, and then Black Death; no workers, land values explode, overpopulation.



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## 1366-1373 Marriage, Career, Travels, Italy John of Gaunt

1366 Marriage: Geoffrey Chaucer marries Philippa de Roet, a lady-in-waiting to Queen Philippa of Hainault. Philippa very upper class aristocrat far above Chaucer. They have three children the first of whom - a son named Thomas - is born in 1367.

1367 Spain: Chaucer in Spain arranging diplomatic alliances for John of Gaunt  
Already high at court due to link to John of Gaunt (son of Ed III)

1369 Begins *Book of the Duchess*: an elegy for Blanche of Lancaster that is commissioned by her husband. It is completed by 1374, when her widower John of Gaunt pays Chaucer for the book.

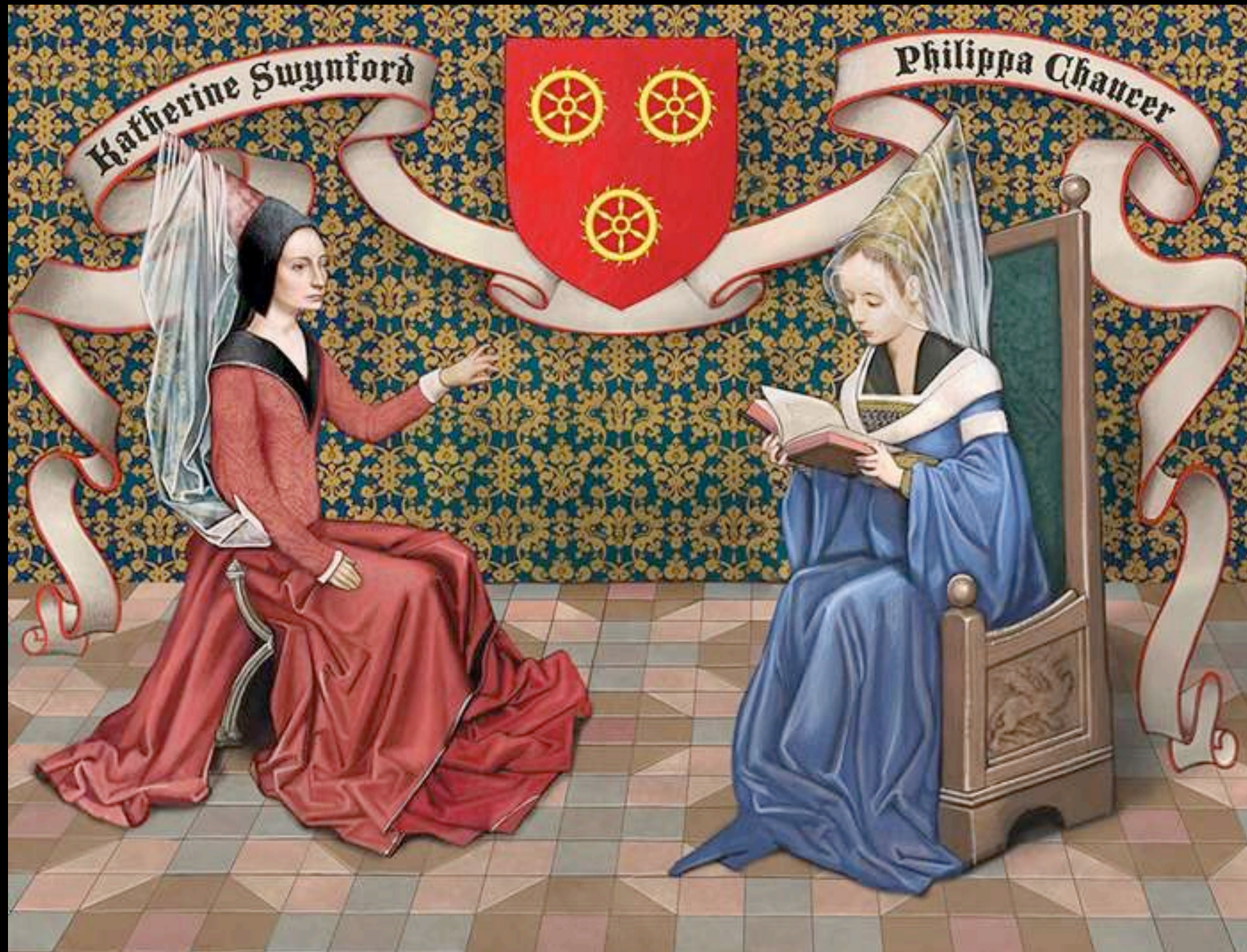
1370 Second Tour of Duty: Chaucer completes his second tour in the English Army, after spending one year fighting in France under John of Gaunt.

1372 after death of Queen Philippa, Alice Perrers becomes Ed III mistress, friend of Chaucer

1373 Travels to Italy: Chaucer visits Genoa and Florence. He reads Italian medieval poetry, an influence on his own creative work and meets Boccaccio in Flo author of *The Decameron*.



# Katherine and Philippa de Roet (1346-1387)



Philippa was the daughter of Sir Gilles de Roet, who was a knight of Hainault and accompanied Queen Philippa to England.<sup>[2]</sup> He later became the Guienne King of Arms. Her father went to serve the queen's sister, Marguerite, who was the empress of Germany and the two younger children – Philippa and Katherine – were left in the care of Queen Philippa.



# Katherine and Philippa de Roet

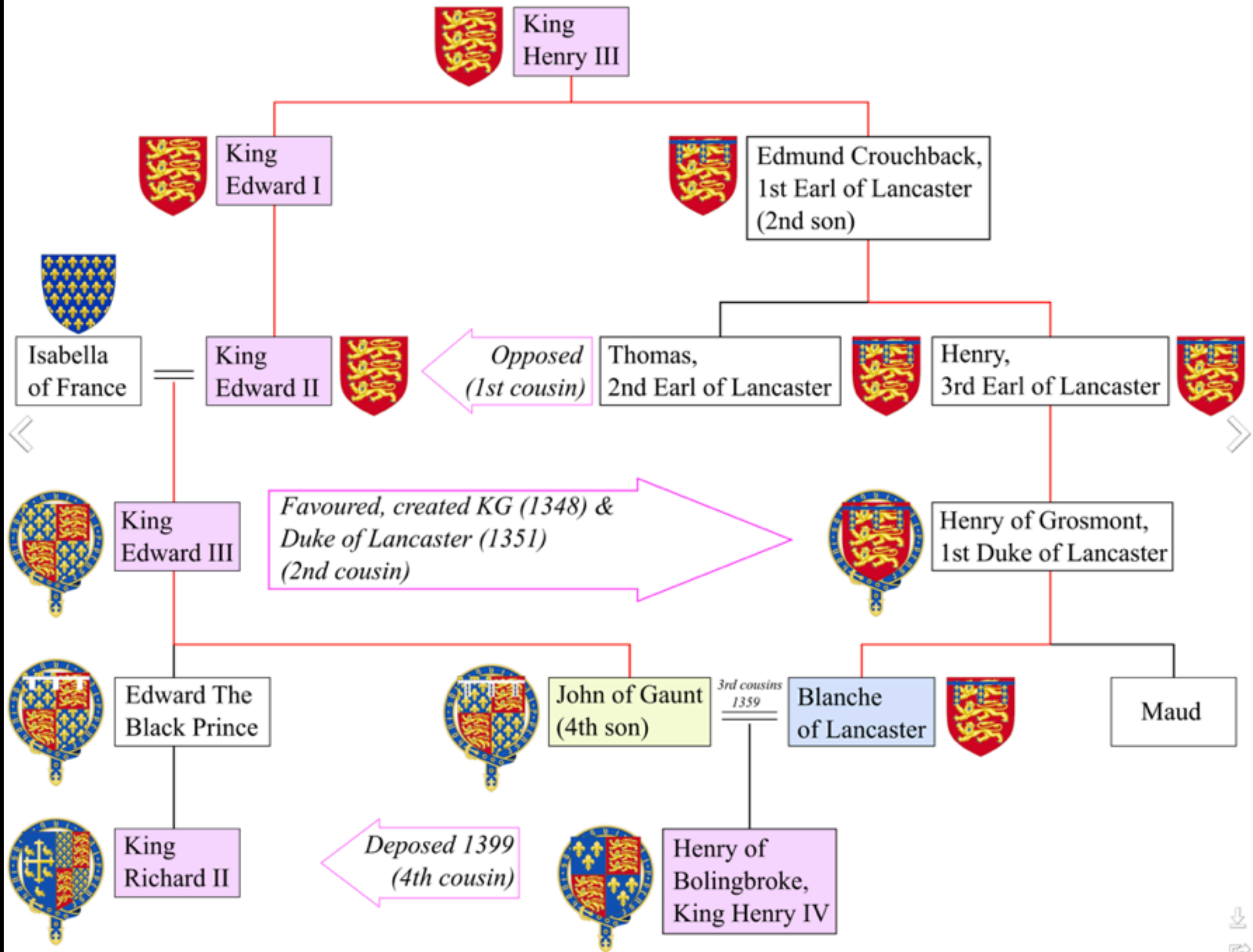


Katherine

ANYA  
SETON



# Descent of John of Gaunt





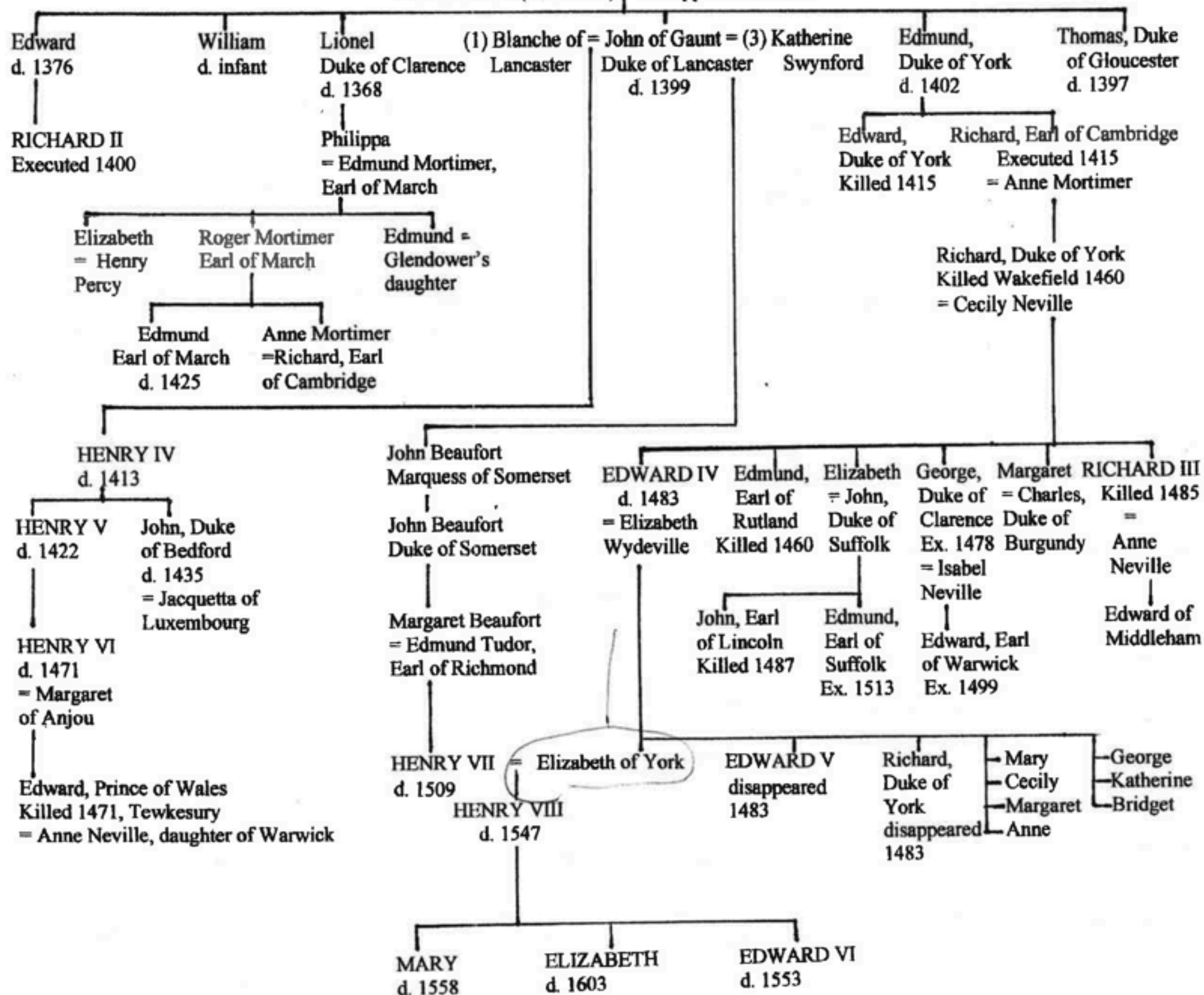


King Edward III  
1312-1377  
King 1327-1377



# LANCASTER, YORK, AND TUDOR CONNECTIONS

EDWARD III (died 1377) = Philippa of Hainault

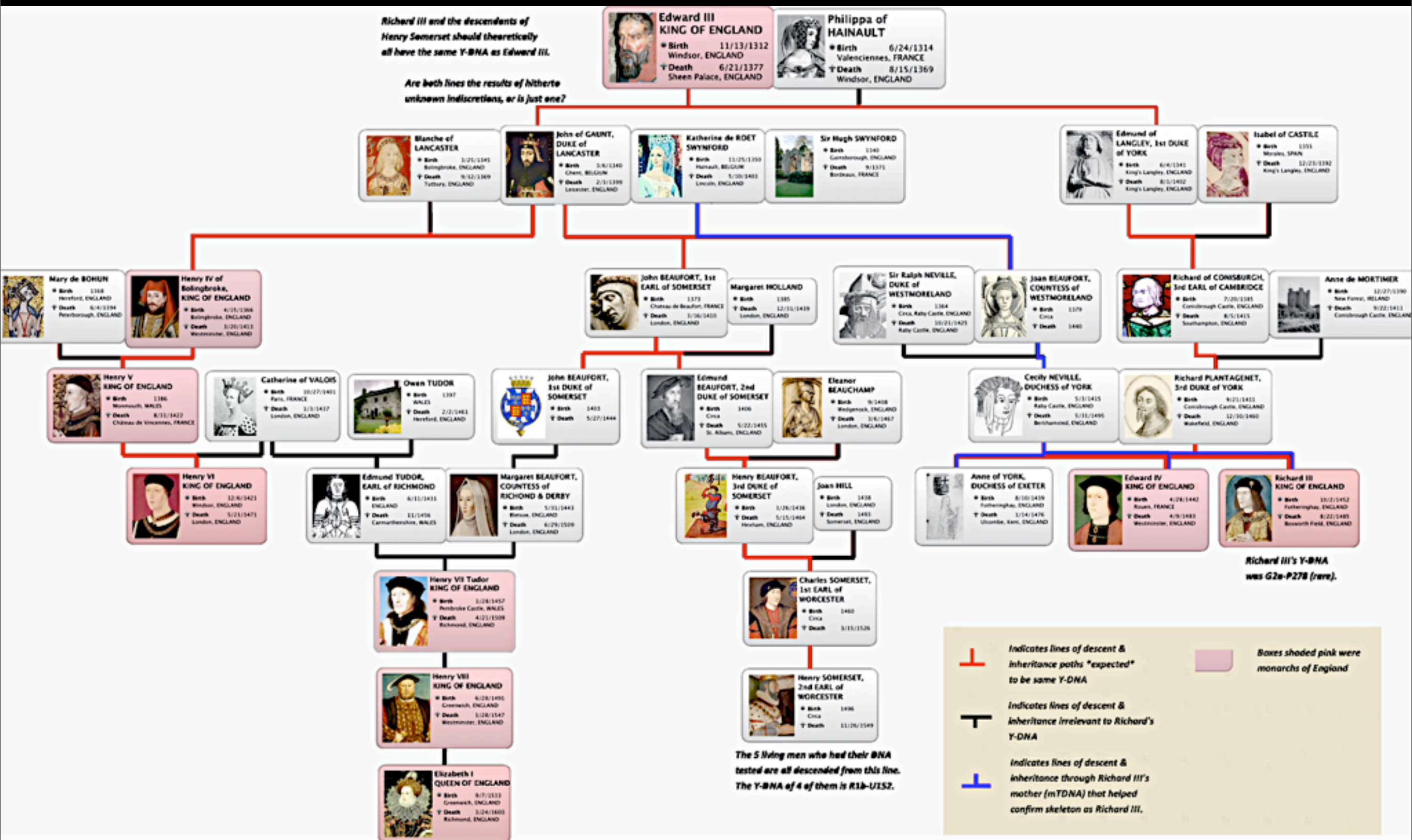


LANCASTER

TUDOR

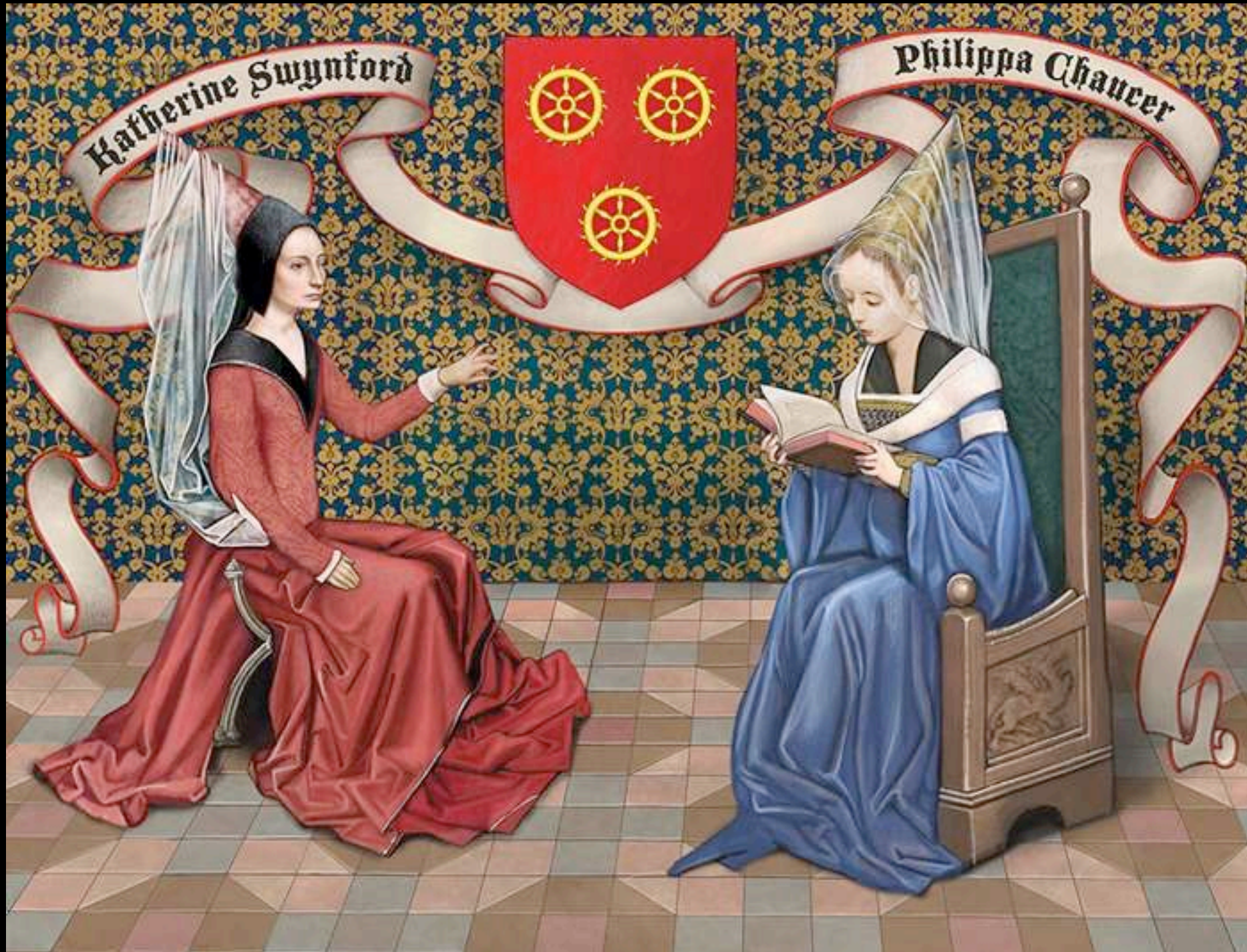
YORK







# Katherine and Philippa de Roet







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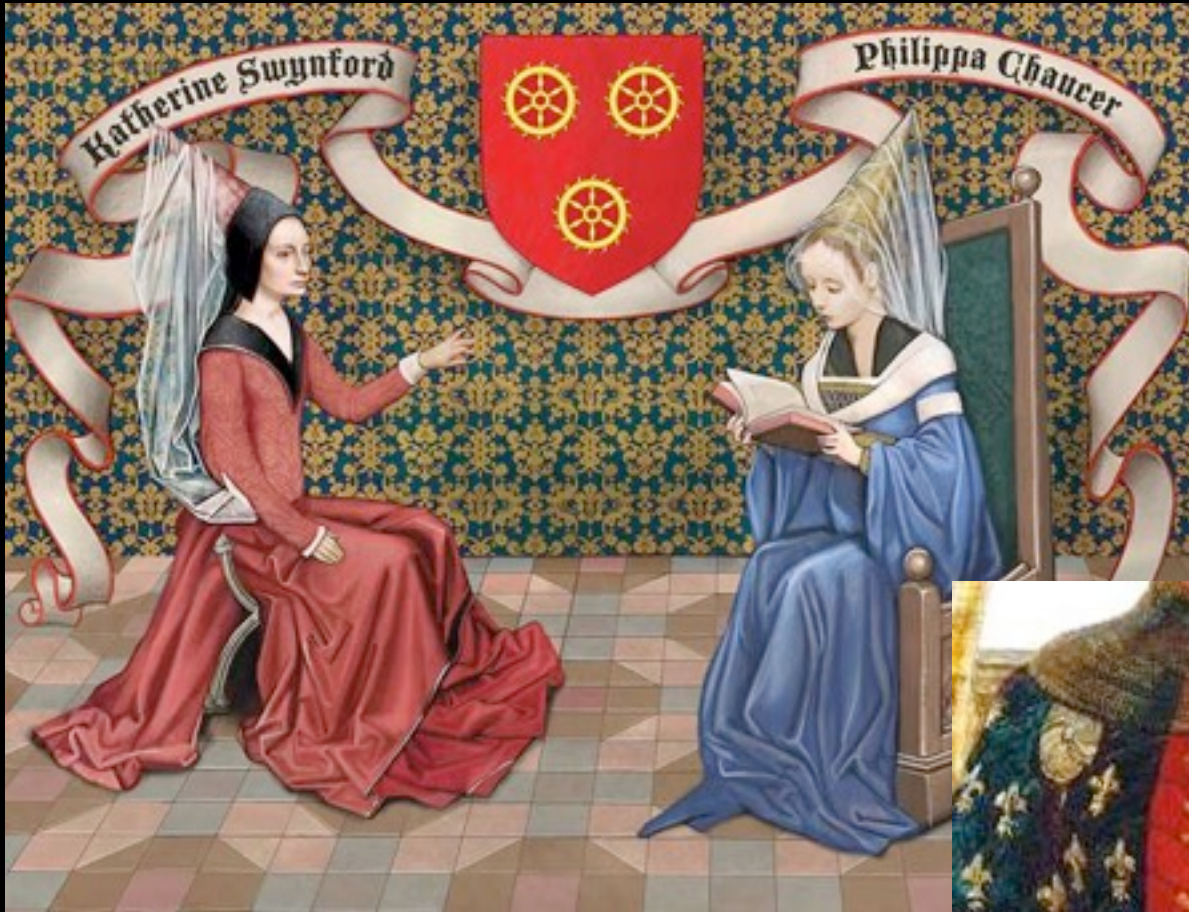
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# 1372 Death of Queen Philippa, King Ed III Desconsolate Alice Perrers enters the royal household.



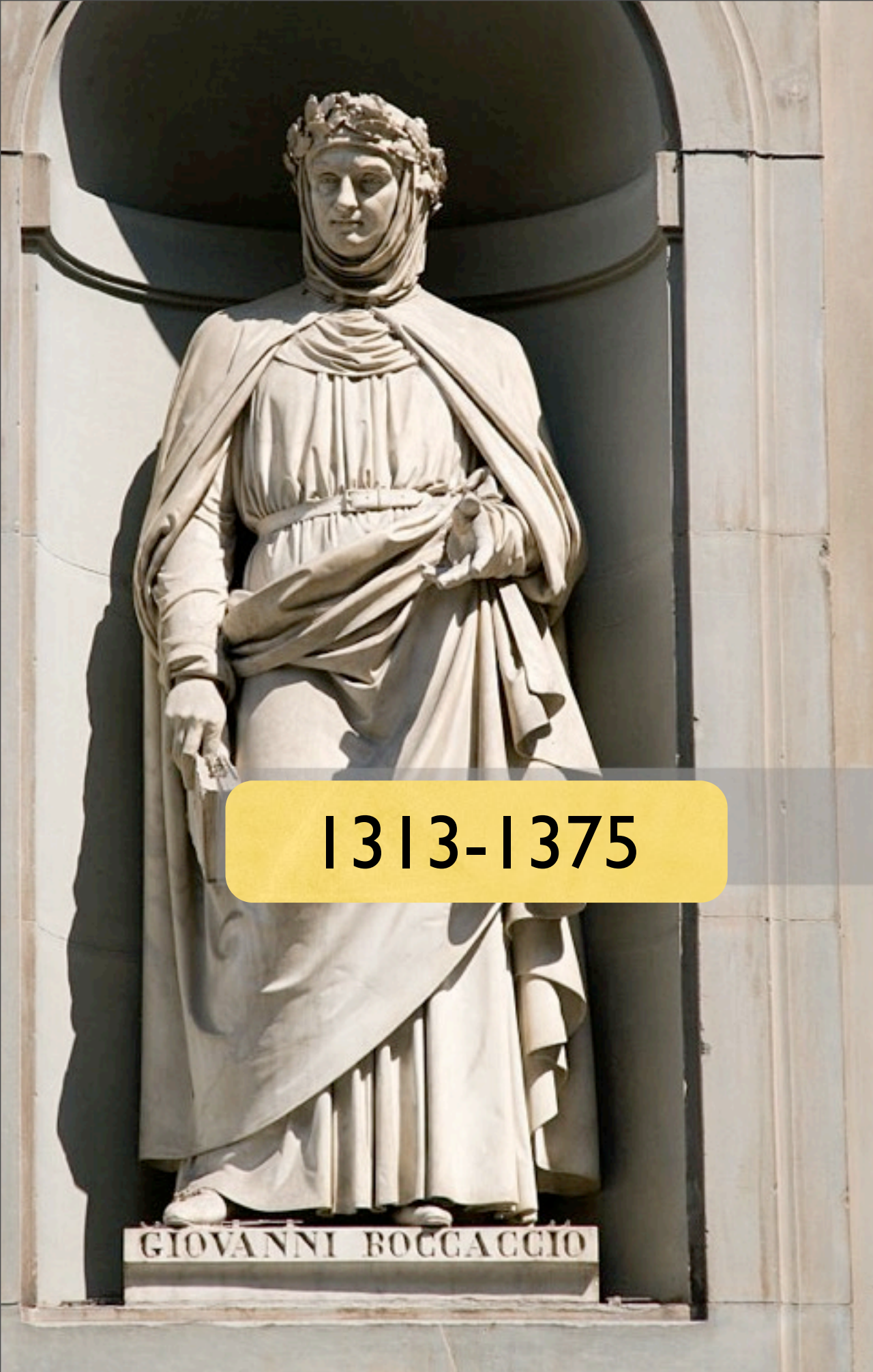
1372-1377





# I 373 TRAVELS IN ITALY, GENOVA, MILAN, PADUA, FLO BOCCACCIO





1313-1375



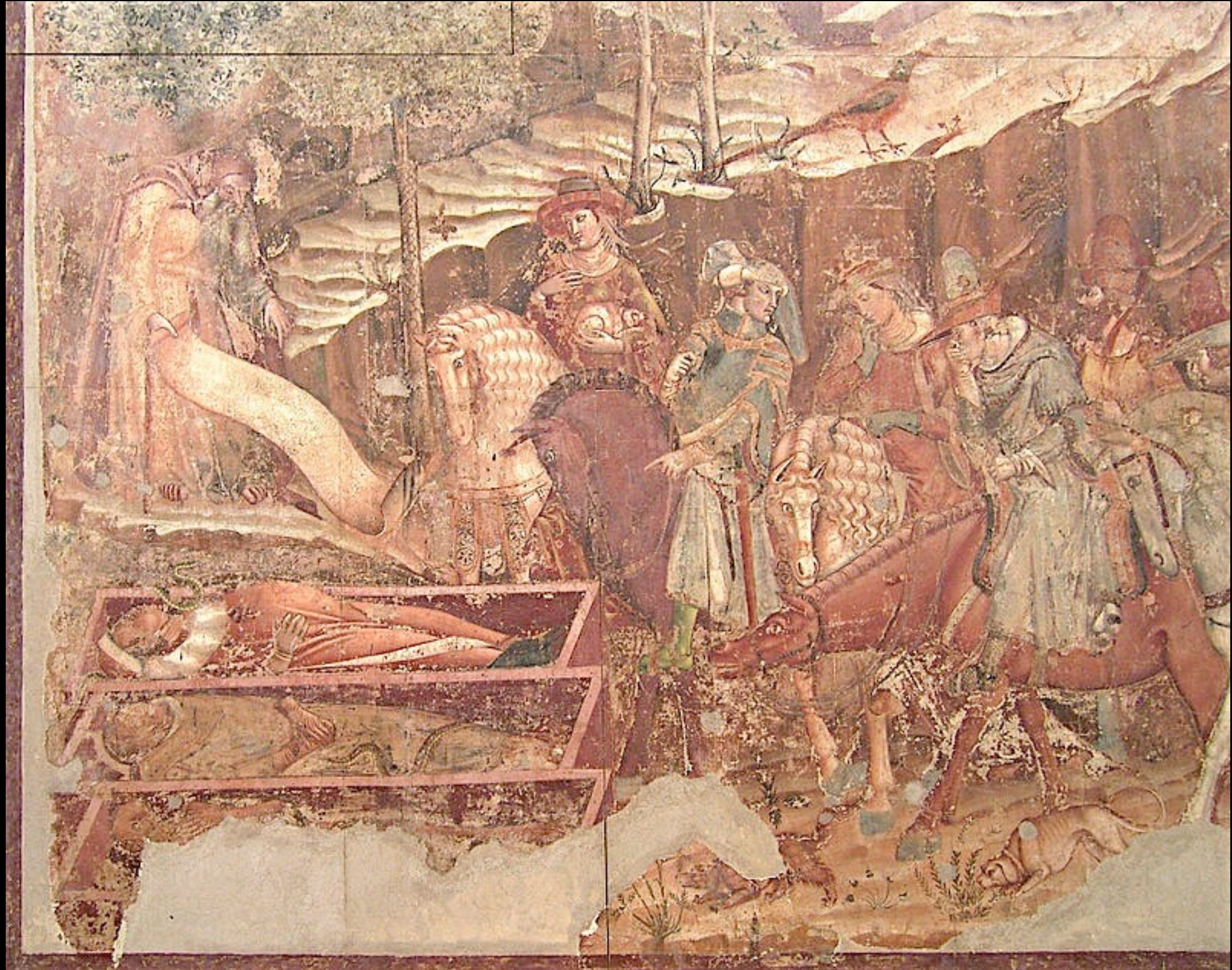




1313 born in Certaldo  
1315 father marries noblewoman  
1315 father successful merchant  
1313-1320 Gio gets very good education in Flo  
1327 father goes Naples for business  
takes Giovanni (big city, big commerce, big world)  
1332 father and son goes Paris, edu, lectures  
1333 Gio writing, reads Petrarch  
1340 writes publishes Filocolo (romance)  
1340 Gio back in Florence, writing  
1347 in Ravenna visits Dante tomb  
1348 back in Flo to witness Black Death  
father dies serving city in crisis  
1350 meets Petrarch in Florence  
1351 begins Decameron (collecting for years)  
1352 Decameron published, immediate hit  
1357 several meetings with Petrarch  
1360s active in Flo politics (like Dante)  
1365 travels to Avignon, Pope, as Flo amb.  
1373 delivers first annual "Lectura Dantis"  
1374 Chaucer meets Boccaccio in Flo  
1373-75 retire to Certaldo  
1375 dies at Certaldo



1348, Black Death the most important experience of his life













teuerent le chief ce sans aucune chose  
dur ilz yrirent micheuaut de mesi  
ne et penserent de eulx esloigner de  
illens. Si sen alerent a naples ou  
la iouuenelle plourant en ceste  
munt et confondra en plourant dema  
dant son pot de basilic moult. Et  
par ainsi son amour malfortunee  
pust fin. Mais apres ce que la chose  
fut sene par maintes homes de me  
sine. vng clerc dillens copola vne  
chancon qui en cestui pays est en  
res chantee en tel refrain. apantant  
cristian fut celui qui mou basilic  
cubla.

Et apres seurent la somme de la xxx  
vi. nouuelle compree p pamphile sur  
la ius iournee done filostre est roy.

**U**ne noble iouuenelle natie  
de brece vne ate de lombardi  
e ama vng iouuenel ap  
pelle gabriot. Elle noimee anduole  
incompt a son auu vng songe fut  
par elle. et u a elle en incompt vng  
aular. Gabriot soubdenement mou  
nit entre les bras de lanne anduo  
le. Tandis que elle et vne sienne ser  
uente portoit a l'ostel le corps de ga  
briot mort elles furent punies par  
muet des seigneurs du preuost. Ando  
le qui confessa la verite au preuost  
il vout par force congnoistre la iou  
uenele qui pas ne souffra la chose.  
le pere de la femme ouy compter le ar  
et delum la fille trouuee inuente.  
et elle qui du tout refusa estre ou  
monde vout vure en habit de  
souda ngle des nonnains.

Et apres seurent la continuatio

de la xxxv. a la xxxvi. nouelle compree  
par pamphile sur la ius iournee done  
filostre est roy.

**L**a nouuelle compree par fi  
loine fut tresagrabie  
aux dames. car maintes  
son elles auoient ouy la chancon  
dont le refrain est a desus estape. et  
onques en demendand elles n'auoi  
ent pu sauoir pour quele cause la  
chancon eust este fin. Mais si tost que  
la xxxv. nouelle fut finie le roy m  
posa a pamphile qui suust loy die.  
pamphile a donc dist le songe m  
te en la desuolue nouelle un don  
ne matiere de reuer vne nouelle en  
la quele est fin mention de deux songes  
qui presiguoient aucunes choses  
futures soubz apparence de choses in  
passees. les deux amas qui en ceste  
nouelle copree leurs visions il a  
primes oient enuierment reuer lo  
deux songes qu'ilz enprent veur la  
rite a complie. pour tant vous dire  
amouneles deus saoir q'en coule  
mes et seines est vne generale passi  
on de veoir diuerses choses endormis  
et combien que a ceite qui dorment  
toutes leurs visions ou songes sem  
blent a eulx estre tres veritables. et  
quant ilz sont eueilles ilz mgnit  
aucuns songes vray. et aucuns  
vraissemblables et en pnt hors de  
toute frice. Toutefois leu auoit  
maintes songes auoir este vray par  
quoy aucuns a diuident aux son  
ges ainsi grande soy come ilz feroient  
aux choses que ilz verroient en real  
land. Et tant que pour leurs songes  
ilz se treublent et esgouissent selon  
que par ces songes ilz ont prouue

estant. Et au contraire aduent que  
aucuns homes ne auoient q'a aucuns  
songe soit vray nulques a ce quilz voient  
eulx estre ches es perils y auant vent  
en demend le ne approuue ne les vis  
neles autars qui ainsi auoient aux so  
ges. car consours ne sont vray. et  
moult ne sont faulx. Et l'au de  
nous a peu par soy congnoistre que so  
ges ne soient pas tous loys vray. et q  
deus est moult q songes ne soient  
pas tous loys faulx en la xxxv. nouelle  
le compree par filostre. et come il p  
auant ay dit. Je l'entens moult en  
estre meue. xxxvi. nouelle par quoy  
seu selon vout deute vure ne doit po

songe delaisser a faire les biens y l'un  
propre. ne faire aussi choses peruer  
les ne mauuaises combien que les so  
ges semblent estre fauorables a bien  
ou a mal faire. et quilz semblent con  
forter par aucuns argumens a nul  
desquels len ne doit croire. Et ainsi  
par opposer bonne chose nest que ad  
iouter soy a tous songes. Mais lail  
sons a tant des songes et venons a  
compre de nostre xxxvi. nouelle.

Et apres seurent au long le com  
pte de la xxxvi. nouelle compree p  
pamphile sur la quatrieme iournee  
done filostre est roy.



**E**n brece vne ate de lombard  
die fut aulterfoi vng no  
ble seime appelle sire noir  
de tout ceintur qui entre les

autres enfans auoit vne fille nom  
mee anduole mene et asse. telle et a  
donc non manee. Anduole sen amon  
m d'un lieu tolu appelle gabriot ion

Decameron Vaticano, 14th Century illustrated Ms.



# Early illustrated Manuscript of Decameron

MS. Holkham misc. 49, fol. 5r

© Bodleian Library, University of Oxford











Decameron  
Florence  
1352  
Earliest printed edition,  
Venice, 1492



# World of the Stories: NEW WORLD OF THE MERCHANT

## Italy

new men

goodbye to chivalry

real people

people from all classes all stations(vs queens)

lower classes present too for first time in lit

not just sweet world of French courtier

now Egypt, Tunisia, Cyprus etc.

the world of tough commerce

tough bankers

tough lawyers

every real day experience

vivid presentation of sex

(vs sweet euphemisms of courtly love)

travel

sex-lots of it.

## LANGUAGE

earthy,

direct,

vernacular,

rough,

language of the people,

none of the rhetorical phoniness,

talk of rough bodily functions,

shit and fucking.

## ITALY

here we see the new world of new commercial cities of Italy: Flo / Genoa / Pisa

Decameron registers the new world of triumphant Italy coming in the 15thC

when the Renaissance will make Italy the cultural center of the world xt



# The Decameron is Modern

Boccaccio one of first people to use the word "modern."

In doing so he alerts us to the beginning of something new in his age.

He and Petrarch are living in new age when all the verities of the age of Dante are up for discussion.

Black Death changed everything.....turned everything upside down.

Thus the Decameron is a work for the modern age.

It anticipates the **Modern Condition** which is insecurity, relativity, every man his own philosopher every man his own theologian.

In the Modern Age we all have to **CONSTRUCT our own reality our own values**. That is the Modern dilemma.....to feel alone in the world without security..without foundation.

The Decameron in its brilliant structure introduces us to that condition with a great technique....the structure forces us into the condition of ambiguity as readers and thus we **EXPERIENCE** the modern condition in reading the book.







# 1374- Royal Office, 1377 Death of King Ed III 1387 Death of Philippa

1374 Becomes Comptroller: C. appointed to the lucrative job of Comptroller of Customs for the Port of London. In twelve years while he holds this position, he writes most of his poetry.

1375 Anelida and Arcite: C/ begins work on the poem Anelida and Arcite. Like most of Chaucer's works, it's impossible to know the exact date at which the poem was written. ? 1370s.

1377 King Edward III dies. His grandson Richard II takes the throne. He is the nephew of Chaucer's political patron, John of Gaunt, which is good news for Chaucer's career.

1379 The House of Fame: C. begins *The House of Fame*, a poem with 2,000-plus lines. It describes a vision he received in a dream, and is completed the following year.

1382 Troilus and Criseyde, Parlement of Foule: Chaucer composes the 700-line poem Parlement of Foules (also spelled Fowles). Chaucer also begins work on the epic poem Troilus and Criseyde. Scholars believe Troilus and Criseyde was composed between 1382 and 1388.

1385 Justice of the Peace: Chaucer takes a four-year position as a Justice of the Peace in Kent,

1386 elected to Parliament, Chaucer resigns as Comptroller and becomes a Member of Parliament, representing Kent. He also begins work on *The Legend of Good Women*.

1387 Philippa, wife dies. The causes (and exact date) unknown.





King Richard II

1367-1400

King in 1377 age 10

His Uncle John of Gaunt  
dominates the early years  
(His father Edward the Black Prince  
had died of malaria 1376)

1381 The Peasants Revolt

1396 John of Gaunt marries Katherine





In 1397, Richard took his revenge on the lords who had opposed him, many of whom were executed or exiled. The next two years have been described by historians as Richard's "tyranny". In 1399, after John of Gaunt died, the king disinherited Gaunt's son, Henry of Bolingbroke, who had previously been exiled. Henry invaded England in June 1399 with a small force that quickly grew in numbers. Meeting little resistance, Bolingbroke deposed Richard and had himself crowned king: King Henry IV.



# 1387-1400

1387 Philippa, wife dies. The causes (and exact date) unknown.

1388 Begins Canterbury Tales: Chaucer begins work on his masterpiece, *The Canterbury Tales*. The collection of stories about religious pilgrims is written over a period of ten years, between the late 1380s and the late 1390s.

1389 Receives Royal Appointment: Chaucer is appointed Clerk of the King's Works, a job akin to chief overseer for all royal building projects. In this capacity, he oversees jobs at the Tower of London, Westminster Palace, Windsor Castle, and St. George's Chapel.

1391 Changes Jobs: Chaucer leaves the King's Works job and begins working as a Deputy Forester in the royal forest of North Petherton.

1398 Completes Canterbury Tales end of the 1390s approaches,

Oct 25, 1400 Chaucer Dies

Geoffrey Chaucer dies of unknown causes.

1556 Tomb Moved

Chaucer's remains are moved to a more elaborate tomb in a different part of Westminster Abbey. He is the first resident of what is now called Poet's Corner, a section of the abbey reserved for writers.





# The Canterbury Tales 1400



**GEOFFREY CHAUCER**  
*The Canterbury Tales*







The frame story of the poem, as set out in the 858 lines of Middle English which make up the General Prologue, is of a religious pilgrimage. The narrator, Geoffrey Chaucer, is in The Tabard Inn in Southwark, where he meets a group of "sundry folk" who are all on the way to Canterbury, the site of the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket, a martyr reputed to have the power of healing the sinful. The setting is April, and the prologue starts by singing the praises of that month whose rains and warm western wind restore life and fertility to the earth and its inhabitants. This abundance of life, the narrator says, prompts people to go on pilgrimages; in England, the goal of such pilgrimages is the shrine of Thomas Becket. The narrator falls in with a group of pilgrims, and the largest part of the prologue is taken up by a description of them; Chaucer seeks to describe their 'condition', their 'array', and their social 'degree.' According to The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Volume 1, "The narrator, in fact, seems to be expressing chiefly admiration and praise at the superlative skills and accomplishments of this particular group, even such dubious ones as the Friar's begging techniques or the Manciple's success in cheating the learned lawyers who employ him". Chaucer points out the virtues and vices of each of the pilgrims as described within the work.





The pilgrims include a knight, his son a squire, the knight's yeoman, a prioress accompanied by a second nun and the nun's priest, a monk, a friar, a merchant, a clerk, a sergeant of law,, a haberdasher, a carpenter, a weaver, a dyer, a tapestry weaver, a cook, a shipman, a doctor of physic, a wife of Bath, a parson, his brother a plowman, a miller, a manciple, a reeve, a summoner, a pardoner, the Host (a man called Harry Bailey), and a portrait of Chaucer himself. At the end of the section, the host proposes that the group ride together and entertain one another with stories. He lays out his plan: each pilgrim will tell two stories on the way to Canterbury and two on the way back. Whoever has told the most meaningful and comforting stories, with "the best sentence and moost solaas" (line 798) will receive a free meal paid for by the rest of the pilgrims upon their return. The company agrees and makes the host its governor, judge, and record keeper. They set off the next morning and draw lots to determine who will tell the first tale. The Knight wins and prepares to tell his tale.<sup>1</sup>



1     **Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote**  
       *When April with its sweet-smelling showers*  
 2     **The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,**  
       *Has pierced the drought of March to the root,*  
 3     **And bathed every veyne in swich licour**  
       *And bathed every vein (of the plants) in such liquid*  
 4     **Of which vertu engendred is the flour;**  
       *By the power of which the flower is created;*  
 5     **Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth**  
       *When the West Wind also with its sweet breath,*  
 6     **Inspired hath in every holt and heeth**  
       *In every holt and heath, has breathed life into*  
 7     **The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne**  
       *The tender crops, and the young sun*  
 8     **Hath in the Ram his half cours yronne,**  
       *Has run its half course in Aries,*  
 9     **And smale foweles maken melodye,**  
       *And small fowls make melody,*  
 10    **That slepen al the nyght with open ye**  
       *Those that sleep all the night with open eyes*  
 11    **(So priketh hem Nature in hir corages),**  
       *(So Nature incites them in their hearts),*  
 12    **Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,**  
       *Then folk long to go on pilgrimages,*  
 13    **And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,**  
       *And professional pilgrims (long) to seek foreign shores,*  
 14    **To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;**  
       *To (go to) distant shrines, known in various lands;*  
 15    **And specially from every shires ende**  
       *And specially from every shire's end*  
 16    **Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende,**  
       *Of England to Canterbury they travel,*  
 17    **The hooly blisful martir for to seke,**  
       *To seek the holy blessed martyr,*  
 18    **That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke.**  
       *Who helped them when they were sick.*



# Prologue

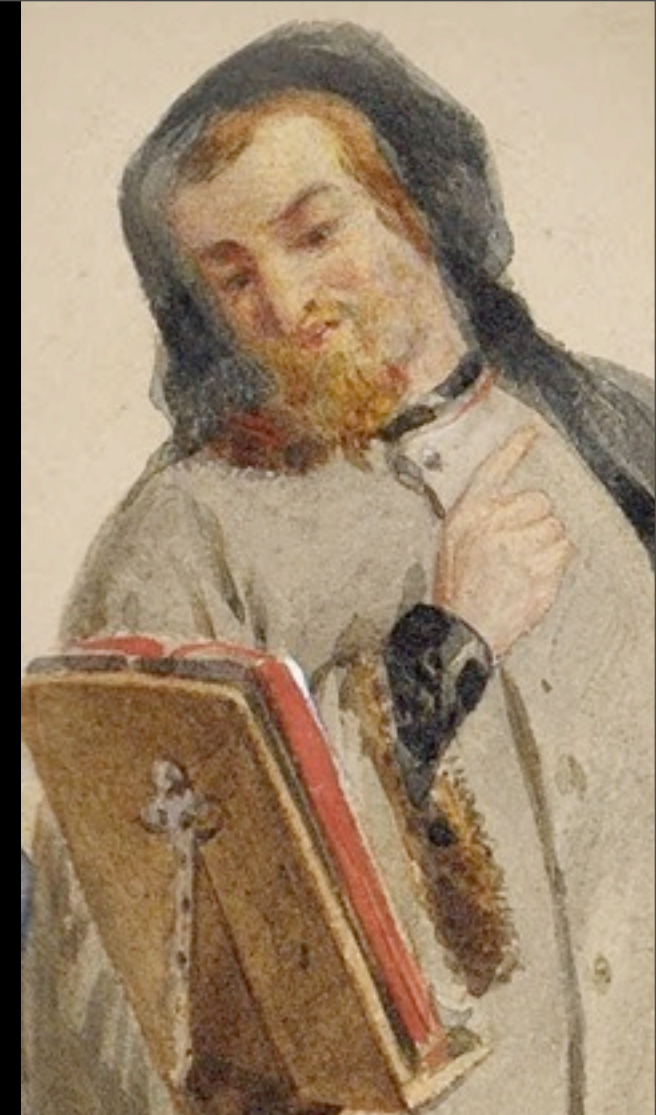
As soon as April pierces to the root  
The drought of March, and bathes each bud and shoot  
Through every vein of sap with gentle showers  
From whose engendering liquor spring the flowers;  
When zephyrs have breathed softly all about  
Inspiring every wood and field to sprout,  
And in the zodiac the youthful sun  
His journey halfway through the Ram has run;  
When little birds are busy with their song  
Who sleep with open eyes the whole night long  
Life stirs their hearts and tingles in them so,  
On pilgrimages people long to go  
And palmers to set out for distant strands  
And foreign shrines renowned in many lands.  
And specially in England people ride  
To Canterbury from every countyside  
To visit there the blessed martyred saint  
Who gave them strength when they were sick and faint.

    In Southwark at the Tabard one spring day  
It happened, as I stopped there on my way,  
Myself a pilgrim with a heart devout  
Ready for Canterbury to set out,  
At night came all of twenty-nine assorted  
Travelers, and to that same inn resorted,  
Who by a turn of fortune chanced to fall  
In fellowship together, and they were all  
Pilgrims who had it in their minds to ride  
Toward Canterbury. The stable doors were wide,  
The rooms were large, and we enjoyed the best,





# The Canterbury Tales 1400



GEOFFREY CHAUCER  
*The Canterbury Tales*





# The Wife of Bath's Prologue

## *The Prologe of the Wyves Tale of Bathe*

- 1     **"Experience, though noon auctoritee**  
      "Experience, though no written authority
- 2     **Were in this world, is right ynogh for me**  
      Were in this world, is good enough for me
- 3     **To speke of wo that is in mariage;**  
      To speak of the woe that is in marriage;
- 4     **For, lordynges, sith I twelve yeer was of age,**  
      For, gentlemen, since I was twelve years of age,
- 5     **Thonked be God that is eterne on lyve,**  
      Thanked be God who is eternally alive,
- 6     **Housbondes at chirche dore I have had fyve --**  
      I have had five husbands at the church door --
- 7     **If I so ofte myghte have ywedded bee --**  
      If I so often might have been wedded --



5 **Thonked be God that is eterne on lyve,**  
Thanked be God who is eternally alive,

6 **Housbondes at chirche dore I have had fyve --**  
I have had five husbands at the church door --

7 **If I so ofte myghte have ywedded bee --**  
If I so often might have been wedded --

8 **And alle were worthy men in hir degree.**  
And all were worthy men in their way.

9 **But me was toold, certeyn, nat longe agoon is,**  
But to me it was told, certainly, it is not long ago,

10 **That sith that Crist ne wente nevere but onis**  
That since Christ went never but once

11 **To weddyng, in the Cane of Galilee,**  
To a wedding, in the Cana of Galilee,

12 **That by the same ensample taughte he me**  
That by that same example he taught me

13 **That I ne sholde wedded be but ones.**  
That I should be wedded but once.

14 **Herkne eek, lo, which a sharp word for the nones,**  
Listen also, lo, what a sharp word for this purpose,

15 **Biside a welle, Jhesus, God and man,**  
Beside a well, Jesus, God and man,



from **The Wife of Bath's Prologue**

The Pardoner started up, and thereupon  
"Madam," he said, "by God and by St. John,  
That's noble preaching no one could surpass!  
I was about to take a wife; alas!

5 Am I to buy it on my flesh so dear?  
There'll be no marrying for me this year!"



"You wait," she said, "my story's not begun.  
You'll taste another brew before I've done;  
You'll find it doesn't taste as good as ale;  
10 And when I've finished telling you my tale  
Of tribulation in the married life  
In which I've been an expert as a wife,  
That is to say, myself have been the whip.  
So please yourself whether you want to sip  
15 At that same cask of marriage I shall broach.  
Be cautious before making the approach,  
For I'll give instances, and more than ten.  
And those who won't be warned by other men,  
By other men shall suffer their correction,  
20 So Ptolemy has said, in this connection.  
You read his *Almagest*; you'll find it there."



"Madam, I put it to you as a prayer,"  
The Pardoner said, "go on as you began!  
Tell us your tale, spare not for any man.  
25 Instruct us younger men in your technique."  
"Gladly," she said, "if you will let me speak,  
But still I hope the company won't reprove me  
Though I should speak as fantasy may move me,  
And please don't be offended at my views;  
30 They're really only offered to amuse. . . ."



The Wife of Bath

**3 noble preaching:** In the passage preceding this excerpt, the Wife of Bath has spoken at length about her view of marriage.

**15 cask:** barrel; **broach:** tap into.

**20 Ptolemy** (tŏl'ə-mē): a famous astronomer of the second century A.D. The *Almagest*, his most famous work, does not, however, contain the proverb cited in lines 18–19.





# The Wife of Bath's Tale

When good King Arthur ruled in ancient days  
(A king that every Briton loves to praise)  
This was a land brim-full of fairy folk.  
The Elf-Queen and her courtiers joined and broke  
35 Their elfin dance on many a green mead,  
Or so was the opinion once, I read,  
Hundreds of years ago, in days of yore.  
But no one now sees fairies any more.  
For now the saintly charity and prayer  
40 Of holy friars seem to have purged the air;  
They search the countryside through field and stream  
As thick as motes that speckle a sun-beam,  
Blessing the halls, the chambers, kitchens, bowers,  
Cities and boroughs, castles, courts and towers,  
45 Thorpes, barns and stables, outhouses and dairies,  
And that's the reason why there are no fairies.  
Wherever there was wont to walk an elf  
To-day there walks the holy friar himself  
As evening falls or when the daylight springs,  
50 Saying his matins and his holy things,  
Walking his limit round from town to town.  
Women can now go safely up and down  
By every bush or under every tree;  
There is no other incubus but he,  
55 So there is really no one else to hurt you  
And he will do no more than take your virtue.



Now it so happened, I began to say,  
Long, long ago in good King Arthur's day,  
There was a knight who was a lusty liver.  
60 One day as he came riding from the river  
He saw a maiden walking all forlorn  
Ahead of him, alone as she was born.  
And of that maiden, spite of all she said,  
By very force he took her maidenhead.



65 This act of violence made such a stir,  
So much petitioning to the king for her,  
That he condemned the knight to lose his head  
By course of law. He was as good as dead

35 mead: meadow.

42 motes: specks of dust.

43 bowers: bedrooms.

45 thorpes: villages; outhouses: sheds.

47 wherever . . . elf: wherever an elf was accustomed to walk.

51 limit: the area to which a friar was restricted in his begging for donations.

54 incubus (in'kyə-bəs): an evil spirit believed to descend on women while they sleep.

39-56 What seems to be the Wife of Bath's attitude toward friars?

61 forlorn: sad and lonely.

63-64 of that maiden . . .  
maidenhead: in spite of the maiden's protests, he robbed her of her virtue.



(It seems that then the statutes took that view)

70 But that the queen, and other ladies too,  
Implored the king to exercise his grace  
So ceaselessly, he gave the queen the case  
And granted her his life, and she could choose  
Whether to show him mercy or refuse.



75 The queen returned him thanks with all her might,  
And then she sent a summons to the knight  
At her convenience, and expressed her will:  
"You stand, for such is the position still,  
In no way certain of your life," said she,  
80 "Yet you shall live if you can answer me:  
What is the thing that women most desire?  
Beware the axe and say as I require.



"If you can't answer on the moment, though,  
I will concede you this: you are to go  
85 A twelvemonth and a day to seek and learn  
Sufficient answer, then you shall return.  
I shall take gages from you to extort  
Surrender of your body to the court."



Sad was the knight and sorrowfully sighed,  
90 But there! All other choices were denied,  
And in the end he chose to go away  
And to return after a year and day  
Armed with such answer as there might be sent  
To him by God. He took his leave and went.



95 He knocked at every house, searched every place,  
Yes, anywhere that offered hope of grace.  
What could it be that women wanted most?  
But all the same he never touched a coast,  
Country or town in which there seemed to be  
100 Any two people willing to agree.



Some said that women wanted wealth and treasure,  
"Honor," said some, some "Jollity and pleasure,"

71 **grace:** mercy; clemency.

65–74 What punishment do the king and the law demand? To whom does the king grant the final judgment?

87 **gages:** pledges.



Some "Gorgeous clothes" and others "Fun in bed,"  
 "To be oft widowed and remarried," said  
 105 Others again, and some that what most mattered  
 Was that we should be cosseted and flattered.  
 That's very near the truth, it seems to me;  
 A man can win us best with flattery.  
 To dance attendance on us, make a fuss,  
 110 Ensnares us all, the best and worst of us.



Some say the things we most desire are these:  
 Freedom to do exactly as we please,  
 With no one to reprove our faults and lies,  
 Rather to have one call us good and wise.  
 115 Truly there's not a woman in ten score  
 Who has a fault, and someone rubs the sore,  
 But she will kick if what he says is true;  
 You try it out and you will find so too.  
 However vicious we may be within  
 120 We like to be thought wise and void of sin.  
 Others assert we women find it sweet  
 When we are thought dependable, discreet  
 And secret, firm of purpose and controlled,  
 Never betraying things that we are told.  
 125 But that's not worth the handle of a rake;  
 Women conceal a thing? For Heaven's sake!  
 Remember Midas? Will you hear the tale?



Among some other little things, now stale,  
 Ovid relates that under his long hair  
 130 The unhappy Midas grew a splendid pair  
 Of ass's ears; as subtly as he might,  
 He kept his foul deformity from sight;  
 Save for his wife, there was not one that knew.  
 He loved her best, and trusted in her too.  
 135 He begged her not to tell a living creature  
 That he possessed so horrible a feature.  
 And she—she swore, were all the world to win,  
 She would not do such villainy and sin  
 As saddle her husband with so foul a name;  
 140 Besides to speak would be to share the shame.  
 Nevertheless she thought she would have died  
 Keeping this secret bottled up inside;

115 ten score: 200.

117 but she will: who will not.

120 void of sin: sinless.

127 Midas: a legendary king of Phrygia in Asia Minor.

129 Ovid (ŏv'ĭd): an ancient Roman poet whose *Metamorphoses* is a storehouse of Greek and Roman legends. According to Ovid, it was a barber, not Midas's wife, who told the secret of his donkey's ears.

133 save: except.



It seemed to swell her heart and she, no doubt,  
Thought it was on the point of bursting out.



145 Fearing to speak of it to woman or man,  
Down to a reedy marsh she quickly ran  
And reached the sedge. Her heart was all on fire  
And, as a bittern bumbles in the mire,  
She whispered to the water, near the ground,  
150 "Betray me not, O water, with thy sound!  
To thee alone I tell it: it appears  
My husband has a pair of ass's ears!  
Ah! My heart's well again, the secret's out!  
I could no longer keep it, not a doubt."  
155 And so you see, although we may hold fast  
A little while, it must come out at last,  
We can't keep secrets; as for Midas, well,  
Read Ovid for his story; he will tell.



This knight that I am telling you about  
160 Perceived at last he never would find out  
What it could be that women loved the best.  
Faint was the soul within his sorrowful breast,  
As home he went, he dared no longer stay;  
His year was up and now it was the day.



165 As he rode home in a dejected mood  
Suddenly, at the margin of a wood,  
He saw a dance upon the leafy floor  
Of four and twenty ladies, nay, and more.  
Eagerly he approached, in hope to learn  
170 Some words of wisdom ere he should return;  
But lo! Before he came to where they were,  
Dancers and dance all vanished into air!  
There wasn't a living creature to be seen  
Save one old woman crouched upon the green.  
175 A fouler-looking creature I suppose  
Could scarcely be imagined. She arose  
And said, "Sir knight, there's no way on from here.  
Tell me what you are looking for, my dear,  
For peradventure that were best for you;  
180 We old, old women know a thing or two."

147 sedge: marsh grasses.

148 bumbles in the mire: booms in the swamp. (The bittern, a wading bird, is famous for its loud call.)  
What does this comparison suggest about the queen's whisper?



Sir Gawain, from an illuminated manuscript

179 peradventure: perhaps.















