

Geoffrey Chaucer

ca.1340-1400

G. Chaucer

- Second only to Shakespeare as England's greatest poets.
- Served with the English army in France, and was sent on various diplomatic missions for Richard III (including a long period in Italy in 1373).
- His career starts with the imitation and re-elaboration of French models, but his most original contribution comes from his encounter with Italian culture.

Italian influence: *The House of Fame* (1378-80)

Written after a journey to Italy.

From Dante: the poem as a vision (dream poem) and the idea that good poetry could use vernacular.

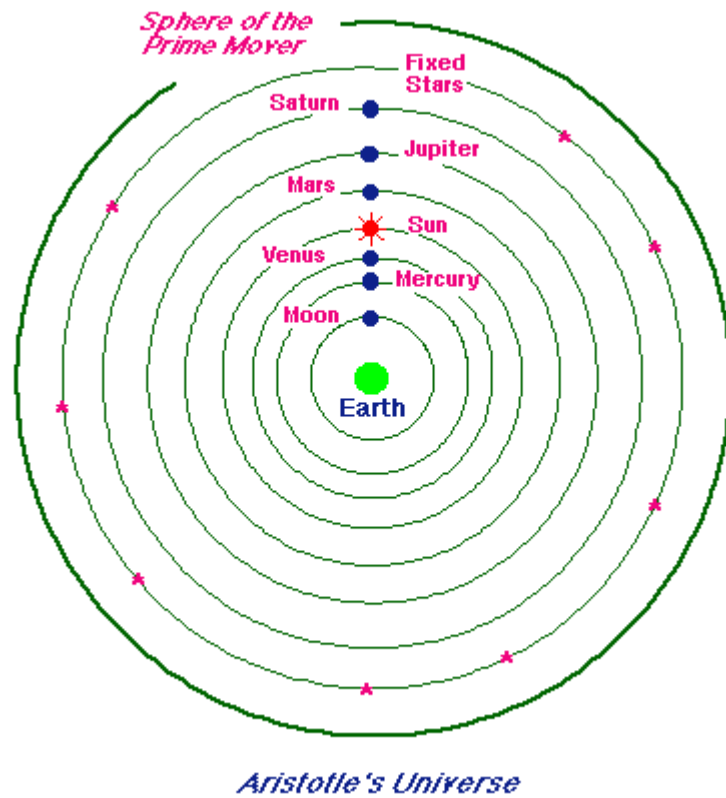
Attempt to elevate Middle English.

Upon falling asleep the narrator finds himself in a glass temple adorned with the images of the famous and their deeds. Meditation on the nature of fame and trustworthiness of records.

The Parliament of Fowles (1380-82)

- Dream poem. The poet falls asleep reading Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*. Scipio appears and guides him to a place in which Nature is convening a parliament at which the birds will all choose their mates on St Valentine's day. The birds' position shows a hierarchy, from the noblest to the humblest → medieval social hierarchy is a law by nature.
- Cicero /'sɪsəˌrəʊ/ Scipio /ˌskɪpiəʊ/

Aristotle's Universe



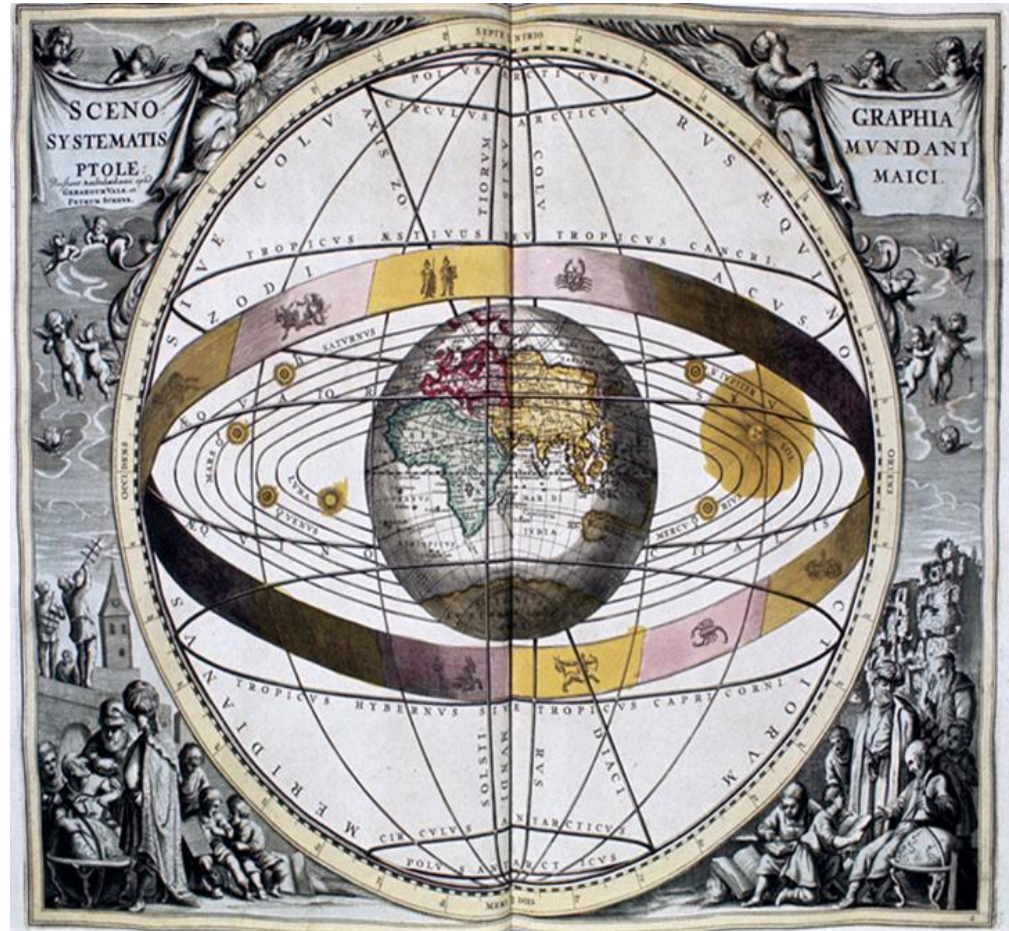
Geocentric versus Heliocentric System

Views of the universe
Ptolemy **Copernicus**



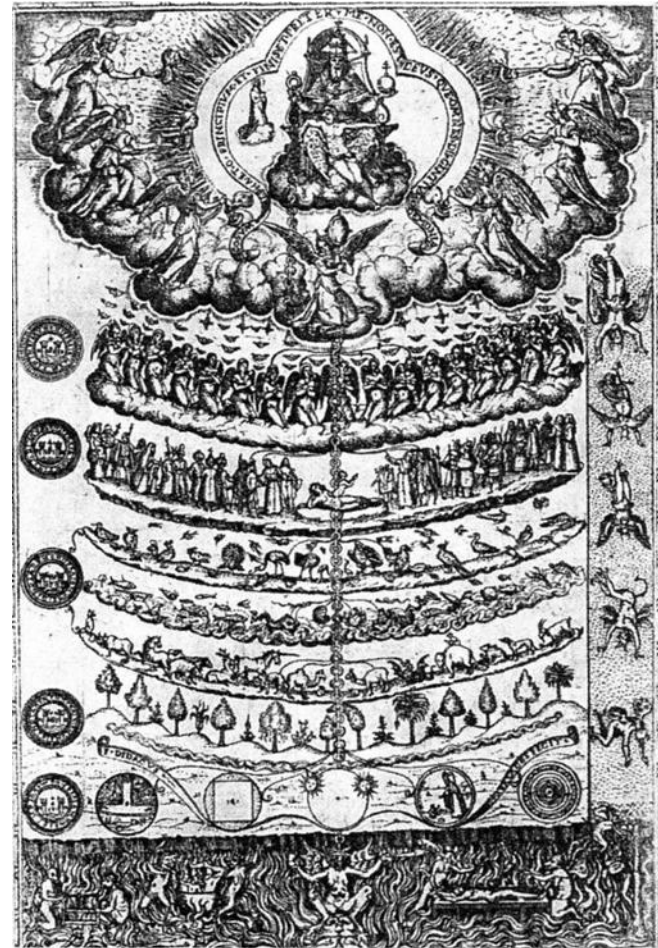
Ptolemy /'tɒləmi/ vs Nicolaus Copernicus

Latin name Claudius Ptolemaeus. 2nd century AD, Greek astronomer, mathematician, and geographer. His *Geography* was the standard geographical textbook until the discoveries of the 15th century. His system of astronomy, the Ptolemaic system as expounded in his *Almagest*, remained undisputed until the Copernican system was evolved (Copernicus, 1543)



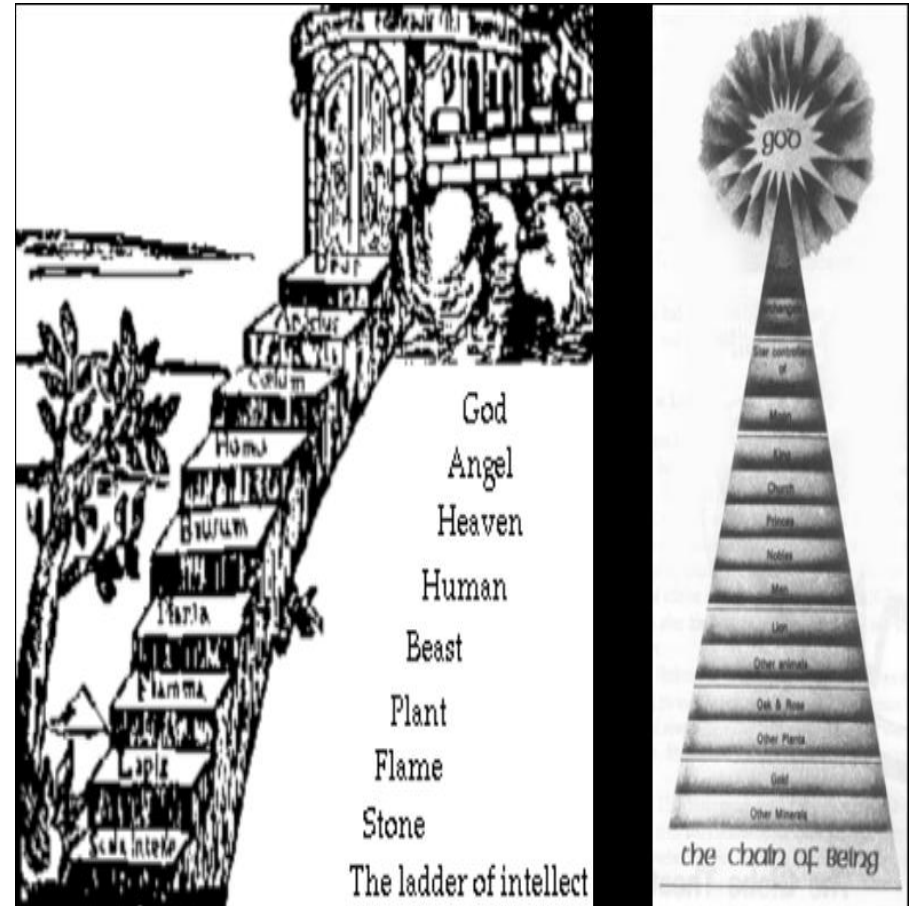
The Great Chain of Being (decreed by God)

- God (Christ+Virgin Mary)
- Angels
- Kings and Queens
- Commoners
- Animals
- Plants
- Non-living Things
- The chain stretches from God to the tiniest particle of sand
- A place for everything and everything in its place



The Great Chain of Being will influence the Elizabethan notion of the world

- A medieval metaphor illustrating the hierarchy of being from God to the lowliest
- A Christian Concept (See Psalm 8 in The Book of Psalms in the Bible)
- It shows the order of everything and its relation in importance to everything else.
- Everything is linked together in a hierarchy



Psalm 8, Book of the Psalms (Bible). King David is speaking, a hymn to God for his creation

- 1 O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth! who hast set thy glory above the heavens.
- 2 Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast thou ordained strength because of thine enemies, that thou mightest still the enemy and the avenger.
- 3 When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained;
- 4 What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?
- 5 For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour.
- 6 Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet:
- 7 All sheep and oxen, yea, and the beasts of the field;
- 8 The fowl of the air, and the fish of the sea, and whatsoever passeth through the paths of the seas.

Troilus and Criseyde (1382-86)

- A romance (in rhyme royal 7-line stanzas, rhyming abab bcc). Story of two lovers, from Homer's Iliad. Troilus is the son of King Priam of Troy / 'praɪ əm /. She then betrays him with Greek warrior Diomedes / ,daɪ ə'mi diz/. Influenced by Boccaccio's *Il filostrato*.
- Chaucer's version can be said to reflect a less cynical and less misogynist world-view than Boccaccio's. **Psychological insight**. Criseyde is more fearful and sincere rather than simply fickle (capricious and volatile,) and having been led astray by the eloquent and perfidious Pandarus.
- It also inflects the sorrow of the story with **humour**.
- For Chaucer's work see: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Troilus-and-Criseyde>

The Canterbury Tales (ca. 1387)

- Influence of Boccaccio's *Decameron*.
- The '*General Prologue*' frames a set of stories.
- 30 Pilgrims meet at the Tabard Inn in Southwark (London), including the poet. The Host of the inn suggests they should tell 2 stories on the way to Canterbury and 2 on the way back. They are going to St Thomas Becket's shrine in Canterbury.
- Only 22 (not 120) stories are completed. (two more are uncompleted). Unfinished work.

The Pilgrims

- A picture of medieval society:
- A clerk, a merchant, the wife of Bath, a franklin (small landowner), a haberdasher (merciaio), a weaver, a dyer (tintore), a cook, a doctor of physic, a pardoner, a prioress, a nun, a monk, a friar a parson. A knight (the highest in rank), his son the squire and a Yeoman (the squire's servant). The lowest is the ploughman.

Characters

- Chaucer chooses members from the middle classes, the clergy and representatives of the feudal society. He did not portray the aristocracy or the peasants. No nobleman would have travelled with commoners but on their own entourage. On the other hand, lower classes could not afford the expense of such a trip.
- He did not follow any social hierarchy. Men and women are mixed as if to underline the importance women were assuming.

Tone, modes and style

- The journey is an allegory of the course of human life in the Middle Ages → (as in *Everyman* and *Piers Plowman*). The point of departure is very human and linked to wordly pleasures while the destination is holy. Canterbury is the symbol of the celestial city, the end of life. Religious meaning.
- The journey is also a true experience, a pilgrimage. Secular meaning. Realism, vivid details, rich vocabulary. Chaucer describes the characters with subtle irony.
- In the tales, too, you find stylistic variety, realism and allegory.

The Pardoner

- The pardoner boasts of his skills in selling indulgences, he is proud and mean; after a few drinks he admits that his relics are fake, so he is a swindler. His aim is making money and not «the correccioun of sinne» -→ Chaucer indirectly criticizes the Church.
- The pardoner's tale is an exemplary story about avidity (three men who look for death and finally find it). He tells his story with great self-confidence and afterwards, despite his "confession", he tries to sell his relics, but the host threatens him with a swear word and the knight must intervene to make peace between them.
- See the animation of the Pardoner's tale by Leonardo Bussolo: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jPkhuvl3Y8Y>

The Wife of Bath

- Bold and handsome face, the hat she wore was like a shield in shape and size, she was married five times, she was very friendly and could give remedies for all love's misfortunes. Her teeth were wide apart (sign of a lascivious nature in the Middle Ages), she had already been on many pilgrimages (Boulogne, Rome, St James of Compostella), she wore a riding skirt round her big hips and red stockings, she is alive, laughs and jokes with everybody. Her tale, set at the court of King Arthur, talks about the rape of a girl and the punishment of the knight who raped her.
- See animated version of the Wife of Bath's tale:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_XJCOmcKadQ

Middle English/Modern English translation

A good WIF was ther OF biside BATHE,
There was a good WIFE OF beside BATH,
But she was somdel deaf, and that was scathe.
But she was somewhat deaf, and that was a pity.
Of clooth-makyng she hadde swich an haunt
She had such a skill in cloth-making
She passed hem of Ypres and of Gaunt.
She surpassed them of Ypres and of Ghent.

Middle English /Modern Translation

- 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 which power the flower is created;
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GihrWuysnrc>

Chaucer's verse

- The verse: rhyming couplets of iambic pentameters
- Each line has 10 syllables
- 5 iambs (˘-/˘-/˘-/˘-/˘-) unstressed/stressed

There was a business woman from near Bath
But, more's the pity she was a bit deaf;
So skilled clothmaker, that she outdistanced
Even the weavers of Ypres and of Ghent

22 Tales

- Fabliaux: comic tales in a popular setting the triangle (wife, lover, old husband)
- Romance genre
- Religious themes (a version of the story of the patient Griselda)
- Beast fable (The Nun's Priest's Tale)

Anticlericalism

- It appears in many of Chaucer's characters belonging to the Clergy (pardoner, friar, prioress, monk).
- The **pardoner** is a swindler.
- The **friar** has married off many girls and paid for their dowries. Actually he must do it, because he has seduced them and has to pay for the virginity he has taken from them. He likes to hang out with wealthy landowners, barmaids, noblewomen, and tavern owners. If he were truly living the life that St Francis (the first friar) prescribed, he would spend time with the poor and sick.

The Monk

- The **Monk** is a manly man. The Monk's favorite past-time is hunting. To this end he keeps gorgeous (and probably expensive) horses and greyhounds. Like the Prioress, the Monk is all sorts of things that, as a religious figure, he should probably not be: a hunter, overfed, expensively dressed in fur and gold jewelry, and a cultivator of expensive habits.

The Prioress

- The Prioress (the superior of a convent of nuns) is trying to be very elegant and refined. She tries very hard to seem courtly. When she sees a mouse caught in a trap, she weeps, perhaps believing that this is how a damsel of the court would behave. She sings through her nose, speaks in correct French and eats so carefully that she never spills a drop. She is very elegantly dressed, with a string of coral beads attached to a pendant that reads "Amor Vincit Omnia," or "Love Conquers All." The beads and the pendant are interesting, because she is a prioress (or nun) who is in charge of a convent, so we would expect her to be carrying rosary beads with a crucifix on the end.

The parson: a good priest

- A parson is a parish priest, and with this Parson we get an exemplary one. Unlike the Friar or the Monk, who fail to practice what they preach, the Parson lives the Gospel he teaches, by being holy and virtuous in all things, giving to the poor while he himself lives a life of poverty, and visiting his widely-spaced parishioners, rain or shine. The Parson is explicit about the motivation for his behavior: he must serve as a good example to his parishioners.

Lollardy and Black Plague

- Criticism of the wealth and behaviour of the Clergy throughout the 14th century (→Chaucer: 1340-1400 ca)
- Black death (1348): the bubonic plague seemed to be a punishment from God and the clergy's inability to help people. Their many privileges turn people against them.
- Rise of a movement called Lollardy, led by John Wycliffe (ca. 1320-83). They attacked the power and worldliness of the Church. They condemned the doctrine of the transubstantiation of the bread and wine of the Eucharist, and in many ways anticipated the Reformation of the 16th century.