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A Chaucerian Pilgrimage

By Patrick Hicks

I teach at a private college in South Dakota, and each fall, usually around the third week of September when the leaves shake themselves loose, we open up Geoffrey Chaucer's masterpiece, *The Canterbury Tales.* The story is some 600 years old, it's set in medieval England, and it takes place on a dirt road that leads toward a cathedral. The text is challenging for young Americans, particularly the language, but I admire how my students shoulder into it and let the strange words of Middle English float into their imaginations.

Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour.

So begins one of the greatest literary and social documents we have in our language. I get so excited to explain what England was like in the late 1300s that I gush. I talk about how the Black Death decimated half of the population between 1347-51, and I mention that a mighty hurricane in 1362 knocked down a number of steeples in London, and I also point out that in 1390 our friend Geoffrey Chaucer had the misfortune of being robbed not once but twice on the same day. Even as my students' eyes glaze over, I'm busy making a mess of the blackboard. Chalk dust floats around me, I pace the classroom waving my hands, and I talk with wonder about a group of pilgrims who have decided to make the hard journey to Canterbury. Why do they want to see the tomb of Thomas Becket, sometimes called Thomas à Becket, anyway? Who was he and why was he murdered? What do *The Canterbury Tales* tell us about travel and how we perceive the world?

Thanks in part to my dual citizenship in Ireland and the United States, I've had the good fortune to live in Northern Ireland, England, Germany, and Spain for many years. Although I was born in America, my wife is British and my favorite city anywhere in the world is London. I always feel a sense of homecoming when I return to Charing Cross Road or set foot in St. James's Park. I've led a

number of study-abroad courses to England over the past decade because it allows me to travel, but, more important, it also allows me to have an unconventional relationship with my students. They get to see me unshaven and groggy at breakfast, they see me fidget for coffee, and they see me navigate the train system. Leading a study-abroad course means embracing a variety of roles, and I'm always aware that this experience will be the one they remember long after graduation. It won't be the big test on Shakespeare or that final on James Joyce, it will be their time in England. They may not be able to recite *The Canterbury Tales* in Middle English, but they will recall our journey to Canterbury and how we retraced the pilgrims' steps. It is the tale behind the *Tales* that will matter to them.

We begin in London, at the Tabard Inn. Chaucer's characters spent the night here and then loaded up their donkeys for the pilgrimage east. The inn is now long gone—it burned down in the 1600s—but on the night before our journey to Canterbury we visit the site where it used to stand. There isn't much to see except for a plaque that mentions how thousands of pilgrims set forth from this spot to see the shrine of Thomas Becket. It's now just a dark alleyway with dumpsters. Cigarette butts float in ugly pools of water. After my students take a few photos we go around the corner to the George Inn. This wooden structure was built nearly 300 years after Chaucer's death, and it's now a landmark protected by the government. We sit in the cobblestone courtyard and have a drink. We talk about Chaucer and have a round of pints beneath the stars. I never drink more than two pints with my students, so after my second Guinness, I wave goodnight and remind them about our early start in the morning. I want them back in our hotel at a reasonable hour. I point toward the Tube station and remind them to get off at Victoria.

"Make good choices," I say. "Take care of each other."

Then I stroll along the river as Big Ben bongs in the distance. My feet echo off the paving stones.

Back in medieval England, as the pilgrims plodded down the dirt road to Canterbury, they told stories to pass the time. Some of those tales were bawdy, some were noble, and some were instructive. On the 9:33 train to Canterbury, I ask my students what they did the night before because I want to hear their stories. We talk about movies and books. They listen to their iPods and sometimes they offer up an earbud so that I can listen to a song. This is my favorite part of the journey because they share what's going on with them (sick grandparents, a brother in Iraq, how they're struggling in

Professor X's class), and I'm reminded that this is a great adventure for them. For some of my students this is the first time they've left home—and it was exactly the same for the pilgrims in the 1300s. For many of them, it was their first time outside the known world of London.

I turn the conversation back to Chaucer and ask what they know about this guy Becket. Why are the pilgrims going to see his shrine anyway?

The bright ones tick off information I gave in a lecture, and I nod for them to continue as the countryside blurs past our train. Occasionally we burst into a tunnel.

Here's the basic story behind the murder: King Henry II appointed his childhood friend Becket as archbishop of Canterbury in 1162 because he thought Becket would be a loyal servant. It seems that Becket had a genuine religious conversion when he became archbishop, and he took his holy office seriously. He wouldn't bow to his old friend, the king. Both men were stubborn, both had strong opinions about church and state, so a showdown was inevitable. Henry II had a blistering temper, and after yet another incident where Becket challenged him, the monarch was a bubbling volcano of rage. He pointed at his knights and yelled, "Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest?"

That's one version of the story. Another account has Henry saying something far more poisonous and withering. While scanning the room he is reported to have said (I like to imagine him pointing a finger), "What miserable drones and traitors have I nourished and brought up in my household who let their lord be treated with such shameful contempt by a low-born cleric?"

Four of these "miserable drones" departed for Canterbury under the belief their king wanted Becket transformed into a corpse. When they arrived at the cathedral Becket was, by some accounts at least, deep in prayer. He could have escaped but he stayed put, even when the knights entered the nave, even when they unsheathed their swords. The confrontation was quick, brutal, and it ended when one of the knights hacked off the top of Becket's skull. The archbishop slumped to the ground, one of the knight's clerks stepped on his neck and, with the tip of a sword, flicked large bits of Becket's brain across the floor.

"Let's away. This fellow won't be getting up again," one of the knights said. They rode back to London.

When the monks found Becket they discovered he was wearing a hair shirt crawling with lice—it teemed and vibrated with little

bloodsucking mouths. Becket was quickly made into a saint, miracles began to happen at his shrine, and people flocked to see this martyr in Canterbury. But it's the hair shirt that Becket wore as a sign of spiritual atonement that always fascinates my students. The quarrel between church and state never captures their attention, it's always that hair shirt. I've often wondered if I should omit this detail because it clouds the larger issue of the confrontation between ecclesiastical and political power—and yet, grubby details like this add life to history. They make my students curious to know more. So, for now, the shirt stays in the story.

As the train speeds through towns called Chatham, Sittingbourne, and Faversham, they keep asking me about that hair shirt.

"Man, that's gross. Would Chaucer's pilgrims have worn those things?"

"Good question. Which character do you think might wear one?"

Canterbury Cathedral is a poem set in stone. It rises with towers and crosses and flying buttresses and stained-glass windows. Whenever I step into the nave, I'm aware that centuries of people have walked across these flagstones before me. Mighty columns launch themselves into the ceiling, and I wonder about the stonemasons who chiseled them into shape. How on earth did they lift that much tonnage overhead?

We move to the spot where Becket was hacked down. There is a simple altar beneath a sculpture of three jagged swords converging into one sinister point. The sword tips look corroded and lathered with oil.

"His brains were scooped out here?" a student asks. He's a theater major who wears a long leather trench coat. He hasn't shaved for a few days.

"We think so, yes."

My student looks around and nods. "Would the pilgrims know that?"

"Probably."

We climb the stairs toward the onetime tomb of Saint Thomas. The stone beneath my feet has been worn down by thousands of pilgrims who approached this holy site on their knees. They inched up the stairs in prayer and polished the rock away, kneecap by kneecap. I'd like to tell my students more about Becket's tomb, but Henry VIII had it destroyed in 1538. The famous martyr needed to be forgotten because he represented the old religion of Catholicism, and Henry

VIII wanted a Protestant realm; he had the tomb broken into rubble. Henry II squabbled over church and state in the 1100s with Becket, and this issue continued to vex his royal descendent. Henry VIII, however, solved the problem by breaking from the Vatican altogether. No Pope, no problem. The king was now free to do as he pleased.

We move up the wide stairs into Trinity Chapel where the shrine used to be. Light flitters down through stained-glass windows and an enormous half-circle of stone is before us. A single candle burns in empty space. The flame jerks restlessly. My students take photos with their new cameras, and we listen to the church around us: echoing footsteps, a cough, the swoosh of a door opening somewhere. Then we walk down the stairs and step out into the sun. The wind is strong. Flags clatter against their poles, people protect their hats.

"What happened to Becket's body?" a business major asks. He's got both hands in his pockets, and he squints at the tower high above.

Maybe the body was broken into pieces and scattered around England for use in secret Catholic services? One story suggests a pub called itself the Bishop's Finger because it had part of Becket's hand. "But the truth is we don't know. The man's body vanished on us."

Another student turns to me and gathers her hair into a ponytail. "So, Doctor H., what's next?"

What we do next is wonderfully cheesy. We go to a wax museum which has the major characters of *The Canterbury Tales.* They're all here. The Wife of Bath, the Miller, the Knight, the Pardoner, the Reeve. An audiotape pretends to speak for them as lights flash on and off. Smell-o-rama fills up each room with the stink of pigs and the smell of campfire. Styrofoam rats peek out from the walls, and plastic turds hide on the footpath we're supposed to follow from display to display. If only they would do this for other great masterpieces like *Hamlet* or *The Great Gatsby.* I'd sure pay money to see a wax figure of Gatsby in a swimming pool or Ahab getting eaten by a white whale.

Then it's off to a gift shop for trinkets. Keepsakes have been sold here for more than 800 years—pilgrimage and commerce are old bedfellows in this English town—but I'm baffled by some of the things for sale. On the train back to London my students dump out their plastic bags and show me what they bought: a key chain with Becket on it, a teddy bear dressed like an archbishop, a tie that looks like a stained-glass window, chocolate crosses. One of my quiet

students, here I'll call her Anastasia, has bought a copy of *The Canterbury Tales.* She has dreams of going to graduate school and studying literature. She wants to be a professor at a small college and someday bring students to England. In time, I think she'll do all those things.

I point to her book. "Don't you own a copy of that already?"

"I do, but this one is from Canterbury. That's pretty cool."

And so, as we speed back to London, I pretend to thumb through Anastasia's new book, one I will no doubt teach again soon. Meanwhile, though, to pass the time, the other students around me are busy telling stories to each other. They laugh and flirt. I study the words of Middle English and pretend not to listen to their tales.

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