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## CHAPTER 1



### *Vintry Ward, London*

Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience.

—*James Joyce*, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

In the early 1340s, in Vintry Ward, London—the time and place of Chaucer’s birth—a book went missing. It wasn’t a very important book. Known as a ‘portifory,’ or breviary, it was a small volume containing a variety of excerpted religious texts, such as psalms and prayers, designed to be carried about easily (as the name demonstrates, it was portable).<sup>1</sup> It was worth about 20 shillings, the price of two cows, or almost three months’ pay for a carpenter, or half of the ransom of an archer captured by the French.<sup>2</sup> The very presence of this book in the home of a merchant opens up a window for us on life in the privileged homes of the richer London wards at this time: their inhabitants valued books, objects of beauty, learning, and devotion, and some recognized that books could be utilized as commodities. The urban mercantile class was flourishing, supported and enabled by the development of bureaucracy and of the clerkly classes in the previous century.<sup>3</sup> While literacy was high in London, books were also appreciated as things in themselves: it was

<sup>1</sup> Sharpe, *Calendar of Letter-Books of the City of London: Letter-Book F*, fol. ccxviiiib, 255.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Dyer, *Making a Living in the Middle Ages: The People of Britain, 850–1520* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), x, 240; Crow and Olson, *Chaucer Life-Records*, 24–25.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066–1307*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

not unheard of for merchants to accept books as payment, as a form of treasure.<sup>4</sup>

The man from whom this book was stolen, Benedict de Fulsham, lived in Vintry Ward, and had worked with wines, as the king's butler, although he was primarily a pepperer, employed in the lucrative spice trade.<sup>5</sup> The thief, Richard de Pembroke, was a tailor, probably a lowly one. Standing as pledges for the prosecution were two local men: one of these men was Richard Chaucer, the step-grandfather of the poet and himself a vintner, although he lived in the neighbouring Cordwainer Ward, a few streets away.<sup>6</sup> The case was heard by the mayor, sheriffs, and aldermen of London on the Wednesday after the Feast of the Translation of St Thomas the Martyr, in the fifteenth year of Edward III's reign. This description of the date (12 July 1341 in our terminology) foregrounds the importance of both the king and the church. Time was measured according to the number of years that the monarch had been on the throne, and according to the moment in the liturgical year, a timescale punctuated by saints' and feast days. On a more microlevel, the very rhythms of the week and the day were determined by the time of the church too: there were meat-eating days and fast days, and the time of day tended to be marked in relation to the canonical hours, such as prime, terce, and nones.<sup>7</sup> But merchant's time moved to a different beat: to the logic of the flow of money, to the rhythms of payment, delivery, debt, and interest, and to the calculation of the cost of delay.<sup>8</sup> For the society into which Chaucer was born, city, church, monarch, and trade guild all exerted their pressures.

London life, then, was carefully regulated and ordered by a number of authorities. Another case, also from around the time of Chaucer's birth, illustrates the street-level policing of life in Vintry Ward. This case—heard

<sup>4</sup>William Walworth accepted a romance of Alexander and an Arthurian tapestry as payment for a debt in 1382; see A. H. Thomas (ed.), *Calendar of Plea and Memoranda Rolls of the City of London, 1381–1412* (Cambridge: University Press, 1932), Roll A25, Membrane 5b, 10–11.

<sup>5</sup>*Calendar of Close Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office: Edward II* (London: HMSO, 1892–98), Membrane 3, 4:624 (29 December 1326).

<sup>6</sup>V. B. Redstone and L. J. Redstone, 'The Heyrons of London,' *Speculum* 12 (1937): 183–95.

<sup>7</sup>City dwellers would hear the prayers being sung. Prime was sung at around 6:00 a.m., terce at about 9:00 a.m., and nones at around 3:00 p.m.

<sup>8</sup>Jacques Le Goff, 'Merchant's Time and Church's Time in the Middle Ages,' in *Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 29–42.

on the Wednesday before the Feast of the Circumcision in the seventeenth year of Edward III (31 December 1343)—concerned an ‘affray’ in Vintry Ward three days earlier.<sup>9</sup> John de Oxford, John de Cleuf, and Henry de Ledham were walking, holding a light before them, when they encountered John Harris, the beadle of the ward, and his men at La Ryole. They passed peacefully, but a little way behind them followed two more of John de Oxford’s company, without a light. The beadle asked them what they were doing without a light, and where they were going, and a quarrel broke out. John de Oxford and Henry de Ledham now returned, drew their swords, and assaulted the beadle, wounding him in the right arm. The scenario immediately illustrates the careful policing of the wards. The beadle and his men were actively watching the nighttime streets and were alert to anything being done in darkness. Whether they were engaged in nefarious or innocent pursuits, John de Oxford and his friends were armed and drew their swords at the first hint of trouble. The incident occurred at La Ryole. The name of the street—a version of La Reole, a town in Bordeaux—is testament to the number of Gascon dwellers (many temporary, some more permanent) in Vintry Ward, and to the importance of the wine industry in the fabric of the ward. The name became corrupted to the Tower Royal or La Royal, because the king owned property there, and his mansion became the Queen’s Wardrobe. The street reached up to the border of Vintry Ward and Cordwainer Ward, and it is likely that the beadle was policing the boundaries of the ward, the edge of his jurisdiction. Such boundaries were not marked by walls or other physical divisions; streets cut across multiple wards, and parishes could also straddle more than one ward, but everyone knew where the authority of one ward ended and another began.

Violence broke out quickly. John de Oxford, who is depicted as the instigator of this Vintry Ward affray, was a skinner, engaged in the often putrid but very lucrative fur trade. His name tells us his origins, and other contemporary documents identify him as the servant of Henry of Eynsham.<sup>10</sup> Eynsham is a small settlement very close to Oxford, so we see

<sup>9</sup> A. H. Thomas (ed.), *Calendar of Plea and Memoranda Rolls, 1323–1364* (Cambridge: University Press, 1926), Roll A5, Membrane 13, 192–93.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., Roll A3, Membrane 13b, 122; Roll A3, Membrane 16b, 129.

here immigrant men from the same area working together in London. This was not the only time that John was engaged in fights in the street, and he was even imprisoned in 1340.<sup>11</sup> His standing, however, was not affected: we find him in 1344 designated as one of twelve upstanding skinnners with the good of the trade at heart, appointed to inspect the practices of others within the trade.<sup>12</sup>

These cases give us a snapshot of Vintry Ward in the early 1340s, before the demographic and social upheaval brutally wrought by the plague, before the English victories at Poitiers and Crécy, before the dramatic rise of English as a literary language. These were years on the cusp of change. This was the decade in which gunpowder was developed and gold coins were first minted in London; at court Queen Philippa was patronizing Hainuyer poets from her native land; over in France and Italy, Machaut and Boccaccio were writing some of their greatest works—works that were to be hugely influential on Chaucer.<sup>13</sup> While all educated English people knew French (and educated men all knew Latin), Chaucer's Thameside mercantile upbringing gave him the opportunity to mix with Italians and to learn their language—a skill that was to transform not only Chaucer's own poetry but English literature.<sup>14</sup>

Vintry Ward was located on the river, where cargos of Gascon wine were unloaded and stored in the vintners' cellars before the ships were sent back to the Continent, piled high with English wool. To live in the middle of things, at the pulsing centre of a hectic, ever-moving city, is to experience a constant, intoxicating assault on the senses. The sounds of the city came from all sides: sellers shouting their wares, civic proclamations, the snufflings of animals such as pigs who found their way into houses and shops, carts and horses rumbling down the streets, and the bells. There were no public clocks in London yet, though they would arrive soon, and the tolling of the church hours was an important way of structuring the day.<sup>15</sup> The small square mile or so of the walled and gated city supported

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., Roll A3, Membrane 16b, 129.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., Roll A5, Membrane 22b, 209.

<sup>13</sup> These changes are discussed in detail in later chapters. See especially chapters 3, 4, 6, 10, and 13.

<sup>14</sup> Edwards, 'Italy,' 7.

<sup>15</sup> See W. M. Ormrod, *Edward III* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 453–54, for clocks in Edward III's reign; see Jacques Le Goff for a groundbreaking discussion of the relationship between

108 parish churches, including Chaucer's parish church, St Martin in the Vintry, so churches could be seen everywhere, punctuating the urban landscape.<sup>16</sup> At street level, the cityscape comprised densely built tenements, many of which were made up of shops fronting the street with living quarters above and behind. Houses extended up about three storeys and down to the cellars, particularly important for the vintners (plate 1). Rooms also overhung the streets, although they had to be at least nine feet up so that a man could ride a horse underneath.<sup>17</sup> In Vintry Ward, there were some magnificent residences, and the impressive houses owned by the wealthy merchants, complete with gardens and courtyards, were juxtaposed with multi-occupancy tenements.

There were, of course, public health problems in the medieval city. Chaucer's family property stretched back to the Walbrook, a river that today is wholly subterranean and that, in Chaucer's day, carried sewage to the Thames. Some people defecated in the open, animals could not easily be controlled, and offal, blood, and dung were transported out of the city in open carts.<sup>18</sup> But civic officials were very much occupied with implementing public health measures. London had an aqueduct for piping water around the city, streets were regularly cleaned, and privies were common. The foremost historian of London cautions that 'there is no reason to suppose that medieval London was unduly squalid,' and that the worst problems developed in the sixteenth century, when the population rapidly increased.<sup>19</sup> Sweet, more exotic smells were also to be found; incense was burnt in every church and a little way to the north of Chaucer's home, near the house of his grandparents, the pepperers congregated around Sopers' Lane. They sold a dazzling array of spices that would bewilder even

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merchant's time and church time, and mechanical clocks and the church's hours and offices. He writes that (in Artois) the communal clock was 'an instrument of economic, social, and political domination wielded by the merchants who ran the commune.' See *Time, Work and Culture*, 35.

<sup>16</sup> John Schofield, 'Medieval Parish Churches in the City of London: The Archaeological Evidence,' in Katherine L. French et al. (eds.), *The Parish in English Life, 1400–1600* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 37. The description of Chaucer's family home in the deed by which Chaucer quitclaimed the property in 1381 specifies that it was in the parish of St Martin Vintry. Crow and Olson, *Chaucer Life-Records*, 1.

<sup>17</sup> Barbara A. Hanawalt, *Growing Up in Medieval London: The Experience of Childhood in History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 25.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 28–29.

<sup>19</sup> Barron, *London*, 255.

the most sophisticated modern cook.<sup>20</sup> The fourteenth-century desire for spices supported an extraordinary trade that brought the products of Southeastern Asia to the shops and tables of London.<sup>21</sup> More commonly, in the streets, cookshops, alehouses, and brewhouses of London, one might eat a hot pie and drink some ale—or, in a tavern, one could drink wine.<sup>22</sup> Wine was the lifeblood of Chaucer's family and their neighbours, and wine created the wealth and royal contacts that established the social identity of the Chaucers, along with other well-off vintners. The English strongly favoured the wines of Gascony; German wines were of much less interest to the medieval English palate.<sup>23</sup> Standing in these streets—in Thames Street, where Chaucer lived, or on one of the myriad lanes, such as Three Cranes Lane or Oxenford Lane, that led off this major thoroughfare—one might touch almost anything: the warm fur worn by prostitutes as well as queens, the smooth stone of a church, a hard silver coin minted nearby in the Tower, the soft dough being taken to the baker's for cooking or the warm loaf of bread being brought back home, the heavy barrels of wine on which the area depended, a sheet of stiff parchment on which crucial accounts were carefully kept.<sup>24</sup> Vintry Ward, ca. 1342, was a place of excitement, business, corruption, entertainment, and opportunity.

For a newborn baby, interiors are more important than streets. Chaucer was lucky. He was born to comfortably off parents who lived in a spacious house, and both his parents, John and Agnes, were alive for his entire childhood and young adulthood. When he was born, his extended family, in similarly affluent circumstances, lived close by. His grandmother, Mary, with her third husband, Richard Chaucer, lived on Watling Street, in Cordwainer Ward, in a house that Mary had originally inherited from her first husband, John Heron, a pepperer. (Her second husband, Robert Chaucer, was Chaucer's grandfather.) Chaucer's uncle, Thomas

<sup>20</sup>Freedman, *Out of the East*, 8–12.

<sup>21</sup>Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System, A.D. 1250–1350* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

<sup>22</sup>See Martha Carlin, 'The Host,' in Stephen H. Rigby (ed.), *Historians on Chaucer: The 'General Prologue' to the 'Canterbury Tales'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 460–81, for a discussion of the different characters and functions of various types of drinking establishments at this time.

<sup>23</sup>Barron, *London*, 84.

<sup>24</sup>In 1351, the city tried to prevent prostitutes from wearing fur; Riley, *Memorials of London*, 267.



Heron, John's constant associate and friend, was based just round the corner from John and Agnes.<sup>25</sup> Chaucer was born at a time when the idea of domesticity and the home was increasingly important.<sup>26</sup> In the middle of the fourteenth century, not only did households seek privacy from outside observers, as lawsuits relating to overlooking and intrusion illustrate, but city dwellers were also concerned with the privacy of the individual within the house, demonstrated by the multiplication of rooms in London houses.<sup>27</sup> The kind of house that Chaucer was born in had private spaces as well as public areas, and contained relatively luxurious furnishings. The Chaucer home—probably 179 Thames Street—certainly had extensive cellars and private rooms.<sup>28</sup> There would have been a large hall, rooms upstairs known as 'solars' or living rooms, bedchambers, and a privy. The family might have all slept in one bedchamber, with apprentices in another bedroom.<sup>29</sup> An inventory of the Vintry Ward home of a prominent vintner, Henry Vanner, taken in 1349, describes a house with a hall, three chambers, a kitchen, a storeroom, a chamber below the hall, a shop, and a cellar.<sup>30</sup> Working from home, or living in the office, were standard practice for medieval merchants, whose houses were also places of business, and the household comprised the nuclear family plus apprentices and servants.<sup>31</sup> Women often took part in running the business, and might keep running it themselves if they were widowed. Households such as Chaucer's were furnished and decorated with tapestries and hangings,

<sup>25</sup> Redstone and Redstone, 'The Heyrons of London'; Lister M. Matheson, 'Chaucer's Ancestry: Historical and Philological Re-Assessments,' *Chaucer Review* 25:3 (1991): 171–89.

<sup>26</sup> Goldberg, 'Fashioning of Bourgeois Domesticity.'

<sup>27</sup> The Assize of Nuisance heard cases relating to the invasion of privacy, for instance, complaints about windows overlooking the property of others. For discussion, see Barbara Hanawalt, *The Wealth of Wives: Women, Law, and Economy in Late Medieval London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 142–43. For the multiplication of rooms in London houses, see Schofield, *Medieval London Houses*, 93. In chapter 7, I discuss public and private spaces and the problems of privacy in detail.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Bestul, 'Did Chaucer Live at 177 Upper Thames Street?,' *Chaucer Review* 43:1 (2008): 1–15; Crow and Olson, *Chaucer Life-Records*, 8–11. Matheson shows that John Chaucer probably moved into this house between 1337 and 1339 ('Chaucer's Ancestry,' 184).

<sup>29</sup> Schofield, *Medieval London Houses*, 71.

<sup>30</sup> Guildhall Record Office, Husting Roll 77, item 66. See also A. R. Myers, 'The Wealth of Richard Lyons,' in T. A. Sanquist and M. R. Powicke (ed.), *Essays in Medieval History Presented to Bertie Wilkinson* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), 306.

<sup>31</sup> Goldberg, 'Bourgeois Domesticity,' 135–36.

comfortable beds and cushions, and display objects, such as silver plates and cups.<sup>32</sup> He would have had a cot to sleep in and soft coverings to keep him warm.

Simple things matter to babies: being warm, having good-quality milk—his mother would have been well nourished, and generally mothers breast-fed their children themselves, until their child was between one and three—and being comfortable.<sup>33</sup> Most of all, of course, babies need to be loved. We can't hope to find out anything about John and Agnes's emotional connection with their son, but most medieval parents loved their children, as do most modern ones,<sup>34</sup> and contemporary accounts and advice manuals demonstrate that parents cared about the same eternal issues of childcare as new parents do today—most pressingly, often, how do you help the baby get to sleep? How do you soothe them? Bartholomeus Anglicus, writing in the thirteenth century, recommended rocking a baby to sleep, and singing to them, methods that are still the preeminent ways of getting babies to sleep.<sup>35</sup> Very wealthy households even employed someone as a 'rocker' in nurseries.<sup>36</sup> Parents or nurses and babies sometimes co-slept, not simply because of lack of space but for comfort.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, a scurrilous story was spread that the real John of Gaunt had been accidentally smothered by a nurse in this way and replaced in the royal nursery by a butcher's son.<sup>38</sup> Some advice manuals reveal neglect and abuse: William of Pagula's manual, written about fifteen years before Chaucer's birth, warns that parents must not tie a baby into a cot or leave

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 126–28, 132–35; Felicity Riddy, "'Burgeis' Domesticity in Late-Medieval England,' in Kowaleski and Goldberg, *Medieval Domesticity*, 29–30.

<sup>33</sup>Nicholas Orme, *Medieval Children* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 58, 66.

<sup>34</sup>Many historians have written about medieval parents' attitudes to their children, and about the medieval conception of childhood. For an excellent discussion of the issues and the relevant historiography, see Barbara A. Hanawalt, 'Medievalists and the Study of Childhood,' *Speculum* 77:2 (2002): 440–60.

<sup>35</sup>Bartholomeus Anglicus, *On the Properties of Things: John Trevisa's Translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus, 'De Proprietatibus Rerum,'* ed. M. C. Seymour (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), book 6, chapter 4, 299.

<sup>36</sup>Paul B. Newman, *Growing Up in the Middle Ages* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2007), 67.

<sup>37</sup>Orme, *Medieval Children*, 78.

<sup>38</sup>Marion Turner, 'Conflict,' in Paul Strohm (ed.), *Middle English: Oxford Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 266–67.

them unattended for too long.<sup>39</sup> Contemporary London records tell of tragedies and atrocities—a baby eaten by a pig, others killed by fire along with their parents in cramped living quarters, and, rarely, infanticide.<sup>40</sup> Chaucer's young life, though, was privileged, and he is likely to have been cosseted and protected, insulated from some of the most egregious dangers of city life.

We do not know Chaucer's exact date of birth, but it was probably in 1342 or 1343. In 1386, he declared that he was more than forty years old, and that he had borne arms for twenty-seven years. If he first bore arms in 1359 (on the French campaign in which he was taken prisoner), he is likely to have been sixteen or seventeen at that point, possibly a little older.<sup>41</sup> He was born, then, when Edward III had been on the throne for about fifteen years, after his father, Edward II, had been deposed in 1327. Edward and Phillippa of Hainault already had several children, including Edward the Black Prince, Lionel of Antwerp (one of Chaucer's first employers), and John of Gaunt, who was to be very important in Chaucer's life, and who was almost exactly the same age as him. Babies were born at home and baptized within a day or so at the parish church. Baptism was a fairly traumatic experience for the brand-new baby, as it involved immersion in water three times. The baby, with father and godparents, but not the mother—who was not allowed to enter the church until she underwent the churching ceremony a few weeks after birth, and who anyway would have been recovering from the difficulties of giving birth without much medical help—gathered in the porch or doorway of the church. The baby, as a non-Christian, could not enter the church before she or he had been instructed, exorcised, blessed, and named. The party then went to the font, near the door, for the anointing and baptism ceremony. The ritual had several different parts; its central purpose was to bring the child into the Christian community so that she or he had the chance of ultimate salvation. This entry into the Christian community also, of course, made the

<sup>39</sup> Colin Platt, *The Parish Churches of Medieval England* (London: Chancellor, 1995), 49.

<sup>40</sup> Hanawalt, *Growing Up*, 64, 26–27; Richard H. Helmholtz, 'Infanticide in England in the Later Middle Ages,' *History of Childhood Quarterly* 1 (1974–75): 282–390; Barbara Hanawalt, *Crime and Conflict in English Communities, 1300–1348* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 154–57.

<sup>41</sup> Crow and Olson, *Chaucer Life-Records*, 24.

baby a member of an earthly group, the large community of Christians and the small, local community of the parish. The godparents, who usually lived nearby and hence were on hand, gave gifts and often the name; they became the child's spiritual family. The child's name—in this case, Geoffrey—was repeated twenty-four times during the service, in a symbolic establishment of his identity as a valued individual, set now on his path in life, with the support of his parents, their friends (the godparents), and the structures of the parish.<sup>42</sup>

St Martin Vintry offered a secure parish home. One of four churches in Vintry Ward—the others were St Michael Paternoster, St James Garlickhythe, and St Thomas Apostle—it was the church most specifically associated with the wine merchants; it provided an identity with a long history and a prestigious pedigree. Three hundred years earlier, not long after the Norman Conquest, it had been termed the *baerman-necyrce*, the church (*cyrce*) of the carriers or porters (the *baermanne*—the men who bore things). It was, in other words, the church of merchants, of traders. There are several references to it as *baermanecherche* throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.<sup>43</sup> In 1299, it was rebuilt, largely at the expense of Matthew Columbars, who had left money for this purpose in his will. He was a Bordeaux wine merchant who had been the king's chamberlain, or taker of wines, throughout England, responsible for choosing and buying the king's wines. His arms were placed in the east window of the church.<sup>44</sup> The church, dedicated to St Martin, patron saint of the vintners' company, was dominated by the wine trade. A few years after Chaucer's baptism, for instance, the wealthy John Gisors, alderman, mayor, MP, and politician, scion of a patrician family that had long been dominant in London trade and politics, was buried in the church, before the rood.<sup>45</sup> Chaucer, the son of a prominent vintner, became part of a community that offered protection and stability.

Unlike the Gisors family, Chaucer's own family did not have a long London provenance. His great-great-grandfather, Robert le Taverner, or

<sup>42</sup> Orme, *Medieval Children*, 24–37.

<sup>43</sup> Henry A. Harben, *A Dictionary of London* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1918), 387.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 387; Schofield, 'Medieval Parish Churches,' 50.

<sup>45</sup> Reginald R. Sharpe (ed.), *Calendar of Wills Proved and Enrolled in the Court of Husting, London, A.D. 1258–A.D. 1688* (London: John C. Francis, 1890), Roll 78 (248), 1:643.

Robert de Dinehinetune, was from Ipswich, in Suffolk. He was also known as Malen or Malyn of London, which suggests he traded in the capital as well as in East Anglia. Malyn seems to have been the family name, with Dinehinetune referring to their village, and taverner to their trade. His son, Andrew de Dynnyngton, was married to Isabella, and was based in Ipswich.<sup>46</sup> Their son, Robert, went to London, where he became the apprentice to a mercer, John de Dowgate, also known as John le Chaucer. This John de Dowgate/Chaucer, had business dealings with John Heron, a wealthy pepperer. In 1302, John de Dowgate/Chaucer was involved in a street fight and eventually died of his wounds. He left a quarter of his business to his apprentice, Robert, who took his name as a token of respect.<sup>47</sup> And when John de Dowgate's friend, John Heron, died, Robert married his widow, Mary. This couple were Chaucer's grandparents, the parents of his father, John Chaucer. Robert held royal appointments, as deputy to the king's butler, Henry de Say, in London, in 1308,<sup>48</sup> and as collector in London for customs on wine levied on merchants from Aquitaine in 1310.<sup>49</sup> Robert and Mary's son, John, was born around 1312, and Robert died two or three years later.<sup>50</sup> Meanwhile, he still had family connections back in Ipswich, notably his sister, Agnes, who had married Walter de Westhale. Mary Chaucer, widowed for the second time, married again, this time to Richard Chaucer—we do not know if he had a relationship to Robert or to Robert's erstwhile master. In 1324, anxious to secure John Chaucer's inheritance from his own father (her brother), Agnes de Westhale abducted her nephew, hoping to marry him to her daughter. This dramatic episode is attested to in the subsequent lawsuits: Agnes and Geoffrey Stace (whom she would later marry) kidnapped John, a child of about twelve, from Cordwainer Street and carried him off. His stepfather, Richard, and half-brother, Thomas Heron, pursued the abductors to Ipswich, where they robbed Agnes of £40 worth of property. John was returned to his parents

<sup>46</sup> Matheson, 'Chaucer's Ancestry,' 172.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 179–81.

<sup>48</sup> *Calendar of the Patent Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office: Edward II* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1894–1904), Membrane 20, 1:143 (15 November 1308), <http://sdr.lib.uiowa.edu/patentrolls/e2v1/body/Edward2vol1page0143.pdf>.

<sup>49</sup> Walter Rye, 'Chaucer's Grandfather, Robert le Chaucer,' in Edward A. Bond and Walford D. Selby (eds.), *Life-Records of Chaucer* (London: N. Trübner, 1886), 3:128.

<sup>50</sup> Matheson, 'Chaucer's Ancestry,' 175.

unharméd, and unmarried. After protracted lawsuits, the Chaucer family was awarded enormous damages of £250 by a London court in 1327.<sup>51</sup>

Family squabbles, jealousies, and infighting dominated high politics in England at this time too. In 1326, Queen Isabella, her lover, Roger Mortimer, and her teenage son, Edward of Windsor, had invaded England and taken up arms against Edward II, Isabella's husband and Edward of Windsor's father. Towards the end of the year, the king was captured. London strongly supported Isabella and Prince Edward and pushed for the deposition of Edward II and his replacement by his son. In January 1327, Edward II was indeed deposed, although he was not killed, and his son was crowned on 1 February. That night, a Scottish army attacked England, and plans were formed for a counterattack.<sup>52</sup> In the summer, John Chaucer and his half-brother Thomas Heron, along with a troop of Londoners, took part in a shambolic campaign against the Scots. The following year, as tensions mounted in the country and Henry, earl of Lancaster, mobilized against Mortimer, John Chaucer was amongst a group who rode to fight with Lancaster against Isabella and Mortimer. This venture too collapsed, and a number of Londoners were summoned to appear at the Court of Hustings in 1329; those who failed to appear, including John Chaucer, were outlawed.<sup>53</sup> However, this is unlikely to have had much force or meaning, especially as Edward III was shortly to topple Mortimer and have him executed, with the support and help of the earl of Lancaster.

In the 1330s, John Chaucer entered into sober adulthood and became established as a wine merchant. His name often crops up in city records in association with other well-respected merchants. He travelled to Europe; for instance, in 1338 his name appears in a list of men to whom the king issued letters of protection just before an English army went to fight in France, basing itself at Antwerp. Vintner Henry Picard and John Heron also figure in this list.<sup>54</sup> He shipped wool between Ipswich and Flanders

<sup>51</sup>Crow and Olson, *Chaucer Life-Records*, 3. Redstone and Redstone, 'Heyrons of London,' 185–86.

<sup>52</sup>Ormrod, *Edward III*, 64–65.

<sup>53</sup>Redstone and Redstone, 'Heyrons of London,' 186–88.

<sup>54</sup>Thomas Rymer, *Foedera* (London, 1704–35), 5:51–52. John Heron may have been another family connection, and he also seems to have taken part in the 1327 foray with John Chaucer and Thomas

around the time of Chaucer's birth.<sup>55</sup> Chaucer's mother was Agnes de Copton, daughter of John de Copton, and niece of Hamo de Copton, who owned quite a lot of property in and around the city.<sup>56</sup> In material terms, both of Chaucer's parents brought wealth to the marriage and both were Londoners and owners of London property. By 1342, around when Chaucer was born, John's name appears, consenting to city legislation about wine, alongside other well-known vintners, such as Thomas Gisors and John de Stodeye.<sup>57</sup> In the 1360s, John Chaucer appears in the records as a supporter of Richard Lyons, a merchant who rose to extraordinary wealth and influence, was impeached by the Good Parliament, emerged relatively unscathed, but was then executed by the rebels during the Rising of 1381.<sup>58</sup> The inventory for Lyons's house in Kerion Lane, at the heart of Vintry Ward and very close to the Chaucer residence, survives and bears witness to the lifestyle of the richest residents of the ward.<sup>59</sup> As well as detailing the contents of his ship, several taverns, and a shop, the inventory divides the house into the following rooms: 'sale,' 'parlour,' 'principale chamber,' 'seconde chambre,' 'tierce chambre,' 'chapel,' 'garderobe,' 'naparie,' 'petit garderobe,' 'chapman chaumbre,' 'autre chambre pur autres,' 'panetrie et botellie,' 'cusyne,' 'larder,' 'stable,' and 'comptour.' Featherbeds, occasional tables, chandeliers, chaise longues, and cushions abound.<sup>60</sup> Chaucer grew up surrounded by solid wealth, amongst people who cared about comfort and about lovely things.

The structures and communities of late-medieval London were idiosyncratic. A family's identity was strongly tied both to ward and to parish. The ward was the bigger structure. London was divided into

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Heron, and in the 1328 venture alongside John Chaucer; see Redstone and Redstone, 'Heyrons of London,' 186–88. Crow and Olson suggest that the John Chaucer in this record could have been a different John Chaucer (*Chaucer Life-Records*, 4), but the presence of Heron and Picard makes it very probable that this is indeed the poet's father.

<sup>55</sup> Crow and Olson, *Chaucer Life-Records*, 4.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 7–8.

<sup>57</sup> Sharpe, *Calendar of Letter-Books: Letter-Book F*, fol. lxiiv, 78; Thomas Milbourn (ed.), *The Vintners' Company, Their Muniments, Plate, and Eminent Members* (London: Vintners' Company, 1888), 5. See also Anne Crawford, *A History of the Vintners' Company* (London: Constable, 1977), 35.

<sup>58</sup> See 9 December 1364, in Thomas, *Calendar, 1364–1381*, Roll A10, Membrane 4b, 11. Lyons's career is discussed in more detail in subsequent chapters in this study, especially chapters 7 and 12.

<sup>59</sup> National Archives, E 199/25/72.

<sup>60</sup> Myers, 'Wealth of Richard Lyons,' 307–29.

twenty-four wards at this point (in 1394 Farringdon was split in two, making twenty-five). The ward was an instrument of city government: the wardmote, a gathering of all the men in the ward, both householders and servants, under the direction of the ward's elected alderman, met to elect jurors or advisors to the alderman, hear new civic legislation, discuss necessary public health and safety measures, and complain about antisocial and illegal behaviour. Being part of a ward meant taking some of the collective responsibility for making sure that the streets were clean, that precautions were taken against fire, and that brothel owners were made notorious. Ordinary householders knew that they could be the focus of criticism and accusation if they built illegal extensions, threw dung onto the street, or ignored price controls.<sup>61</sup> The wards had markedly different characters. In 1304, a list of aliens (foreigners) who protested about paying a tax demonstrates that they were living in only eight of the twenty-four wards. Vintry Ward had the most immigrants, mainly from Gascony, the hub of the wine trade. Adjoining Dowgate was the home of Germans and people from the Low Countries; those from Spain, Italy, and Provence lived in the wards of Cordwainer, Cheap, and Langbourn.<sup>62</sup> While there are certainly cases in which we see Londoners closing ranks against foreigners, we can also find cases in which European immigrants were treated with notable equity. One case, centering around the nonpayment of money owed for wine, which should have been paid on a quay in the Vintry, involved a Gascon merchant and a London apprentice. It went before a jury deliberately comprised half of Gascons, before going to the arbitration of four members of the vintners' guild, and the decision was in favour of the Gascon merchant.<sup>63</sup> The existence of nearby Olde Iuwerie, however, so named after the expulsion of the Jews in 1290, reminds us that not all immigrants, or descendants of immigrants, were treated equally.<sup>64</sup>

As a riverside ward, the Vintry must have been strongly influenced by *all* the immigrants and products arriving at the docks and being transported further into the city; it was a borderland, a transition point between

<sup>61</sup> Barron, *London*, 122–23.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>63</sup> Thomas, *Calendar, 1381–1412*, Roll A29, Membrane 11, 162.

<sup>64</sup> Kathy Lavezzo, *The Accommodated Jew: English Antisemitism from Bede to Milton* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), 109–11.



the English market and the rest of the world. Ships arrived every day. They brought wine from Gascony, England's most important import, but they also brought skins, furs, and leather from Spain; fish, timbers, beeswax, grain, iron, zinc, and copper from German and Baltic lands; squirrel skins from Lithuania, Poland, and Hungary; other skins from Russia, Finland, and Estonia; spices and silks from the Far East via numerous middlemen; glass, paper, and fustian from Italy; and sugar, fruits, and alum from the Mediterranean.<sup>65</sup> To see these ships unload, to experience the shops of London, to live in a wealthy household complete with luxury fabrics and sophisticated spices and wines, was to be aware of a global economy on a vast scale. References to products in Chaucer's poetry often include their place of origin—'cloth of Reynes' (*Book of the Duchess*, 255); 'a steede of Lumbardy' ('Squire's Tale,' 193); 'outlandish [foreign] ware' (*The Former Age*, 22)—suggesting that their provenance added to their value; people cared about the origin of their goods. The wharfs of Vintry Ward and the Thames itself were the doors and road that led to this greater world, a world everywhere evident within the ward itself.

Being part of a parish provided a different kind of identity. But just as the ward made its wealthiest members feel part of a global network, part of the superstructure of London, and part of a local community, so the parish rooted its members in international Christendom, in the English church, and in the diocese, while primarily being a local organization. Crucially, laypeople in the parish were not the passive recipients of the church's services. They had responsibility for the upkeep of parts of the church, gave money to the church, and assisted with regular duties, such as locking up holy oil, chrism, and the host, and covering and locking the font. Some parishioners gave generous bequests.<sup>66</sup> The church was more than a place of worship for parishioners; it was a community centre where people might go for meetings, or to trade, or even for a cockfight.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>65</sup>Barron, *London*, 86.

<sup>66</sup>In 1350, John Gisors left detailed instructions for the provision of a chantry at St Martin Vintry in his will: the chaplain was to have his own chamber, a chalice, a two-volume missal, a portifory, a psalter, vestments, and a cope of fine linen; he also provided garments for the deacon and subdeacon and various vessels and cloths of silk and gold. Sharpe, *Calendar of Wills*, Roll 78 (248), 1:643.

<sup>67</sup>Katherine French, *The People of the Parish: Community Life in a Late Medieval English Diocese* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 1, 30.

Every church was supposed to contain a diverse range of objects, according to surviving lists of diocesan instructions. Above all, each church was supposed to have a range of books, including a manual, ordinal, missal, collect book, a *legenda* (of saints' lives and scriptural lessons for readings), a number of music books, and a copy of the statutes of the synod. Not all churches had all these things, but they do all seem to have a reasonably wide range of items.<sup>68</sup> Chaucer's parish church also contained an altar to St Thomas Martyr: Thomas à Becket, the great London saint whose shrine at Canterbury was to provide the never-reached goal of the *Canterbury Tales*. As well as attending weekly Mass, Chaucer, along with the other parishioners, heard instruction four times a year on six points: the fourteen articles of faith, the ten commandments of the law and two of the Gospel, the seven works of mercy, the seven deadly sins, the seven virtues, and the seven sacraments. Since the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, confession to one's parish priest was mandatory every Lent; at this time the priest, if he were conscientious, also inquired into the confessant's religious knowledge.<sup>69</sup> Each church was staffed by a few men—perhaps a deacon and subdeacon, as well as the priest; at the least a parish clerk and perhaps a holy water clerk or boy.<sup>70</sup> In the poll tax of 1381, St Martin Vintry returned three chaplains as well as the rector.<sup>71</sup> St Martin Vintry would have been a constant part of Chaucer's life, perhaps from the very day of his birth, certainly from the first few days, a place for worship and instruction, but also a place of gathering and belonging.

We do not know if Chaucer had siblings. There is a much later reference to Katherine, wife of Simon Mannyng, as Chaucer's sister, and Chaucer did have connections with Simon, mainprising him (standing surety for him in law) in 1386.<sup>72</sup> Most wealthy families in this period ended up with only two or three surviving children, so it would not be unusual if Geoffrey were the only child to survive.<sup>73</sup> It is very likely that he did have siblings who died either at birth or in infancy; certainly all children saw

<sup>68</sup> Platt, *Parish Churches*, 27–29.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 61–62.

<sup>71</sup> A. K. McHardy, 'Taxation of the Clergy, 1379–81: Poll Tax of 1381 in the City of London,' in *The Church in London, 1375–1392* (London: London Record Society, 1977), 25–27, *British History Online*, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/london-record-soc/vol13/pp25-27>.

<sup>72</sup> Crow and Olson, *Chaucer Life-Records*, 285–89.

<sup>73</sup> Orme, *Medieval Children*, 53.

infant mortality at close hand in this era. Whether or not he had siblings as playmates, Chaucer was brought up in a district where everyone knew everyone else and where his father was a well-known personage; his childhood was embedded in his parents' social networks, and it was probably highly social. Toys tend to be ephemeral and few have survived, but those that have bear witness to the essential similarity of many aspects of play across the centuries. Medieval children, it turns out, liked playing with toy cooking sets, dolls, and knights on horseback; in other words, they engaged in imitative and imaginative play, acting out what they saw adults doing and pretending to be grown-ups themselves.<sup>74</sup> Very wealthy children had more technical, mechanical toys.<sup>75</sup> Children played outside, particularly with balls, and also went swimming and fishing; inside they learnt games of skill, memory, and chance, such as dice, backgammon, draughts, chess, and cards.<sup>76</sup> Young children spent a lot of time with their parents and often followed the parent of the same gender: records of accidents show us that boys seem to have been outside more with their fathers, while girls led a more domestic existence.<sup>77</sup> We can't know what kind of child Chaucer was—confident or introverted, the centre of attention or an observer, imaginative or orderly, careful or physically bold—but we can be sure that his early life was inflected by his father's business. The life of a merchant's son was infused with trade, with the products and practitioners of international importing and exporting, and with London retail too; business was everywhere in the houses and streets in which Chaucer spent his early years.

In 1347, John Chaucer got a new job: in February, he was appointed as deputy to the king's butler, John de Wesenham, in Southampton; a couple of months later he was also made the deputy for collecting customs on cloth and beds exported by foreign merchants from Southampton, Portsmouth, Chichester, Seaford, and Shorham.<sup>78</sup> The position of deputy

<sup>74</sup>On medieval toys, see Patricia Clare Ingham, *The Medieval New: Ambivalence in an Age of Innovation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 75–76; and J. Allen Mitchell, *Becoming Human: The Matter of the Medieval Child* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 59–116.

<sup>75</sup>Orme, *Medieval Children*, 168–72.

<sup>76</sup>*Ibid.*, 178–79.

<sup>77</sup>Barbara Hanawalt, 'Childrearing among the Lower Classes of Late Medieval England,' *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 8:1 (1977): 8; Orme, *Medieval Children*, 67.

<sup>78</sup>*Calendar of the Patent Rolls Preserved in the Public Records Office: Edward III* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1891–1916), Membrane 30, 7:253; Membrane 15, 7:276.

butler was essentially that of a tax collector, but one with specialist knowledge of wines.<sup>79</sup> The king's butler appointed several deputies to oversee the purchase of wines in different ports, and both John's father and his step-father had held similar appointments.<sup>80</sup> John's second role, exacting customs on the export of woolen cloths and beds, reflected the complexities of the wine trade as merchants tried to fill up their ships in both directions.<sup>81</sup> The king's butler and his deputies were frequently accused of corruption: in 1333 the butler's deputies were removed from office and in 1339 and 1345 they were warned against extortion under pretence of purveyance. In 1351 a statute was passed forbidding the evil practices of the king's butler and his deputies.<sup>82</sup> Certainly, anyone doing this job would have to be streetwise at the least; it was normal to use such positions for personal profit. Although the war with France was causing some difficulties for the wine trade, and coastal ports were at risk of attack—Southampton had been raided by the French in 1338 and further attacks were feared—the wine trade remained very lucrative.<sup>83</sup>

Merchants in Southampton lived well: a will from 1349 mentions silver vessels, silk, lengths of fine cloth, carpets, bed-hangings, feather-beds, chests, doublets, tunics, and robes, evidence of a healthy disposable income and of the same kind of taste as London merchants and indeed aristocrats.<sup>84</sup> While not nearly as important as London, Southampton was a major port and, like London, its dependence on international trade gave it a cosmopolitan atmosphere: in the thirteenth century a local merchant owned products from all over Europe, ate imported fruits, and kept an African monkey as his pet.<sup>85</sup> The Chaucers may not, however, have spent much of their time there: it is likely that they travelled back to London regularly; perhaps indeed Agnes and Geoffrey stayed there most of the

<sup>79</sup>George Unwin (ed.), *Finance and Trade under Edward III* (Manchester: Longmans, Green, 1918), 282.

<sup>80</sup>For Richard Chaucer's appointment in London on 6 October 1341, under Reymund Seguin, see *Calendar of the Patent Rolls: Edward III*, Membrane 9, 5:289.

<sup>81</sup>Unwin, *Finance and Trade*, 251, 296–97; Margery Kirkbride James, *Studies in the Medieval Wine Trade*, ed. Elspeth M. Veale (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 168.

<sup>82</sup>Unwin, *Finance and Trade*, 289–90.

<sup>83</sup>James, *Medieval Wine Trade*, 9, 16; Colin Platt, *Medieval Southampton: The Port and Trading Community, A.D. 1000–1600* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 107–9.

<sup>84</sup>Platt, *Medieval Southampton*, 102.

<sup>85</sup>*Ibid.*, 103.

time. John certainly would have continued his own business dealings in the city, and they still owned their property there. But John was also now closely involved in the king's business, particularly in purchasing wine and sending it to the king's residences at Winchester, Salisbury, Oxford, and Odiham, and provisioning other castles such as Porchester, Carisbroke, and Marlborough.<sup>86</sup> He was perhaps making or consolidating the contacts that were to enable him to place his son in a royal household in the middle of the 1350s.

After John had been in this job for a year, unimaginable catastrophe struck: for the Chaucer family, for the country, for the whole of Europe and Asia, probably the most devastating catastrophe that the world has ever known. The ships that brought wine, spices, metals, timber, skins, fabrics, and fruits also brought a terrifying disease. The story of the Black Death is well known: it spread from the East, inexorably travelling across Europe, hitching a ride on the trade networks so fundamental to the Asian, North African, and European economies. It was a monstrous, agonizing, and brutal disease. It is possible that half of England's people died. It reached every corner of the country; it was indiscriminate in the toll it exacted.<sup>87</sup>

Many writers have speculated about the effect of the Black Death on the mentality of the survivors. Some suggest that it caused a *carpe diem* attitude, others that it led to increased emphasis on piety and religion. Literary critics point to a 'reciprocity between the depth of the pandemic's impact and the vigor of creative expression, particularly within the evolving category of literature,' in the years that followed.<sup>88</sup> Contemporary commentators desperately searched for a reason behind it, blaming the Jews, general immorality, or bad air.<sup>89</sup> Boccaccio—whose works would later change the trajectory of Chaucer's poetic career—wrote his magnum opus, the *Decameron*, just after the plague. He writes passionately about the behaviour of the people in plague-stricken Florence, painting a fictional picture of inverted moral codes and desperation. The ten wealthy protagon-

<sup>86</sup> James, *Medieval Wine Trade*, 182.

<sup>87</sup> Dyer, *Making a Living*, 271–72.

<sup>88</sup> Jamie C. Fumo, *Making Chaucer's 'Book of the Duchess': Textuality and Reception* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2015), 66.

<sup>89</sup> See documents in Rosemary Horrox (trans. and ed.), *The Black Death* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 56–57.

onists retreat from the city to the countryside, to tell stories and while away the time until the plague passes. Indeed, the rich did suffer less than the poor, as they did not live in such close proximity to each other, and they had more freedom of movement, but no class of people was immune—one of the king's daughters, Joan, died in Bordeaux in 1348.<sup>90</sup> The plague came to the Bordeaux region in the early months of 1348 and, from John Chaucer's point of view, was disastrous for the wine trade. While in 1308–9 (a bumper year) 102,724 tuns were exported from Gascon ports, in 1348–49, only 5,923 were exported.<sup>91</sup> There were human tragedies about to hit the Chaucer family when the plague came to England. In April 1349, all of John and Agnes's London relatives were wiped out. Possibly, it was their absence in Southampton that saved John and his family from perishing as well, through contact with their close relatives Richard Chaucer and Thomas Heron. The plague struck Southampton too, of course, as it struck everywhere, and the terror of the epidemic affected everyone. Yet, as historians have pointed out, recent archaeological evidence reveals that bodies were neatly laid out in cemeteries, not tipped into mass pits, and institutional records show that government went on much as usual. The records suggest a surprising continuity, demonstrating that the structures and institutions of the country were remarkably robust.<sup>92</sup>

The horrors of the Black Death must be seen in the context of a society in which death routinely struck people down at a much younger age than is the case today, where death appeared even more random and unpredictable than it does to us. Tragedy was the condition of life, as it always is, but in a far more extreme way: parents regularly saw their babies stillborn and experienced child after child dying; many more women died in childbirth, as minor infections could easily be fatal in an age before antibiotics. We have not experienced anything on the scale of the Black Death; no event, either natural or man-made, in the twentieth or twenty-first century has destroyed that kind of proportion of the general population. The differences in our attitudes to and expectations about death

<sup>90</sup> Dyer estimates that among the rich, mortality was about 27 per cent, among the clergy 42–45 per cent, and among peasants between 40 and 70 per cent. *Making a Living*, 272.

<sup>91</sup> James, *Medieval Wine Trade*, 26.

<sup>92</sup> Dyer, *Making a Living*, 273.

make it clear that our society would react very differently to a plague on the scale of what happened in 1348–49. Many people have written about the fact that Western culture today is a culture that excludes death, where dead bodies are not usually viewed, where death is taken out of the home and into a medical context and funeral industry, where death is, in many ways, taboo.<sup>93</sup> This was not the case in the Middle Ages. That doesn't mean that people did not mourn the loss of their family and friends just as much as we do today, but it does mean that people had different horizons of expectation and thought differently about the place of death in their lives.

The cycle of life and death is one of the great leitmotifs of medieval poetry, memorably expressed by Chaucer in many of his poems. The *Canterbury Tales* opens with the image of April succeeding March, spring succeeding winter, life succeeding death, masterfully linking this imagery with human sickness both physical and spiritual:

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;  
Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth  
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth  
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne  
Hath in the Ram his half cours yronne,  
And smale foweles maken melodye,  
That slepen al the nyght with open ye  
(So priketh hem nature in hir corages),  
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,  
And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,  
To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;  
And specially from every shires ende  
Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende,

<sup>93</sup>Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (London: Sage, 1993).

The hooly blisful martir for to seke,  
That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke. (1–18; plate 2)

The church's cycle of Lent and Easter mirrors the natural cycle of the seasons as spring and regeneration succeed winter. The extraordinary opening sentence culminates in a celebration of the thaumaturgic power of saintly relics ('The hooly blisful martir,' 17), as the pilgrimage brings spiritual healing to the pilgrim. The very cadences of these lines, with two parallel clauses, both beginning 'Whan . . .' (1, 5) building up to a decisive 'Thanne' (12) powerfully suggest that the cycles—of the seasons, the crops, the church year, human sin and recovery, and human life and death—have a balance and an order. That order is not a fair one—suffering and death strike unannounced and horrifically—but the cycle of life is inevitable. A passionate concern with these cycles of life and death suffuses the poetry of Chaucer, and of many of his contemporaries.<sup>94</sup> However, Chaucer is ultimately not interested in *dwelling* on that which we cannot change; rather, he depicts the choices and circumstances of particular individuals, at particular places and particular times. Indeed, in the opening of the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer quickly moves away from his distancing depiction of the eternal cycles of life to focus, instead, on what happened 'in that seson on a day, / In Southwerk at the Tabard as I lay' (19–20). He shifts our perspective from the eternal to the temporal, from the sacred to the secular, from the cosmic to the street-level. Both this juxtaposition of perspectives and the ultimate focus on a viewpoint in medias res, rather than an omniscient view from above, are hallmarks of Chaucer's poetics.

Chaucer's own family starkly experienced the tragedy of life in April 1349. In London, Thomas Heron made his will on 7 April, bequeathing all his tenements to John and making him his executor.<sup>95</sup> Five days later, when Richard Chaucer made his will, Thomas was already dead. Richard provided for two chantries, one in St Mary de Aldermarie and one in St Michael de Paternoster, for himself and for the souls of Thomas and of Richard's late wife, Mary, Chaucer's grandmother, whose tomb was in

<sup>94</sup> See, for instance, my discussion of the *Book of the Duchess* in chapter 5.

<sup>95</sup> Sharpe, *Calendar of Wills*, Roll 76 (169), 1:544.



St Mary Aldermarie.<sup>96</sup> We do not know exactly when she died; Richard's will was proved in July.<sup>97</sup> John Chaucer had now lost his parents, stepfather, and brother, and these losses made him a much richer man. Agnes also lost relations: her uncle, Hamo de Copton and her cousin Nicholas de Copton (Hamo's son) both died, and Agnes inherited their substantial property.<sup>98</sup> Nicholas's will is dated on the same day as Richard Chaucer's, 12 April. John now resigned his customs job and went back to London—but a changed London. It is impossible to know how he and his wife felt about profiting from this terrible tragedy. It had altered their—and everyone's—lives materially and emotionally; those who survived had new challenges to face.

When the 1350s started, Chaucer, aged seven or eight, was back in London with his parents. They were in very affluent circumstances but, like so many others, must have been reeling from the psychological fallout of the worst disaster in recorded history.<sup>99</sup> The Chaucer family was not alone in benefitting financially from the horrors of the plague: those who survived found they could command higher wages and a better standard of living, and there was a little more social mobility in the decades following the first arrival of the disease.<sup>100</sup> There were also, however, attempts to intervene in the market for the benefit of those at the top.<sup>101</sup> The Statute of Labourers tried, unsuccessfully, to fix wages at pre-plague levels but it could not hold back the changed economic conditions that the shortage of labour caused. In 1350, the mayor and aldermen of London issued new regulations to try to control wages and prices: this document has the aim of amending and redressing 'the damages and grievances' of the people of the city, who have been suffering from 'masons, carpenters, plasterers, tilers, and all manner of labourers' taking 'unreasonably more than they

<sup>96</sup>Ibid., Roll 77 (59), 1:590.

<sup>97</sup>Lister Matheson suggests that she may have died shortly before April 1339, when Thomas Heron granted a property to Richard Chaucer, perhaps because he had inherited the family home (originally his own father's house) on Mary's death. 'Chaucer's Ancestry,' 183.

<sup>98</sup>Sharpe, *Calendar of Wills*, Roll 77 (107), 1:600; 'The soke of Aldgate,' in G.A.J. Hodgett (ed.), *The Cartulary of Holy Trinity, Aldgate* (Leicester: London Record Society, 1971), fol. 175v, 197–99. *British History Online*, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/london-record-soc/vol7/pp197-199>.

<sup>99</sup>Dyer points out that on a global scale, the Black Death exceeded in mortality any other known disaster. *Making a Living*, 233.

<sup>100</sup>Ibid., 279.

<sup>101</sup>Kaye, *History of Balance*, 391–97.

have been wont to take.’ Amidst the detailed regulations about exactly how much different kinds of labourers could be paid, and exactly how gloves, shoes, and different kinds of wine should be priced, over and over again we see the phrase ‘not take more than they were wont to take.’<sup>102</sup> Civic authorities and the government tried hard to fix the economy at pre-1349 levels, to override the dramatically changed conditions. Labourers and the poor, however, had died in such numbers that the balance of society had changed, and the lower classes had a little more power. This kind of legislation reveals attempts to maintain a status quo that had gone forever. Instead, this was an era of economic and social change and development, of ‘newfangledness’—a word that Chaucer himself would later coin.<sup>103</sup> Sumptuary laws sought to prevent social mobility and to maintain class stratification by prescribing what fabrics people of different social statuses could wear, but such legislation had very little effect and indeed was almost immediately repealed.<sup>104</sup> People now were a little less bound to remain metaphorically or physically in the place where they were born. Of course, mercantile families were more used to experiencing the quick rise of new men than were laboring peasants or the aristocracy. The fact that all aspects of life are dependent on economics, on wages and prices, supply and demand, had always been evident to men such as John Chaucer and his associates. So the new zeitgeist was an intensification of the usual condition of mercantile society, less of a shock than it might have been to long-established landed gentry, for example. Nonetheless, from the 1350s onward, there was a clear perception that things had changed, that the world was a more uncertain and unpredictable place.

Chaucer was now at the age when infancy was thought to end and childhood to begin. This was the time when children might attend school and generally start to live a more structured kind of existence. Many boys

<sup>102</sup> Riley, *Memorials of London*, 253–57 (translated from *Letter-Book F*, fol. clxxxix).

<sup>103</sup> The *Middle English Dictionary* assigns the first recorded usages of the word to Chaucer, although this does not, of course, demonstrate definitively that he was the first to use the word. See Hans Kurath, Sherman M. Kuhn, and Robert E. Lewis (eds.), *Middle English Dictionary* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1952–2001), available online at <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>. On Chaucer and the new, see Ingham, *The Medieval New*, 112–40.

<sup>104</sup> October 1363, in Given-Wilson (ed.), *Parliament Rolls of Medieval England* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2005), Membrane 3, no. 25, 5:165–66 (hereafter, PROME). The law was repealed at the subsequent parliament (January 1365). PROME, Membrane 2, no. 11, part 2, 5:182.

and girls who learnt to read did so initially in the home.<sup>105</sup> Learning the alphabet and entering literacy was then, as it is now, associated with a domestic, maternal kind of learning that also, paradoxically, begins to separate the child from the mother, as does the earlier entry into language itself.<sup>106</sup> As Chaucer moved beyond the home, primary scene of the entry into literacy, he entered into a new reading scene, the male-dominated space of the schoolroom. There were several local schools, including one at St Paul's Cathedral, which Chaucer might have attended. The schoolboy lived a structured life, attending school from early in the day, wearing a long gown, carrying his writing materials with him.<sup>107</sup> Schools were also places of discipline and corporal punishment: in a neat example of poetic justice, in 1301 an Oxford teacher fell out of a tree and drowned while cutting rods to beat his pupils.<sup>108</sup>

At school, the focus was on learning Latin. The school alphabet was comprised of twenty-four letters (there was no 'j' or 'w') and the symbols for 'et,' 'con,' and 'est.' The alphabet was recited like a prayer, beginning with the sign of the cross and ending with 'Amen.'<sup>109</sup> Later in the century, Trevisa wrote that since 1349—that is, after the plague—English had supplanted French as the language of teaching in schools.<sup>110</sup> However, Christopher Cannon has recently argued persuasively that this account is misleading and that Trevisa's views were skewed by his experiences of Oxford grammar schools, which were not representative of the rest of the country. Cannon argues that Trevisa's account misrepresents the role of French as well as the role of English and that surviving textbooks strongly suggest that students were immersed in Latin from a young age—in other

<sup>105</sup>Nicholas Orme, *Medieval Schools: From Roman Britain to Renaissance England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 60–61.

<sup>106</sup>Miri Rubin writes that the ABC 'epitomizes the acquisition of the formal properties of language, that learning which removes the child from the breast where it first learns to speak into the world of grammar. ABC is innocence and its loss.' Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (London: Allen Lane, 2009), 278. See also Georgiana Donavin, *Scribit Mater: Mary and the Language Arts in the Literature of Medieval England* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 163–84.

<sup>107</sup>Orme, *Medieval Schools*, 133.

<sup>108</sup>*Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>109</sup>*Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>110</sup>*Ibid.*, 75, 87. There is evidence that, from the 1340s, some textbooks included English translations of verb paradigms, for instance, John Cornwall's *Speculum Grammatice*, discussed in Orme, *Medieval Schools*, 106.

words, that a vernacular was not routinely used in teaching Latin.<sup>111</sup> Cannon also argues that what Chaucer learnt at school ‘shaped his writing ever afterwards,’ and indeed that the extraordinary outpouring of poetry in the last decades of the fourteenth century can be connected with the training received in schoolrooms during these years, as the teaching of grammar ‘licensed experimentation and exploration,’ through the encouragement of independent composition and improvisation.<sup>112</sup>

Boys such as Chaucer, who went to school, experienced books en masse in the schoolroom. St Paul’s, for instance, had a very large library: in 1328, William Tolleshunt left a sizeable collection of books for the school, including Hugutio, Isidore, Priscian, and books on logic, law, and medicine.<sup>113</sup> Boys owned their own books and passed them on. Books were not always worth a fortune and were not always luxury objects. In 1337, for instance, John Cobbledick left twenty-nine books to Oriel College, worth a total of £9, 2s (around 6s each, less than Chaucer’s first employer was to spend on his paltok [tunic] and leggings, as we shall see in chapter 2).<sup>114</sup> A manuscript of *Troilus* was valued at 20 shillings in 1394 (the same price as the portifory discussed at the beginning of this chapter).<sup>115</sup>

The space of the schoolroom itself was different from schoolrooms today. The master sat in a chair of authority, raised up, surveying the room, while the boys sat in benches around the edges.<sup>116</sup> Perhaps the most obvious association is the panopticon, a conceptual space in which the teacher is all-important and the boys under his surveillance. Another way of thinking of this bookish space, though, is the theatre. This was a space for performance, and performativity reflected the spirit of education at this time more generally.<sup>117</sup> At school, boys engaged with set texts not by mindlessly

<sup>111</sup> Christopher Cannon, *From Literacy to Literature: England, 1300–1400* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 17–34.

<sup>112</sup> Cannon, *Literacy to Literature*, 8, 13, 85.

<sup>113</sup> Orme, *Medieval Schools*, 154. See also Edith Rickert, ‘Chaucer at School,’ *Modern Philology* 29:3 (1932): 257–74.

<sup>114</sup> Charles F. Briggs, ‘The Clerk,’ in Rigby, *Historians on Chaucer*, 187–205, 197. See chapter 2 in this study for Chaucer’s paltok.

<sup>115</sup> Carlin, ‘Host,’ 477.

<sup>116</sup> Orme, *Medieval Schools*, 153, 162.

<sup>117</sup> Seth Lerer, *Children’s Literature: A Reader’s History from Aesop to Harry Potter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 5.

learning but by parsing, translating, paraphrasing, writing commentaries, and debating morals. Dialectic and argument were the essence of the experience of the medieval schoolboy: ‘disputations . . . were the heart and soul of the educational curriculum.’<sup>118</sup>

It is instructive to look at some of the foundational books that medieval schoolboys grappled with in the schoolroom. Aesop’s *Fables* are perhaps the most iconic of ‘childhood’ texts. At the heart of the medieval school curriculum, they are still read by children and adults alike today, and they are deliberately provocative texts. Medieval children were encouraged to be scholarly but also to interpret for themselves. Indeed, in the Aesop they had before them, they saw active reading exemplified: they read not a text that even pretended to be by Aesop but a version by Avianus, who had translated Babrius’s Greek verse translation of Aesop’s text into Latin verse; or by Romulus, who had translated Phaedrus’s Latin verse translation of Aesop into Latin prose; or by Walter of England, who had compiled a set of Latin verse based on Romulus.<sup>119</sup> Texts appeared with glosses and commentaries, and sometimes summaries were added. In Avianus’s version, a later writer added *promythia* and *epimythia* at the beginning and end of the fables, to point to a moral.<sup>120</sup> Some fables contain morals in the voice of a character, some in the voice of a narrator. Some fables have no obvious moral at all. Thus, the collection includes, for instance, the fable of the crow and the jar, in which the crow is able to raise the water level on the jar and quench his thirst by dropping pebbles into the container, demonstrating the superiority of foresight over effort, or the fable of the ant and the grasshopper, in which the ant profits from hard work and the grasshopper is not allowed the fruits of the ant’s labour. In contrast, the collection also includes the story of the traveller and the satyr, in which the traveller is punished for being able to warm his fingers and cool his food with his breath, or the story of the monkey’s

<sup>118</sup> David C. Fowler, *Life and Times of John Trevisa, Medieval Scholar* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), 68; Thomas L. Reed, *Middle English Debate Poetry and the Aesthetics of Irresolution* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990), 43–55; Peter Travis, *Disseminial Chaucer: Rereading the Nun’s Priest’s Tale* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 57.

<sup>119</sup> Lerer, *Children’s Literature*, 41–43.

<sup>120</sup> ‘Introduction to the Fables of Avianus,’ in J. Wight Duff and Arnold M. Duff (trans.), *Minor Latin Poets*, Loeb Classical Library 434 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 2:675. Promythia introduce a fable; epimythia provide a moral at the end.

twins, in which the favourite twin ends up abandoned, and the spurned baby ends up as the lucky one. An explicit moral is included for this story, but it is hardly satisfying, especially for the monkey who has been abandoned to predators ('many come to like what once they slighted; and hope, changing the order of things, carries the lowly back into happier fortune').<sup>121</sup> Such stories encourage debate and dissent over their meanings. In the schoolroom, Chaucer learnt to argue for argument's sake, to play with rhetoric, to defend a position, however indefensible. These early experiences infused Chaucer's later poetry. Most notably, as Peter Travis has magisterially demonstrated, the multigeneric, debate-dominated 'Nun's Priest's Tale' returns the reader to 'foundational curricular experiences,' to a time when Chaucer was 'most intimately engaged in the craft of literary analysis, imitation, and production.'<sup>122</sup>

For an increasingly independent child, the streets of London offered many kinds of excitement. Londoners were accustomed to civic entertainment and performances, from mayoral ceremonies, plays, and fairs to pillorying, rough music, and hangings.<sup>123</sup> Much later in Chaucer's life, he was living in Aldgate when Vintry Ward became the centre of the worst atrocity of the Rising of 1381: the mass murder of immigrant workers, pulled out from the sanctuary of St Martin Vintry and slaughtered in the street.<sup>124</sup> In Chaucer's childhood, the blood that flowed in Vintry Ward usually came from animals. In 1368, the jurors of several wards, including Vintry, held inquests about who was throwing offal and other remnants from the slaughtering of animals into the Thames, and who was carrying the animal parts through the streets, spilling blood and animal organs into the lanes.<sup>125</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, the streets of Vintry Ward also played host to the most important men in the country, who attended feasts in the ward and used it as a thoroughfare. A feast hosted by Henry Picard in the late 1350s or early 1360s became known as the Feast of the

<sup>121</sup> Avianus, 'The Monkey's Twins,' in Duff and Duff, *Minor Latin Poets*, 2:736–37.

<sup>122</sup> Travis, *Disseminal Chaucer*, 54–57, 83.

<sup>123</sup> Anne Lancashire, *London Civic Theatre: City and Pageantry from Roman Times to 1558* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 52–55; Hanawalt, *Growing Up*, 33.

<sup>124</sup> V. H. Galbraith (ed.), *The Anonimale Chronicle: 1333 to 1381* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1970), 145–56; translated in R. B. Dobson, *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381* (London: Macmillan, 1970), 162.

<sup>125</sup> Thomas, *Calendar, 1364–1381*, Roll A13, Membrane 6, 93.

Five Kings; a generation later, in the early fifteenth century, Lewis John hosted the sons of Henry IV at a feast in Vintry Ward at which Chaucerian poems were performed.<sup>126</sup> One of my favourite Vintry Ward streets—‘Knight riders streete’—was so named because knights were armed at the Tower Royal and then rode through this street on their way to Smithfield for jousting.<sup>127</sup> And sometimes dramas that began inside the houses of Vintry Ward played out in the streets. Joan and William Sharpyng, whose marriage was breaking apart because of William’s impotence, came into conflict on the streets of Vintry Ward in the early 1370s, as William repeatedly assaulted her there while attempting to prevent her consulting her lawyer.<sup>128</sup> The streets of Vintry Ward were spectacular, cosmopolitan, filthy, smelly, banal, beautiful, violent, and changeable.

Chaucer entered his teens while living in this dynamic urban environment, learning languages and business skills, enjoying the comfortable lifestyle of his wealthy parents, mixing with people he had known all his life, secure in his Thames Street home in the Vintry. But he was about to move out of his comfort zone and into a quite different mode of life. By the time the Black Prince, fresh from his incredible victory at Poitiers, triumphantly entered London in 1357 with his prisoner, the French king, to be greeted by elaborate pageants and displays, Chaucer was no longer living with his parents in Vintry Ward. He had begun his career and was now living and serving in an aristocratic great household.

<sup>126</sup>The five kings are usually said to be the kings of England, France, Scotland, Cyprus, and Denmark, but they were not all in England at the same time. There probably was a lavish feast including some kings, but the story has been embroidered over time. See C. L. Kingsford, ‘The Feast of the Five Kings,’ *Archaeologica* 67 (1916): 119–26. A note in Ashmole 59 accompanying Scogan’s Moral Balade reads: ‘Here folowethe nexst a moral balade to my lord the Prince, to my lord of Clarence, to my lord of Bedford, and to my lorde of Gloucestre, by Henry Scogan, at a souper of feorthe mercheande in the Vyntre in London, at the hous of Lowys Johan.’ Katherine Forni (ed.), ‘Scogan’s Moral Balade,’ in *The Chaucerian Apocrypha: A Selection* (Kalamazoo, MI: TEAMS Middle English Texts, 2005), 148–52.

<sup>127</sup>John Stow, ‘Vintrie warde,’ in C. L. Kingsford (ed.), *A Survey of London; Reprinted from the Text of 1603* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908), 245, *British History Online*, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/no-series/survey-of-london-stow/1603/pp238-250>.

<sup>128</sup>Thomas, *Calendar, 1364–1381*, Roll A15, Membrane 3, 117–18; Roll A19, Membrane 7, 173–74.

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