

# Princeton University Press Ideas Podcast

## Interview with Marion Turner on *CHAUCER: A European Life*.

### Marshall Poe

Welcome to the New Books Network

Hello everybody. This is Marshall Poe. I'm the editor of the New Books Network and this is an episode in the Princeton University Press Ideas Podcast. And today we are very fortunate to have Marion Turner on the show, and we will be talking with her about her book *CHAUCER: A European Life*, which came out from Princeton in 2019. Marion, welcome to the show.

### Marion Turner

Thank you for having me.

### Marshall Poe

Absolutely, my pleasure. Could you begin the interview by telling us a little bit about yourself?

### Marion Turner

Sure. My name is Professor Marion Turner. I'm a Professor of English Literature at the University of Oxford, where I'm a tutorial fellow at Jesus College. So I teach literature from kind of the 7th Century through to the 16th and I research all kinds of things [having] to do with the late medieval, particularly Chaucer.

### Marshall Poe

You have to cover a lot of centuries compared to your coffee.

### Marion Turner

Yeah. Well I do and I actually also stray into the modern because I also teach courses on Life Writing since I became a biographer writing this book, so I actually teach kind of every century in a way.

### Marshall Poe

Wow. Yeah, that's a lot! That is a lot. Good on you! Could you tell us why you wrote this book?

### Marion Turner

Well, I suppose I thought that there were a lot of stories that needed to be told about Chaucer and stories that haven't been told, and on the contrary, and there's a lot of misconceptions that people have about Chaucer, about medieval literature, and I wanted to put some of those right. So Chaucer, first of all, had a completely fascinating life and I think a lot of people just don't know that--that this was a man who was a prisoner of war who traveled all over France and Italy and Spain, who had all kinds of interesting jobs, worked for the king, saw The Peasants Revolt happening in London, invented iambic pentameter--did so many things and was such an experimental interesting guy--but people tend to think of him in somewhat staid terms and one of the things that I really wanted to do was to unpick the idea of Chaucer as the "Father of

English Literature,” which I think has a real hold on people's idea of Chaucer and it's an idea--this sense of the “Father of English Literature”--it makes people think of him as patriarchal, as conventional, and as of course, English. And so I wanted both to look at the idea of him as “patriarchal,” the “Father of the Canon,” and demonstrate the fact that, in fact, he was very interested in the new, in experiment, in debunking ideas of authority and authoritative voices.

And then also, I mean, you can see that the subtitle of my book is *A European Life*. So I wanted to interrogate that idea of “Englishness” and to re-establish Chaucer not as the “Head of the English Canon,” but as a great European poet, as someone who traveled widely and who was influenced by all kinds of cultural streams that came, in fact, from all over the world, but particularly from Europe, and to help people to think about him as someone that was expansive in his interests and, therefore, to help people to think about literature in English and English culture as something that is fundamentally “European,” “transnational,” “global”—not as “insular,” “limited,” “nationalistic.”

### Marshall Poe

I'm glad you mentioned travel because I think many people have the misconception that people in the medieval period or late medieval period did not travel a lot or even in the early modern period. I remember seeing a diagram or a map of the places that Thomas Hobbes went and he went everywhere all over Europe and, yeah, people think of him as an “English philosopher.” Well, not really because these people traveled a lot and, as we'll talk about in Chaucer's case, he travelled even more than your sort of average...he was kind of a court functionary at a point, so we'll get into that.

This is a kind of what we call in America “inside baseball question.” And I mean, the question is specific to a particular field of interest. Could you tell us a little bit about the sources of Chaucer's life? I've worked in the medieval period myself and I know that sometimes they're quite thin, but I'd be interested to hear how we know what we know about Chaucer.

### Marion Turner

Yeah, so we actually know a huge amount about Chaucer. So if you compare what we know about Chaucer to what we know about Shakespeare, there really is no comparison; we know so much more about Chaucer, even though he of course lived a couple of hundred years earlier. And the main reason for that is that he was a civil servant and the English are very good at bureaucracy and so there's a huge amount of records. There's a volume called “The Chaucer Life Records,” which has around 500 separate documents, which all refer specifically to two aspects of Chaucer's life. These documents, though, they are not private diaries or letters and none of them has anything at all to do with the fact that he was a poet; as far as we know he was never paid anything for his poetry.

So these documents are, I mean, many of them are things that might first of all seem to be quite dry documents, but in fact what I found was, when you when you dig into them, when you expand them, you can do all kinds of things with them. So lots of these records are things like the fact that he is paid for doing something. For example, he appears in the list of people who are all getting given livery when a member of the royal family dies. It's those kinds of documents. It's not, you know, a personal letter from his son or anything like that. So one of the things that I did was I would look at some of these records as starting points and then I might put them back into their original context. So rather than seeing them in the context of a volume

of Chaucer life records, I would take the document that, for instance, tells us that Chaucer was given a safe conduct in Navarre and in Spain (modern Spain, but then it was a separate Kingdom of Navarre) and I would then look at all the other documents from the chancellery of Navarre that were issued in the same week to try to see what was going on when he was there. Who was this? Who was it who was giving him the safe conduct? Who else was at the court at that time? And I went to Navarre, physically went to that actual palace where that safe conduct was issued, looked at the streets around it, saw where the street of the Jews was, saw what kind of architecture is there, and tried to expand that small document into something much richer, which could really tell us all kinds of things about his life. Or another example would be the earliest Chaucer life record, which just tells us that he, as a teenager when he was working as a page, was given clothes by his employer.

So his employer was a Countess Elizabeth de Burgh who was married to the son of the King Lionel and everyone has known about this document, as they say: it's the earliest Chaucer life record that says that she bought him these clothes. So then I looked into the clothes. The main item was called a [Unintelligible—poltock?]. And so I looked into fashion history. I looked into two contemporary chronicles. I tried to find out what exactly [unintelligible—poltock] was or what people were saying about the [unintelligible/poltock] and I found out this was a completely fascinating item of clothing, that this was in fact something which was scandalous at the time. It was high fashion. It was brand new at the time that Chaucer given it and that very shortly afterwards conservative, ecclesiastical often, chroniclers were saying that this garment was so scandalous because it was short and tight and it allowed people to see men's genitals kind of outlined very provocatively. So chroniclers were saying at the time that it was such an outrageous item of fashion that it had actually caused the plague to return to England—that God had sent the plague as a punishment. This is that the second wave of the plague in the 1360s.

So this turned out to be an incredibly rich document that initially seems quite throwaway, quite minor, but you find out all kinds of things. A lot of people really found that that anecdote I think very interesting in the book. It's in the second chapter, in the chapter about the household, and I think one of the things that people found interesting about it was this sense of immediate accessibility, the sense of relevance with the present day, you know, the idea that “oh look, back in the 14th century, just like today, people are saying things to teenagers like ‘oh, you can't go out dressed like that and what do you think you're doing showing off your body in that way?’” And with even more specific relevance to our particular moment right now, people are also saying, “oh, it's those young people, they caused the plague.” There's lots of discussion about you know, “oh look at young people socializing spreading COVID.” You do get this sense of “the things that don't change,” but the other thing that I think is really important about this anecdote and about thinking about the past in general is not only the sense of relevance and accessibility, which is absolutely there, but also the absolute otherness, because these were not fashions that the young Geoffrey chose to wear. He worked in a job in which he was not paid a salary; he was paid in a place to sleep and food and clothes and a kind of education in manners and in other kinds of cultural pursuits; he didn't choose these clothes, the great lady for whom he worked bought him these clothes because she wanted the people in her retinue, the people who were sitting around in her hall, to look fashionable because that would reflect well on her.

Chaucer, you know, unlike privileged teenagers today, was not able to have much of a private life; he didn't have a room of his own; he wasn't able to craft his own identity in the way that

most teenagers would feel is very important today; he wasn't able to choose his own style, his own fashion, where he slept, what he ate, anything like that. He had to live in a much much more public way. So I think that's just a really really important reminder to us when we're thinking about the past to think not only about what is familiar but also to make these really difficult leaps of the imagination and really try to think about what it meant to live in a very different way, with different standards and different ideas about what it meant to be a person, to be an individual.

### Marshall Poe

And at that point in his life, and we'll come to this in a second, but he was what we would call "in service." So he really wasn't his own person.

### Marion Turner

Yeah, he was "in service" but not in the way that we would think of a domestic servant, because this was a privileged position. So this was a position that only a very lucky young man would have, you know, he was a page boy; he was not, you know, in the kitchens slaving away all day. He would mainly have been running errands and being treated almost like a son of the house. I mean not quite as much as that; he still had to do what he was told but he was getting an education, making connections, doing those kinds of things. And as I say, being a kind of ornamental figure as well, he would have been doing things like music and poetry and sword fighting and those kinds of things, not slaving away carrying buckets of water up the stairs or anything like that.

### Marshall Poe

So could you tell us a little bit about Chaucer's background and early life before he ends up wearing this garb, the name of which I have forgotten but am going to Google?

### Marion Turner

Chaucer was born in the early 1340s in London. He was born in and lived in Vintry Ward. So medieval London, a lot of London in fact, was divided into wards. Vintry Ward, as you can tell, was named after the vintners, so wine merchants. Of course other people lived there as well, but it was known for the wine trade and Chaucer's father was a wealthy wine merchant who traveled to France to get wines to sell.

So Chaucer was from a well-off background not an aristocratic background, but a well-off mercantile background. Vintry Ward was one of the wards which was right on the north bank of the River Thames. So it's on the river, so if you're in Vintry Ward you are seeing ships coming in and going out every day, ships that were bringing products from all over the world, from as far afield as Indonesia at this time. Of course, the ships didn't come directly from Indonesia. There would have been many middlemen, but products were coming from that far and Vintry Ward was the ward of London that had more immigrants in it than any other ward of London. So Chaucer grew up meeting people who came from lots of different countries and hearing lots of different languages. All educated men at this time were trilingual—English, French and Latin—in England, but he had other languages as well and learned languages such as Italian.

He was brought up in Vintry Ward. He may have also spent some time in Southampton when his father got a job there for a bit and his father had positions for the royal household as well, provisioning some of the king's residences with wine, so he had royal connections, which may

have helped Chaucer to get a leg up when he himself got a job later in life. We don't know much about his early life. We have to speculate a certain amount about what he would have done. So we don't know which school he went to but he certainly went to school, went to a grammar school in London, and there were various possibilities, and he would have been schooled in Latin very much and learnt all kinds of skills therein. And in London he would have experienced the drama of London streets, the excitement of living in a big city--not very big by today's standards-- but big compared to the hamlets that most people lived in at that time. So he had a cosmopolitan early existence and an early existence that was rooted in multilingualism and a world in which it was normal for people to travel around, to travel abroad as his father did, and also a world which had some connections to the court, to the highest people in the land, without by any means being "of the court."

### Marshall Poe

Yeah, this is a great segue to my next question. He was not an aristocrat. He was not a nobler peer. How did he make it into the circle of the court?

### Marion Turner

Well, we don't know exactly how he got his lucky break, but it was probably through his father's connection because his father worked as what was known as a deputy butler to the king. We didn't mean he was a butler in a modern sense, but that he provisions some of the king's residences with wines and so on, so probably that was how Chaucer got his first posting as a page.

He then went on being attached to various royal households for most of the rest of his life. I think he must have done well once he arrived; it must have been clear that this was someone of exceptional intelligence and ability. So in his early years when he was a page he was working for Elizabeth the Countess of Ulster and very soon afterwards for her husband as well, Lionel of Antwerp, and because of the nature of the great household when that household went to war, he went to war with them. So when the war with France was renewed he went and fought with the king's sons and the king in France in 1359 and 1360 and he was captured, he was taken prisoner, he was ransomed by the king, and then after that he was employed doing things like taking letters when the peace discussions were happening after that that part of the Hundred Years War. And later on in life he had attachments to John of Gaunt's household and also to Edward III's household and then later Richard II's household, and had a number of appointments. He was clearly a useful person. I think partly he clearly had very good language skills. He was also an able diplomat, so we often hear of him traveling to Europe on diplomatic missions. And I think that was partly because he was good at talking and he obviously had a way with words, as we can see in his amazing writings, and after some of the battles that he fought in his early life mostly he was not a fighter, mostly he was sent on missions by the royal household in order to negotiate with people, negotiate war treaties or peace treaties, or marriage treaties. He was better at talking than fighting and I think the fact that he knew Italian meant he was sent on Italian trips, because not very many people did know Italian and I think this is an interesting example of his mercantile background probably working in his favor. Because he was brought up amongst Italian merchants, he knew Italian and then because of this interesting position he had, kind of straddling the worlds of the mercantile world and the court world, he was in the position to be sent on courtly missions. So he was sent to Italy twice but he also, while working for the royal household, was simply given more quotidian roles as well. It wasn't all traveling around Europe and going to Milan and Pavia.

He also got a job as a customs officer, which he did for many years. And that was also a royal appointment, something that the king gave him to do, but it involved essentially being an accountant. He always worked, you know, all through his life. He was doing paid work and, incredibly almost, he was writing things like the Canterbury Tales, you know, largely in his spare time.

### Marshall Poe

Two questions. When did he start writing? And why did he start writing?

### Marion Turner

Well, I mean those are really interesting questions. So we know that he was writing by the early 1370s. I think he was certainly writing earlier than that as well. You know, you don't suddenly start writing and produce *The Book of the Duchess* as your first ever attempt, but we know that he wrote that poem after someone's death. So he wrote it probably around 1370. So when he was maybe coming up to thirty in his late twenties, but he must have written things earlier. He may even have written things in French in his youth because it was much more normal for someone like him at the court to write in French, but we don't know and then he wrote an incredible amount after that. Of course, there are other things that did not survive and we can see that he was someone who was absolutely driven to write. I think he was someone who had to write it in a way that you can't rationalize or explain. So I think that the amount that he wrote, and not for financial reward, you know, the amount that he wrote I think shows how passionate he was intellectually about writing.

So I suppose a supplementary question within your question is also not just "why did he write?" but "why did he write the kinds of things that he wrote?" Because it wasn't automatic that someone such as Chaucer would write in English or would write the range of poems that he wrote. And so I think first of all the fact that he chose to write in English...I mean, Chaucer was someone who was fascinated by experiment, you know, he always wanted to do experimental things. Now, of course people have always written things in English. There was a long unbroken tradition of literature in English, you know, going back to before *Beowulf*. So it wasn't that it was entirely novel, but people hadn't written these kinds of texts in English. He was very much writing initially within a French tradition, writing what we call a love narrative, the kinds of things that poets writing in French, people such as de Machaut--those kinds of poems have always been written in French before and Chaucer decided to try this in English to see what he could do with this language. So I think partly he's challenging himself; he wants to do something innovative; he wants to do something different, and that sense of being experimental, of wanting to do new things in literature, really continues when he encounters the Italians. I think the influence of the great Italian poets is really fundamental to what Chaucer is doing, even the very decision to write in English is in many ways an international, not a national decision, because he's following in the footsteps of people such as Dante who had decided that you could write great poetry in his Tuscan dialect, you didn't have to use Latin; you didn't have to use the authoritative language; you could use the vernacular.

So Chaucer is following that European tradition and says "Well, okay if the Italians can do it in Tuscan, why can't I try in my little vernacular?" "Why can't I see what English can do with this second cousin language, this less important little brother language?" "Can I try and see what it can do?" And then once he had really read those Italian poets in great detail, particularly Dante

and Boccaccio, that also radically changes the kinds of poems that he writes and feels that he that he wants to write. So he uses the Italians both for subject matter and also for style. So it's after he's read certain verse forms and line forms in Italian that he develops a whole range of different kinds of verse forms; things like the seven-line royal stanza as well as line forms such as the ten-syllable-five stress iambic pentameter, which is developed from an Italian metrical form. So he uses the Italians to do something different but it's very much inspired by them. So I think he's driven by this desire to innovate and we see that right across his writing life because he keeps on doing new things, different things. There really is an infinite variety in the kind of poetry that he writes—he also writes some prose, of course, but it's mainly poetry—and the variety is incredible. It's extraordinary to see a writer who can write the bawdy rude fabliaux tales and then translates Boethius's philosophy and can a translation of the French Romance of the Rose, can write short lyric poems, can translate moral fables and saints lives, can write dream visions...[Unclear] there's just so much there. It's hard to believe anyone could do so much.

### Marshall Poe

This may sound very odd, but I'm reminded of Keith Richards listening to American blues music and thinking "this is what I need to do."

I have to do this, but did he actually meet these Italian poets, and he could converse with them because he spoke Italian right?

### Marion Turner

Well, he did speak Italian, but he probably didn't meet them, no. Dante was long dead. It's one of those tantalizing things because he nearly overlapped with Petrarch when Chaucer went to Lombardy, which is where Petrarch had been living. He nearly overlapped with Boccaccio. And he could have met Boccaccio, actually. It's one of those things a lot of people like to imagine that he did, because Chaucer went to Florence not long before Boccaccio gave a series of lectures about Dante in Florence. It is conceivable that they met but there is absolutely no evidence, unfortunately. But yeah, lots of people have written that as a fictionalized story. But probably when he was in Italy he was able to pick up a lot of their manuscripts and to pick up texts that no one else had read, you know, so that he's reading particularly things like the poetry and prose of Boccaccio before anyone else in England has read those texts at all.

### Marshall Poe

I'm glad you mentioned manuscripts and you mentioned Beowulf. If I'm not incorrect, Beowulf survives in one manuscript. Is that right?

### Marion Turner

Yes. Yes that is right and even that manuscript was burnt and is flawed.

### Marshall Poe

Right, and so this leads to my question, for whom was he writing and do we have a lot of manuscripts? This is obviously prior to the printing press. What do we know about the circulation of his manuscripts?

### Marion Turner

Yes, so we have a lot more manuscripts of Chaucer's texts than we do of Old English poetic text. So we have I think 80-something manuscripts of the Canterbury Tales, but none of them

are from Chaucer's lifetime, so, you know, they proliferated in the 15th century. So Chaucer had died in 1400. The two earliest manuscripts...I mean, it's possible that they were written in his last years, but probably just afterwards. But they're roughly contemporaneous with Chaucer. And lots of people think that even if Chaucer himself didn't have anything to do with them, that his son may have had something to do with them. And there's a there's a lot of discussion about whether the scribe of those manuscripts was in fact a scribe who had worked personally for Chaucer and therefore had a close understanding of Chaucer's intentions for the text. And those things are under debate, but in terms of your question about for whom was he writing?

Well, we have various ways of thinking about this. So we know that some of his early readers were people who were somewhat like himself, so some of his early readers were people who were kind of on the fringes of the court. So people who worked for the court who were members of the household, but were not aristocrats, you know, so when you look at the wills of people such as dukes and the highest aristocracy at this time, the books that they leave are not books in English. The fictional books tend to be books in French, but we do know that chamber knights--so people have a slightly lower level, but still very privileged members of the court--that they were reading Chaucer's texts and quoting from them. Someone such as Sir John [Unintelligible] for instance who wrote his own texts. We also have references to merchants and city people reading his texts. So someone, for instance, a merchant used a manuscript of Troilus to pay a debt in the 1390s.

So yeah, so we have these, you know, these really interesting references to people who were more "of the city" reading his texts and scribes, such as someone called Thomas [Unintelligible] who was actually executed in the 1380s. He was reading Troilus very early because he wrote his own text that was very much influenced by Troilus. So I think it's very likely that he had a mixed audience of men and women. In one of his poems in the prologue to the Legend of Good Women he imagines giving the poem to the queen, Queen Anne. Whether or not that actually happened, he's imagining an audience which includes women and again at the end of Troilus he talks about his audience as an audience which includes women. So I think he is very much trying to write for women as well as men and writing in English makes it more likely that he can reach a slightly more diverse range of people.

So in choosing to write in English, he's making it more likely that women can read his work and also more likely that people of a slightly more mixed class demographic can read his texts. It's not the case that your average ploughman is sitting around reading The Knight's Tale, not at all. But it's also not the case that only very privileged members of the court are reading Chaucer's texts. I think it's almost certain that his texts, that the Canterbury Tales in particular, was performed, for instance in the Tabard Inn, the real Tabard Inn. Chaucer sets the opening of the Canterbury Tales in the Tabard Inn. This was a real pub and the person who ran it was Harry Bailey, as he is in the Canterbury Tales. [Unclear] I think that it is extremely likely that his text was read in a situation in which people are sitting around, drinking, eating and socializing, and of course texts were very frequently read out loud at this time. In fact, even if you were reading on your own privately, you would most likely read the text out loud, you know. Reading silently was quite a new thing that was coming in, but very often if you had a text you would be reading it out to a group of people, so many people would be accessing it at once. There's a lovely scene in Troilus and Criseyde where the heroine Criseyde is sitting with a group of her ladies and one of them is reading out a romance text and they are all listening and talking about it and singing and it's like a lovely kind of medieval book group image of how people experienced reading as



something that was collaborative and something that prompted conversation and I think we can very much imagine that happening both in a courtly kind of setting with some of Chaucer's poems and in the more accessible pub kind of setting that is drawn for us in the Canterbury Tales.

#### Marshall Poe

This question might be inside baseball as well, but I've done a little of this work. How are these manuscripts dated? Are there watermarks at this time on paper or how do you do it?

#### Marion Turner

Most of them aren't on paper; they're on parchment. Although when paper comes in it is marked, but more by handwriting. So that's the main way because handwriting changes and paleographers can mainly date through the handwriting style and also sometimes of course [through] ownership. We have records of people who have written their names in [books] when they owned them, those kinds of things as well. But it's mainly done by dating the handwriting.

#### Marshall Poe

Yeah, I see. God bless the paleographers. Yeah. I remember taking paleography courses in graduate school. My follow-up question is: was it unusual for somebody in his position—he was a royal official and an important one—to embark on these kinds of literary ventures?

#### Marion Turner

Well, it was unusual to do it to the extent that he did it and certainly it was extremely unusual to do it as well as he did it in that almost no one else before or since has ever written as well as Chaucer, perhaps no one. Writing poetry was something that was a fashionable thing to do at court. Lots of people were writing poetry or experimenting with poetry; it was a game that people would do of writing texts and exchanging poems. He had friends who wrote poems as well and he would exchange texts with them. In one of his short poems he talks about the fact that he's translating a poem by a friend of his but his friend was writing in French. It was much easier for him. He says "rhyme in English has such scarcity. I think it's much harder for me because English had fewer words at this time," but he's also of course making it clear that [despite] how great he is, he is nonetheless borrowing new words to make his poems work.

So people did write poems in that courtly scenario and also increasingly at this time there's a beginning of a trend where you get these "bureaucrat poets." So he's right at the beginning of that movement where there's more and more people who are highly literate who are working as accountant clerks and minor officials who want to write poetry. So we see more of them going into the 15th century and he's at the beginning of that kind of trend, but what's extremely unusual is the amount that he writes, the sheer volume and the brilliance of it. I still even after all these years thinking about these things, I still feel quite a thrill when I think about what it was like for him, you know, he worked in the daytime for many years. He was working on the key side in London doing his accounts during the day and then trudging home to his flat. His flat was over old Gates, or one of the gates of the city of London. In fact the gate through which the rebels flowed in 1381 during the Great Revolt—sometimes known as The Peasants Revolt. He would trudge home to that flat and he would sit there and presumably he would light his candles and he would set to work. He must have had his own volumes and lots of text, even though books are expensive. He must have had his own volumes of all kinds of things, Boethius, Boccaccio and so on and he sat to work, you know, writing his poetry into the night having spent

the day at the office doing his accounts and he imagines that scene for us in a poem called the House of Fame.

Now it's a fictional text, so we can't take this as straightforward autobiography, but it's also a poem about a guy called Geoffrey who works in accounts and is a poet so, you know, a thinly-veiled avatar here! And this guy works hard and then he trudges home and Chaucer's also self-mocking and creates all these personae and avatars in his poems who are a bit bumbling and awkward and a bit stupid often. And so he talks about this Geoffrey going home and says, you know, he just sits dumb as a stone looking at another book dazed [unclear] and he's talking about the fact that he has writer's block because he's just going and sitting in his room and looking at his books all the time desperately trying to get inspiration. And interestingly, in this poem the guide figure who is himself also quite mocked and in various ways his advice isn't necessarily right, you know, but what he says is "your problem is that you're not going to your door, where all your neighbors are, you know, you're not going and listening to their stories and talking to them" and so he says, "you know go and listen to your neighbors; get some inspiration from them instead of only looking at books."

And it's interesting because this text is in many ways a precursor to the Canterbury Tales and what we see in the Canterbury Tales is a text, which is on the one hand incredibly erudite, based very much on all kinds of literary sources, but also puts forward the idea that the conceit that you should listen to ordinary people's stories that you shouldn't just look at the classics and great books and great literary sources, but that really in order to make your own literature you need to listen to new things, to new sources, to new stories, to real people, to the story that a miller will tell, not only the story that a great poet will tell, and not only listen to the upper classes, but listen to ordinary voices too.

### Marshall Poe

I find all this fascinating. One of the questions that is often asked of artists and poets and writers is why they do what they do. And in this case and in many other cases, the answer has not so much to do with their context, but I don't know how better to put it, that they get carried away with the work; it becomes an end in itself. I've felt this in my own life when I was writing books and articles that, you know, I just had an ocean and suddenly I was immersed and I didn't have a choice anymore.

The text was writing me. I was writing the text and I think this is true of a lot of people who have an artistic or writerly bent. So you talked a little bit about his inspiration. Now clearly it was these Italians, but how did he get the idea of writing about common people? Was this an ordinary thing to do?

### Marion Turner

No. So this is a really really unusual thing to do and I think the fact that it is so unusual is really important in trying to understand Chaucer's brilliance. So the idea of a tale collection, that's not a new idea; there's lots of other texts that do that. So you have a way of gathering together lots of different stories within an overarching frame and one of his sources is Boccaccio's *Decameron*. So in the *Decameron* ten people get together. In fact, they're escaping the plague. Ten people get together and for ten days they each tell a story, so you end up with ten days of ten tales, a hundred all together. So it's very perfectly formed. And the key thing

about the tale-telling group is that they are all essentially identical so when they're described they are a gender mix, but when they're described they're described as all beautiful, upper-class, refined. They're related to each other and close friends. They are socially identical so that model is then completely turned on its head and your Chaucer does something completely different when he decides to gather together this crew of people who are very much varied in terms of social class. So from the highest one...well from high, but he doesn't actually have the highest in society; the highest person he has is a knight and he only has one ploughman figure who doesn't get to tell a tale. So it's more about all the in-between kind of people, the emergent social classes, you know, so there's a lawyer, there's a merchant, there's a friar, there's a cook, you know, all kinds of middling people. It's a quite urban group in many ways. Lots of the kinds of people were migrating to cities and taking their chances there particularly in the post-plague years, so, I think that in literature at this time there are examples of descriptions of people of different social classes. So in a genre called "estate satire," for example, where people from different kinds of classes were described in their faults or kind of mocked and satirized, but no one had done anything like the Canterbury Tales before; I mean, it was an idea that came from Chaucer, the idea of taking these people of different social classes and saying, "Okay. I'm going to juxtapose a knight's tale with a miller's tale. I'm going to have interruption and juxtaposition at the heart of my poetics," which is what Chaucer does. So he refuses to have the tales told in order of hierarchy or order, you know the knight tells the first tale, the host then wants the next highest personal social class to tell the next tale, but the miller will not have it. He's drunk. He interrupts. He insists that he should tell the next tale and he does and he tells a brilliant tale. It's hilarious. It's packed with beautiful imagery and it mocks and parodies the knight's tale and shows us things that the knight was doing that the knight maybe didn't fully realize and then, crucially, this is not an aberration. After that we never go back to hierarchical order in the tales. It becomes this vibrant group where people will jump up, "I want to tell the next tale." [Unclear]. There's debate and there's all kinds of engagement. And I think that one of the things that Chaucer's really profoundly committed to is the idea of trying to think about perspective, so that what you see depends on where you are standing, both literally and metaphorically. On his travels he saw early experiments in artistic perspective. And I think he was profoundly interested in moral and in literary and in aesthetic perspective in all kinds of ways. So if you only listen to stories told from people of one social class, you will only hear one kind of story in a way, you know, and he was saying "Look, we have to listen to different points of view. We don't have to like it. We don't have to think they're all equally good. That's up to the reader or the listener what they think, but you have to *try*, to listen to different points of view. You have to think about why does this person think this sort of way and we can only really get a proper purchase on that by hearing different perspectives and different points of view." And that really is the cornerstone of his of his art, I think.

### Marshall Poe

I have a friend who studies Elizabethan poetry and one of the things he points out is you probably have heard of some Elizabethan poets, but there are a lot of Elizabethan poets that you've never heard of. Is that true of Chaucer? Did he have literary peers that have vanished in the...and I hate to use this expression, the "mists of time?" Did he have a context that we can reconstruct?

### Marion Turner

Yes, absolutely. Chaucer was writing at a time when quite a few poets started to write in the vernacular. So there are some who, you know, some people might have heard of, so people

such as Langland who wrote *Piers Plowman* or the anonymous poet who wrote *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Pearl* and two other poems as well or John Gower who wrote three very long poems one in English, one in French, one in Latin. He was someone that Chaucer definitely knew. And they've referred to each other and are referred to together in documents.

So there were poets such as those whom we know about who are still studied today and there are other more obscure writers, some of whom I've mentioned briefly in the course of this interview. There are also lots of anonymous writers, people who wrote romances, for example, or short lyric poems whose names we don't know, so he does have a poetic context but most of his context, or much of it anyway, is not people who are writing in English because his literary influences were really more people who were writing in other languages and a lot of the people that he knew personally as poets, particularly in his in his younger years, were people who were writing in French and I think such is the nature of the way that a lot of us read or are taught that it's easy to forget that multilingual poetic environment that was so fundamental in Chaucer's time.

### Marshall Poe

Yeah, that's fascinating. Again, I'm sort of reminded of Keith Richards, because you know, if you want to understand the early Rolling Stones, you have to listen to American Blues, but there were a lot of English guys who are also producing it that we don't know anything about them anymore. They're kind of forgotten.

I do want to ask about how Chaucer became Chaucer, because most educated people--let's put it that way--will know about Chaucer, something, but they have forgotten all these other names and I'd be interested in understanding how he—and I don't know if people still say “the canon” anymore--but how he entered the canon and when?

### Marion Turner

Yeah. That's a really interesting question. So in the 15th and 16th century for a time people used to talk about a triumvirate of medieval English poets and they would talk about Chaucer, Gower, and Lydgate as three great poets and no one really does that anymore. So one thing that happens is that when Caxton sets up his printing press later in the 15th century, Caxton tended to want to print things that were written basically in London English, so in the East Midland dialect that Chaucer wrote in. So poems such as the absolutely brilliant *Gawain and the Green Knight*, which was written in a northwestern dialect, was ignored, was not printed until I think the 19th century. So Chaucer has an advantage at that point because he's writing in the dialect that became the language of bureaucracy and became standard English. He was always in fashion and partly of course, there is a consensus that he deserves it. He is really good and also he wrote so much. I think that's also something really important: that he wrote such variety that people could--depending on what you like--you can always find something that you like in Chaucer. If you want a serious saints life, you find that. If you want a funny bawdy fabliau about people having sex in a tree, you can find that as well, literally. It's quite interesting, if you look across time, you know, in the 15th century the tales that are most often kind of copied out separately, that people like the most, were often quite kind of serious moral tales that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century no one liked at all. Everyone likes people farting out of the window and that kind of thing, so there's a Chaucer for every age, every generation, that kind of thing. In the 16th century someone called Thynne printed a big edition of Chaucer's works. And that was the first time that a vernacular poet was given a “work,” so it's called the *Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* and

that had only ever been done for Latin writers. So right then in the 16th century and in the early 16th century Chaucer was being praised and lauded then as the founder of the English canon and English literature. I mean partly it is because, although even then people were saying his language was hard, but it's obviously recognizable in a way that earlier English was just more difficult; it was a step too far for lots of people and still is a step too far for lots of people, but from then onwards Chaucer was always hugely hugely influential, you know, a massive influence on a huge number of writers. So really from very early on he is being praised as this father figure.

### Marshall Poe

Well Marion, this has been absolutely fascinating. I've learned a lot about Chaucer and I think people will learn a lot about Chaucer from reading your book. Let me ask the traditional final question on the New Books Network. And that is, what are you working on now?

### Marion Turner

Well, I'm now writing a book about the Wife of Bath and I'm thinking about it as a biography of the Wife of Bath across time. So the Wife of Bath is Chaucer's most famous character and also his favorite character. He put her into lots of different texts. She escaped from her own prologue and tale into other Canterbury Tales and even to one of Chaucer's short poems and then you know across the centuries she's escaped into lots of other texts as well. She's a kind of bookrunner.

So I'm writing this as a kind of experimental biography. You know, how can we write a biography of a literary character? So the first half the book thinks about the Wife of Bath as really the first real character in English literature and explores the fact that Chaucer decides to write this character, to make her into a relatively ordinary woman. Usually women in literature had been princesses or saints or nuns or evil enchantresses, but this is a middle-class middle-aged working woman who has sex and goes on holiday and chats to her friends. There's lots of things about this woman which we don't expect to see in literature at this time.

So first off the book looks at where did she come from? What's the mix of literary sources and what's going on in the contemporary historical moment that allows a figure like this to emerge, because she is so extraordinary and unprecedented. And one of the big things that allows it to emerge is the post-plague environment, because the plague was a demographic catastrophe that in fact had effects for women that were quite good in all kinds of ways. It created a lot more opportunities for women, particularly in some parts of Europe and up in northwestern Europe. Lots of better opportunities for sexual choices, for inheritance, for work, all those kinds of things. So I look at how she emerged then and then in the second half of the book I look at her across time.

So I go from her 15th century scribes who tried to write all kinds of comments on the manuscript to put her back in her place. [Unclear]. 17th century ballads. There were printers of ballads who were put in prison and had the ballads about the Wife of Bath burnt. For example, I look at Voltaire's version of the Wife of Bath, at American early 20th century plays about the life of Bath, Pasolini 1970s film version of the Canterbury Tales and what he does with the Wife of Bath and then I come right up to the present day. Last year Zadie Smith wrote a play about the Wife of Bath which unfortunately has been delayed by the pandemic, but hopefully will be performed later this year. But in recent years, in fact, lots of black female poets and writers have

written new versions of the Wife of Bath. So I try to think about why that is. Why is she still speaking to us so much in the present day? And so this is a book that will be out in a couple of years again with Princeton and you can interview me again about that.

### Marshall Poe

I will, absolutely. I also wanted to say that this is quite consistent with the Zeitgeist or at least one portion of it. One of the things I learned recently is that if you go to Wikipedia, there are entries on literary characters. Did you know that? Completely fictional characters get Wikipedia entries. I think you should write the one for the Wife of Bath.

### Marion Turner

I think it's really interesting just thinking about what character is, isn't it? Because I think, you know, for a long time in literature departments we were all kind of taught that we were supposed to despise character study. You know that it's a very naive way of reading to think about character that, you know, people who don't really know. How do we think about characters as real people of course are not just words on a page?

But in actual fact when we think I think more holistically about the reading experience we have to find something in between the idea of "real people" and "just words on a page," because there's something much more complicated going on with literary character and with the kind of responses that are engendered by our connections with literary character.

### Marshall Poe

So I think you're absolutely right and it's funny because sometimes I'll be watching something and I'll I say, "Oh that's *Candide* by another name." And *Candide* probably had some predecessor that I don't even know about. So anyway, Marion, yeah, absolutely fascinating talking to you. I really enjoyed our conversation.

Let me tell all the listeners that this is Marshall Poe. I'm the editor to New Books Network and today we've been talking to Marion Turner about her terrific book, *CHAUCER: A European Life*, out from Princeton University Press. Marion, thank you for being on the show.

### Marion Turner

Thank you so much. It's been a great pleasure.

### Marshall Poe

Absolutely and thank you for everyone who listens to this podcast and I hope that you turn in next time.