TO BEGIN WITH THE OBVIOUS: Geoffrey Chaucer enjoys a foundational status as ‘the father of English poetry’ and the Canterbury Tales has been the most popular of his works. Over eighty manuscripts of it survive, complete, selected or fragmentary; and the earlier existence of a much larger number can be confidently inferred from a variety of evidence. (1) No English poetic work occurs in more fifteenth-century copies. In addition, it was the earliest major such work in English to be printed and the only medieval English one to have been consistently republished over the centuries since Chaucer's death. In terms of English cultural and literary history it is a fundamental work.

The Ellesmere manuscript of the Canterbury Tales, Henry E. Huntington Library, California, EL 26 C 9 (henceforward ‘Ellesmere’), has become a crucial element in modern awareness of Chaucer. The general quality of its decoration and the number of its illustrations of the Canterbury pilgrims have made it the most frequently reproduced of all his manuscripts. And it has had a central role in modern understanding of the text and transmission of Chaucer's most famous work.

Consequently Ellesmere has come to enjoy a position of great importance in our contemporary perceptions of Chaucer's poem. In such circumstances it is appropriate to consider why Ellesmere matters to us as students of the medieval book. How does it contribute to our textual and cultural understanding of the Canterbury Tales?

Before examining such questions, a few facts: Ellesmere comprises two hundred and forty large (394 x 284 ram), good-quality parchment leaves. Its principal content is a version of the Canterbury Tales, although there are further additions to it ranging in date from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries. (2) The text is illustrated by twenty-three marginal miniatures of each of the Canterbury pilgrims placed at the beginning of their respective tales. The manuscript has other elaborate decoration, including over seventy foliate borders, gilt and painted initials of varying size and frequent rubrication. Three artists were employed on the illustrations and possibly others on the borders. It seems certain that the manuscript was produced in London. The hands of some of these decorators have been identified in other London or Westminster-based manuscripts of the early fifteenth century) The overall effect of its quality of production is the creation of a form of de luxe manuscript, the lavishness of which is consistently pleasing to the eye.

The scale of Ellesmere's decorative programme is unique among Canterbury Tales manuscripts. It raises obvious questions. When was it written, for example? There has been general consensus that it is one of the earliest of the manuscripts of the Canterbury Tales. It has been generally assumed that it was prepared after Chaucer's death in 1400, probably at some point in the first decade of the fifteenth century. But recent art-historical research has tended to push the date to ‘probably not after c.1405’. (4) Given the complexities that may have been involved in assembling and ordering the text of an...
The Ellesmere Manuscript is one of the most famous manuscripts of Geoffrey Chaucer’s The Canterbury Tales. It is one of the earliest manuscripts of The Canterbury Tales, having been made in the first decade of the 15th century, and is also richly illustrated. Chaucer died in around 1400 and no manuscripts of The Canterbury Tales date from his lifetime. What is The Canterbury Tales about? To pass the time on the journey, they decide to each tell two tales to the assembled company on the journey there and the journey home. The result is regarded as a masterpiece of medieval literature. The work, however, is unfinished. The poem never describes the return journey, and not all the pilgrims who appear in the poem’s Prologue end up telling a tale. Download Citation | On Jan 1, 2010, A.S.G. Edwards published The ellesmere manuscript: Controversy, culture and the canterbury tales | Find, read and cite all the research you need on ResearchGate. [Show full abstract] the latest scholarship on this manuscript, we offer an exhaustive typology of the annotations. We further conjecture that the Lactantian work was mainly used in two ways: first, as an encyclopaedia of classical culture, and second, as a treatise on patience and a kind of consolatio. Read more. Article. Of the public born: Raymond Hains and La 'France dechiree' (An excerpt from the book manuscript, 'Pu March 2004 · October. H Feldman. Read more. Article.