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 of Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, commonly referred to as the "Ellesmere Chaucer," is one of the most valuable and cherished manuscripts in the Huntington Library. Compiled within five years of Chaucer's death in 1400, it is considered by most experts to be the definitive manuscript of this cornerstone of English literature. This book is an i

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 consolation. 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. The text of the 'Canterbury Tales,' as printed in the present volume, is an entirely new one, owing nothing to the numerous printed editions which have preceded it. The only exceptions to this statement are to be found in the case of such portions as have been formerly edited, for the Clarendon Press, by Dr. Morris and myself. Of the A-type, the best example is the Ellesmere MS.; of the B-type, the best example is the Harleian MS. 7334; of the C-type, the Corpus and Lansdowne MSS.; the D-type is that exhibited by Caxton and Thynne in the early printed editions. It contains the curious coloured drawings of 23 of the Canterbury Pilgrims which have been reproduced for the Chaucer Society.