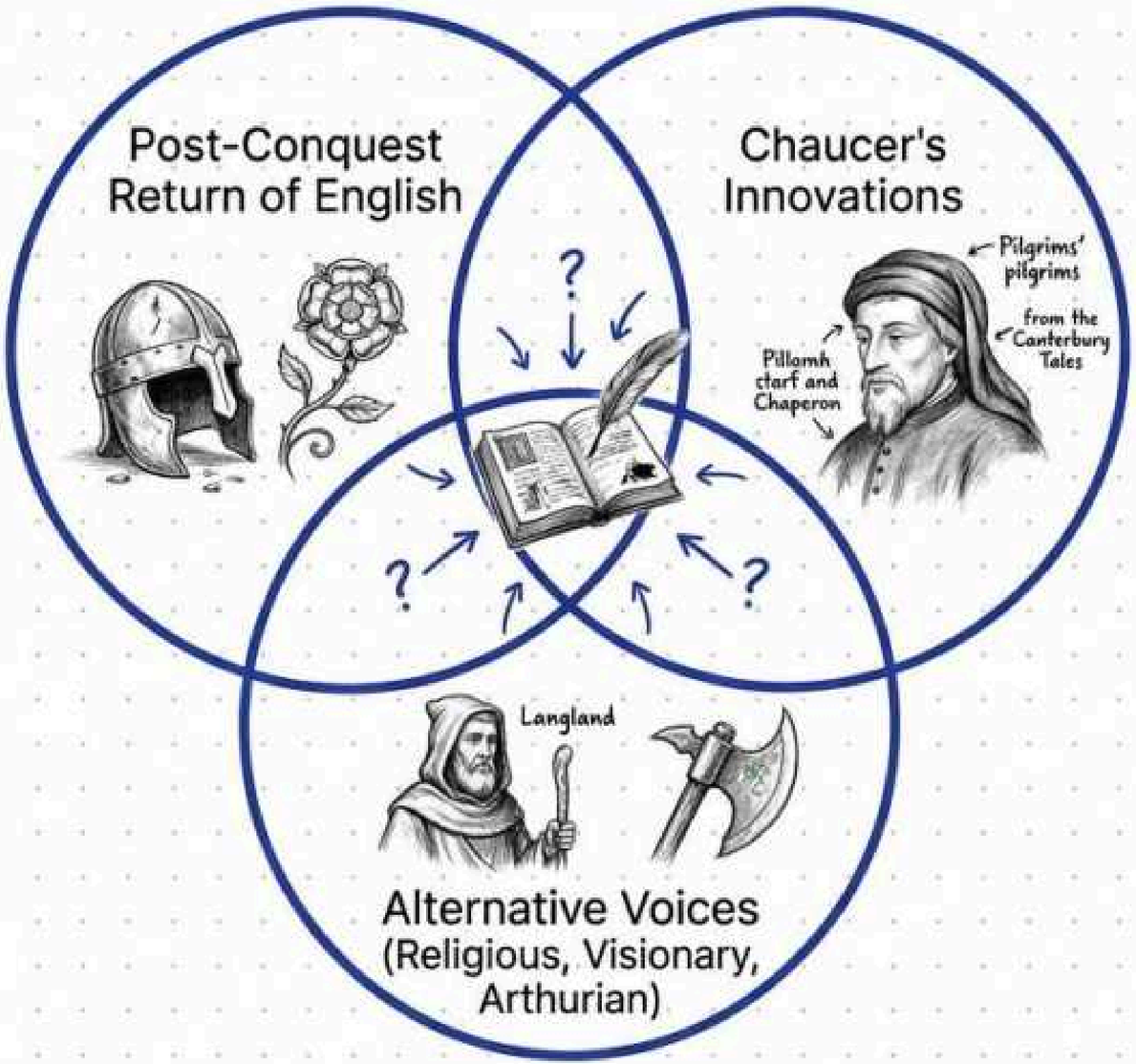
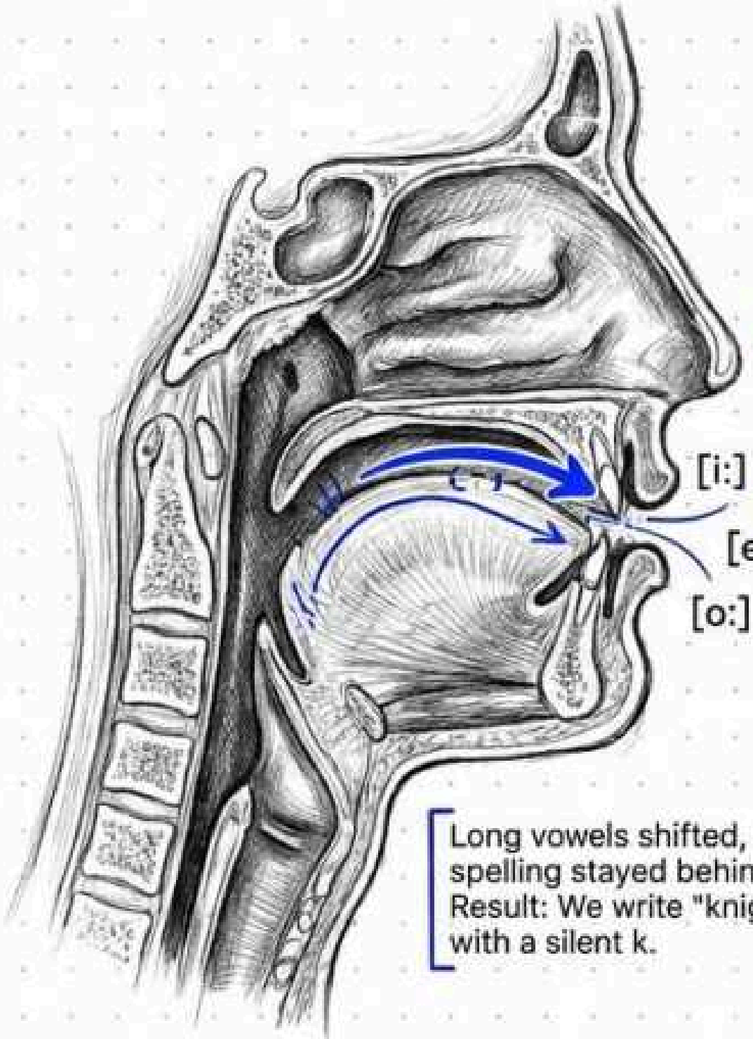
¶ 2.1 & 2.2

1100 to 1485





Long vowels shifted, but spelling stayed behind. Result: We write "knight" with a silent k.

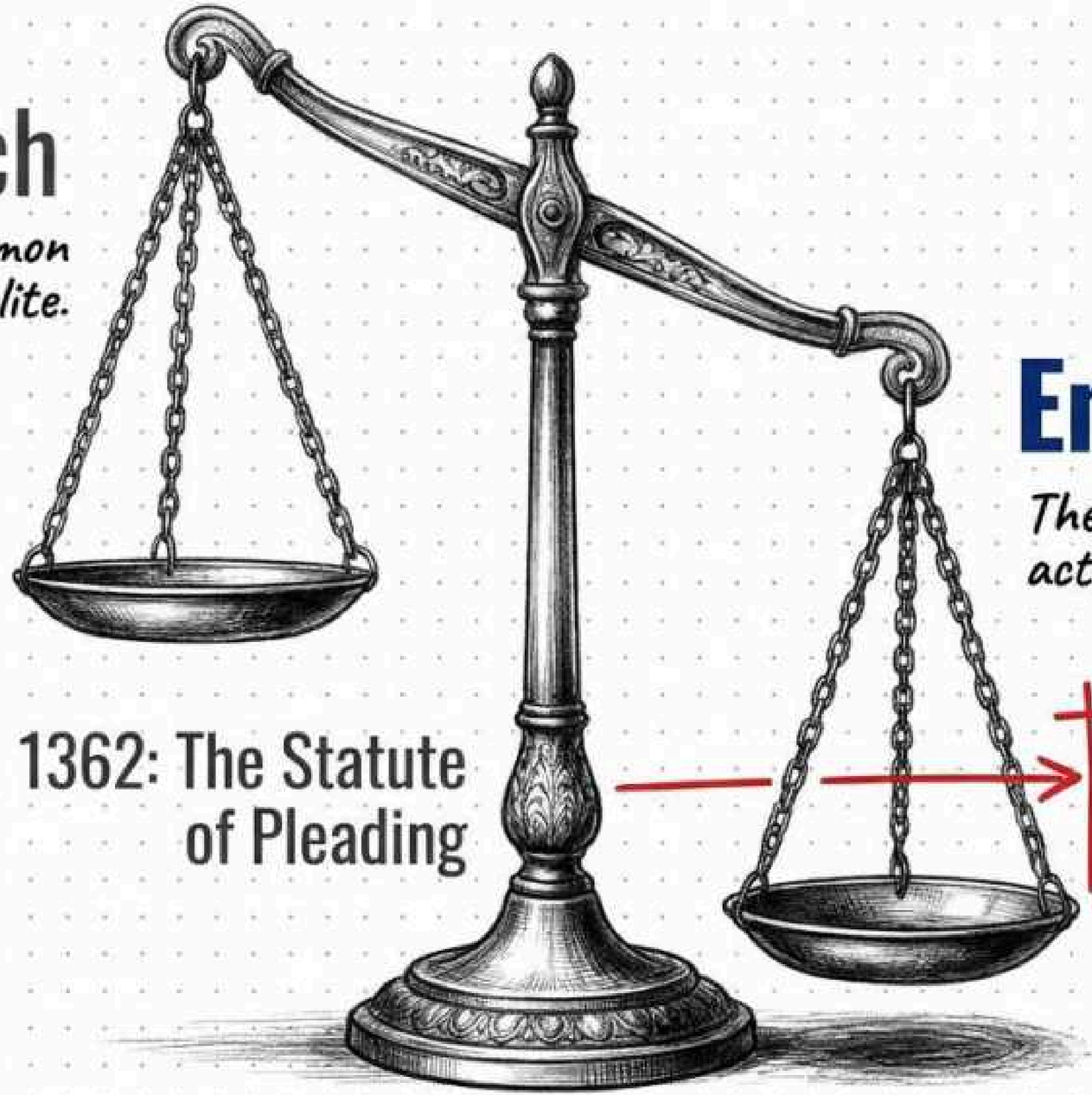


London: Center of government and trade standardizes the written dialect.

¶ 23

French

Remained common among the elite.



English

The language readers actually spoke.

1362: The Statute of Pleading

Parliament opens in English.
Law courts ordered to conduct all proceedings in English.

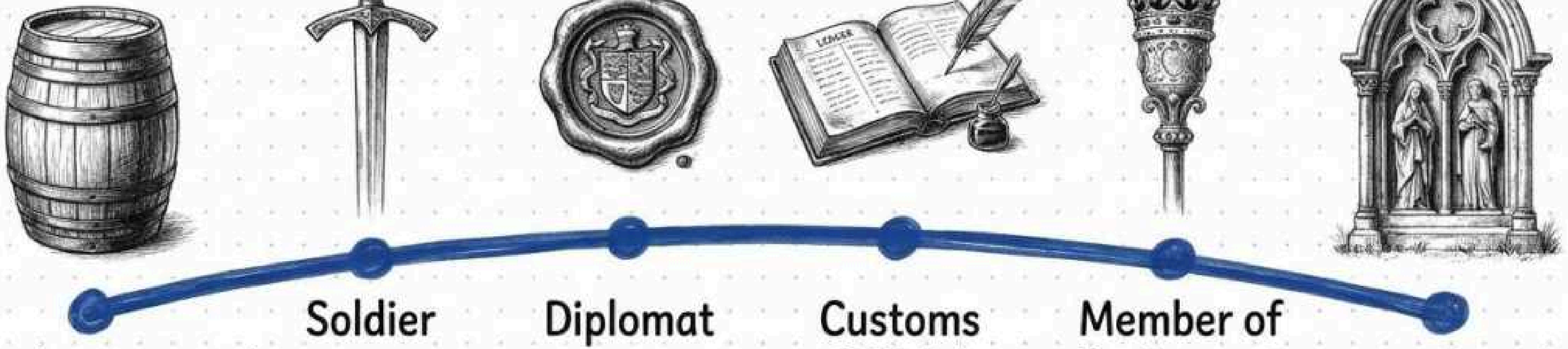
¶ 2.4

Black Death
(33–50% mortality in 1348–49)
+
Hundred Years' War
+
Peasants' Revolt (1381)

→ Labor Scarcity ↑ → Wages ↑ → Traditional Rank & Obedience ↓

The 14th century crisis engine dismantled the rigid medieval hierarchy, reshaping English society from the bottom up.

¶ 2.5



Born (early 1340s)
Merchant's Son

Soldier

Diplomat

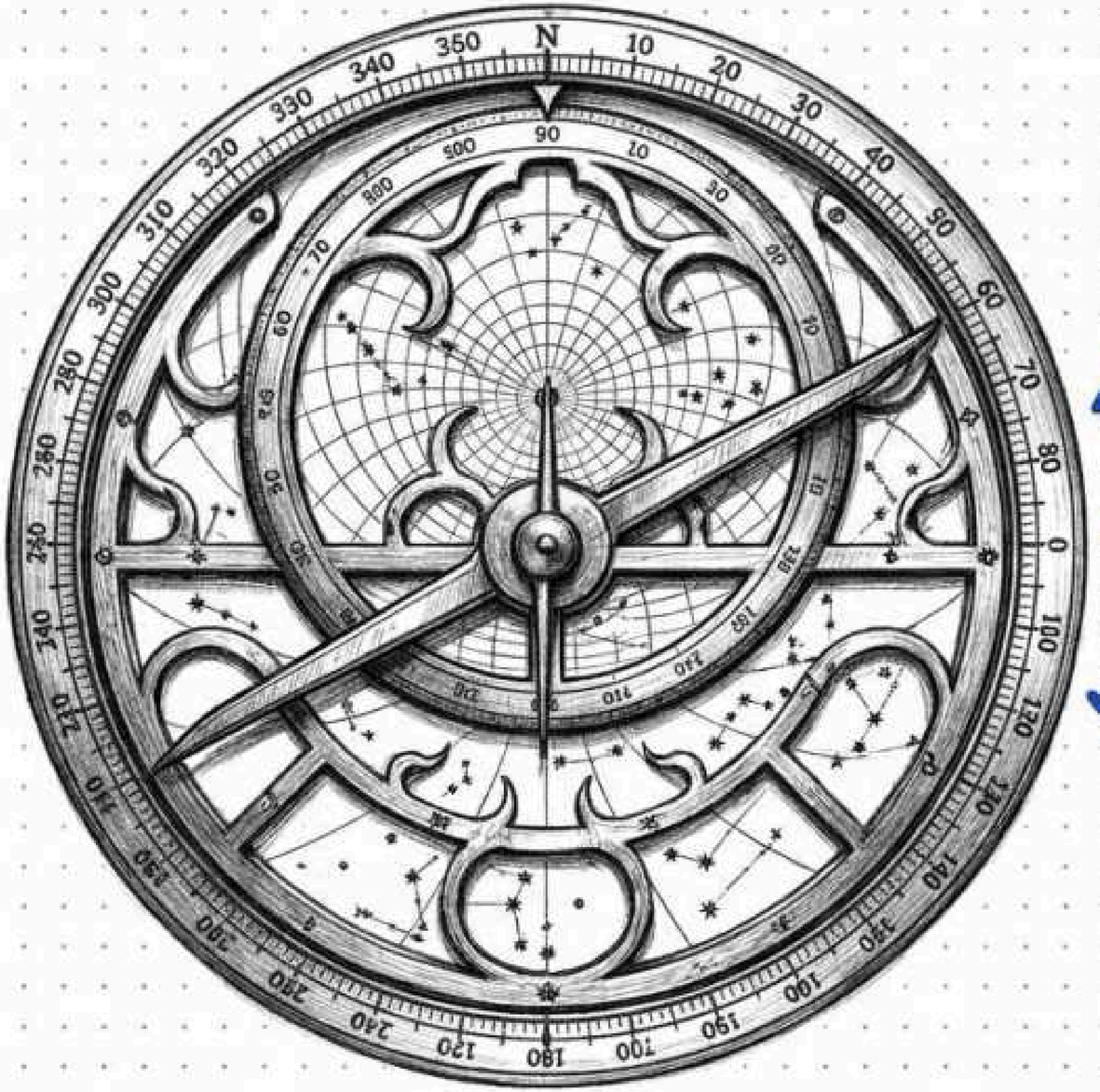
Customs
Official

Member of
Parliament

Died (1400)
Poets' Corner

Chaucer chose to write in English when French and Latin were the easy, prestigious choices for a man of his standing.

¶2.6



Dream Visions

The Book of the Duchess,
The Parliament of Fowls

Tragic Romance

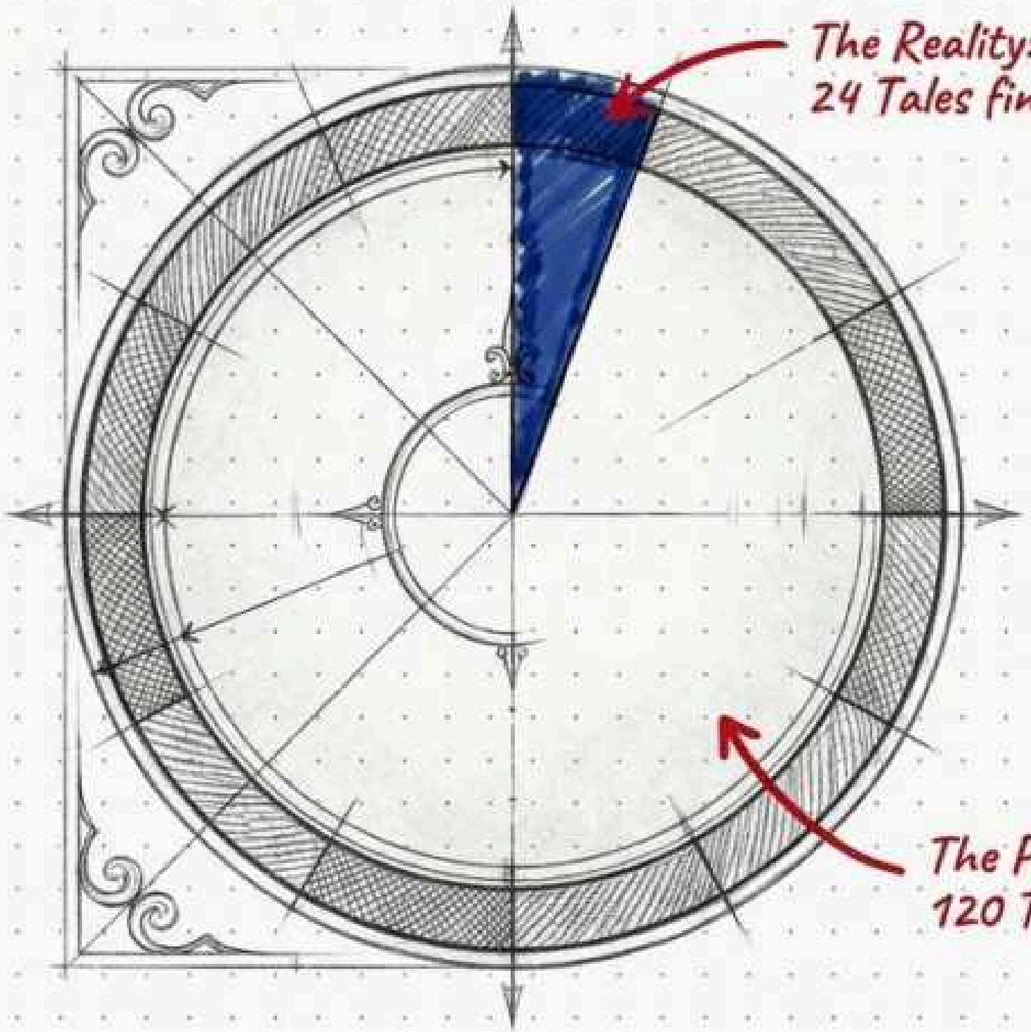
Troilus and Criseyde (Written mid-1380s, set in Troy, crafted in intricate seven-line stanzas)

Translation & Science

Translation of Boethius, and a technical treatise on the Astrolabe (measuring the stars)

¶ 2.7

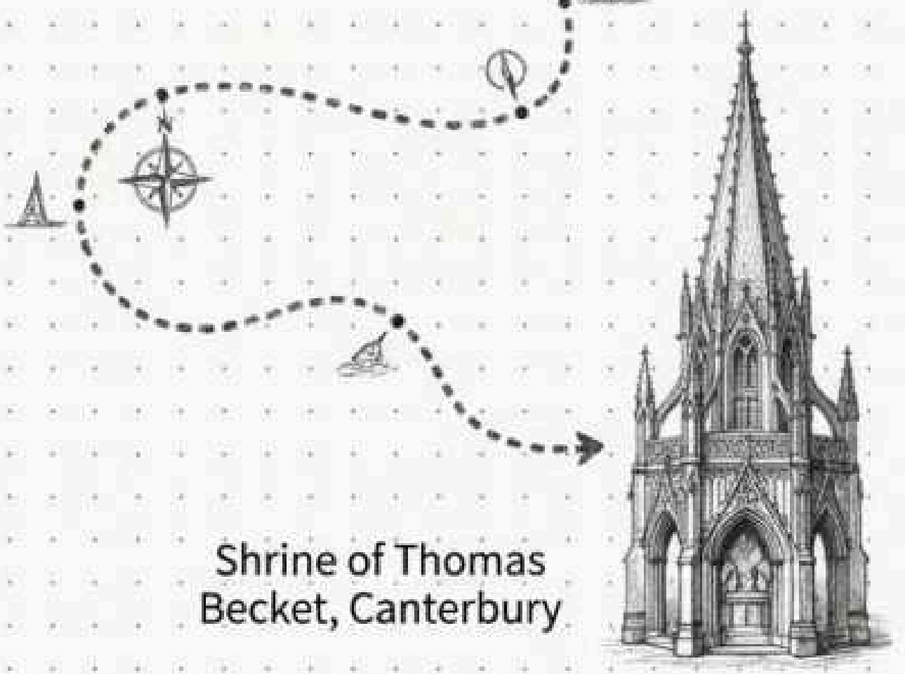
The Blueprint (Begun c. 1387)





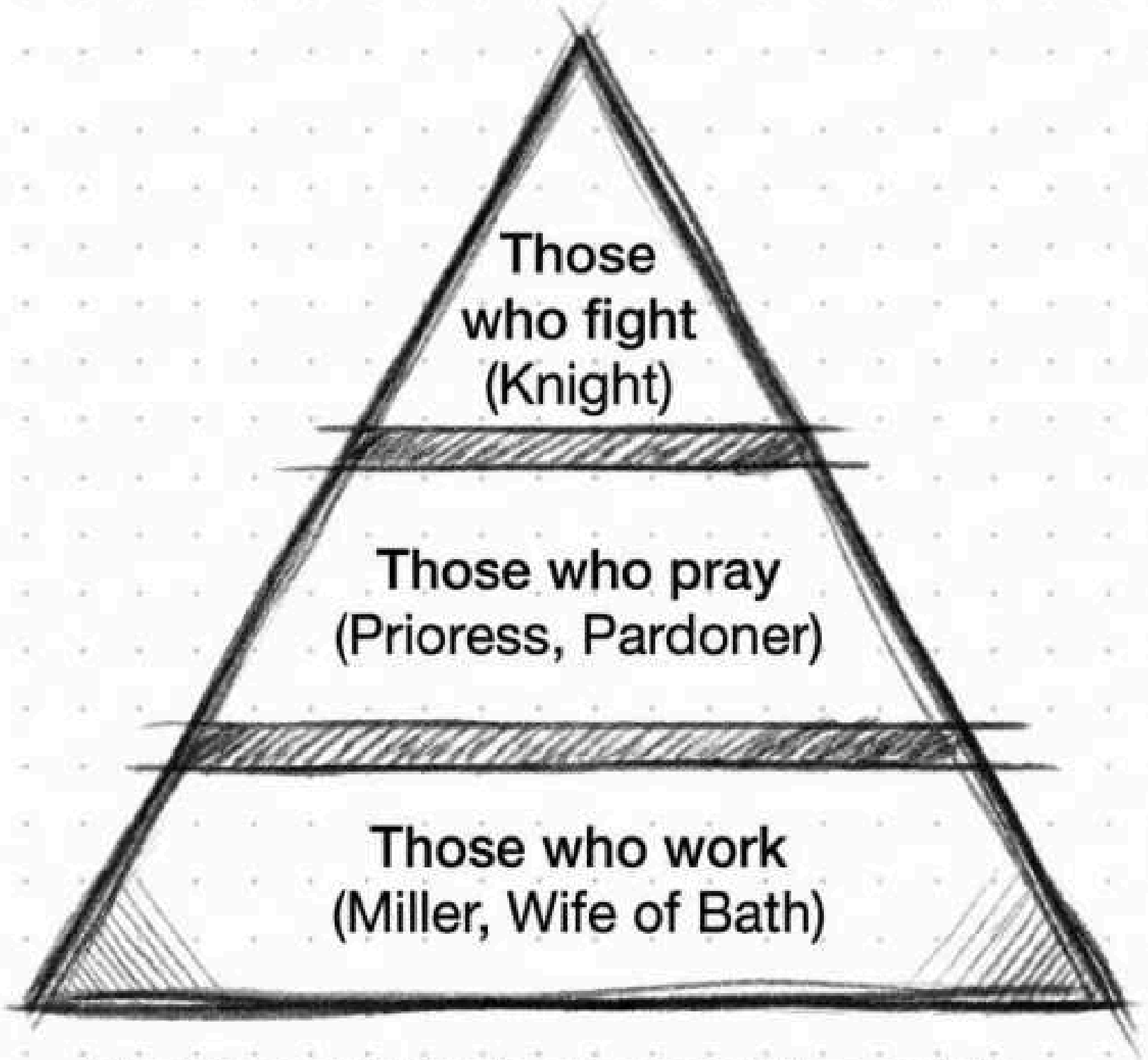
Tabard Inn, Southwark
(South of London)

30 pilgrims agreeing to tell stories on the road.



Shrine of Thomas Becket, Canterbury

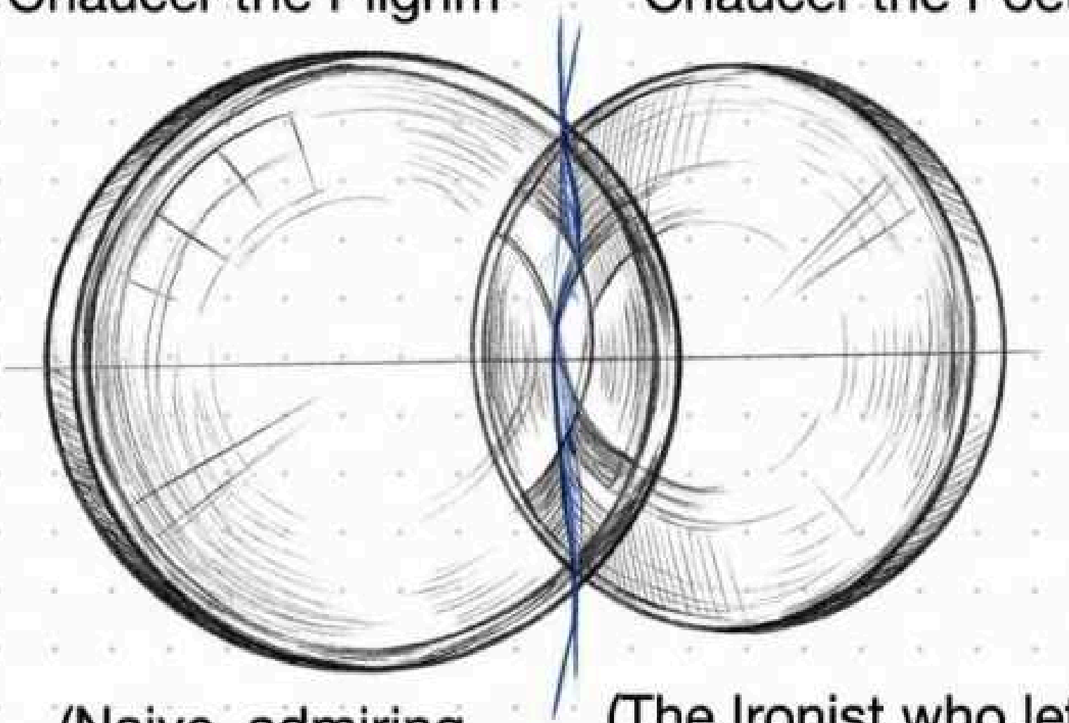
¶ 2.8



The General Prologue provides quick, sharp, satiric portraits of these classes.

Lens 1:
Chaucer the Pilgrim

Lens 2:
Chaucer the Poet



(Naive, admiring, takes everyone at face value)

(The Ironist who lets the reader see more than he explicitly says)

¶ 2.9

Sacred/Moral:
Prose Sermon
(The Parson's Tale)



Allegorical:
Beast Fable
(The Nun's Priest's Tale - about a proud rooster)



Profane/Bawdy:
Fabliau
(The Miller's Tale - a bawdy comic story)



High / Sacred

Low / Profane

Didactic:
Moral Exemplum
(The Pardoner's Tale)



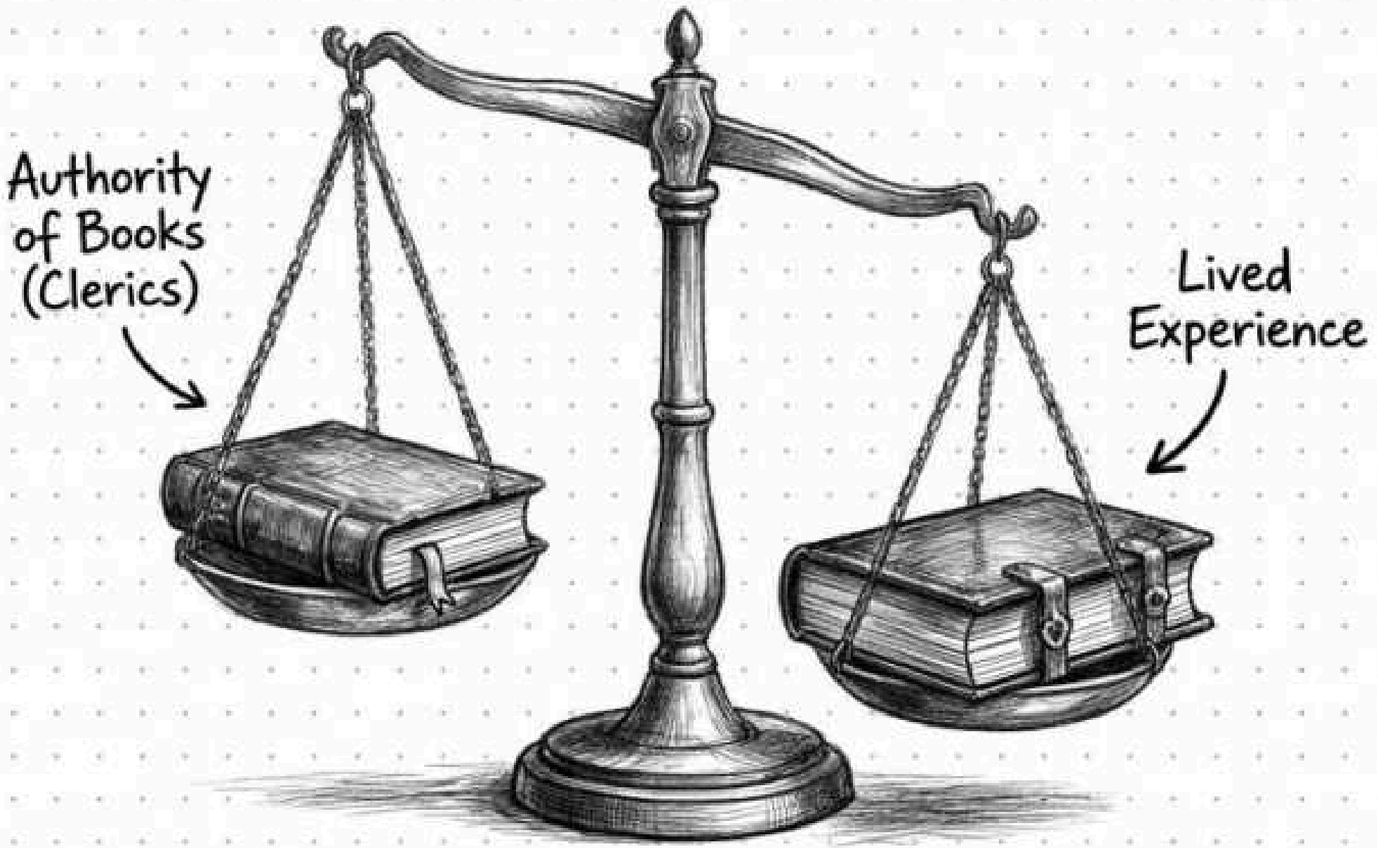
Noble:
Courtly Romance
(The Knight's Tale)



A complete library of medieval forms bound in one frame.

¶ 2.10

The Character: The Wife of Bath
(Cloth-maker, survivor of five husbands).



The Argument: Women have been unfairly written about by male clerics; experience is as valid a guide as ancient authority.

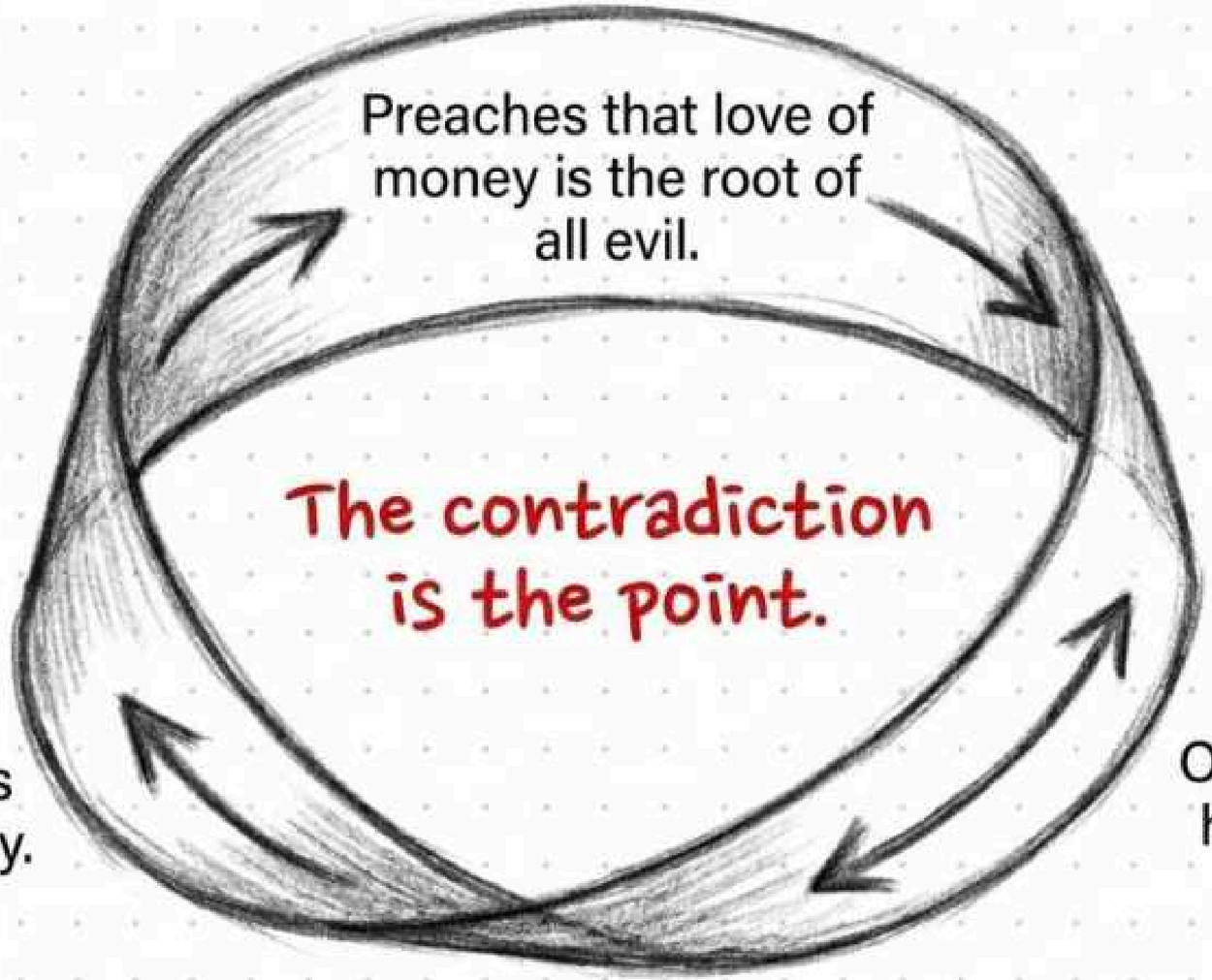
The Core Question:

What do women most desire?

↓

Sovereignty over their own lives.

¶ 2.11



Chaucer is fascinated by the gap between words and deeds, turning low comedy into profound moral inquiry.

1 Line = 10 Syllables = 5 Beats

Iambic Pentameter

da DUM | da DUM | da DUM | da DUM | da DUM
da DUM | da DUM | da DUM | da DUM | da DUM

} Couplets (pairs of rhyming lines)

The Effect: This strict verse structure fixed the English poetic line for centuries. Yet, Chaucer's ear for jokes, slang, and interruptions made it sound like genuine human speech.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (Late 14th century, unknown northwest poet).
The Tradition: The Alliterative Revival (a return to older verse forms).

¶ 2.13

Gawain's Honor Tested
at a Lord's Castle

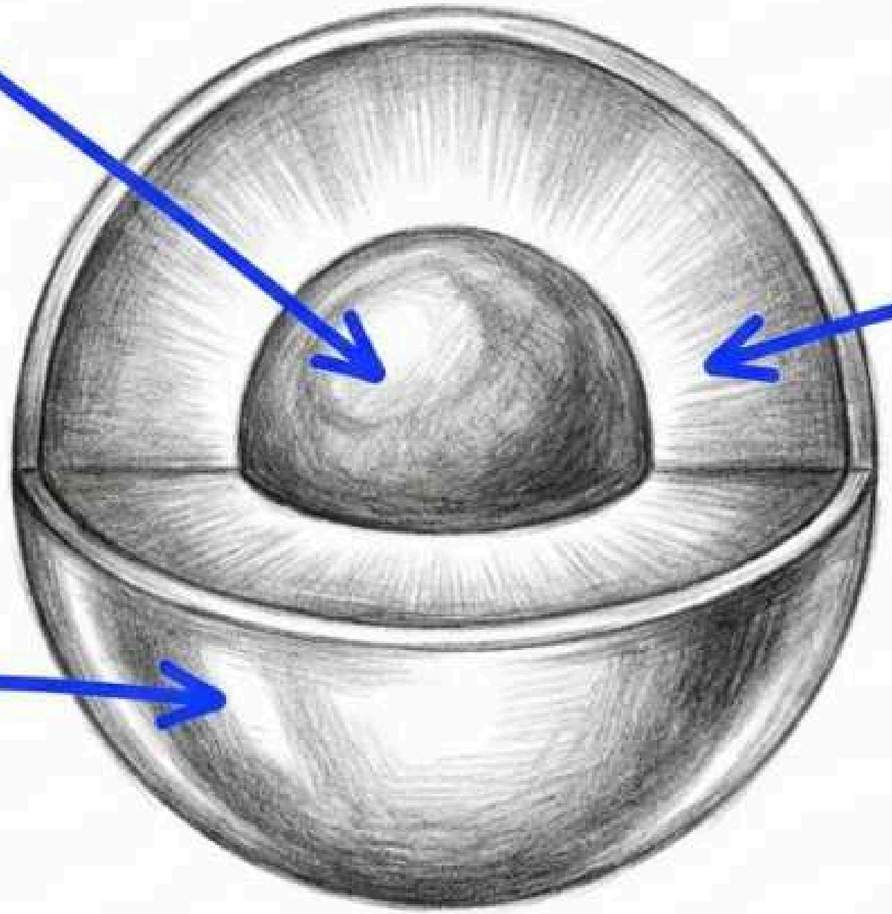


The Green Giant's
Challenge at Arthur's Court

A Year of Waiting

¶ 2.14

Core: Raw Grief & Elegy
(A grieving father meets his dead daughter).

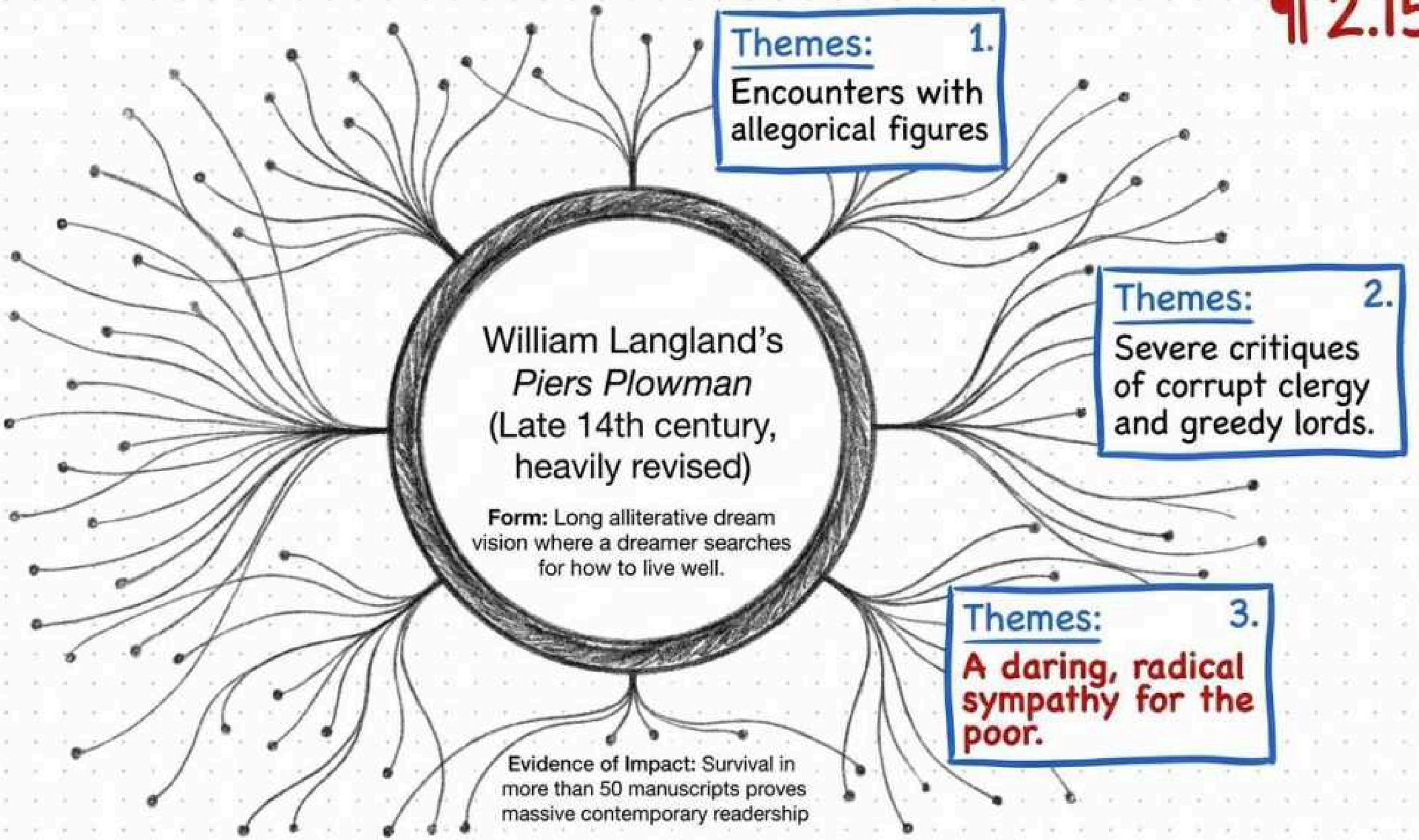


Mantle: Dream Vision
(The daughter appears as a maiden in paradise)

Nacre: Consolation & Intricate Craft
(Complex rhymes and repeated words)

Context: Found in the exact same manuscript as Gawain; proves the vast craft the Middle Ages could pour into a few hundred lines of grief.

¶ 2.15


William Langland's
Piers Plowman
(Late 14th century, heavily revised)
Form: Long alliterative dream vision where a dreamer searches for how to live well.
Themes: 1.
Encounters with allegorical figures
Themes: 2.
Severe critiques of corrupt clergy and greedy lords.
Themes: 3.
A daring, radical sympathy for the poor.
Evidence of Impact: Survival in more than 50 manuscripts proves massive contemporary readership

¶ 2.16

Religious Women Writing in English

Julian of Norwich



- **Context:** Received visions in 1373 while gravely ill.
- **Output:** Revelations of Divine Love.
- **Defining Tone:** Optimistic assurance ('All shall be well').

Margery Kempe



- **Context:** A married woman from King's Lynn.
- **Output:** The Book of Margery Kempe (dictated).
- **Legacy:** Often classified as the very first autobiography in the English language.

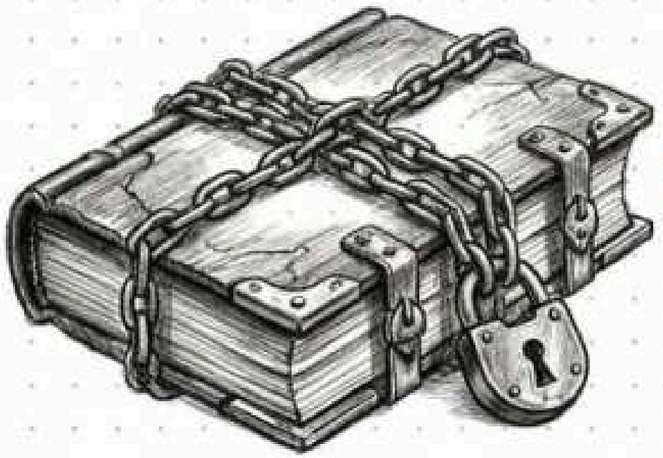
Risk/Hazard

¶ 2.17

Action:
John Wycliffe (d. 1384) & followers produce the first complete English Bibles.

Reaction (The Threat): The Church fears lay readers interpreting scripture without institutional guidance.

Consequence: The 1409 Constitutions of Oxford strictly forbid unauthorized translations.



Foreshadowing: The fight over who may read the Bible in English runs straight into the next era.



Step 1: The Town Guilds (Mystery Plays)

- Biblical scenes performed on wagons at Corpus Christi (e.g., the York cycle with 48 distinct pageants).

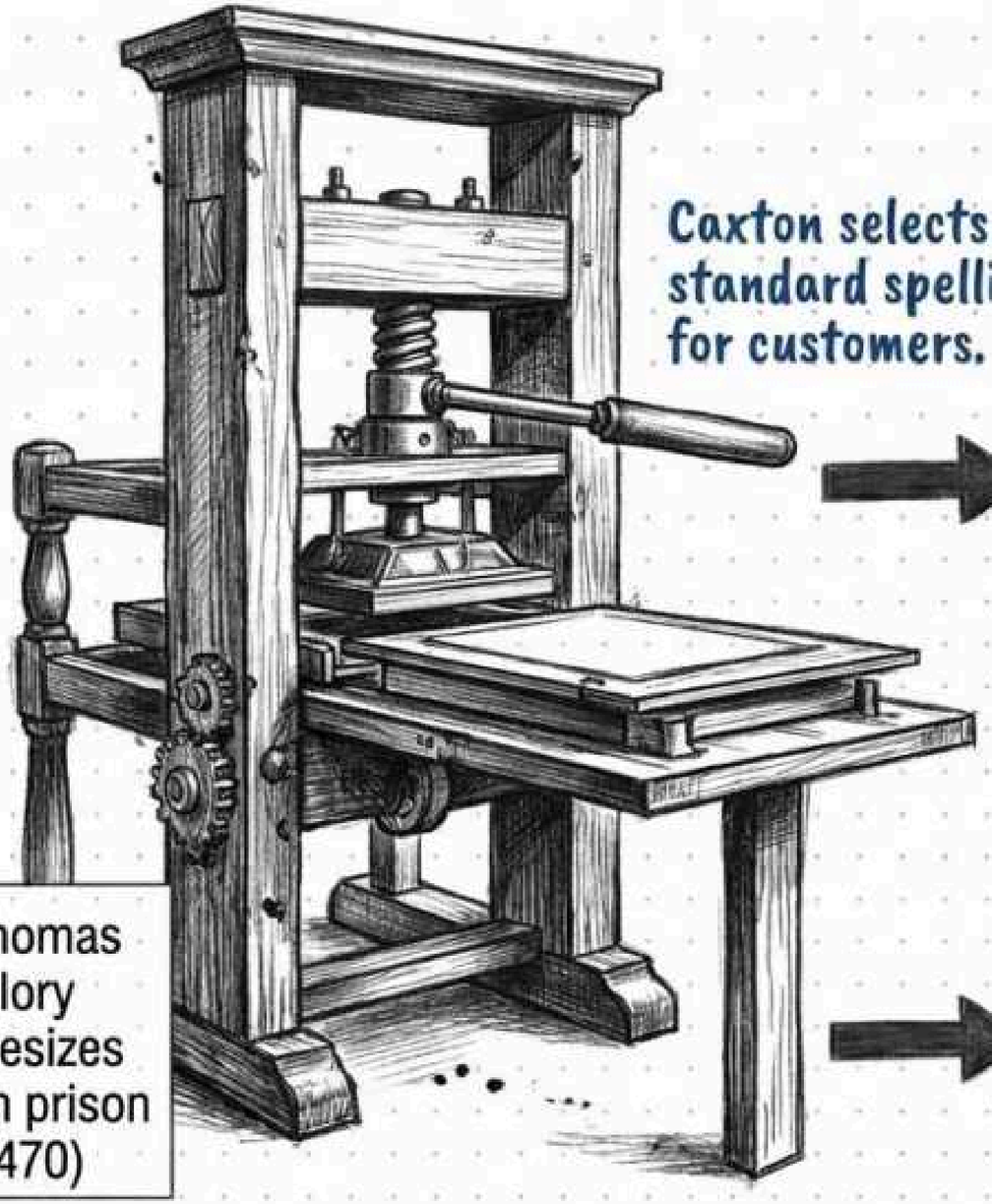
Step 2: Farce Meets Sacred

- The Wakefield Second Shepherds' Play, which dramatically mixes low sheep-stealing farce directly with the high holy nativity.

Step 3: Morality Plays

- Everyman (late period), showing an abstract portrait of a man deserted by everything except his "Good Deeds" as he faces death.

¶ 2.19 & 2.20



Caxton selects standard spellings for customers.

Input 1 (Language):
Regional dialects/spellings

Input 2 (Legend):
French + English stories of Arthur, Lancelot, Guinevere

Sir Thomas Malory synthesizes them in prison (~1470)

Output:
Standard Written English

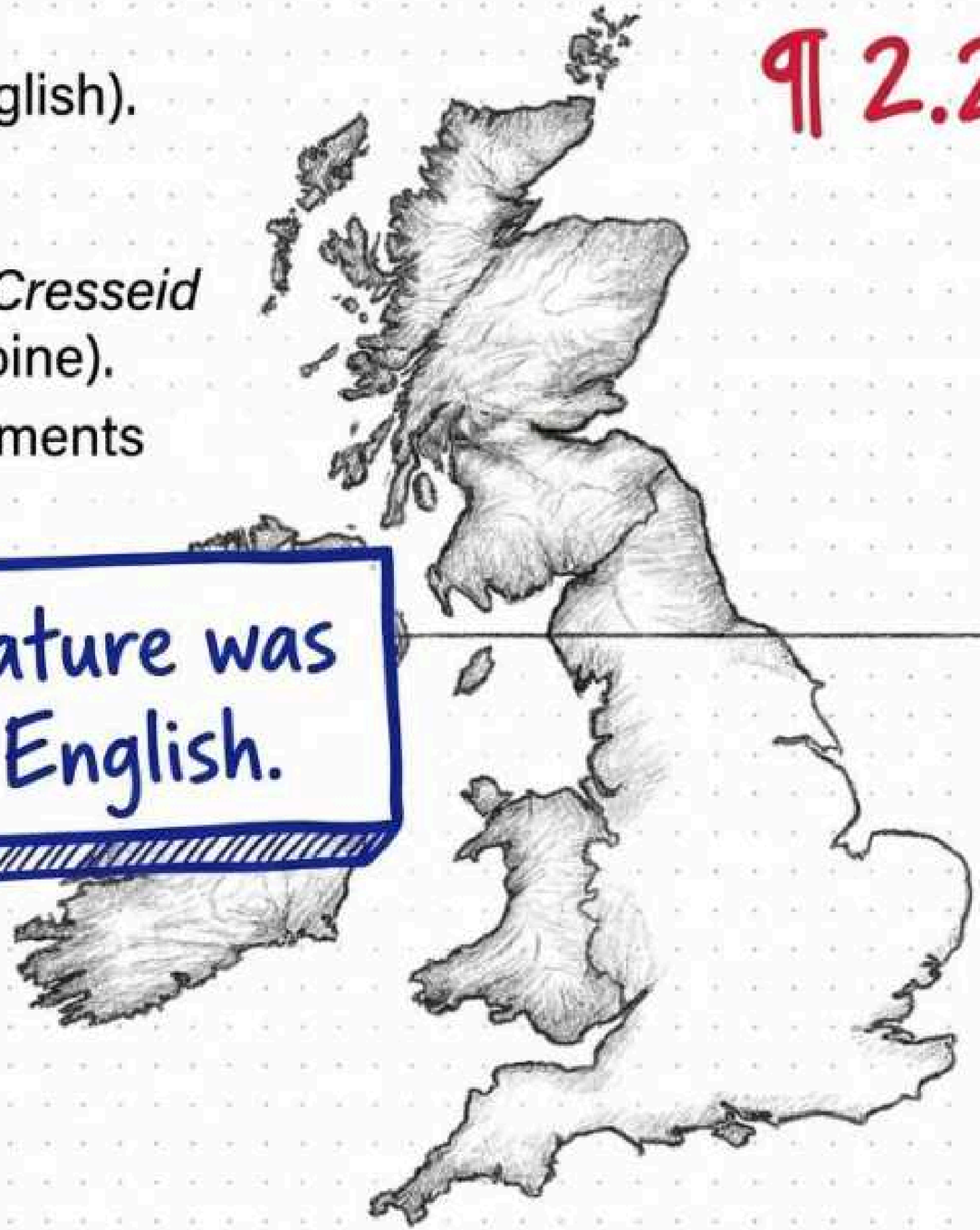
Output:
Le Morte d'Arthur
(Printed 1485 in 21 books, cementing the English Arthurian legend)

¶ 2.21

The Language: Scots (a sister language to English).

The Peers:

- **Robert Henryson:** Wrote *The Testament of Cresseid* (a bleak, punishing sequel to Chaucer's heroine).
- **William Dunbar**: Spanned extremes from laments for dead poets to savage comedy.



English literature was never only English.

English (Chaucer)

¶ 222

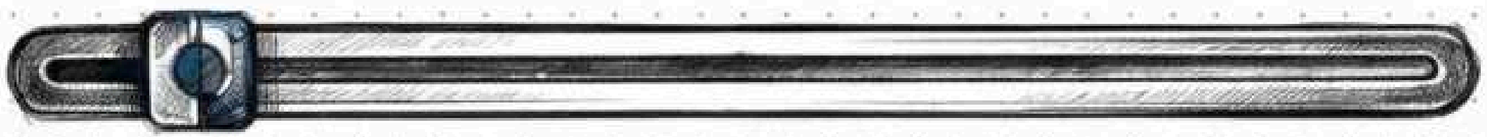
Human Range

Saintly  Shameless

Epistemology

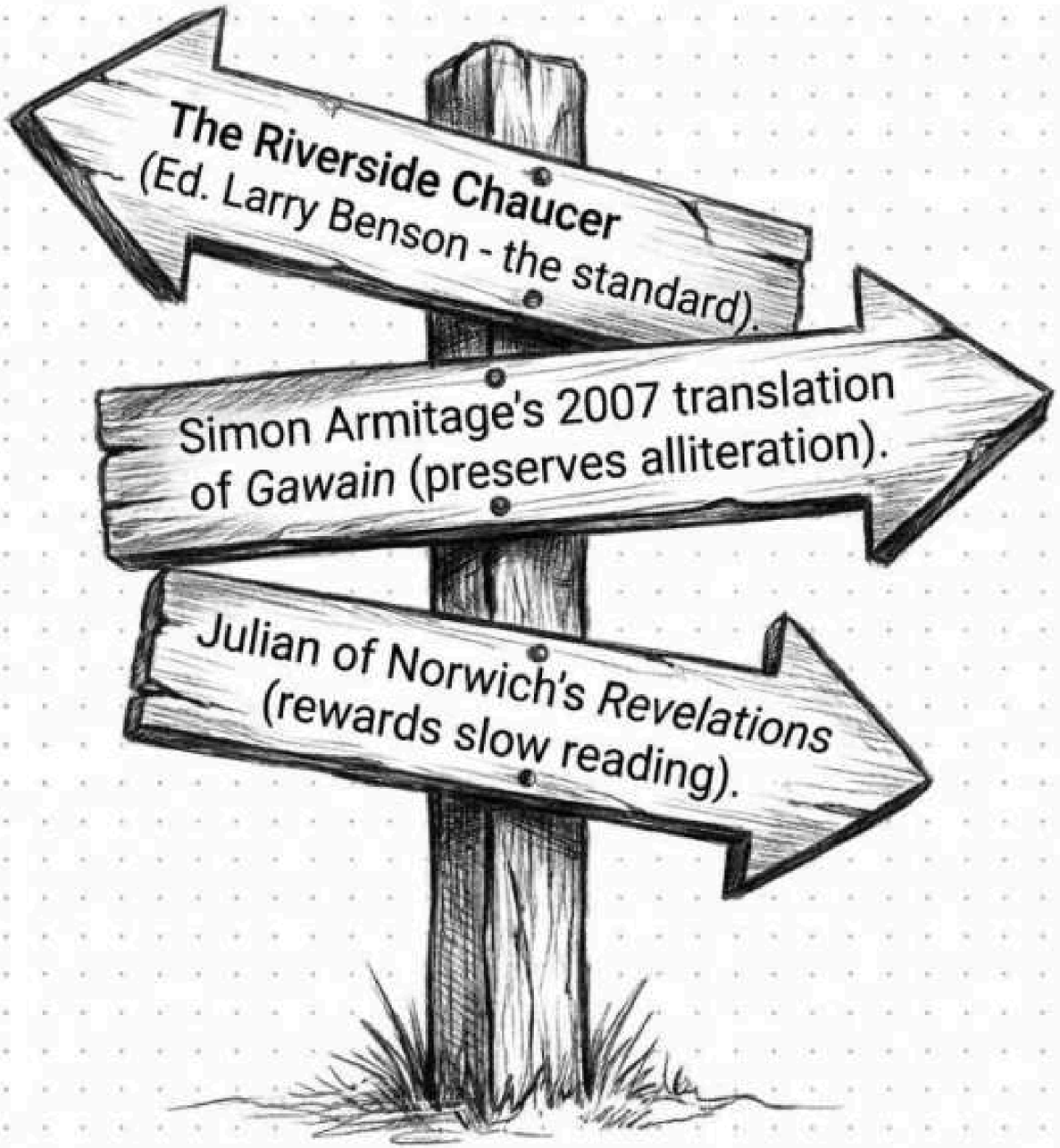
Authority  Experience

The Motif

Dream  Quest

An age built from many languages, finally becoming robust and confident in English.

¶ 2.23 & 2.24



Analytical Exercise Framework

- **Step 1:** Select one pilgrim from the General Prologue and read aloud.
- **Step 2:** Extract two implicit details that reveal character without explicit statement.
- **Step 3:** Assess Narrator Admiration: Does Chaucer the Pilgrim admire them? How can you tell?