Meet Geoffrey Chaucer



*Chaucer was one of the most original men who ever lived. There had never been anything like the lively realism of the ride to Canterbury done or dreamed of in our literature before. He is not only the father of*

*all our poets, but the grandfather of all our hundred million novelists.*

–—G. K. Chesterton, from “The Greatness of

Chaucer” in Geoffrey Chaucer, 1932

**G**eoffrey Chaucer’s exact year of birth is not certain, since no document recorded it. He was probably born around 1343 in London. His father was a middle-class wine merchant, and the young Chaucer became a page in the royal household while still a teenager. Despite the mundane duties that he carried out, the position exposed the youth to the speech, manners, and shortcomings of high-born people of the day.

His education was broad. He was a voracious reader who read in four different languages—English, Latin, French, and Italian. As one of his later works, a treatise on an astrolabe, showed he was knowledgeable about science as well as literature.

When he was in his twenties, Chaucer was made a court official, an appointment that began many years of public service. During his career, he traveled abroad on diplomatic missions and gained knowledge of both French and Italian literature and culture.

**Life As a Writer:** For the rest of his life, Chaucer held a variety of governmental posts. Despite his duties, he managed to produce a large body of work. Many scholars divide his work into three distinct periods. His early poetry includes the *Book of the Duchess* and the *Romaunt of the Rose.* Later, he wrote the *Parliament of Fowls* and *Troilus and Criseyde.* His most mature works, written in his forties, include the *Legend of Good Women* and *The Canterbury Tales.*

**The Canterbury Tales:** *The Canterbury Tales* is considered Chaucer’s masterpiece for several reasons. First, it marks the beginnings of a new tradition: Chaucer was the first writer to use English in a major literary work. Secondly, it gives a picture of a cross-section of society during the 1300s. Finally, it is a detailed, lifelike, and engaging picture. Chaucer lets his characters speak as they might actually talk. This was risky because they did not always talk in a polite way, which could offend some readers. Chaucer acknowledges this fact himself:

*. . . I rehearse*

*Their tales as told, for better or for worse,*

*For else I should be false to what occurred.*

*So if this tale had better not be heard,*

*Just turn the page and choose another sort;*

*You’ll find them here in plenty, long and short;*

*Many historical that will profess*

*Morality, good breeding, saintliness.*

*Do not blame me if you should choose amiss.*

Some critics were shocked by the earthy language and humor in certain stories, but even more were captivated by the characters, stories, and the language itself. *The Canterbury Tales* shows Chaucer’s mastery of numerous poetic forms and

his thorough grounding in history, mythology, psychology, science, theology, and business. He created approximately 17,000 lines of vivid poetry that has such universal appeal that it still attracts new readers today.

**Introducing the Tales**

*The people we read about are as real as the*

*people we brush clothes with in the street,—*

*nay, much more real, for we not only see their*

*faces, and the fashion and texture of their*

*garments, we know also what they think, how*

*they express themselves, and with what eyes*

*they look out to the world.*

–—Alexander Smith, Dreamthorp

**BACKGROUND**

In *The Canterbury Tales,* Chaucer uses a form that had been used before—the frame tale, a larger story, inside of which are many smaller stories. Since Chaucer had spent time in Italy, he was familiar with the *Decameron,* an earlier frame tale written by the Italian poet Boccaccio. In fact, he even incorporated stories from that work and

from others into his own stories. Retelling older tales was a common practice in Chaucer’s day. After all, before stories were printed, as they are today, people were used to hearing and rehearing the same tales. Their pleasure came not just from

the plot, but from the storyteller’s skill. Each teller added special qualities to a story.

Although Chaucer was not the first to use the frame tale, or even most of the plots themselves, he used the material in a special way. Each of the smaller stories was told by a character whose language and style was distinctive.

Today, this may not sound so unusual, but before Chaucer, most literature featured epic heroes—larger-than-life characters—or highly stylized figures who demonstrated only a few particular qualities. Chaucer’s characters, although they are types, are well-rounded flesh-and-blood people. Through them, Chaucer provided a lively look at three distinct groups of people in fourteenth century England:

**Members of the feudal system:** Knight, Squire, Yeoman, Franklin, Plowman, Miller, Reeve

**People in religious life:** Nun, Monk, Friar, Cleric, Parson, Summoner, Pardoner

**The rising middle class:** Merchant, Sergeant at the Law, Five Tradesmen, Cook, Skipper, Doctor, Wife of Bath, Manciple, Host through these characters, readers are given an overview of many of the concerns and interests of fourteenth-century people. The concerns reflected major social changes that were occurring:

**Social changes** The old feudal system was beginning to come apart. Previously, the ruling classes had held all the power because they owned the land, which was a major source of wealth. Then the Black Death killed a huge percentage of the agrarian workers and tenant farmers. The ones who remained felt a new power, since landowners depended on these workers. Realizing this new status, the peasants began making demands. They were no longer content with life as it had been. Also, a new class of merchants, traders, and shopkeepers arose in response to widening trade

Opportunities, adding a new level to society.

**Religious changes** The church was losing some of its power and influence for several reasons. There was controversy after the French Pope Clement V moved the seat of the Church to France. This led to a series of arguments over who was really the head of the Church. Second, literacy was becoming more widespread. Once only the clergy could read and write, but now schools were springing up to teach the new merchants how to read, write, and do their accounting. As more people learned to read, literary tastes began to change. Instead of reading religious tracts or moralistic tales, people wanted more realistic works. *The Canterbury Tales* provided this.

Scholars think Chaucer originally planned an even more ambitious project than the one he created. A character in the Prologue, the Host, suggests that each of the thirty pilgrims tell four stories each, which suggests that Chaucer planned 120 different tales. However, he died after having written only twenty-two of them. Since he left behind a pile of incomplete tales and story parts, no one knows exactly when they were written or

in what order Chaucer intended them.

**THE TIME AND PLACE**

*The Canterbury Tales* takes place during the fourteenth-century on a pilgrimage to Canterbury. People had been making that journey for 200 years to worship at a shrine of St. Thomas à Becket. He had been the archbishop of Canterbury during the reign of Henry II and was murdered by that king’s knights over religious differences.

Becket’s murder, inside the Cathedral, made him a martyr, and in 1220 an elaborate gold shrine was built to hold his remains. Every half a century, celebrations were held there on the anniversary of his death, and these celebrations attracted numerous

pilgrims. The 200th anniversary of Becket’s death fell within Chaucer’s lifetime, and this event brought larger crowds than usual.

Did You Know?

The Canterbury Tales were written in English, but not in the English of today. Chaucer spoke a language that we now call Middle English. Middle English was the language of England after the Norman Conquest of 1066 and before the modern English that we speak today. Besides the older Anglo-Saxon words, it also included many words from French and from Latin. Furthermore, it no longer contained all the complicated word endings used in Old English. Although many Middle English words look familiar today, their pronunciation was quite different in Chaucer’s time. For example, what we now call the silent e at the ends of certain words was once a separate syllable. The fact that Chaucer chose Middle English at all was unusual at the time. Most writers of his day wrote in French or in Latin, and Chaucer knew both of those languages. He could have

chosen one of them. Middle English was considered ordinary, not literary, language, and the fact that Chaucer selected it suggests that these tales were written for the general population instead of the ruling classes.

**CRITIC’S CORNER**

*Like vacation acquaintances in all time periods, the Canterbury pilgrims*

*experience each other in a lighthearted way. The pilgrimage offers them time*

*and space away from their everyday cares; they are on holiday, thus open to*

*each other in a way they would not be in any other context. A spirit of play*

*animates their interactions, a spirit of acceptance informs their attitudes.*

*People who would otherwise be separated by social class or occupation or*

*gender are brought together by chance. . . .*

—Margaret Hallissy, A Companion to Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales