

Chapter 3

Geoffrey Chaucer

Life and Works



Geoffrey Chaucer (c 1343–1400) was called “the father of English poetry” and one of the greatest narrative poets of England. He translated many poems from French, learned a lot from Italian poetry and invented many poetic metres and forms which were to be widely used later.

He was born into a prosperous wine merchant’s family in London. He studied at Oxford and Cambridge. By serving as a page to Elizabeth, Countess of Ulster, he came into contact with the court and nobility. In 1359 he accompanied the English army to France. In 1367 he entered the service of King Edward III, who sent him on several diplomatic missions to Spain, France and Italy. These missions broadened his view and he learned a lot through his observation. In 1374 he became a controller in the Customs House in the port of London. He liked reading and writing in his spare time. His library of sixty books was quite a large one at that time. His post in the Customs House was dismissed in 1386 though he was elected a member of the Parliament. However, in 1389 he was appointed clerk of the king’s works at Westminster and Windsor, and the new king Henry IV granted him a pension. He had a good knowledge of Latin, French and Italian. He was versed in French and Italian literature. His rich life experiences and his knowledge of the world equipped him socially and intellectually to be the founder of English poetry. All the best poems and histories in Latin, French and Italian were well known to him. Although he borrowed freely from them, he was never a servile imitator of foreign authors, and had broad literary views of his own. He died on the 25th of October 1400, and was buried in the Poets’ Corner at Westminster Abbey.

Chaucer’s literary career can be divided into three periods, coinciding with his life experiences. The first period is one of translation from French (e.g. *The Romance of the Rose*). The second is one of adaption from Italian (e.g. *Troilus and Criseyde*, modelling on Boccaccio’s works). The third is one of creation in pure English with *The Canterbury Tales* as the masterpiece of his whole literary career. On this monumental work he spent 15 years, beginning from 1386. In the first period, Chaucer tried his hand on metre, language and

subject. In the second period, he borrowed foreign themes but showed his own creativeness. In the third period, he had his own choice of subjects, depiction of characters, diction and plot.

Brief Comment

Chaucer was a mirror of the times. His works reflected vividly the changes that had taken root in English culture of the second half of the 14th century. The foundations of the feudal system had already begun to crumble. The people's uprising of 1388 raised the question as to the abolition of feudalism. The glory of the Catholic Church began to decline. England was on the brink of a great historical change. And it was at this historical moment that Chaucer's poetry traced out a path to the literature of the English Renaissance.

Chaucer was a transitional figure in that he, in some aspects of his works, was still bound to the traditions of the Middle Ages and many of his poems were written in the manner of the French poets who enjoyed great popularity among the nobility. And in his translation of various works of French authors, he was still attracted by the form of vision so favoured in the Middle Ages. However, his allegories and symbols were already tinged with realistic images. He was drawn to everything that was earthly, tangible and human.

Chaucer was the most important poet of England of that age, whose contributions can be seen as follows.

First, he brought the French and Italian humanistic thoughts to England, which served as a bridge between European Renaissance and England thus preparing the way for Renaissance in England. His work was permeated with lively and swift free-thinking, so characteristic of the age of Renaissance. As the forerunner of the English Renaissance, he believed in the right of man to earthly happiness. He was anxious to see man be freed from superstition and blind belief in fate, and he was always keen to praise man's energy, intellect, quick wit and love for life.

Second, he greatly enriched the rhyme schemes by introducing from France the rhymed stanzas of various types. The rhymed couplet of iambic pentameter was the form he was most at home with. Alliterative verse of the Old English period was to give way to new poetic forms.

Third, with *The Canterbury Tales*, he declared the greatness of national literature of England. His use of London dialect promoted the position of language used by common people and refined it into an acceptable literary one. Thus he established a language of literature. And the language he used is vivid and smooth, which, together with the rhymed couplet, makes a very easy and good reading, a great contribution to constructing a nation's vernacular literature.

Fourth, with his vivid portrait of common people of all walks of life, he helped found the realistic tradition. He created a strikingly brilliant and picturesque panorama of his time and his country. His realism, biting irony and freedom of views reached such a high level of power that it had no equal in all the English literature up to the 16th century. Owing to the true-to-life

depiction of characters and the broad reflection of the whole society, Chaucer was properly and rightly praised by Gorky as “the founder of English realism”.

Selections

The Canterbury Tales

Outline

Chaucer’s masterpiece is *The Canterbury Tales*, one of the most famous works in all literature. The plan of the work is magnificent, to represent the wide sweep of English life by gathering a motley company together and letting each class of society tell its own favourite stories. Though the great work was never finished, Chaucer succeeded in his purpose so well that in *The Canterbury Tales* he gave us a picture of contemporary English life, its works and plays, its deeds and dreams, its fun and sympathy and hearty joy of living such as no other single work of literature has ever equalled. *The Canterbury Tales* opens with a general prologue where we are told of a company of pilgrims that gathered at Tabard Inn in Southwark, a suburb of London. They are on their way to the shrine of St Thomas à Becket at Canterbury. They set out together with the “jolly innkeeper”, Harry Baily, who becomes their governor and proposes that each pilgrim should tell two tales on the way to Canterbury and two more on the way back. The total number of tales would be 120, according to Chaucer’s plan, exceeding that of Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, in which ten different narrators each tell a tale a day for ten days, but the author failed to carry out his plan and only 24 tales were written.

The prologue is a splendid masterpiece of realistic portrayal, the first of its kind in the history of English literature. We see the whole cavalcade, as it rides out on a fine spring morning. The pilgrims are people from various parts of England, representatives of various walks of life and social groups, with various interests, tastes and predilections. First there rides a worthy knight, just back from the war. His dress and bearing are very plain and modest. This is Chaucer’s ideal of a national champion. The knight’s son, a gay young squire, thinks more of his dress and of song-making than of other chivalrous duties. He prefers the court to the battlefield. After them rides the knight’s attendant, a yeoman in Lincoln green, with a “mighty bow” in his hand. This forester, who has a hunting horn with him, recalls to the reader the image of Robin Hood. Then comes a prioress who weeps when she sees a mouse caught in a trap, but turns her head when she sees a beggar in his ugly rags. Her image as well as those of the fat monk, the jolly friar, the summoner, the pardoner and the “doctor of physic” is all treated in an ironical manner. With a feeling of sympathy Chaucer describes the clerk, a poor philosopher who spends all his money on books, the Parish priest, also a poor person of a town who reminds us of John Wyclif and John Ball, the shipman, the miller, the parson and the franklin. Among the other pilgrims there is a wife from the town of Bath, a gaily dressed

middle-aged widow, who hopes to find a husband in Canterbury, a reeve, a merchant and some rich artisans with their own cook, and, at last, the poet himself. Each of the narrators tells his or her tale in a peculiar manner, thus revealing his or her own views and character.

The General Prologue¹
(excerpt)

As soon as April pierces to the root
The drought of March, and bathes each bud and shoot
Through every vein of sap with gentle showers
From whose engendering liquor spring the flowers;
When zephyrs² have breathed softly all about 5
Inspiring every wood and field to sprout,
And in the zodiac the youthful sun
His journey halfway through the Ram³ has run;
When little birds are busy with their song
Who sleep with open eyes the whole night long 10
Life stirs their hearts and tingles in them so,
Then off as pilgrims people long to go,
And palmers⁴ to set out for distant strands
And foreign shrines renowned in many lands.
And specially in England people ride 15
To Canterbury from every countryside
To visit there the blessed martyred saint⁵
Who gave them strength when they were sick and faint.
In Southwark at the Tabard⁶ one spring day
It happened, as I stopped there on my way, 20
Myself a pilgrim with a heart devout
Ready for Canterbury to set out,
At night came all of twenty-nine assorted
Travellers, and to that same inn resorted,
Who by a turn of fortune chanced to fall 25
In fellowship together, and they were all
Pilgrims who had it in their minds to ride
Towards Canterbury. The stables doors were wide,
The rooms were large, and we enjoyed the best,
And shortly, when the sun had gone to rest, 30
I had so talked with each that presently

I was a member of their company
And promised to rise early the next day
To start, as I shall show, upon our way.
But none the less, while I have time and space, 35
Before this tale has gone a further pace,
I should in reason tell you the condition
Of each of them, his rank and his position,
And also what array they all were in;
And so then, with a knight I will begin. 40
A Knight was with us, and an excellent man,
Who from the earliest moment he began
To follow his career loved chivalry.
Truth, openhandedness, and courtesy.
He was a stout man in the king's campaigns 45
And in that cause had gripped his horse's reins
In Christian lands and pagan through the earth,
None farther, and always honoured for his worth.
He was on hand at Alexandria's fall⁷.
He had often sat in precedence to all 50
The nations at the banquet board in Prussia.
He had fought in Lithuania and in Russia,
No Christian knight more often; he had been
In Moorish Africa at Benmarin,
At the siege of Algeciras in Granada, 55
And sailed in many a glorious armada
In the Mediterranean, and fought as well
At Ayas and Attalia when they fell
In Armenia and on Asia Minor's coast.
Of fifteen deadly battles he could boast, 60
And in Algria, at Tremessen,
Fought for the faith and killed three separate men
In single combat. He had done good work
Joining against another pagan Turk
With the king of Palathia. And he was wise, 65
Despite his prowess, honoured in men's eyes,
Meek as a girl and gentle in his ways.
He had never spoken ignobly all his days
To any man by even a rude inflection.
He was knight in all things to perfection. 70

He rode a good horse, but his gear was plain,
For he had lately served on a campaign.
His tunic was still spattered by the rust
Left by his coat of mail, for he had just
Returned and set out on his pilgrimage. 75

His son was with him, a young Squire, in age
Some twenty years as near as I could guess.
His hair curled as if taken from a press.
He was a lover and would become a knight. 80
In stature he was of a moderate height
But powerful and wonderfully quick.

He had been in Flanders, riding in the thick
Of forays in Artois and Picardy,
And bore up well for one so young as he,
Still hoping by his exploits in such places 85
To stand the better in his lady's graces.

He wore embroidered flowers, red and white,
And blazed like a spring meadow to the sight.
He sang or played his flute the livelong day.
He was as lusty as the month of May. 90

His coat was short, its sleeves were long and wide.
He sat his horse well, and knew how to ride,
And how to make a song and use his lance,
And he could write and draw well, too, and dance.
So hot his love that when the moon rose pale 95
He got no more sleep than a nightingale.
He was modest, and helped whomever he was able,
And carved as his father's squire at the table.

But one more servant had the Knight beside,
Choosing thus simply for the time to ride: 100

A Yeoman, in a coat and hood of green.
His peacock-feathered arrows, bright and keen,
He carried under his belt in tidy fashion.
For well-kept gear he had a yeoman's passion,
No draggled feather might his arrows show, 105
And in his hand he held a mighty bow.
He kept his hair close-cropped, his face was brown.
He knew the lore of woodcraft up and down.
His arm was guarded from the bowstring's whip

By a bracer, gaily trimmed. He had at hip 110
A sword and buckler, and at his other side
A dagger whose fine mounting was his pride,
Sharp-pointed as a spear. His horn he bore
In a sling of green, and on his chest he wore
A silver image of St Christopher. 115
His patron, since he was a forester.
There was also a Nun, a Prioress,
Whose smile was gentle and full of guilelessness.
“By St Loy⁸!” was the worst oath she would say.
She sang mass well, in a becoming way, 120
Intoning through her nose the words divine,
And she was known as Madame Eglantine.
She spoke good French, as taught at Stratford-Bow⁹
For the Parisian French she did not know.
She was schooled to eat so primly and so well 125
That from her lips no morsel ever fell.
She wet her fingers lightly in the dish
Of sauce, for courtesy was her first wish.
With every bite she did her skillful best
To see that no drop fell upon her breast. 130
She always wiped her upper lip so clean
That in her cup was never to be seen
A hint of grease when she had drunk her share,
She reached out for her meat with comely air.
She was a great delight, and always tried 135
To imitate court ways, and had her pride,
Both amiable and gracious in her dealings.
As for her charity and tender feelings,
She melted at whatever was piteous.
She would weep if she but came upon a mouse 140
Caught in a trap, if it were dead of bleeding.
Some little dogs that she took pleasure feeding
On roasted meat or milk or good wheat bread
She had, but how she wept to find one dead
Or yelping from a blow that made it smart, 145
And all was sympathy and loving heart.
Neat was her wimple in its every plait,
Her nose well formed, her eyes as gray as slate.



Her mouth was very small and soft and red.
 She had so wide a brow I think her head 150
 Was nearly a span broad, for certainly
 She was not undergrown, as all could see
 She wore her cloak with dignity and charm,
 And had her rosary about her arm,
 The small beads coral and the larger green, 155
 And from them hung a brooch of golden sheen,
 On it a large A and a crown above;
 Beneath, "All things are subject unto love."

Notes

1. In the modern English translation by Theodore Morrison, Chaucer's original metrical form, the heroic couplet, is used.
2. zephyrs: the west wind
3. Ram: sign of the Zodiac (Aries)
The sun is in the Ram from March 21 to April 19.
4. palmers: pilgrims, who originally brought back palm leaves from the Holy Land
5. saint: St Thomas à Becket, slain in Canterbury Cathedral in 1170
6. Tabard: an inn at Southwark, a suburb of London, South of the River Thames
7. Alexandria's fall: Alexandria is a city in Egypt, captured in 1365 by King Peter of Cyprus.
8. St Loy: perhaps St Eligius, apparently a popular saint at this time
9. Stratford-Bow: in Middlesex, near London, where there was a nunnery

For Study and Discussion

1. Read again and digest how Chaucer organised his lines. What kind of emotion does such organisation arouse when you read them?
2. Even from this short excerpt, one can feel how observant the poet is. He turned his observation into fine description and vivid portrayal of the characters in his tales. Now practise your own story-telling and give a description of the knight, his son and the nun.