

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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CHAUCER

(1343-1400)

Works

The Book of the Duchess 1369
The House of Fame 1370
Parlement of Foules 1381
Troilus and Criseyde 1380
Translation of Boethius, Consolation 1380's
The Canterbury Tales 1387-1400

Biography

Geoffrey Chaucer was born in London about 1340, to a family of French descent who had made their fortune in the wine trade. It was Chaucer's fortune to have been brought up near the Wine-Trade docks of the River Thames, where he had a chance to watch foreigners at work and play, as well as a wide variety of English types; practice in life studies which would pay off richly in the *Canterbury Tales*, and in the human studies in *Troilus and Criseyde*. When he was ready for a career his father got him a job as a page at court, an apprenticeship which taught him a lot about the world, and from there Chaucer stepped into a long life of business and diplomacy.

For a while he studied law at the Inns of Court. He was active on the continent, in various military capacities, including some hush hush message carrying for the King. In company with various royal personages, Chaucer traveled widely on the continent. He went on to form many fruitful personal connections, while still a young man, and to observe life in its pageantry, especially as it played out into the separation among the three dominant classes both of continental and of English society: the nobility, the church and the commoners. (His eye for class differences was sharp.)

Chaucer married in 1360, had three or four children, and settled down to a life of business. For some time he served as Comptroller of Customs for the port of London, a job in which, we can be sure, he had ample opportunity to observe human nature at work. (These work challenges were also training in time management, understanding of logic and structure, and self-discipline.) His last prominent career work assignment was as Clerk of the King's works, a role in which he served as an administrator of buildings and works for the Royal Domain. From 1387 to the time of his death, Chaucer was also spending quality time on his masterwork, *The Canterbury Tales*.

Achievements

The Canterbury Tales, which draws on the broad experience of humanity, is a long poem considered by most critics to be Chaucer's greatest work, and though it is in many ways devoted to universal issues, lasting personality types which might well have been plucked from the ancient character repertoires of Theophrastus, it is also a work of great innovation.

The Canterbury Tales consists of a General Prologue and twenty-four stories told by pilgrims making their way as a group to Canterbury. The conception and execution of this great work was carried out by Chaucer during the last ten or twelve years of his life, and comes before us as a testimony to his powerful fictional transformation, of the human meaning of what was in fact an annual pilgrimage to the Cathedral of Thomas a Beckett, the Cathedral in which the archbishop had been murdered. The idea of introducing an Inn, along the route leading to the Cathedral, was the literary framework genius that gave Chaucer a mental stage on which to place his vivid picture of the human life of his time. Of similar

brilliance was the idea—in itself totally improbable—of bringing together in one place, an Inn, a widely diverse set of social classes and background experiences. Chaucer's achievement was to match his transformative vision with a technical device, the trip to an inn, which brought a new image of the world into perspective.

As you read this text you will be struck by Chaucer's fascination with social classes, and their typical representatives, as they gather in the Tabard Inn. Does it seem to you that Chaucer is consciously creating a portrait of his own society? If so, does that portrait spring from the narrative instinct or from the desire to portray society? Can you observe that Chaucer's achievement includes his ability to think from within the minds of his social types?

There is some wholistic drive, in Chaucer, to see his whole society as a unit. The interhatching of 'modern' concerns with old-fashioned values can be disengaged from all Chaucer's major characters, generated as they are from an urbane business oriented 14th century Londoner, who was at the same time an imaginative antiquary, constantly probing ways of giving fresh life to the historical past. The Wife of Bath, the Miller, Nicholas and the Pardoner all reflect that kind of genesis. Each of these characters sports newsworthy and perfectly modern faults: the Wife a casual search for pleasure (and or money) in the course of acquiring and discarding mates; the Miller a heavy handed thief on the grain trade; Nicholas a spirited and lusty lady's man, indifferent to the deception and humiliation he dispenses en route to the main goal; the Pardoner a seller of fake gewgaws, a slick con man, though at the same time a purveyor of wise sayings about moral integrity. The old-fashioned in each of these characters is in their exemplary natures—the way each of them 'stands for' a bundle of traits, the Wife for the polyandrous, the Miller for the fraudulent, Nicholas for the city slicker swain, and the pardoner for the eternal con man. The final drive of this great work probably transcends even the powerful desire to see society as a whole. Like Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* reaches for a comprehensive grasp of the entire human condition—not one under God, as in Dante, but one, and throbbing with life. Sociologist before his time, Chaucer reaches into new dimensions of characterization, getting inside the minds of real people in their social setting. This too is a way to describe his achievement, bringing a new image of the world into perception.

In the mid 1380's, while *The Canterbury Tales* were cooking in Chaucer's mind, he created an epic poem, *Troilus and Criseyde*, which many readers have found finer and more complete--the original plan of the *Canterbury Tales* was never completed—than the *Canterbury Tales*. This epic, in *rime royale*, took much inspiration from the contemporary Italian poet, Boccaccio, but struck its own original and powerful note. The core of the epic is the passion and conflict of sexual desire, between two young lovers, Troilus and Criseyde. Unlike the comparable ancient tale, of Hero and Leander who long for each other across the Bosphorus, and ultimately perish, Chaucer's twist on ancient myth is bitter, if also a bit detached. It is this tone which sets Chaucer's stamp on the work, gives it that 'realistic' force we treasure in *The Canterbury Tales*. In the end Criseyde welches out on the solemn love she has sworn to Troilus, and leaves the Trojan camp. She returns to her father, the prophet Calchas, in the Greek camp, and falls head over heels in love with the Greek hero Diomedes. So much for the tricks of Cupid, and the vulnerability of Troilus, which is rendered here with touching depth.

Characters

The Wife of Bath. This memorable lady, from the *Canterbury Tales*, continues to haunt us, with her blend of carnality and spirituality. She consumes her husbands with gusto, and is ever ready for more, yet understands the finite power in desire, and sees life as a comedy.

Troilus, the love-soaked youth of *Troilus and Criseyde*, represents a figure Chaucer creates in many versions, the manly naïve young man who falls victim to his own passion, and only in the end eats up the bitter truth, that his girlfriend has flown the coop.

The Pardoner is one of those types that Chaucer can skew to the wall, and does in *The Canterbury Tales*. The pardoner is a master of moral high talk, but a con man just under the surface, as his victims learn in spades.