

Geoffrey Chaucer

(c. 1343–1400)

Geoffrey Chaucer, often called the father of English poetry, made the English language respectable.

Ordinary people in Chaucer's England spoke the Anglo-Norman composite now called Middle English, a language that became the ancestor of Modern English. But in Chaucer's time the languages of literature, science, diplomacy, and religion were still Latin and French. Before Chaucer it was not fashionable for serious poets to write in English. People felt that English couldn't possibly convey all the nuances and complexities of serious literature. There were, it is true, some exceptions: The so-called Gawain poet (page 158) wrote in a northwestern dialect of English, and, of course, there were the popular ballads.

But the poets who wrote these works lacked the social stature of Chaucer. Chaucer was a well-known government official who served under three kings—Edward III, Richard II, and Henry IV. By composing in the **vernacular**—the everyday language spoken in London and the East Midlands—Chaucer lent respectability to a language that would develop into the medium for one of the world's greatest bodies of literature. In this sense, he was indeed the father of English poetry.

Friends in High Places

Not a great deal is known of Chaucer's life. He was born into a middle-class family in London in the early 1340s, not long after the beginning of the Hundred Years' War. We are told that his father was a wine merchant who had enough money to provide his son with some education. The young Chaucer read a great deal and had some legal training. He became a page to an eminent family from whom he received the



Geoffrey Chaucer (1400) by an unknown artist.

By Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London.

finest training in good manners. As he advanced in his government career, he became attached to several noble patrons.

We know, too, that Chaucer was captured in France while serving as a soldier during the Hundred Years' War and that

he was important enough to have the king contribute to his ransom. We also know that he married Philippa and had at least two children and that he was on several occasions sent to Europe as the king's ambassador. In 1367, he was awarded the first of several pensions for his services to the Crown. (On April 23, 1374, he was granted the promise of a daily pitcher of wine.) In 1385, he was appointed justice of the peace in the county of Kent, later becoming a member of Parliament. He continued to serve and to enjoy the king's protection.

Writing and Holding a Job

It seems clear that Chaucer was a relatively important government servant and that his work took precedence over his writing. (It would be as if a prominent adviser to the United States president were also a highly acclaimed poet.) Yet he wrote a great deal, and sometimes for personal advancement. In about 1369, for example, he composed his first important poem, *The Book of the Duchess*, in memory of his patron's wife, who had just died of the plague. But Chaucer's writing is just as clearly more than an attempt at political advancement or a passing fancy. Despite his government responsibilities; between 1374 and 1386, Chaucer managed to create several great allegorical poems, including the *House of Fame* and the *Parliament of Fowls*, and his poignant and amusing love story *Troilus and Criseyde*.



The Italian Connection

In 1372 and 1378, Chaucer traveled in Italy, where he was very likely influenced by the poems of Dante and Petrarch and by the stories of Giovanni Boccaccio (page 152). The connection between Boccaccio's collection of tales called the *Decameron* (c. 1348–1353) and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (c. 1387–1400) is evident. Both use a framing device within which the characters tell their tales, and both include tales based on similar old plots. The framing device in the *Decameron* is a group of people who have fled the plague-ridden city of Florence and tell stories to while away their time in the country. Chaucer's frame is a religious pilgrimage during which each traveler is to tell four stories, two going out and two returning.

Chaucer began writing *The Canterbury Tales* in 1387, during a few years of unemployment when his patron was out of the country. Perhaps because he felt that he had lost his ability to find rhymes, he never completed all the stories. But the collection still must be considered one of the greatest works in the English language. *The Canterbury Tales* alone—even only the Prologue, where each traveler is described—would be sufficient to place Chaucer in the company of Shakespeare and Milton.

The Force of Personality

What is so great about *The Canterbury Tales*? In part, its greatness lies in Chaucer's language. But its greatness also comes from the sheer strength of Chaucer's spirit and personality. John Gardner, one of Chaucer's many biographers, offers a tribute to Chaucer's lasting power:

In a dark, troubled age, as it seems to us, he was a comfortable optimist, serene, full of faith. For all his delight in irony—and all his poetry has a touch of that—he affirmed this life, to say nothing of the next, from the bottom of his capacious heart. Joy—satisfaction without a trace of sentimental simple-mindedness—is still the effect of Chaucer's poetry and of Chaucer's personality as it emerges from the poems. It is not

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the simple faith of a credulous man in a credulous age: No poet has ever written better on the baffling complexity of things. But for all the foggy

shiftings of the heart and mind, for all the obscurity of God's huge plan, to Chaucer life was a magnificent affair, though sadly transient; and when we read him now, six centuries later, we are instantly persuaded.

The End of the Old Alliterative Anglo-Saxon World

Chaucer used several metrical forms and some prose in *The Canterbury Tales*, but the dominant meter is based on ten syllables, with an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. We call this meter **iambic pentameter**. It is a rhythm that most closely matches the way English is spoken. You might hear this rhythm if you read aloud this line in Middle English (*swich* means "sweet"):

And bathed évery véyne in swich lícour

When we read a line such as this, we experience a version of the meter that was to become the most popular metrical line in English. At a stroke, we have abandoned the old, alliterative world of the Anglo-Saxons and have entered the modern world of Shakespeare, Wordsworth, and even America's Robert Frost.

The Father in the Family Vault

Chaucer died on October 25, 1400, if we are to believe the date on his tombstone (which an admirer erected in Westminster Abbey in 1556). Chaucer was the very first of those many famous English writers who would be gathered into what we know as the Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey—one of the great tourist sights in London today. "The Father of English poetry," notes Nevill Coghill, "lies in his family vault."

The Canterbury Tales: Snapshot of an Age

The Canterbury Tales gives us a collection of good stories and a snapshot, a picture frozen in time, of life in the Middle Ages. To include the complete range of medieval society in the same picture, Chaucer places his characters on a pilgrimage, a religious journey made to a shrine or holy place. These pilgrims, like a collection of people on tour today, are from many stations and stages of life. Together they travel on horseback from London to the shrine of the martyr Saint Thomas à Becket at Canterbury Cathedral, about fifty-five miles to the southeast.

The *Tales* begin with a General Prologue, the first lines of which establish that this pilgrimage takes place in the spring, the archetypal time of new life and awakening. Fifty-five miles is a long journey by horseback, especially along muddy tracks that would hardly pass as roads today. An inn was always a welcome oasis, even if it provided few luxuries. The

poet-pilgrim narrator, whom many consider to be Chaucer himself, starts out at the Tabard Inn in Southwark, a borough in the south of London, where he meets twenty-nine other pilgrims also bound for Canterbury. It is the host of the Tabard who suggests to the pilgrims, as they sit around the fire after dinner, that they exchange tales to pass the time along the way to Canterbury and back to London. The host's suggestion sets up Chaucer's frame story—the main story of the pilgrimage that includes each pilgrim's story.

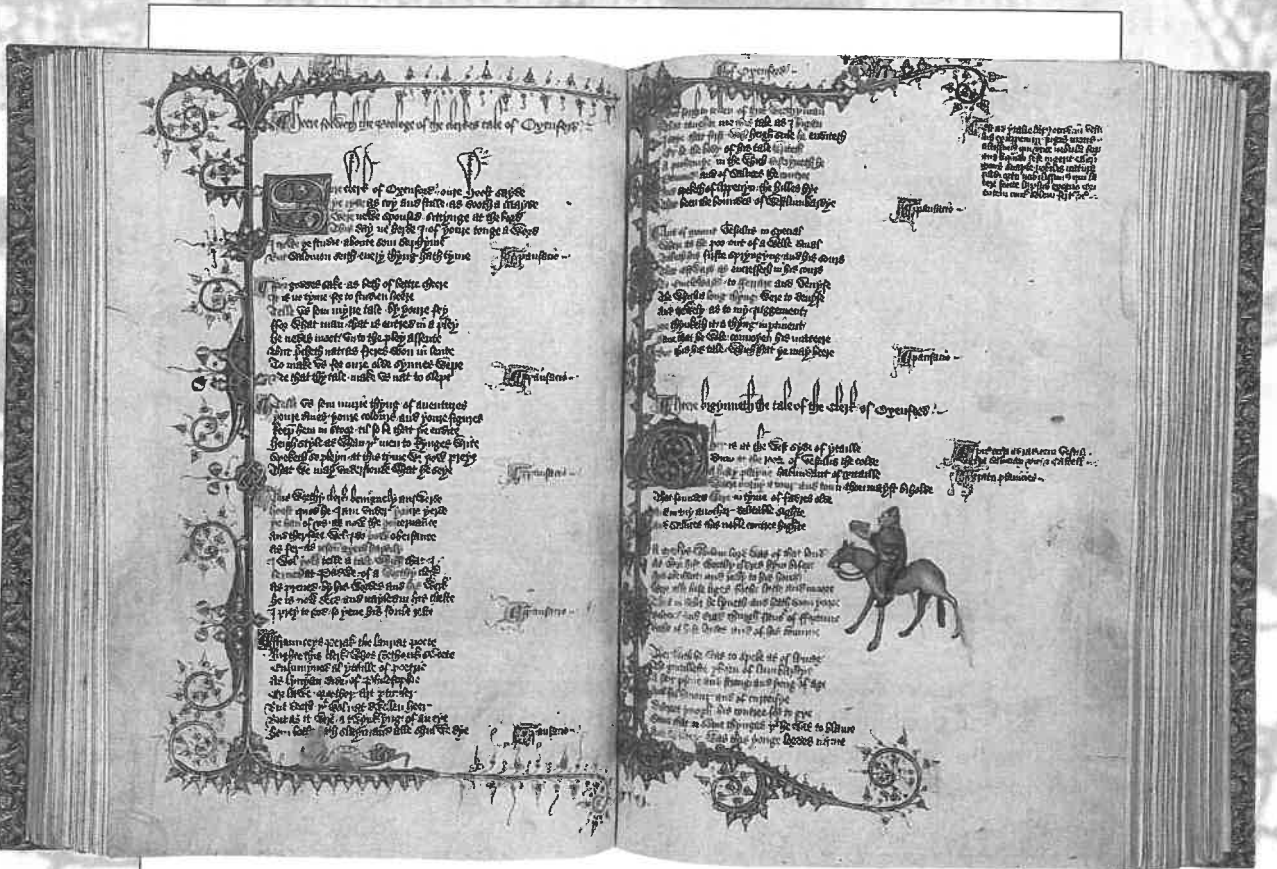
As the Prologue progresses and we are introduced to the pilgrims, Chaucer's brilliant picture of life in late medieval England comes into focus. Here is what Nevill Coghill, one of Chaucer's translators, says about the Prologue:

Page from *The Canterbury Tales*, from the Ellesmere manuscript (15th century).



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Pages from *The Canterbury Tales*, from the Ellesmere manuscript (15th century).

In all literature there is nothing that touches or resembles the *Prologue*. It is the concise portrait of an entire nation, high and low, old and young, male and female, lay and clerical, learned and ignorant, rogue and righteous, land and sea, town and country, but without extremes. Apart from the stunning clarity, touched with nuance, of the characters presented, the most noticeable thing about them is their normality. They are the perennial progeny of men and women. Sharply individual, together they make a party.

Chaucer, from the Ellesmere manuscript, fol. 153v.

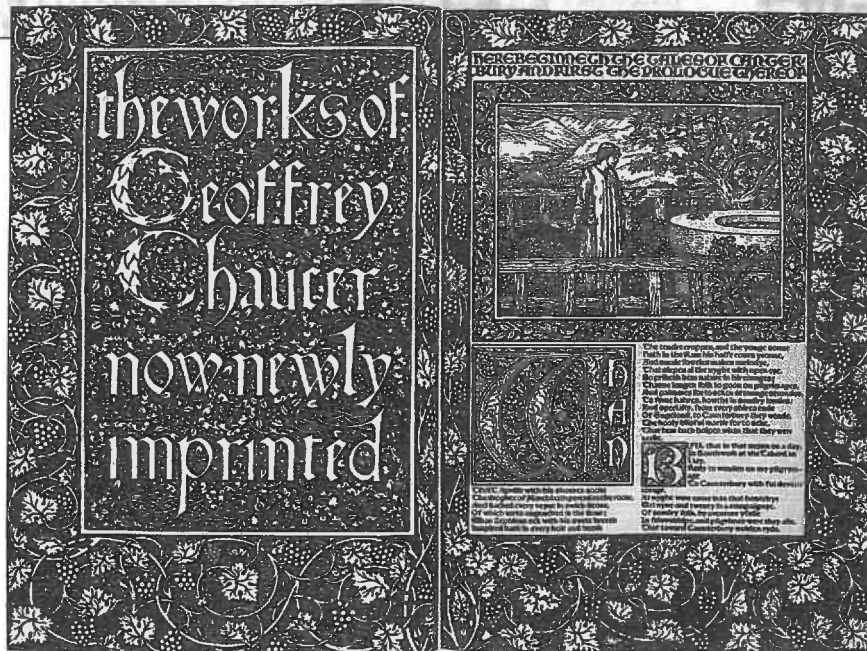
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At its most basic level, Chaucer's great work possesses an archetypal unity. As a pilgrimage story, it is one of the world's many quest narratives, and it moves appropriately from images of spring and awakening at the beginning of the Prologue to images of penance, death, and eternal life in the Parson's tale at the end of the work. The storytellers themselves are pilgrims, presumably in search of renewal at the Thomas à Becket shrine. Coming as they do from all walks of life, all social classes, they cannot help but represent "everyman," or all of us, on our universal pilgrimage through life.

William Morris's edition of *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, published by the Kelmscott Press. C. 43. h. 17.

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Chaucer's Middle English is here translated into Modern English by Nevill Coghill. While this version is true to the spirit of Chaucer's original poem, you might attempt at least bits of the *Tales* in the wonderfully musical original.

Brief Pronunciation Guide to Middle English

Vowels

a: *ab*, as in *father*.

ai, ay, ei, ey: a long *a*, as in *pay*.

au, aw: *ow*, as in *house*.

oo: *oh*, as in *oat*.

e: at times, like a long *a*, as in *mate*. When a double *e* is used, it is always long. *Eek* is pronounced *āk*.

e: at times, like a short *e*, as in *men*.

The final *e* in Middle English is a separate syllable sounded like a final *ab*: *soote* rhymes with *soda*. But when the final *e* precedes a word that starts with a vowel or an *b*, it is not sounded. In "droghte of March," the final *e* in *droghte* is silent.

Consonants

g: hard *g*, as in *go*, except before *e* or *i* (in words borrowed from French) where it is sounded like *zh*, as in *garage*. *Pilgrimage* rhymes with *garage*.

gh, ch: like the German *ch*, as in *nicht*. (These sounds are usually silent in Modern English.) *Knight* is pronounced *k·nicht*!

–**tion, –cial:** The *t* and *c* in such words are not blended with the *i* as they are in Modern English (as in the words *condition* and *special*). The *i* is sounded as a separate syllable. *Speçial* would have three syllables and *condition* four: *kon·di·sē·ôn'*. (*C* has the sound of *s* when it comes before *i*.)