

# Geoffrey Chaucer

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**Geoffrey Chaucer**



Chaucer: Illustration from Cassell's *History of England*, circa 1902.

**Born:** c. 1343

**Died:** October 25, 1400

**Occupation:** Author, poet, philosopher,  
bureaucrat, diplomat

**Geoffrey Chaucer** (c. 1343 – October 25, 1400)  
was an English author, poet, philosopher,

bureaucrat courtier, and diplomat. Although he wrote many works, he is best remembered for his unfinished frame narrative *The Canterbury Tales*. Sometimes called the father of English literature, Chaucer is credited by some scholars with being the first author to demonstrate the artistic legitimacy of the vernacular English language, rather than French or Latin.

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## Life



Chaucer as a pilgrim from the

Chaucer was born in 1343 in London, although the exact date and location of his birth are not known. His father and grandfather were both London vintners and before that, for several generations, the

family were  
merchants in  
Ipswich. His

name is derived from the French *chausseur*, meaning *shoemaker*. In 1324 John Chaucer, Geoffrey's father, was kidnapped by an aunt in the hope of marrying the twelve year old boy to her daughter in an attempt to keep property in Ipswich. The aunt was imprisoned and the £250 fine levied suggests that the family was financially secure, upper middle-class, if not in the elite. John married Agnes Copton, who in 1349 inherited property including 24 shops in London from her uncle, Hamo de Copton, who is described as the "moneyer" at the Tower of London. He was also convicted of sexually harassing a boy of 13. He was put on trial but was released.

There are no details of Chaucer's early life and education but compared to his near contemporary poets, William Langland and The Pearl Poet, his life is well documented, with nearly five hundred written items testifying to his career. The first time he is mentioned is in 1357, in the household accounts of Elizabeth de Burgh, the Countess of Ulster, when his father's connections enabled him to become the noblewoman's page. He also worked as a courtier, a diplomat, and a civil servant, as

well as working for the king collecting and inventorying scrap metal. In 1359, in the early stages of the Hundred Years' War, Edward III invaded France and Chaucer travelled with Lionel of Antwerp, 1st Duke of Clarence, Elizabeth's husband, as part of the English army. In 1360, he was captured during the siege of Rheims, becoming a prisoner of war. Edward contributed £16 as part of a ransom, and Chaucer was released. Chaucer was then known as the prisoner.

After this, Chaucer's life is uncertain, but he seems to have travelled in France, Spain, and Flanders, possibly as a messenger and perhaps even going on a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. Around 1366, Chaucer married Philippa (de) Roet. She was a lady-in-waiting to Edward III's queen, Philippa of Hainault, and a sister of Katherine Swynford, who later (ca. 1396) became the third wife of Chaucer's friend and patron, John of Gaunt. It is uncertain how many children Chaucer and Philippa had, but three or four are the numbers most widely agreed upon. His son, Thomas Chaucer, had an illustrious career, chief butler to four kings, envoy to France, and Speaker of the House of Commons. Thomas' great-grandson (Geoffrey's great-great-grandson), John de la Pole, Earl of Lincoln, was the heir to the throne designated by Richard III before he was

deposed. Geoffrey's other children probably included Elizabeth Chaucy, a nun; Agnes, an attendant at Henry IV's coronation; and another son, Lewis Chaucer.

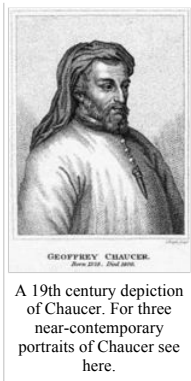
Chaucer is presumed to have studied law in the Inner Temple (an Inn of Court) at about this time, although definite proof is lacking. It is recorded that he became a member of the royal court of Edward III as a valet, yeoman, or esquire on 20 June 1367, a position which could entail any number of jobs. He travelled abroad many times, at least some of them in his role as a valet. In 1368, he may have attended the wedding of Lionel of Antwerp to Violante, daughter of Galeazzo II Visconti, in Milan. Two other literary stars of the era who were in attendance were Jean Froissart and Petrarch. Around this time Chaucer is believed to have written *The Book of the Duchess* in honor of Blanche of Lancaster, the late wife of John of Gaunt who died in 1369.

Chaucer travelled to Picardy the next year as part of the military expedition, and visited Genoa and Florence in 1373. It is on this Italian trip that it is speculated he came into contact with medieval Italian poetry, the forms and stories of which he would use later. One other trip he took in 1377

seems shrouded in mystery, with records of the time conflicting in details. Later documents suggest it was a mission, along with Jean Froissart, to arrange a marriage between the future Richard II and a French princess, thereby ending the Hundred Years War. If this was the purpose of their trip, they seem to have been unsuccessful, as no wedding occurred.

In 1378, Richard II sent Chaucer as an envoy/secret dispatch to the Visconti and to Sir John Hawkwood, English Man-at Arms/Soldier for Hire, in Milan. It is on the person of John Hawkwood that Chaucer based his Knight's Character. The Knight, based on his description/dress and appearance, looks exactly like a soldier for hire/mercenary would have looked in the fourteenth century.

\_\_\_\_\_ A possible indication  
that his career as a  
writer was appreciated came when Edward III  
granted Chaucer *a gallon of wine daily for the rest  
of his life* for some unspecified task. This was an  
unusual grant, but given on a day of celebration,  
St. George's Day, 1374, when artistic endeavours  
were traditionally rewarded, it is assumed to have  
been another early poetic work. It is not known



A 19th century depiction of Chaucer. For three near-contemporary portraits of Chaucer see here.

which, if any, of Chaucer's extant works prompted the reward but the suggestion of poet to a king places him as a precursor to later poets laureate. Chaucer continued to collect the liquid stipend until Richard II came to power, after which it was converted to a monetary grant on 18 April 1378.

Chaucer obtained the very substantial job of Comptroller of the Customs for the port of London, which Chaucer began on 8 June 1374. He must have been suited for the role as he continued in it for twelve years, a long time in such a post at that period. His life goes undocumented for much of the next ten years but it is believed that he wrote (or began) most of his famous works during this time period. He was mentioned in law papers of 4 May 1380, involved in the *raptus* of Cecilia



Chaumpaigne. What *raptus* means, rape or possibly kidnapping, is unclear, but the incident seems to have been resolved quickly and did not leave a stain on Chaucer's reputation. It is not known if Chaucer was in the city of London at the time of the Peasants' Revolt (the Tower of London was stormed in 1381).

While still working as comptroller, Chaucer appears to have moved to Kent, being appointed as one of the commissioners of peace for Kent, at a time when French invasion was a possibility. He is thought to have started work on *The Canterbury Tales* in the early 1380s (the Pilgrims' Way used by his fictional characters on their way to Canterbury Cathedral passes through Kent). He also became a Member of Parliament for Kent in 1386. There is no further reference after this date to Philippa, Chaucer's wife, and she is presumed to have died in 1387. He survived the political upheavals caused by the Lords Appellants despite the fact that Chaucer knew well some of the men executed over the affair.

On 12 July 1389, Chaucer was appointed the clerk of the king's works, a sort of foreman organizing most of the king's building projects. No major works were begun during his tenure, but he did

conduct repairs on Westminster Palace, St. George's Chapel, Windsor, continue building the wharf at the Tower of London, and build the stands for a tournament held in 1390. It may have been a difficult job but it paid well: two shillings a day, over three times his salary as a comptroller. In September 1390, records say that he was robbed, and possibly injured, while conducting the business, and it was shortly after, on 17 June 1391, that he stopped working in this capacity. Almost immediately, on 22 June, he began as deputy forester in the royal forest of North Petherton, Somerset. This was no sinecure, with maintenance an important part of the job, although there were many opportunities to derive profit. It is believed that Chaucer stopped work on the Canterbury Tales sometime towards the end of this decade.

Soon after the overthrow of his patron Richard II in 1399, Chaucer vanished from the historical record. He is believed to have died of unknown causes on 25 October 1400 but there is no firm evidence for this date, as it comes from the engraving on his tomb, which was built more than one-hundred years after Chaucer's death. There is some fanciful speculation—most recently in Terry Jones' book *Who Murdered Chaucer?: A Medieval Mystery*—that he was murdered by enemies of

Richard II or even on the orders of his successor Henry IV. There is however no solid evidence to support this claim.

The new king (Henry IV) did renew the grants assigned to Chaucer by Richard, but in *The Complaint of Chaucer to his Purse*, Chaucer hints that the grants might not have been paid. The last mention of Chaucer in the historical record is on 5 June 1400, when some monies owing to him were paid. Chaucer was buried in Westminster Abbey in London, as was his right owing to the jobs he had performed and the new house he had leased nearby on 24 December 1399. In 1556 his remains were transferred to a more ornate tomb, making Chaucer the first writer interred in the area now known as Poets' Corner.

## Works

Chaucer's first major work *The Book of the Duchess* was an elegy for Blanche of Lancaster (who died in 1369). It is possible that this work was commissioned by her husband John of Gaunt, as he granted Chaucer a £10 annuity on 13 June 1374. This would seem to place the writing of *The Book of the Duchess* between the years 1369 and

1374. Two other early works by Chaucer were *Anelida and Arcite* and *The House of Fame*. Chaucer wrote many of his major works in a prolific period when he held the job of customs comptroller for London (1374 to 1386). His *Parlement of Foules*, *The Legend of Good Women* and *Troilus and Criseyde* all date from this time. Also it is believed that he started work on *The Canterbury Tales* in the early 1380s. Chaucer is best known as the writer of *The Canterbury Tales*, which is a collection of stories told by fictional pilgrims on the road to the cathedral at Canterbury; these tales would help to shape English literature.

*The Canterbury Tales* contrasts with other literature of the period in the naturalism of its narrative, the variety of stories the pilgrims tell and the varied characters who are engaged in the pilgrimage. Many of the stories narrated by the pilgrims seem to fit their individual characters and social standing, although some of the stories seem ill-fitting to their narrators, perhaps as a result of the incomplete state of the work. Chaucer drew on real life for his cast of pilgrims: the innkeeper shares the name of a contemporary keeper of an inn in Southwark, and real-life identities for the Wife of Bath, the Merchant, the Man of Law and the Student have been suggested. The many jobs

Chaucer held in medieval society—page, soldier, messenger, valet, bureaucrat, foreman and administrator—probably exposed him to many of the types of people he depicted in the *Tales*. He was able to ape their speech and satirise their manners in what was to become popular literature among people of the same types.

Chaucer's works are sometimes grouped into, first a French period, then an Italian period and finally an English period, with Chaucer being influenced by those countries' literatures in turn. Certainly *Troilus and Criseyde* is a middle period work with its reliance on the forms of Italian poetry, little known in England at the time, but to which Chaucer was probably exposed during his frequent trips abroad on court business. In addition, its use of a classical antiquity|classical subject and its elaborate, courtly language sets it apart as one of his most complete and well-formed works. In *Troilus and Criseyde* Chaucer draws heavily on his source, Boccaccio, and on the late Latin philosopher Boethius. However, it is *The Canterbury Tales*, wherein he focuses on English subjects, with bawdy jokes and respected figures often being undercut with humour, that has cemented his reputation.

Chaucer also translated such important works as Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* and *The Romance of the Rose* by Guillaume de Lorris (extended by Jean de Meun). However, while many scholars maintain that Chaucer did indeed translate part of the text of *The Romance of the Rose* as *Roman de la Rose*, others claim that this has been effectively disproved. Many of his other works were very loose translations of, or simply based on, works from continental Europe. It is in this role that Chaucer receives some of his earliest critical praise. Eustache Deschamps wrote a ballade on the great translator and called himself a "nettle in Chaucer's garden of poetry". In 1385 Thomas Usk made glowing mention of Chaucer, and John Gower, Chaucer's main poetic rival of the time, also lauded him. This reference was later edited out of Gower's *Confessio Amantis* and it has been suggested by some that this was because of ill feeling between them, but it is likely due simply to stylistic concerns.

One other significant work of Chaucer's is his *Treatise on the Astrolabe*, possibly for his own son, that describes the form and use of that instrument in detail. Although much of the text may have come from other sources, the treatise

indicates that Chaucer was versed in science in addition to his literary talents. Another scientific work discovered in 1952, *Equatorie of the Planetis*, has similar language and handwriting compared to some considered to be Chaucer's and it continues many of the ideas from the *Astrolabe*. The attribution of this work to Chaucer is still uncertain...

## Influence

### Linguistic



Portrait of Chaucer from Thomas Hoccleve, who

personally knew Chaucer, so it is probably an accurate depiction

Chaucer wrote in continental accentual-syllabic metre, a style which had developed since around the twelfth century as an alternative to the alliterative Anglo-Saxon metre. Chaucer is known for metrical innovation, inventing the rhyme royal, and he was one of the first English poets to use the five-stress line, the iambic pentameter, in his work, with only a few anonymous short works using it before him. The arrangement of these five-stress lines into rhyming couplets, first seen in his *Legend of Good Women*, was used in much of his later work and became one of the standard poetic forms in English. His early influence as a satirist is also important, with the common humorous device, the funny accent of a regional dialect, apparently making its first appearance in *The Reeve's Tale*.

The poetry of Chaucer, along with other writers of the era, is credited with helping to standardize the London Dialect of the Middle English language from a combination of the Kentish and Midlands dialects. This is probably overstated; the influence of the court, chancery and bureaucracy—of which Chaucer was a part—remains a more probable



influence on the development of Standard English. Modern English is somewhat distanced from the language of Chaucer's poems owing to the effect of the Great Vowel Shift some time after his death. This change in the pronunciation of English, still not fully understood, makes the reading of Chaucer difficult for the modern audience, though it is thought by some that the modern Scottish accent is closely related to the sound of Middle English. The status of the final *-e* in Chaucer's verse is uncertain: it seems likely that during the period of Chaucer's writing the final *-e* was dropping out of colloquial English and that its use was somewhat irregular. Chaucer's versification suggests that the final *-e* is sometimes to be vocalised, and sometimes to be silent; however, this remains a point on which there is disagreement. When it is vocalised, most scholars pronounce it as a schwa. Apart from the irregular spelling, much of the vocabulary is recognisable to the modern reader. Chaucer is also recorded in the Oxford English Dictionary as the first author to use many common English words in his writings. These words were probably frequently used in the language at the time but Chaucer, with his ear for common speech, is the earliest manuscript source. *Acceptable, alkali, altercation, amble, angrily, annex,*

*annoyance, approaching, arbitration, armless, army, arrogant, arsenic, arc, artillery and aspect* are just some of those from the first letter of the alphabet.

## **Literary**

Chaucer's early popularity is attested by the many poets who imitated his works. John Lydgate was one of earliest imitators who wrote a continuation to the *Tales*. Later a group of poets including Gavin Douglas, William Dunbar and Robert Henryson were known as the Scottish Chaucerians for their indebtedness to his style. Many of the manuscripts of Chaucer's works contain material from these admiring poets and the later romantic era poets' appreciation of Chaucer was coloured by their not knowing which of the works were genuine. 17th and 18th century writers, such as John Dryden, admired Chaucer for his stories, but not for his rhythm and rhyme, as few critics could then read Middle English and the text had been butchered by printers, leaving a somewhat unadmirable mess.<sup>[1]</sup> It was not until the late 19th century that the official Chaucerian canon, accepted today, was decided upon; largely as a result of Walter William Skeat's work. One

hundred and fifty years after his death, *The Canterbury Tales* was selected by William Caxton to be one of the first books to be printed in England.

## Chaucer's English

Although Chaucer's language is much closer to modern English than the text of *Beowulf*, it differs enough that most publications modernise (and sometimes bowdlerise) his idiom. Following is a sample from the prologue of the "Summoner's Tale" that compares Chaucer's text to a modern translation:

| <i>Line</i> | <i>Original</i>                                 | <i>Translation</i>                           |
|-------------|---|--|
|             | This frere bosteth<br>that he knoweth<br>helle, | This friar boasts that he<br>knows hell,     |
|             | And God it woot,<br>that it is litel wonder;    | And God knows that it<br>is little wonder;   |
|             | Freres and feendes<br>been but lyte<br>asonder. | Friars and fiends are<br>seldom far apart.   |
|             | For, pardee, ye han<br>ofte tyme herd telle     | For, by God, you have<br>ofttimes heard tell |
|             | How that a frere<br>ravyshed was to             | How a ravished friar                         |

|  |  |
|--|--|
| helle  | went to hell   |
| In spirit ones by a<br>visioun;                    | In spirit, once by a<br>vision;                          |
| And as an angel<br>ladde hym up and<br>doun,       | And as an angel led<br>him up and down,                  |
| To shewen hym the<br>peynes that the were,         | To show him the pains<br>that were there,                |
| In al the place saugh<br>he nat a frere;           | In the whole place he<br>saw not one friar;              |
| Of oother folk he<br>saugh ynowe in wo.            | He saw enough of other<br>folk in woe.                   |
| Unto this angel spak<br>the frere tho:             | To the angel spoke the<br>friar thus:                    |
| Now, sire, quod he,<br>han freres swich a<br>grace | "Now sir," said he,<br>"Are friars in such<br>good grace |
| That noon of hem<br>shal come to this<br>place?    | That none of them<br>come to this place?"                |
| Yis, quod this<br>aungel, many a<br>millioun!      | "Yes," answered the<br>angel, "many a<br>million!"       |
| And unto sathanas he<br>ladde hym doun.            | And the angel led him<br>down to Satan.                  |
| --And now hath<br>sathanas,--seith he,--<br>a tayl | He said, "And Satan<br>has a tail,                       |

|  |  |
|--|--|
| Brodder than of a<br>carryk is the sayl.           | Broader than a large<br>ship's sail.           |
| Hold up thy tayl,<br>thou sathanas!--quod<br>he;   | Hold up your tail,<br>Satan!" he ordered.      |
| --shewe forth thyn<br>ers, and lat the frere<br>se | "Show your arse, and<br>let the friar see      |
| Where is the nest of<br>freres in this place!--    | Where the nest of friars<br>is in this place!" |
| And er that half a<br>furlong wey of<br>space,     | And before half a<br>furlong of space,         |
| Right so as bees out<br>swarmen from an<br>hyve,   | Just as bees swarm<br>from a hive,             |
| Out of the develes<br>ers ther gonne dryve         | Out of the devil's arse<br>there drove         |
| Twenty thousand<br>freres on a route,              | Twenty thousand friars<br>on a route,          |
| And thurghout helle<br>swarmed al aboute,          | And they swarmed all<br>over hell,             |
| And comen agayn as<br>faste as they may<br>gon,    | And came again as fast<br>as they had gone,    |
| And in his ers they<br>crepten everychon.          | And every one crept<br>back into his arse.     |
| He clapte his tayl                                 | He clapped his tail                            |

agayn and lay ful  
stille.

again and lay very still.  
[2]

## **Monuments and Tributes**

A building has been named in Chaucer's honour at the United Kingdom Civil Service School.

## **Historical reception and representation**

### **Manuscripts**

As early as 1400, Chaucer's courtly audience grew to include members of the rising literate, middle and merchant classes, which included many Lollard sympathizers who would have been inclined to read Chaucer as one of their own, particularly in his satirical writings about priests and various religions. We would not have so many manuscripts of Chaucer's works today if this group of readers had not created a great demand for them.

### **Printed books**

Later on, representations of Chaucer began to

circle around two co-existing identities: 1) a courtier and a king's man, an international humanist familiar with the classics and continental greats; 2) a man of the people, a plain-style satirist and a critic of the church. All things to all people (barring some sensitive moralists), for a combination of mixed aesthetic and political reasons, Chaucer was held in high esteem by high and low audiences--certainly a boon for printers and booksellers.

[<http://www.uwm.edu/Library/special/exhibits/clast>]  
The sixteenth-century folio editions of Chaucer's Works were seminal events in the construction of this national literary forefather who could be read in support of both radical and conservative positions as well as different historical narratives: a popular, reformation from below and a court-controlled reformation from above. So it was then abandoned.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Chaucer was printed more than any other English author, and he was the first author to have his works collected in comprehensive single-volume editions in which a Chaucer canon began to cohere. Some scholars contend that that sixteenth-century editions of Chaucer's *Works* set the precedent for all other English authors in terms of presentation,

prestige and success in print. These editions certainly established Chaucer's reputation, but they also began the complicated process of reconstructing and frequently inventing Chaucer's biography and the canonical list of works attributed to him.

William Caxton's two folio editions of *The Canterbury Tales* were published in 1478 and 1483 (an online edition of Caxton's *Canterbury Tales* is maintained by De Montfort University) . Richard Pynson, the King's Printer for about twenty years, was the first to collect and sell something that resembled an edition of the collected works of Chaucer, introducing in the process five previously printed texts that are not Chaucer's. (The collection is actually three separately printed texts, or collections of texts, bound together as one volume.) There is a likely connection between Pynson's product and William Thynne's a mere six years later. Thynne had a successful career from the 1520s until his death in 1546, when he was one of the masters of the royal household. His editions of *Chaucers Works* in 1532 and 1542 were the first major contributions to the existence of a widely recognized Chaucerian canon. Thynne represents his edition as a book sponsored by and supportive of the king who is praised in the preface by Sir



Brian Tuke. Thynne's canon brought the number of apocryphal works associated with Chaucer to a total of 28, even if that was not his intention. As with Pynson, once included in the *Works*, pseudepigraphic texts stayed within it, regardless of their first editor's intentions.

Probably the most significant aspect of the growing apocrypha is that, beginning with Thynne's editions, it began to include medieval texts that made Chaucer appear as a proto-Protestant Lollard, primarily the *Testament of Love* and *The Plowman's Tale*. As "Chaucerian" works that were not considered apocryphal until the late nineteenth century, these medieval texts enjoyed a new life, with English Protestants carrying on the earlier Lollard project of appropriating existing texts and authors who seemed sympathetic--or malleable enough to be construed as sympathetic--to their cause. The official Chaucer of the early printed volumes of his *Works* was construed as a proto-Protestant as the same was done, concurrently, with William Langland and *Piers Plowman*. The famous *Plowman's Tale* did not enter Thynne's *Works* until the second, 1542 edition. Its entry was surely facilitated by Thynne's inclusion of Thomas Usk's *Testament of Love* in the first edition. The *Testament of Love* imitates,

borrowed from, and thus resembles Usk's contemporary, Chaucer. (*Testament of Love* also appears to borrow from *Piers Plowman*.) Since the *Testament of Love* mentions its author's part in a failed plot (book 1, chapter 6), his imprisonment, and (perhaps) a recantation of (possibly Lollard) heresy, all this was associated with Chaucer. (Usk himself was executed as a traitor in 1388.)

Interestingly, John Foxe took this recantation of heresy as a defense of the true faith, calling Chaucer a "right Wiclevian" and (erroneously) identifying him as a schoolmate and close friend of John Wycliffe at Merton College, Oxford.

(Thomas Spengler is careful to highlight these facts in his editions and his "Life of Chaucer.") No other sources for the *Testament of Love* exist--there is only Thynne's construction of whatever manuscript sources he had.

John Stow (1525-1605) was an antiquarian and also a chronicler. His edition of Chaucer's *Works* in 1561 brought the apocrypha to more than 50 titles. More were added in the seventeenth century, and they remained as late as 1810, well after Thomas Tyrwhitt pared the canon down in his 1775 edition. The compilation and printing of Chaucer's works was, from its beginning, a political enterprise, since it was intended to establish an English

national identity and history that grounded and authorized the Tudor monarchy and church. What was added to Chaucer often helped represent him favourably to Protestant England.

In his 1598 edition of the *Works*, Speght (probably taking cues from Foxe) made good use of Usk's account of his political intrigue and imprisonment in the *Testament of Love* to assemble a largely fictional "Life of Our Learned English Poet, Geffrey Chaucer." Speght's "Life" presents readers with an erstwhile radical in troubled times much like their own, a proto-Protestant who eventually came around the king's views on religion. Speght states that "In the second year of Richard the second, the King tooke Geffrey Chaucer and his lands into his protection. The occasion wherof no doubt was some daunger and trouble whereinto he was fallen by favouring some rash attempt of the common people." Under the discussion of Chaucer's friends, namely John of Gaunt, Speght further explains:

Yet it seemeth that [Chaucer] was in some trouble in the daies of King Richard the second, as it may appeare in the Testament of Loue: where hee doth greatly complaine of his owne

rashnesse in following the multitude,  
and of their hatred of him for  
bewraying their purpose. And in that  
complaint which he maketh to his  
empty purse, I do find a written copy,  
which I had of Iohn Stow (whose  
library hath helped many writers)  
wherein ten times more is adjoined,  
then is in print. Where he maketh great  
lamentation for his wrongfull  
imprisonment, wishing death to end  
his daies: which in my iudgement doth  
greatly accord with that in the  
Testament of Love. Moreover we find  
it thus in Record.

Later, in "The Argument" to the *Testament of Love*, Speght adds:

Chaucer did compile this booke as a  
comfort to himselfe after great griefs  
conceiued for some rash attempts of  
the commons, with whome he had  
ioyned, and thereby was in feare to  
loose the fauour of his best friends.

Speght is also the source of the famous tale of  
Chaucer being fined for beating a Franciscan friar  
in Fleet Street, as well as a fictitious coat of arms

and family tree. Ironically--and perhaps consciously so--an introductory, apologetic letter in Speght's edition from Francis Beaumont defends the unseemly, "low," and bawdy bits in Chaucer from an elite, classicist position. Francis Thynne noted some of these inconsistencies in his *Animadversions*, insisting that Chaucer was not a commoner, and he objected to the friar-beating story. Yet Thynne himself underscores Chaucer's support for popular religious reform, associating Chaucer's views with his father William Thynne's attempts to include *The Plowman's Tale* and *The Pilgrim's Tale* in the 1532 and 1542 *Works*.

The myth of the Protestant Chaucer continues to have a lasting impact on a large body of Chaucerian scholarship. Though it is extremely rare for a modern scholar to suggest Chaucer supported a religious movement that didn't exist until more than a century after his death, the predominance of this thinking for so many centuries left it for granted that Chaucer was at least extremely hostile toward Catholicism. This assumption forms a large part of many critical approaches to Chaucer's works, including neo-Marxism.

Alongside Chaucer's *Works*, the most impressive literary monument of the period is John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*.... As with the Chaucer editions, it was critically significant to English Protestant identity and included Chaucer in its project. Foxe's Chaucer both derived from and contributed to the printed editions of Chaucer's *Works*, particularly the pseudepigrapha. *Jack Upland* was first printed in Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, and then it appeared in Speght's edition of Chaucer's *Works*. Speght's "Life of Chaucer" echoes Foxe's own account, which is itself dependent upon the earlier editions that added the *Testament of Love* and *The Plowman's Tale* to their pages. Like Speght's Chaucer, Foxe's Chaucer was also a shrewd (or lucky) political survivor. In his 1563 edition, Foxe "thought it not out of season . . . to couple . . . some mention of Geoffrey Chaucer" with a discussion of John Colet, a possible source for John Skelton's character Colin Clout.

Probably referring to the 1542 Act for the Advancement of True Religion, Foxe says he "marvel[s] to consider . . . how the bishops, condemning and abolishing all manner of English books and treatises which might bring the people to any light of knowledge, did yet authorise the

works of Chaucer to remain still and to be occupied; who, no doubt, saw into religion as much almost as even we do now, and uttereth in his works no less, and seemeth to be a right Wicklevian, or else there never was any. And that, all his works almost, if they be thoroughly advised, will testify (albeit done in mirth, and covertly); and especially the latter end of his third book of the Testament of Love . . . . Wherein, except a man be altogether blind, he may espy him at the full : although in the same book (as in all others he useth to do), under shadows covertly, as under a visor, he suborneth truth in such sort, as both privily she may profit the godly-minded, and yet not be espied of the crafty adversary. And therefore the bishops, belike, taking his works but for jests and toys, in condemning other books, yet permitted his books to be read."

It is significant, too, that Foxe's discussion of Chaucer leads into his history of "The Reformation of the Church of Christ in the Time of Martin Luther" when "Printing, being opened, incontinently ministered unto the church the instruments and tools of learning and knowledge; which were good books and authors, which before lay hid and unknown. The science of printing being found, immediately followed the grace of

God; which stirred up good wits aptly to conceive the light of knowledge and judgment: by which light darkness began to be espied, and ignorance to be detected; truth from error, religion from superstition, to be discerned."

Foxe downplays Chaucer's bawdy and amorous writing, insisting that it all testifies to his piety. Material that is troubling is deemed metaphoric, while the more forthright satire (which Foxe prefers) is taken literally.

## List of works

The following major works are in rough chronological order but scholars still debate the dating of most of Chaucer's output and works made up from a collection of stories may have been compiled over a long period.

### Major works

- Translation of Roman de la Rose, possibly extant as The Romaunt of the Rose
- The Book of the Duchess
- The House of Fame
- Anelida and Arcite
- The Parliament of Fowls



- Translation of Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy as Boece
- Troilus and Criseyde
- The Legend of Good Women
- Treatise on the Astrolabe
- The Canterbury Tales

### **Short poems**

- *An ABC*
- *Chaucers Wordes unto Adam, His Owne Scriveyn*
- *The Complaint unto Pity*
- *The Complaint of Chaucer to his Purse*
- *The Complaint of Mars*
- *The Complaint of Venus*
- *A Complaint to His Lady*
- *The Former Age*
- *Fortune*
- *Gentilesse*
- *Lak of Stedfastnesse*
- *Envoy de Chaucer a Scogan*
- *Envoy de Chaucer a Bukton*
- *Proverbs*
- *To Rosemounde*
- *Truth*
- *Womanly Noblesse*

### **Poems dubiously ascribed to Chaucer**

- *Against Women Unconstant*
- *A Balade of Complaint*
- *Complaynt D'Amours*
- *Merciles Beaute*
- *The Visioner's Tale*
- *The Equatorie of the Planets* - A rough translation of a Latin work derived from an Arab work of the same title. It is a description of the construction and use of what is called an 'equatorium planetarum', and was used in calculating planetary orbits and positions (at the time it was believed the sun orbited the Earth). The similar *Treatise on the Astrolabe*, not usually doubted as Chaucer's work, plus Chaucer's name as a gloss to the manuscript are the main pieces of evidence for the ascription to Chaucer. However, the evidence Chaucer wrote such a work is questionable, and as such is not included in *The Riverside Chaucer*. If Chaucer did not compose this work, it was probably written by a contemporary.

### **Works mentioned by Chaucer, presumed lost**

- *Of the Wretched Engendrynge of Mankynde*, possible translation of Innocent III's *De miseria conditionis humanae*
- *Origenes upon the Maudeleyne*

- *The book of the Leoun* - The Book of the Leon is mentioned in Chaucer's retraction at the end of *The Canterbury Tales*. It is likely he wrote such a work; one suggestion is that the work was such a bad piece of writing it was lost, but if so, Chaucer would not have included it in the middle of his retraction. Indeed, he would not have included it at all. A likely source dictates it was probably a 'redaction of Guillaume de Machaut's 'Dit dou lyon,' a story about courtly love, a subject which Chaucer scholars agree he frequently wrote about (Le Romaunt de Rose).

### **Pseudepigraphies and Works Plagiarizing Chaucer**

- *The Pilgrim's Tale* -- Written in the sixteenth-century with many Chaucerian allusions
- *The Plowman's Tale* AKA *The Complaint of the Ploughman* -- A Lollard satire later appropriated as a Protestant text
- *Pierce the Ploughman's Crede* -- A Lollard satire later appropriated by Protestants
- *The Ploughman's Tale* -- Its body is largely a version of Thomas Hoccleve's "Item de Beata Virgine"

- "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" -- Richard Roos' translation of a poem of the same name by Alain Chartier
- *The Testament of Love* -- Actually by Thomas Usk
- *Jack Upland* -- A Lollard satire
- *God Spede the Plow* -- Borrows parts of Chaucer's *Monk's Tale*

## References in popular culture

- In the movie *A Knight's Tale*, Paul Bettany plays Chaucer, as a gambling addicted writer who becomes the herald for the title character's knight in Medieval jousting tournaments.
- In Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* story *Men of Good Fortune* (collected in *The Doll's House*), Chaucer appears briefly in a tavern in fourteenth-century England. He is listening to a companion dismiss *The Canterbury Tales* as "filthy tales in rhyme about pilgrims".

## Notes

1. ^ "From The Preface to *Fables Ancient and*

*Modern*". The Norton Anthology of English Literature. Stephen Greenblatt. 8th ed. Vol. C. New York, London: Norton, 2006. 2132-33. pg. 2132

2. ^ Original e-text available online at the University of Virginia website[1], trans. Wikipedia.

## References

- *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed. Oxford University Press (1987) ISBN 0192821091
- *Chaucer: Life-Records*, Martin M. Crow and Clair C. Olsen. (1966)

## See also

- Literature
- Middle English
- Middle English literature
- Medieval literature
- Chaucer College, a graduate school of the University of Kent, England; North Petherton.
- Asteroid 2984 Chaucer, named after the poet
- The movie *A Knight's Tale* took its name from The Knight's Tale, one of *The Canterbury Tales*, and a fictionalised

Chaucer himself appears as a character in it (played by Paul Bettany), as do characters loosely based on the Pardoner and the Summoner.

- John V. Fleming, an eminent Princeton Chaucerian

## External links

- Poems by Geoffrey Chaucer at PoetryFoundation.org
- Works by Geoffrey Chaucer at Project Gutenberg
- *Chaucer's Official Life* by James Root Hulbert
- Early Editions of Chaucer
- BBC television adaptation of certain of the Canterbury Tales
- Geoffrey Chaucer - Radio broadcast, *In Our Time*, 9 February 2006, BBC Radio 4 broadcast (includes link to Listen Again)
- "Geoffrey Chaucer Hath a Blog" (A Chaucer parody blog)
- The Canterbury Tales and Other Poems
- Chaucer's language: Glossary from the Canterbury Tales
- Troilus and Creseyde
- Biography resources dedicated to Geoffrey Chaucer

- Chaucer at *The Online Library of Liberty*
- The Canterbury Tales: A Complete Translation into Modern English

## **Educational institutions**

- Caxton's Chaucer Complete digitized texts of Caxton's two earliest editions of the Canterbury Tales from the British Library
- Caxton's Canterbury Tales: The British Library Copies An online edition with complete transcriptions and images captured by the HUMI Project
- Chaucer Metapage - Project in addition to the 33rd International Congress of Medieval Studies
- Chaucer Page by Harvard University
- Three near-contemporary portraits of Chaucer
- Astronomy & Astrology in Chaucer's Work

### **Geoffrey Chaucer** ***The Canterbury Tales***

*General Prologue | The Knight's Tale | The Miller's Tale |  
The Reeve's Tale | The Cook's Tale | The Man of Law's Tale  
| The Wife of Bath's Tale | The Friar's Tale |  
The Summoner's Tale | The Clerk's Tale |*

*The Merchant's Tale* | *The Squire's Tale* |  
*The Franklin's Tale* | *The Physician's Tale* |  
*The Pardoner's Tale* | *The Shipman's Tale* |  
*The Prioress' Tale* | *Chaucer's Tale of Sir Topas* |  
*The Tale of Melibee* | *The Monk's Tale* |  
*The Nun's Priest's Tale* | *The Second Nun's Tale* |  
*The Canon's Yeoman's Tale* | *The Manciple's Tale* |  
*The Parson's Tale* | *Chaucer's Retraction*

### **Other works**

*The Book of the Duchess* | *The House of Fame* |  
*Anelida and Arcite* | *The Parliament of Fowls* | *Boece* |  
*The Romaunt of the Rose* | *Troilus and Criseyde* |  
*The Legend of Good Women* | *Treatise on the Astrolabe*

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