

## Author Biography—Geoffrey Chaucer

Geoffrey Chaucer has been credited with using a writing style that set the precedent for English poets to come. His exact date of birth is a mystery, although it can be narrowed down to the early 1340s. His use of Middle English to create his works including *The Canterbury Tales* led to the use of the London dialect of Middle English becoming the Standard for English across the country—and the world. Unlike his predecessors and contemporaries who wrote in the language of the monarchy and nobility (French), Chaucer chose to write in the language of the common people.

During his life, Chaucer saw the Black Death (1348–1351), the Hundred Years' War between France and England (1337–1453), religious upheavals such as those led by the Lollards, political upheavals such as the Peasant Revolt of 1381, and the many attempts to supplant King Richard II. Each of these events affected his life and his work.

### EARLY YEARS

Chaucer had the double fortune of surviving the Black Plague, which ravaged Europe killing upwards of one third of the population including many among the working class, and having a merchant father who could afford to send him to a fine household to work as a Page (a boy who served a knight). In or near 1357, young Chaucer served in London in the house of the Countess of Ulster, the wife of Prince Lionel of Antwerp. A few years later, Chaucer joined the English effort in the Hundred Years' War as one of Prince Lionel's attendants, and went to France where he was taken prisoner. Because of the skill and service he had shown while in the house of the Countess of Ulster, Chaucer's ransom was eventually paid by King Edward III and Chaucer was brought back to England to work in the king's service. Eventually, Chaucer was promoted to the King's Esquire. Working in the service of nobility and monarchy afforded Chaucer opportunities he might not otherwise have had, as Pages received both an academic and social education. A schoolmaster would provide the academic instruction and the lady of the house would train the page in the social manners and arts of a courtier. Among Chaucer's many accomplishments was his acquisition of several languages, including English, French, Latin, and Italian. In the early 1360s, as well as later on, Chaucer used his linguistic prowess to carry out diplomatic missions for King Edward III and King Richard II (who reigned 1377–1400).

### MARRIAGE

In or near 1366 Chaucer married Philippa Roet, a lady in the queen's chamber and sister to the third wife of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster and fourth son of King Edward III. Philippa is believed to have died in 1387. The sisterly connection is assumed to have paved the way for the Duke of Lancaster's patronage of Chaucer. John of Gaunt promoted Chaucer to Squire and paid him 10 pounds per annum, which was a typical salary for a squire. Because of the political nature of Medieval English society, it was John of Gaunt's patronage that allowed Chaucer to obtain good jobs with well-paying salaries. During the years when John of Gaunt was in Spain, however, Chaucer's popularity waned and he approached poverty.

### INFLUENCES

Chaucer's early influences were French poets and his early work resembles the style of these poets. During his many voyages to France and Italy, Chaucer became familiar with the literature of Dante (1265–1321), Petrarch (1304–1374), and Boccaccio (1313–1375), among others. While there is no actual proof that Chaucer modeled his work after Boccaccio, he wrote *The Canterbury Tales* in a style that is reminiscent of the work of Boccaccio's

*Decameron*. Completed in 1358, *Decameron* is a tale of seven women and three gentlemen who flee from a plague-stricken city. Over the course of their ten day voyage to a safe haven, the group takes turns telling stories; they manage to tell 100. Diverging from the *Decameron* a little, Chaucer sends his travelers on a religious pilgrimage to a shrine instead of having them flee from the Black Death. The structure of both poems is similar; however, as both consist of stories that range in topic and were taken from tales that already existed. Unlike today when authors are expected to create their own stories, in Chaucer's time, a good storyteller was determined by his ability to relay the story using emphasis, language, and other creative elements to give the story a fresh appearance despite its familiarity. Thus, Chaucer's tales have been taken from a variety of sources including Boccaccio, just as Boccaccio borrowed from tales of the time.

In addition to literary influences, the many positions Chaucer held throughout his life afforded him opportunities to see people from various walks of life. As a diplomat during the Hundred Years' War, he was called upon to travel to France and Italy, and as controller and clerk of various government departments he would have been required to travel within England as well. Working as a diplomat for the king would have necessitated Chaucer to be cognizant of the affairs of the state. The reign of King Richard II, for example, was a turbulent one as he was called upon to defend his crown from his coronation at ten years of age in 1377 until his eventual abdication in 1399 at the age of 32. Chaucer would also have been privy to discussions of parliamentary changes and other matters of state. Chaucer was also knowledgeable about matters pertaining to the Catholic Church. It is clear from tales such as the *Prioress's Tale*, the *Man of Law's Tale*, and the *Clerk's Tale* that Chaucer was familiar with the Church doctrine as decreed by the Pope. Chaucer also makes comments in a few places about a group of heretics known as the Lollards. Condemned by the Church, this band of heretics led by John Wycliffe raised questions about abuses of the Church including the abuse of power among its personnel. This message of abuse of Church power is apparent in several of the pilgrims including the Friar who is described as one who sells confessions and manipulates people out of their money. The Monk with his lavish attire, expensive horses, and complete lack of obedience to his Order is another example of the abuses of the Church that caused frustration among the Lollards as well as the people of England.

#### STYLE

As already discussed, Chaucer used both French and Italian poetry as his models for style and structure and his tales are revisions of stories which were already told. In that much, his style was similar to that of his contemporaries. However, Chaucer's work is different because he chose to break the norms of literature of the time by writing in the common language of London rather than that of the court. *The Canterbury Tales* was originally written in Middle English, which was the common spoken language of the public, rather than the native French of the reigning monarchs. Most of the poets up to that time wrote in French or Italian. By writing his poetry in the English dialect of London, Chaucer set the precedent for his peers and future poets. Throughout the country there were different dialects of English but, because of the work of Chaucer, the London dialect eventually became the hallmark of proper English. It is believed long time patron and Duke of Lancaster, John of Gaunt, inspired Chaucer's use of Middle English when he requested Chaucer prepare a poem in English in memory of his deceased wife, Blanche.

#### LATER LIFE

Throughout his life Chaucer held many positions including King's Esquire, which he was named in 1378; Controller of Taxes on Wools, Skins, and Hides in the port of London;

Controller of Taxes on Wine and other goods; Member of Parliament in Kent; Clerkship of the Royal Works (his highest position); and Deputy Forester for the Royal Forest at North Petherton, England. For most of his adult life, Chaucer enjoyed a comfortable economic status although there were leaner years near the end of his life when he was reported to be near poverty. Chaucer's livelihood was dependent upon the favor of the king and nobility. As a young man, the favor he had won with King Edward III earned him a release from captivity in France. As an older man, he again won favor with the king and in 1394 was granted a pension of 20 pounds per annum by King Richard II. An annual cask of wine was added to his pension in 1397. After King Richard II's abdication and subsequent death, King Henry IV granted Chaucer a pension of 40 marks and confirmed the pension granted by Richard II. Chaucer died prior to receiving any of this money, however. It is assumed Chaucer worked on *The Canterbury Tales* for many years and was still writing it when he died in 1400. Chaucer's body was entombed in Westminster Abbey in a place that is now known as Poet's Corner.