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坎特伯雷故事集

THE CANTERBURY
TALES
GEOFFREY CHAUCER

THE WORLD'S CLASSICS

GEOFFREY CHAUCER

The Canterbury Tales

*A verse translation
with an Introduction and Notes by*
DAVID WRIGHT

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乔叟(1340—1400),英国杰出的作家和伟大的诗人。生于伦敦一个富裕的中产阶级家庭。当过海关监督,法官和议员,曾出使法、意等国。深得爱德华三世、理查二世和亨利四世三代国王的信任。死后葬于伦敦威斯敏斯特教堂的“诗人角”,这在当时对于一个平民来说是一种殊荣。

乔叟深受意大利人文主义思想的影响,先后发表了《公爵夫人的书》、《声誉之宫》、《百鸟会议》、《贞节妇女的传说》等。前期重要作品是叙事长诗《特罗勒斯与克丽西德》,表现了新兴市民阶级的生活理想。其代表作为14世纪90年代创作的长诗《坎特伯雷故事集》。虽然他未能完成原先的创作计划,但全诗已构成有机的整体。乔叟作品的主要特点是主题、体裁、风格、笔调的多样性,及描写人对生活追求的复杂性。他的作品内含幽默感,同时对重要的哲学问题进行了严肃而宽容的讨论。他既描写世俗的爱,也描写神圣的爱,表现的范围包括淫欲的通奸到与神的精神结合。因此,他的诗通常总是引导读者去深思人与人以及造物主的关系,同时又提供了对人的高尚情操、弱点和愚蠢饶有趣味的看法。乔叟的诗才在当时普遍受到推崇。乔叟是英国人文主义作家的最早代表,且对英国民族语言的形成有较大影响。

《坎特伯雷故事集》的大部分是以韵诗形式写成的。全书收有一篇总引和 23 篇故事,其中散文两篇,其余都是诗体。描写约 30 名前往坎特伯雷朝圣的骑士、乡绅、教士、学者、商人和自耕农在旅途轮流讲述的故事,表现了不同阶层、行业香客们的不同特点。刻画不同阶层的人物,以幽默的笔调讽刺封建社会的丑恶,揭露教会的腐朽,反对禁欲主义,宣扬世俗享乐。其间以短小的戏剧场面相串连,故事的内容和文体各异,并符合每一个讲述者的身份。《坎特伯雷故事集》生动地描绘了 14 世纪英国的社会生活,体现了反封建倾向和人文主义思想。

THE WORLD'S CLASSICS
THE CANTERBURY TALES

GEOFFREY CHAUCER (c.1343-1400), the son of a well-to-do London wine-merchant with court connections, began his career as a page in the household of Elizabeth, Countess of Ulster, wife of Edward III's son Lionel, Duke of Clarence. As a squire serving in Edward III's army when the king invaded France in 1359, he was captured at the siege of Rheims, and subsequently ransomed. A few years later he married Philippa de Roet, a lady-in-waiting to Constance of Castile, the second wife of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster. It was to commemorate John of Gaunt's first wife, Blanche, that Chaucer composed in 1368 *The Book of the Duchess*, the earliest work that can confidently be attributed to him. He served in various campaigns in France and Spain, and twice visited Italy as a negotiator on important diplomatic missions. By the age of 31 he had been appointed Controller of Customs and Subsidiary of Wools, Skins, and Hides in the port of London, a very responsible post which he held for twelve years. During this period he found time to write such major and innovatory works as *The House of Fame*, *The Parliament of Fowls*, and *Troilus and Cressida*. In 1386 he became a Justice of the Peace and Knight of the Shire to represent Kent in Parliament. Soon afterwards his wife died, and he devoted the rest of his life to composing the *Canterbury Tales*, a project that was never completed. He died in 1400 and was buried in Westminster Abbey.

DAVID WRIGHT was Gregory Fellow in Poetry at the University of Leeds. Besides his collected poems, *To the Gods the Shades*, he has published an autobiography, *Deafness*, edited the poems of Hardy and Edward Thomas, and translated *Beowulf* into modern English prose.

For
Will Sulkin: instigator
and
C. H. Sisson: grant translateur

INTRODUCTION

There is nothing quite like Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* in conception and execution. It is not just the range and variety of the poetry and of the tales themselves, or of their themes and subject-matter, but the realism of the portraits of the people who tell the stories, and the interplay between the tales and the characters of the tellers, that is completely original. In conceiving the idea of a pilgrimage to Canterbury in which the travellers amuse themselves by competing to tell the best story they know, Chaucer hit on a device by which he was able to hold up a mirror, not only to the England of his times, but the world we live in. As William Blake said,

The characters of Chaucer's pilgrims are the characters which compose all ages and nations: as one age falls, another rises, different to mortal sight, but to immortals only the same; for we see the same characters repeated again and again, in animals, in vegetables, minerals, and in men; nothing new occurs in identical existence; Accident ever varies, Substance can never change or decay. Of Chaucer's characters, as described in his *Canterbury Tales*, some of the names or titles are altered by time, but the characters themselves for ever remain unaltered, and consequently they are the physiognomies or lineaments of universal human life, beyond which Nature never steps. Names alter, things never alter. I have known multitudes of those who could have been monks in the age of monkery, who in this deistical age are deists. As Newton numbered the stars, and as Linneus numbered the plants, so Chaucer numbered the classes of men . . . Every age is a *Canterbury pilgrimage*; we all pass on, each sustaining one or other of these characters.

Geoffrey Chaucer was born to an eventful age. He began life in the reign of Edward III, some time between 1340 and 1345, and died in 1400, a few weeks after Richard II was deposed and Henry IV crowned king. The Hundred Years War had broken out a few years before Chaucer's birth. The great naval victory of Sluys took place in his lifetime, as did the battles of Crécy and Poitiers, in which English bowmen destroyed the chivalry of France, and in so doing helped to end the feudal system (though

here the deciding event was probably the Black Death of 1349, and a series of further plagues which ultimately reduced the population of England by as much as a third). It was an age of religious schism exacerbated by two rival and warring popes, one in Rome and another in Avignon; of Wyclif, the church reformer and, according to tradition, first translator of the Bible into English; an age, too, of social unrest and uprisings, culminating in the peasants' revolts in France and England, when Wat Tyler and his followers sacked London, murdered the Archbishop of Canterbury, and almost became masters of England. It was an age of transition (though every age is that) when chivalry was at its zenith—the Order of the Garter was founded in 1349—while at the same time the feudal structure was starting to crumble and the mercantile class (to which Chaucer belonged) beginning to flex its muscle. French, as the language of court and Parliament, was on its way out; in 1363 Parliament was first summoned in English, which by the time of Chaucer's birth was well on the road to domination.

Though Chaucer was born over two hundred years earlier, we know a good deal more for certain about his life than we do of Shakespeare's. But then Chaucer was a public man as well as a poet: an eminent civil servant, diplomat, administrator, Justice of the Peace, and Member of Parliament; his wife was closely connected with the court and his sister-in-law married to one of the most powerful members of the royal family. Shakespeare moved in less exalted circles, so naturally fewer documentary records of his affairs survive.

The first we hear of Chaucer is, as D. S. Brewer remarks, 'a characteristic combination of vagueness and sharp outline'. It is an inventory of clothes bought for him when he was a page in the household of Elizabeth, Countess of Ulster, the wife of Edward III's son Lionel, Duke of Clarence, and the date is 4 April 1357. She paid out seven shillings—about £100 today—for a pair of shoes, a jacket, and a pair of black-and-red breeches. That Christmas she made him a further gift of clothing at Hatfield in Yorkshire, where the boy Chaucer would have met his coeval, Edward III's fourth son, John of Gaunt; and most probably his own future wife, Philippa de Roet, then in the service of the countess.

Chaucer's father was John Chaucer, a well-to-do vintner or

wholesale wine-merchant with a house in Thames Street, at that time one of the wealthiest districts in London. The family came from Ipswich and had been in the wine trade for a generation or two. John Chaucer's wife was Agnes de Copton, a rich heiress related by a former marriage to the Baron of the Exchequer and Keeper of the King's Purse. They were obviously able to afford to give their son a good education. Chaucer may have learned his ABC in an infant's school of the kind described in the *Prioress's Tale*, and gone on to St Paul's cathedral school. He would have learned Latin with the aid of a 'Cato'—an anthology of proverbs and adages supposedly collected by Dionysius Cato: Chaucer often refers to this book in *The Canterbury Tales*. Later he would have gone on to study Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a poem which influenced him all his life. Much of the teaching would have been in French, though before he died English was to become the medium of instruction in schools. There is a possibility that he may have studied law at the Inner Temple some time between 1360 and 1366 since, according to Thomas Speght's 1598 edition of Chaucer, a certain Master Buckley saw in the records of the Inner Temple (now lost) that 'Geffrye Chaucer was fined two shillings for beatinge a Franciscan Fryer in fletestrete'. In view of what is said about friars in *The Canterbury Tales*, the incident seems not unlikely.¹

All that is probability: but what is certainly known is that Chaucer went to France with Edward III's invading army in November 1359, and was captured by the French during the siege of Rheims. On 1 March 1360 he was ransomed by the Keeper of the King's Wardrobe for £16—about £5000 nowadays—which was a little less than the ransom paid out for Sir Robert de Clynton's war-horse. Soon afterwards he was employed as a messenger to take letters from Calais to England, and that is the last we hear of him for another six years. It has been supposed that he may have gone with Lionel, Duke of Clarence to Ireland when the latter became viceroy, but it is more probable that he

¹ Chaucer was again in trouble in 1380, when one Cecily Chaumpaigne released him from every sort of action 'tam de raptu meo'. 'Raptu' means rape or abduction. Nothing more is known about the case, but the word was probably used in the latter meaning. Chaucer's own father had been abducted when a boy by his aunt, in an attempt to force him to marry her daughter, and so gain control of certain family property in Ipswich that he had inherited.

was in service with the king. By 1366 he was married. In that year a certain Philippa Chaucer was given an annuity of 10 marks (about £400) for past and future services by Queen Philippa, whose lady-in-waiting she had become. She was the daughter of Sir Paon de Roet, one of the Flemish knights who had come over in the train of Philippa of Hainault when she married Edward III. Philippa Chaucer made her own career, and seems to have become a person of some consequence. After the death of the queen in 1368, she attended Constance of Castile, the second wife of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster. Philippa's sister, Katharine Swynford, was the governess or duenna of Constance's two daughters, and later became the mistress, and on Constance's death the wife, of John of Gaunt. Nothing is known of Chaucer's relations with his wife, but they were probably much happier than the digs at marriage in the *Merchant's Tale* and the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* seem to imply. In the fourteenth century the institution of marriage was an accepted Aunt Sally: the domineering wife was a stock joke, like the mother-in-law joke of the Victorian music-halls.

Meanwhile Chaucer was advancing his public career. Early in 1368 he went to Spain with the Black Prince, whose victory at Najaro put Pedro the Cruel on the throne of Castile.² In the same year he became an Esquire of the King's Household. Apart from personal service, the duties of a squire could include going abroad on diplomatic errands, and that is how Chaucer was often employed during the next ten years. His most important journeys were those to Italy in 1372 and 1378. On the first of them he was one of the three commissioners sent to the Duke of Genoa to arrange the choice of an English port where Genoese merchants could set up their headquarters. He visited Florence, then a great place for books, where he must certainly have acquired Dante's *Divina Commedia*. His second trip, when he gave his friend the poet John Gower power of attorney to act in his absence, was with Sir Edward de Berkely to negotiate 'for certain affairs touching the expedition of the King's war' with Bernabo Visconti, Duke of Milan,³ and his son-in-law, the great condottiere soldier of

² Pedro was later assassinated by his brother, and Chaucer made him the subject of one of the 'tragedies' in the *Monk's Tale*.

³ He was murdered in 1385 and his fate is another of the Monk's 'tragedies'. See 'Of Bernardo of Lombardy' in the *Monk's Tale*.

fortune, Sir John Hawkwood. Visconti was a tyrant but a close friend of Petrarch, who was godfather to one of his sons. On this visit Chaucer became acquainted with the work of Boccaccio, notably his *Filostrato* and *Teseide*, which latter became the basis of the *Knight's Tale*. However, Chaucer seems never to have heard Boccaccio's name, and probably found his works in unsigned manuscripts.

In June 1374 Chaucer was appointed to the responsible and onerous post of Controller of the Customs of Wools, Skins, and Hides in the port of London. The wool trade was the foundation of the country's wealth, and wool customs a main source of the king's revenue. Chaucer had to keep the accounts in his own hand and oversee the collectors, who were all substantial city business men—one of them was William Walworth, the future lord mayor of London who brought the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 to an end when he stabbed Wat Tyler to death at Smithfield. This post Chaucer held for twelve years, longer than anyone else, so he must have been a success. When he was given the additional post of Controller of Petty Customs in 1382, he became the only person in Richard II's reign to hold both offices simultaneously.

While he was Controller, Chaucer and his wife lived in a house above Aldgate, one of the four original city gates. In those years he must have been very comfortably off. Besides his income as Controller, he had an annuity from the king, and the grant of a daily pitcher of wine—which he commuted to another annuity—as well as a pension from John of Gaunt. His wife also received annuities from John of Gaunt and the king. It has been calculated that their combined income was probably around £99 a year—say £30,000 in today's money. No wonder Chaucer could afford to collect a considerable library. Books were of course very scarce and expensive before the invention of printing; few households possessed more than one. Chaucer had sixty—a good deal more than many an Oxford and Cambridge college could boast.

All this while, despite so busy and full a life, Chaucer was writing poetry. In the court circles where he moved as a young man, English was spoken but the language of culture was French or Latin. His choosing to write in English was a new departure, almost as revolutionary as Dante's decision to abandon Latin for the vernacular at the beginning of the century, though when Chaucer started to write he had probably never heard of Dante.

The innovation caught on: his contemporary, John Gower, who had begun by composing all his works in Latin or French, ended by following Chaucer's lead. Theirs was the English of cultivated Londoners; in the fourteenth century the vernacular was spoken in a variety of dialects. Chaucer himself observed of his *Troilus and Cressida*: 'ther is so grete diversite/In Englissh and in writing of our tonge .../That thou be understonde, God I biseche!' Eventually it was Chaucer's London dialect that evolved into standard English, though this was due not so much to Chaucer's literary achievement as to the political, social, and economic importance of London, which drew to it people from all parts of the kingdom.

Chaucer's earliest work was probably the translation of a long love poem in French, the *Roman de la Rose*, into octosyllabic couplets—though only the first 1700 lines can be attributed to him with any certainty. There followed *The Book of the Duchess*, in the same metre, a courtly and aristocratic elegy on the death of Blanche of Lancaster, John of Gaunt's first wife, written about 1368–9. However, it was in Book II of his unfinished *House of Fame* that Chaucer first displayed that genius for vivid characterization, bland irony, oblique humour, and mix of practicality and imagination, rhetoric and realism, that he brought to full flowering in his *Canterbury Tales* and in *Troilus and Cressida*. Chaucer was not, of course, the only poet writing in English at that time. Masterpieces like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Pearl*, and William Langland's *Piers Plowman* were roughly contemporaneous with *The Canterbury Tales*. But these works are rather the last fruits of an Anglo-Saxon metric, more suited to that stronger, inflected language than the freer Middle English that succeeded it: the end rather than the beginning of a tradition. For Chaucer discarded their Anglo-Saxon alliteration—dismissing it as 'rum, ram, ruf'—in favour of an adaptation of French versification and rhyme-schemes 'so far but no farther than the language allowed ... It brought a new clarity into English verse; the language itself grew clearer.'⁴ Indeed Chaucer's metrical innovations alone are enough to earn him the title of 'father of English poetry' bestowed upon him by Dryden. In one of his earliest translations, An A.B.C., he used a five-stress line, the

⁴ C. H. Sisson, *Times Literary Supplement*, 12 September 1980.

pentameter, apparently for the first time in English poetry. For *The Parliament of Fowls* he cut down and simplified—'since rym in Englissh hath such scarcity'—the intricate structure of the French ballade-form to produce a seven-line stanza called 'rhyme-royal' which he later used with great success for long narrative poems like *Troilus and Cressida*. He also invented that staple of English poetry, the rhyming pentameter or heroic couplet, first employed in his *Legend of Good Women*. It became the principal metre for *The Canterbury Tales*. In it Chaucer found he had an ideal vehicle, not only for either rhetoric or the plain style, but narration, description, and conveying the rhythms of ordinary talk.

Chaucer's poetry was designed to be read aloud—printing was not invented for nearly a hundred years after his death. If an illustration in an early manuscript of *Troilus and Cressida* is to be believed, Chaucer himself read his poems to a court audience. That he did so seems attested by the mask or persona that he creates for himself in *The Canterbury Tales* and in poems like *The House of Fame*. There he poses as a portly, bookish, well-meaning, rather dim-witted sort of chap, not much good at making love or poetry, but doing the best he can; which may be 'a simple and easy way of endearing the poet to his audience and, by implication, of winning delighted acclaim when he wrote better than he had promised. It may also have had something to do with Chaucer's bourgeois origins and his position as court poet seeking to please his social superiors.'⁵ And also, perhaps, to do with disassociating himself from any dangerous or upsetting opinions expressed in the poetry.

The Canterbury Tales were begun about 1387, in which year, so far as is known, Philippa Chaucer died. The poet continued to work on them till his own death thirteen years later, when he left them unfinished. He had given up his posts of Controller of Customs in 1386 and moved from his lodging at Aldgate to another in Kent, most probably in Greenwich. At any rate by 1386 Chaucer had become a Justice of the Peace, and one of the two Knights of the Shire to represent Kent in Parliament. There he had no easy time. In February 1388 was convened the 'Merciless Parliament', when the baronial party led by Richard II's

⁵ S. S. Hussey, *Chaucer: An Introduction*.

uncle, the Duke of Gloucester, imprisoned or beheaded the king's friends, some of whom were Chaucer's Custom-house colleagues. However, in May 1389 the young king, having reached the age of twenty-three, successfully asserted his right to rule and re-assumed the reins. Shortly afterwards Chaucer was appointed Clerk of the King's Works, responsible for the maintenance and repair of the Palace of Westminster, the Tower of London, and other royal palaces. One of his first tasks was to put up the scaffoldings for two sets of tournaments held at Smithfield in 1390—a job which obviously furnished material for the brilliant description of the great tournament in Part IV of the *Knight's Tale*. In that year Chaucer managed to get robbed no less than three times in four days—on the second occasion twice on the same day by the same robbers! who stole not only the money he was carrying but his horse as well. It was a considerable sum, worth about £6000; however, the money was not his, but the king's. He was excused from repaying it, but not long after was replaced as Clerk of the Works and appointed deputy keeper of the royal forest of North Petherton in Somerset: which may have been some kind of sinecure. There seems to be no truth in the legend of his impoverished old age. Without going into more detail it may be said that Chaucer remained reasonably well off for the rest of his life. Both Richard II, and Henry IV who deposed him in 1399, continued to pay annuities to the poet, who in the last year of his life leased a house in the garden of Westminster Abbey. There he died and was buried in what has since come to be called 'Poet's Corner'. In his lifetime Chaucer was famous and highly regarded, so this may have been a special honour, for Westminster Abbey was then primarily a burial place of royalty. Chaucer was in fact only the second commoner to be interred there. According to the inscription on his tomb, erected more than a century and a half after his death, he died on 25 October 1400.

The late Patrick Kavanagh remarked, 'it takes a lot of living to make a poem'. A lot of living is what Chaucer put in before he sat down to write his *Canterbury Tales*. To reflect life in its variety, illuminate the humdrum and penetrate the motives and actions of men and women, requires a thorough involvement in the actual world. No one could have had a better preparation than Chaucer for a work of such scope. He had served in military

campaigns, and travelled widely as a diplomat; as a courtier he was familiar with politics and high life, as an administrator with all sorts and conditions of people; moreover, he was one of the new men, a bourgeois, neither insulated in the coded world of the feudal aristocracy nor trapped in the bondage of the labouring classes. Apart from that, he was a man of exceptionally wide reading, not only by the standards of his times: he read and spoke French and Italian as well as Latin, was expert in astronomy, and had more than a smattering of physics, history, theology, philosophy, medicine, law, and even alchemy. His two visits to Italy must have been crucial—it was the Italy of the Trecento, when cities like Milan, Florence, and Pisa were built or building. Here he became acquainted with the New Learning, with the work of Petrarch, Boccaccio, and above all 'the grete poete of Ytalle/That highte Dante'.

Dante's choice of the vernacular for poetry must have confirmed Chaucer in his view that he had been right to choose English as the medium for his own. The subtle deployment of telling realistic detail in the *Divina Commedia* must also have had an influence when Chaucer came to describe the pilgrims in the *General Prologue* to his *Canterbury Tales*. The debt to Boccaccio—whose name Chaucer never mentions, but whose work he knew well—is more obvious but less profound. From him he took, and transformed, the plots and *dramatis personae* for *Troilus and Cressida* and the *Knight's Tale*. It is possible that Boccaccio's somewhat mechanic contrivance for hooking together the collection of stories in the *Decameron* gave Chaucer the idea for his *Canterbury* pilgrims. But if so, Chaucer transmuted Boccaccio's metal into gold. The story-tellers of the *Decameron* all belong to one class and, moreover, are pasteboard figures. There is nothing like the quarrelling Reeve and Miller, or Friar and Summoner scoring off one another with their scurrilous tales—and incidentally drawing some of the most realistic pictures of ordinary daily life in medieval England. There is nothing like the 'marriage debate' sparked off by the Wife of Bath's magnificent feminist monologue: the Oxford Scholar's half-ironic story of patient Griselda, the Merchant's bitter tale of January and May, and its resolution by the generous Franklin. Chaucer is the only English writer to treat marriage (as distinct from love) seriously and at length in poetry. There have been essays by George Meredith,