

An Introduction to Chaucer

Maurice Hussey
A.C. Spearing
James Winny



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BY
MAURICE HUSSEY
A.C. SPEARING
JAMES WINNY

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PREFACE

This book provides the student, the teacher and the interested general reader with a serviceable and not too bulky introduction to Chaucer. It is meant as a 'first book' which will give a general orientation; the student should then go on to the specialist literature which deals in greater detail with many points which are here only touched on.

The book was planned to accompany the series of texts edited by the authors of these chapters, and published by the Cambridge University Press under the general series title 'Selected Tales of Chaucer'. An advantage of this kind of volume, standing at the head of such a series, is that within the individual volumes of text it is not necessary to do more than allude to the topics covered here. The editorial matter in the series of texts can thus concentrate on the particular Tales being studied, while here certain general topics can be treated once, and at length. This book will also be useful, we hope, to readers using a different edition of the Tales.

The text of Chaucer used in this book is that of F. N. Robinson (*The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 2nd ed., Oxford, 1957), modified in accordance with the principles followed in 'Selected Tales of Chaucer'.

M. P. H.

A. C. S.

J. W.

Cambridge
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1. CHAUCER HIMSELF

Geoffrey Chaucer the poet, son of John Chaucer the wine-merchant, was born a few years before the middle of the fourteenth century. The exact date of his birth has not been discovered; but we know that by 1359 Chaucer was old enough to undertake military service in France. The likelihood that he was born about 1343 is confirmed by a legal deposition made in 1386, which affirms Chaucer then to be 'forty years old and more'. He married at least once, and may have been the father of two sons, one of them the 'little Lewis' for whom he wrote a treatise on the astrolabe. Philippa Roet, whom he married in his twenties, possibly in 1366, died about twenty years later in 1387. Chaucer drew his royal pension for the last time in June 1400, and according to the inscription on his tomb in Westminster Abbey he died on 25 October that same year.

This fragmentary outline of the poet's life represents virtually all that is known of him as a man. That so little remains is hardly surprising. The still greater poet who lived two centuries closer to our own times is just as dark to us. Some hints of Chaucer's private life have survived, not in consequence of any contemporary fame which his poetry may have brought him, but in the record of his career as courtier and civil servant which is documented in state accounts. The scraps of factual information which support the broken biographical outline relate to Chaucer's diplomatic activities, and to his work as a servant of the Crown. They shed no light on Chaucer's personal character or the course of his domestic life. The depth of his religious faith or the colour of his political sympathies, his feelings towards his wife and the mood of his final years, are all lost in the dark backward of six centuries. Even with the help of official records, it is impossible to present a coherent account of Chaucer's life without leaning heavily upon conjecture and balance of

likelihood. The impression which emerges is indistinct and tenuous, becoming blurred as soon as we concentrate our scrutiny upon it. What finally appears is the wide disparity between the man and the description of himself offered by the poet.

The record of Chaucer's public career reveals that he led an active professional life which could seldom have allowed much leisure for writing. It may be for this reason that several of his poems, *The Canterbury Tales* among them, were left unfinished. Although the court society to which he belonged knew of his poetry, it is doubtful whether his contemporaries would have regarded Chaucer primarily as a poet. His portrait of the Squire, who could 'songes make and wel endite', reminds us that accomplishment in the arts was expected of a courtier no less than horsemanship and prowess in arms. The Man of Law, it is true, complains that Chaucer has written so much that no story remains untold, and perhaps in this ironic allusion to himself Chaucer acknowledges that he has become famous as a poet. But we should not suppose that his professional activities took second place to his writing, either in Chaucer's private life or in the eyes of his contemporaries. However incomplete, the biography sketched by the official records of Chaucer's appointments and commissions probably gives us a fair idea of the man as his contemporaries saw him.

Although these records ignore the personal details which would most interest us, they indicate how broad an experience of life Chaucer could draw upon when he embarked on his great culminating poem. He came from a prosperous middle-class background, and entered the court while still a boy. We learn first of his service—probably as page—in the household of Princess Elizabeth, a daughter-in-law of Edward III through her marriage to his son Prince Lionel. This early association with the royal circle was to continue throughout Chaucer's life, with only a short interruption between 1386 and 1389 when he seems to have retired to Kent. The first indications of his presence at court appear in records of gifts from Princess Elizabeth, first of clothing and then of 20s. 'for necessities at Christmas'.

This was in 1357. A year later he may have been in attendance upon his mistress at the great Feast of St George, when Edward III entertained the King of France, captured at Poitiers and not yet ransomed, the King of Cyprus¹ and the Queen of Scotland, together with many other nobles. Towards the end of 1359, now seventeen or eighteen, Chaucer was with the English army in France, during Edward III's final attempt to enforce his claim to the French crown. Near Reims he was captured and held prisoner until March of the following year, when his ransom was paid. During the negotiations for peace, which were concluded in October 1360, Chaucer returned to France as an emissary, and carried letters between Calais and England. Subsequently, little is known of Chaucer's life for the next seven years. It seems likely that during this period he was taken into the service of the king, who had already shown his interest in Chaucer by contributing £16 towards his ransom money. When, in 1367, Edward III awarded him a pension of 20 marks² for life, Chaucer was described in the king's accounts as *dilectus vallectus noster*, meaning a well-beloved personal attendant. The term was conventionally used of courtiers in the king's service, but was not necessarily a form of words only. The gifts and pensions which Chaucer continued to receive throughout his life seem to bear witness to a considerable personal charm.

At the end of this obscure period of his life, Chaucer was about twenty-five, possibly married, and about to be entrusted with a series of diplomatic missions abroad. In the summer of 1368 he was issued with a passport and allowed £10 as travelling expenses for a journey whose destination and purpose were not recorded. From June to September of 1370 he was again out of England, as we know from letters of protection granting Chaucer immunity from arrest or lawsuit while he was engaged on the king's affairs during these months. What business took him abroad was not disclosed; but the purpose

¹ The connexion between Peter of Cyprus and Chaucer's Knight is noted in the commentary upon *The General Prologue*, l. 58.

² A mark was 13s. 4d.: thus the pension amounted to £13. 6s. 8d. a year. The equivalent in modern money might be forty times as much.

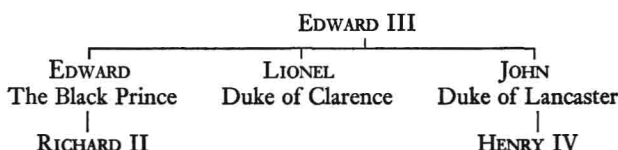
of his next visit to the continent, which lasted from December 1372 until the following May, was to take part in negotiations with the Genoese about the choice of an English port for their trade. It is a measure of Chaucer's diplomatic and business ability that he should have been entrusted with such a task before he was thirty, and evidence of the personal assurance which, whenever he depicts himself in his poems, he pretends not to possess.

This visit to Italy is generally acknowledged as a decisive experience for Chaucer. From Genoa he travelled south to Florence, a proud and beautiful city whose splendid architecture, painting and literature gave her an unrivalled reputation as a home of the arts. Even today Florence is able to astonish the northern visitor by the richness of her cultural treasures, and although Florence acquired much of her present beauty from the still greater artists of the Italian Renaissance, no medieval traveller could have entered the city without a sense of awed excitement. The effect of Chaucer's Italian journey upon his imaginative outlook is not to be reckoned simply through the influence of Dante, Petrarch or Boccaccio upon his own writing. Florence alone would have revealed potentialities of man's creative and artistic power which the much humbler achievements of fourteenth-century England could not have suggested. Contact with this dazzling new world may have given Chaucer's imagination the stimulus which caused it to break into vigorous activity.

Chaucer had given the first substantial proof of his poetic talent shortly before this journey to Italy. In the previous year the duke of Lancaster, brother of Prince Lionel and better known as John of Gaunt, lost his wife Blanche to whom he was deeply attached. What relationship existed between Lancaster and Chaucer before the duchess's death is a matter for conjecture. In serving first his brother Lionel and then his father Edward III, Chaucer could hardly have avoided acquaintance with Lancaster. Whether from affection or sense of courtly duty, Chaucer commemorated Lancaster's grief in *The Book of the Duchess*, one of the earliest of his poems known to us. The relationship between the two men evidently became very

close during the years following. In 1372 Lancaster awarded the considerable pension of £10 to Philippa Chaucer for her services to his second wife, and two years later he granted Chaucer the same generous stipend. Much later in life Lancaster took as his third wife the widowed sister of Philippa, Katherine Swynford, who had borne him four illegitimate children. The link between the two families allows us to suppose that Chaucer was well acquainted with Lancaster's eldest son Henry Bolingbroke, who at the age of thirty-two deposed his cousin Richard and made himself the third of the English kings whom Chaucer was to serve.

Genealogical table showing the relationships of Chaucer's royal patrons



After his return from Italy in 1373, Chaucer was allowed three years of uninterrupted residence in England before being dispatched on a further mission abroad. The appointments and awards conferred upon him during this short period established him as a prosperous and influential member of society. In 1374 he was granted the tenancy of a house above Aldgate, in the city wall north of the Tower of London. Here Chaucer lived rent-free during the period of his married life. In the same year he was appointed Controller of Customs and Subsidy on all the wool, skins and hides passing through the port of London, with the condition that he should keep the records in his own hand: a demand, in effect, that he should not assign his duties to a deputy. As stipend, Chaucer received £10 a year, supplemented by an annual award of 10 marks in recognition of diligent service. Another valuable appointment came his way in 1375, when he was made guardian of two wards of court—legal minors whose estates he was authorized to administer. From this he gained a considerable further income. During the next

year, Chaucer was awarded the substantial fine of over £70 levied upon an unlicensed exporter of wool. If his various duties kept Chaucer too busily engaged to allow much time for writing poetry, he had at least some material compensation. His total income over this short period has been reckoned as equivalent to several thousand pounds of modern money. More important than this, his work brought him into familiar contact with the characters and trades of common life—merchants, shipmen, civic officials—who were to mingle with the figures of courtly literature in his greatest poem.

At the end of these three years Chaucer was in his early thirties, and a citizen of wealth and consequence, with a responsible post and influential friends at court. His diplomatic gifts were now to be employed once more. Between 1376 and 1381 Chaucer's domestic life was again interrupted by several missions abroad. Of the first our only information is that in December 1376 he received a sum of money, probably to cover travelling expenses, in connexion with secret services on the king's behalf. Three months later Chaucer was in Flanders with Sir Thomas Percy, who had been seneschal of Poitou a few years earlier, again engaged on the king's private affairs. It seems likely that Edward III was treating for peace with the French after a recurrence of fighting. From Flanders, Chaucer is known to have travelled to Paris and Montreuil. He was again in France during two weeks of May or June of the same year, probably as one of the negotiators in a renewed discussion of peace terms, and was paid 40 marks for his services. These periods of absence abroad made it impossible for Chaucer to comply with the terms of his appointment as Controller of Customs. Accordingly, he was permitted to appoint a deputy to carry out the duties while Chaucer was engaged on state affairs.

In June 1377 Edward III died after a reign of fifty years, and was succeeded by his grandson Richard II, at this time a boy of ten. The change did not affect Chaucer's position at court. He was confirmed in office as Controller of Customs, the royal annuities granted to Philippa and himself were renewed, and his diplomatic activities

continued. In 1378 he was abroad for five months, accompanying a mission led by Sir Edward de Berkeley to negotiate with Bernabò Visconti, lord of Milan, 'touching the expedition of the king's war' in France, which was still going badly. Chaucer's personal expenses seem to have been unexpectedly great, for although he received an allowance of 100 marks for the journey he overspent this sum by £20, for which he was not reimbursed until 1380. He was again sent to France in 1381. This time the business was a projected marriage between Richard II and a daughter of the king of France. Two previous missions with the same object had been dispatched soon after Richard's accession, both of which Chaucer may have accompanied. The project fell through, and in the year following the young king married Anne of Bohemia, a princess of his own age. There is a tradition that Chaucer's *The Legend of Good Women* was written at the queen's request, and that the poem contains a covert dedication to her.

After the mission to France in 1381, Chaucer's domestic life was undisturbed by foreign journeys for a period of six years. This period of settled residence in London, which brought him up to the age of forty-five, gave Chaucer opportunity to produce a succession of courtly poems crowned by *Troilus and Criseyde*. Beside this long and moving work, he found time to write *The Parliament of Fowls*, *The Legend of Good Women*, and the romance of Palamon and Arcite which was later adopted as *The Knight's Tale*; and to translate the *De Consolatione Philosophiae* of Boethius. His poetic development may have been encouraged during the later part of this productive period by a further increase of income which gave him still greater financial security, and by his release from the possibly irksome duties of the custom-house. The picture of Chaucer's daily life given by the Eagle in *The House of Fame* suggests how hard he may have been pushing himself. Kept busy all day, the Eagle asserts, when his 'rekeninges' were complete Chaucer went home to Aldgate, where

In stede of rest and new thinges . . .
Thou sittest at another book
Till fully daswed is thy look.

We hear more about this dazed look from Harry Bailly, who mocks Chaucer as a timid, uncommunicative traveller lost in his day-dreaming. The obvious irony of Chaucer's references to himself warns us not to regard such remarks very seriously, but there is no reason to doubt the underlying truth of the Eagle's comment. Chaucer's poetry bears witness to his wide reading, both of literature and of scientific works, but the terms of his appointment as Controller did not allow him much personal freedom during the daytime. When, in 1382, he became Controller of the Petty Custom on wines and other merchandise, he was granted permission to appoint a deputy to discharge these new responsibilities. During the year following he was given leave of absence from his post as Controller of Customs for four months, and again for a month in 1384. Finally, in 1385 he was permitted to have a permanent deputy in this office too; so that now, although probably losing part of his stipend to his substitutes in office, Chaucer could devote himself to his poetry.

This period of leisure did not last long. A year later Chaucer's hitherto steady rise of fortune seems to have encountered a serious check. The king's personal extravagance and favouritism aroused growing resentment among commons and nobility alike, and in 1386 an opposition party headed by the duke of Gloucester and the earl of Arundel forced Richard to dismiss his chief ministers, and to accept supervision of his revenue and household. Although Chaucer cannot have been directly involved in this political struggle, he enjoyed the king's favour and could have been regarded as a member of the royal party. This might explain why, in the same year, he lost both controllerships and the house over Aldgate which he had occupied since 1374. But it is possible that he had already voluntarily decided to retire from professional life, and that he had been living in Kent for some time before he gave up the house over Aldgate. In 1385 he was appointed a justice of the peace for that county, and in the following year he was returned as member of Parliament for Kent. His withdrawal from the city about the time of the king's restraint by Gloucester's party may have no political significance. If Chaucer

fell under suspicion as a man who had received marks of the king's favour, he may have found it convenient to reside outside England. In the summer of 1387 he was granted protection for twelve months during his absence at Calais, one of the few remaining English possessions in France. Apart from the fact that he was included in the retinue of Sir William Beauchamp, nothing is known of the circumstances which took Chaucer across the Channel.

Withdrawal from London and the immediate circle of court life did not bring Chaucer the happiness which he may have expected. Within a year or two his wife died, and in the summer of 1388 several writs were issued, authorizing his arrest on charges of debt. Possibly Chaucer was in low water for a time; but in 1389 the king asserted his right to administer his kingdom, and to have a voice in the appointment of his ministers. As a result of this bold move, Chaucer found himself preferred to the most distinguished of the various posts which he held during his career as civil servant, though also the most responsible and demanding. This was the office of Clerk of the King's Works, whose wide range of duties have been summarized by Professor Robinson:

He had charge of buildings and repairs in the Tower, Westminster Palace, and eight other royal residences, together with lodges, mews, parks, and other belongings. In 1390 he was given a special commission to attend to repairs in St George's Chapel, Windsor. It was part of his business, in the same year, to construct scaffolds for two tournaments at Smithfield; and, in addition to the regular duties of his office as Clerk, he was appointed in March to a commission . . . to look after the walls, bridges, sewers, and ditches along the Thames from Greenwich to Woolwich.¹

Although the appointment may have rescued Chaucer from financial distress, in another respect perhaps it could not have been worse timed. Soon after giving up his posts at the custom-house, Chaucer had begun work on *The Canterbury Tales*. Some of the stories now drafted into this varied collection of tales had been written during the previous decade of Chaucer's life—the series of tragic anecdotes

¹ *Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (1957), p. xxiii.

unkindly attributed to the Monk, the life of St Cecile which became *The Second Nun's Tale*, and the romance of Palamon and Arcite. They had been written as individual works, unrelated by the great imaginative scheme that would enable Chaucer to bring together his company of sundry folk and their stories as a close-knit body of characters and tales. At some unrecorded moment after his retirement from London, probably in 1387 or soon afterwards, Chaucer saw how these unconnected stories could be brought within a unified design. His plan envisaged a work of panoramic diversity, held together by the fascinated interest in human character which forty-five years of widely extended experience had developed. It was one of those conceptions, in themselves apparently simple and self-evident, which seem to occur to men of great creative genius as they reach a climax of their power, with an accumulated knowledge of their craft and of human life ready to be poured into a comprehensive masterpiece. *The General Prologue* outlines a scheme which demanded of Chaucer 120 tales, linked by passages of discussion and argument. Beside suggesting his confident vitality as poet, the project implied a belief that he would have leisure for such a vast undertaking. Chaucer can hardly have settled into his stride when the appointment as Clerk of the King's Works arrived, bringing him financial security at the cost of crippling his ambitious poetic design. Under such a flood of practical responsibilities, his work as poet must have been almost completely submerged.

There must still have remained some intervals of leisure. Moreover, the comparatively short tales which Chaucer had set himself to write could not have demanded such long periods of concentrated effort as the courtly poems may have required.¹ But apart from the weight of responsibility which Chaucer had now to bear, his new duties involved much travelling about the country, as well as planning and supervising work on the many buildings under his charge.

¹ The tales told by the Reeve, the Pardoner, the Nun's Priest and the Miller, written during this final phase of Chaucer's career as poet, run to 404, 506, 626 and 668 lines respectively. In contrast, *The Knight's Tale* amounts to 2250 lines.

It was in the course of such professional journeys that, in October 1390, Chaucer was attacked and robbed either twice or three times in a matter of four days. The shock of this experience, aggravated by the loss of money for which Chaucer was accountable, may help to explain his resignation from the post the following summer, after a tenure just short of two years. Possibly he was anxious to return to his pilgrims.

He was not to remain without an official appointment. Within a month of resigning this office, Chaucer was made deputy forester of the royal forest of North Petherton, in Somerset. The usual duties of a forester were to safeguard vert and venison—the deer and its natural cover—for the king's hunting, and to arrest poachers. Whether Chaucer undertook such duties, and whether the appointment obliged him to live in the west of England, we can only guess. If he had resigned a much more important office because its responsibilities had proved too burdensome, he would not willingly have accepted another appointment which promised merely to harrass him in a different fashion. The existence of *The Canterbury Tales* implies that Chaucer enjoyed sufficient personal freedom after 1387 to write most of the twenty-four stories which make up the collection. If the period from 1389 to 1391 is ruled out, as taken up by the demands of the clerkship, and if we accept Robinson's statement that none of the tales can be positively dated later than 1394, it must follow that Chaucer's duties as deputy forester were not very exacting. The fact that he was designated member of a board of Greenwich freeholders in 1394 suggests that he was continuing to reside near London despite his connexion with Somerset. Chaucer was still holding his appointment as deputy forester in 1399, when he took the lease of a house in the garden of Westminster Abbey. It seems fair to assume that he spent little if any time at North Petherton, and that there was now no substantial hindrance to his writing.

The closing years of his life were cheered by renewed marks of royal favour. In 1393 the king made him a gift of £10 in recognition of 'good service rendered' during the previous year, and a year later

Chaucer was granted an annuity of £20. In addition, he was paid £21 due to him as arrears from his clerkship. He must have earned the respect of Henry Bolingbroke, now earl of Derby, who gave him a scarlet robe trimmed with fur valued at £8. Supported by this friendship, Chaucer's private position was unaffected by the political crisis of 1399, which brought Bolingbroke to the throne as Henry IV. The new king confirmed the royal annuity granted by Richard II, together with the allowance of a yearly butt of wine, and conferred an additional stipend of 40 marks upon the poet. There was little time remaining for Chaucer to enjoy the affluence and respect which, if lost during the previous decade, he had now regained. Less than a year after leasing the house at Westminster he died and was buried in the adjoining abbey, the first of a long line of English poets to be honoured by burial within its walls.

We might assume that Chaucer continued writing up to the end of his life, and that the unfinished state of *The Canterbury Tales* is the consequence of his dying before the age of sixty. In fact, there are reasons for supposing that Chaucer abandoned his great work some time before he died. Although it must be difficult to tell at what date this occurred, the moral gravity of *The Parson's Tale* implies an absolute rejection of the comic spirit in which the pilgrimage had set out. This final tale is not an entertaining story but an entirely sober prose sermon on the deadly sins, delivered as an implicit rebuke to the levity which the pilgrims have shown towards the religious task they have undertaken. It involves a change of tone, and suggests a change of purpose, with which Chaucer is completely identified. The tale is followed by an envoy to the reader and a prayer in which the poet begs divine forgiveness for the 'translacions and enditinges of worldly vanitees' which have brought his soul into peril:

the book of Troilus; the book also of Fame; the book of the xxv. Ladies; the book of the Duchesse; the book of Seint Valentines day of the Parlement of Briddes; the tales of Caunterbury, thilke that sownen into sinne;¹ the book of the Leoun. . . and many a song and many a leccherous lay.

¹ 'those which tend towards indecency': meaning the fabliaux.