

Harry Blamires



A  
Short History  
of English  
Literature



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Methuen & Co Ltd



*First published in 1974 by Methuen & Co Ltd  
11 New Fetter Lane London EC4P 4EE*

*Reprinted 1974*

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*Printed in Great Britain by  
Richard Clay (The Chaucer Press), Ltd., Bungay, Suffolk*

*ISBN 0 416 24110 7 hardbound edition*

*ISBN 0 416 24120 4 Methuen paperback*

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## Preface

This work of introduction is designed to escort the reader through some six centuries of English literature. It begins in the fourteenth century at the point at which the language written in our country is recognizably our own, and ends in the 1950s. It is a compact survey, summing up the substance and quality of the individual achievements that make up our literature. The aim is to leave the reader informed about each writer's main output, sensitive to the special character of his gifts, and aware of his place in the story of our literature as a whole. No artificial schematization is imposed, but a pattern emerges naturally from considering writers in the groupings into which they fall by virtue of their historical context and their special interests.

Chapter headings do not define strict watertight divisions. Each one denotes the central interest of a chapter without being exclusive. The bibliography at the end provides chapter-by-chapter reading lists which guide the reader to a sample of texts, mostly inexpensive, and to a few relevant works of critical, historical, or biographical interest. Very many of the listed books are paperbacks.

I gratefully acknowledge the valuable critical help I have received from Professor Harold F. Brooks, and from my son, Alcuin Blamires. Professor Brooks in particular has been most generous in drawing attention to matters in my manuscript that called for re-consideration; but of course I am myself responsible for anything in the book that is amiss.

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# 1

## The fourteenth century

The fourteenth century was an age of healthy literary productivity dominated by four major poets – Chaucer, Langland, Gower and the anonymous ‘Gawayne-poet’. There were also significant religious writers and the unknown makers of Miracle plays.

Geoffrey Chaucer (c.1340–1400) had an important career in public service. He was fighting in France by 1359–60, was taken prisoner and ransomed. No doubt his career benefited from his marriage, for his wife, Philippa, was lady-in-waiting to Queen Philippa. He was early attached to the royal household and went abroad on diplomatic work. His sister-in-law, Catherine, became John of Gaunt’s mistress, then his third



wife. These influential connections, together with his important civil and diplomatic appointments (including missions to Italy), gave Chaucer a wide knowledge of the world, strangely unrestricted, it would seem, by the limitations of outlook which in later ages social class might well have imposed.

*The Book of the Duchess*, Chaucer's earliest work, is an elegy in memory of John of Gaunt's first wife, Blanche, who died in 1369. Its purpose is to praise the deceased and console the bereaved. Chaucer uses the convention of the dream-allegory. The poet falls asleep while reading the very relevant story of 'Ceyx and Alcione', in which Alcione sees her husband in a dream and learns from his own lips of his death at sea. The poet's dream takes him to the countryside on a May morning. There is a hunt in progress; but the poet meets a disconsolate young knight sitting apart, clad all in black and abstracted with grief. The succeeding dialogue between poet and mourner, though its structure owes much to the rhetorical rule-book, is marked by striking touches as the tentativeness, simplicity, and even obtuseness of the inquiring poet are offset by the deep grief of the widower. For at first the knight distances the presentation of his sorrow in artifice: he is the victim of false Fortune who has bereft him of his queen and checkmated him at chess. But the narrator's probing questions then elicit a full and touching account of his lady's beauty, of her wooing and her winning. The reliving of past happiness seems to enable the knight for the first time to confront the stark fact:

'She ys ded!' 'Nay!' 'Yis, be my trouthe!'  
'Is that youre los? Be God, hyt ys routhe!'

A light counterpoint balances the black grief of the 'man in blak' with the white of the lost one, White in name and white in complexion, white-necked and white-handed, and with the white walls of the hill-castle to which the hunters return at the fading of the dream.

This poem illustrates the way Chaucer blends the con-

ventional literary forms with a lively realism and a psychological subtlety that speak to us across the centuries, making the modern reader feel very close to him. We have to forget our prejudices: we must not think of the stylized medieval framework as fettering the poet's spontaneity. For though Chaucer's work throughout shows him to be a craftsman well versed in all the devices prescribed in the study of rhetoric,<sup>1</sup> it does not give us any sense of an inner impulse striving to break out of a literary strait-jacket. Rather the antithetic balance between formality and vigorous realism is something that Chaucer seems to have relished, and it gives his poetry a peculiar charm and piquancy.

Some poets overpower us with their presence or their passion, but Chaucer worms his way into the hearts of his readers, and one key to his insinuating charm is the delightful self-projection that is effected with amusing self-deprecation, even self-mockery. In *The House of Fame* a comically ironic self-portrait emerges in contrast to the solemn machinery of a love dream enriched with the paraphernalia of classical epic. The poet's dream takes him to the Temple of Venus, where he studies a pictorial representation of the story of Dido and Aeneas from the *Aeneid*. An Eagle, sent from heaven, takes him up to the House of Fame, and then to the House of Twigs, where the fortuitousness of earthly fame and fortune is allegorized in the concourse he encounters. The attractiveness of this unfinished poem is enhanced by the comic correspondence between the English poet's guide (the Eagle) and Dante's guide (Virgil) on his parallel ascent in the *Divine Comedy*. There is no depreciative mockery, except of Geoffrey himself. The humour lies

<sup>1</sup> In the Middle Ages all modes of literary expression were codified in the study of *rhetoric*. The codification included what we now call 'figures of speech' as well as techniques like allegory, devices like digression and illustration, and regulations for presenting material in a clear, comprehensive and interestingly varied way.

in the contrast between the devices of high literature and the fumbling poet at the receiving end of the talkative Eagle's disquisitions.

Chaucer used the form of the love vision again, though with different purpose, in *The Parliament of Fowls*. The narrator is taken to a dream-garden, sees the voluptuous goddess in the Temple of Venus, where paintings display victims of tragic love, and then by contrast comes to the fresh outdoor Court of Nature. Here birds of all kinds are engaged in a St Valentine's Day council to choose their respective mates. Three eagles stake their rival claims to the female eagle. After debate the decision is referred to the female eagle herself, and she calls for a year's deferment for reflection. Topical readings of the poem have been hazarded with reference to contemporary royal love-suits; but the tendency now is to emphasize the thematic interest in the way various views of love are voiced and represented. There is a dream-allegory again as prologue to the stories of nine heroines in *The Legend of Good Women*. The poet is taken to task by the god of love for heresy against the law of love in his translation of the *Romaunt of the Rose* and for representation of feminine misdeeds in *Troilus and Criseyde*. He is charged to write of good women, and the stories follow duly, beginning with that of Cleopatra.

*Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer's great completed poem, is a much expanded version of Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*, about two thirds of the work being Chaucer's own additional material. Troilus is the son of Priam, king of Troy. Criseyde is the daughter of Calchas, a Trojan priest who has gone over to the Greeks, leaving her behind in Troy. Troilus falls in love with her and Pandarus brings the two of them together for a night in his home, where their love is consummated. Pandarus, the archetypal go-between, is a great humorous study in knowing contrivance and zestful avuncularity, and he manages the lovers with breathless dexterity. But an exchange of prisoners is arranged by Calchas: his daughter is to be brought over from Troy in return for



an important Trojan prisoner, Antenor. Troilus is heart-broken at the news:

And as in wynter leves ben bireft  
 Ech after other, til the tree be bare,  
 So that ther nys but bark and braunche ilaft,  
 Lith Troilus, byraft of ech welfare,  
 Ibounden in the blake bark of care . . .

Criseyde promises to return soon and passionate vows of fidelity are exchanged; then she departs from Troy under the care of Diomedes, and it is Diomedes who seduces her. As Troilus gradually realizes what has happened, the slow agony is recounted with unforgettable acuteness:

The lettres ek that she of olde tyme  
 Hadde hym ysent, he wolde allone rede  
 An hondred sithe atwixen noon and prime . . .

The pathos is deepened by Chaucer's unerring presentation of Criseyde as a study in weakness rather than falsehood. The frailty of her defences and her resolution is portrayed without rancour. But Troilus's despair is eased only by rushing into battle and eventually meeting death at the hands of Achilles. Chaucer concludes his poem by shifting the viewpoint and urging young people to forsake earthly loves and set their hearts on the love of Christ. The rich personal experience recorded, and the high codes served by it, belong to a world that fades like a flower. The poem ends in prayer.

The first reading of *Troilus and Criseyde* is one of life's great narrative experiences. The subtlety and power of the characterization, the fine penetration revealed in the developing sequence of mood and emotion, and perhaps above all the rapturous tenderness sustained in recording the lovers' joy in each other – these qualities give a rare intensity to the work. It has been called a 'psychological novel', and the words give an accurate suggestion of the reader's close encounter with its personalities. The sustaining of a

deeply intimate tone through 1,177 stanzas of fluent yet dignified rhyme royal<sup>2</sup> is a remarkable achievement.

The *Canterbury Tales* is Chaucer's most celebrated work. The *Prologue* establishes the framework by presenting a party of pilgrims who have gathered at the Tabard Inn in Southwark to make their way to the shrine of St Thomas à Becket at Canterbury. It is a motley assembly of men and women, portrayed in the *Prologue* with relish and vitality, though deadly satire is directed at corrupt ecclesiastics. Harry Bailly, the pilgrims' host at the inn, suggests that, to pass the time agreeably, they should each tell stories on the outward journey and on the return journey. He himself will go with them, and he promises a supper to the one who tells the best stories. This vast scheme was not completed. The twenty-nine pilgrims are represented by only twenty-three tales, not all of them finished. Links between the tales do something to give order to the collection by sketching in a continuing interchange of banter and crosstalk between the pilgrims, but the series of links is too incomplete to do more than whet the appetite for an accomplishment unrealized. The incompleteness of the interconnecting material leaves room for doubt in some cases about the order in which the stories should occur and about how they fit into the various stages of the pilgrims' journey.

Nevertheless, the *Canterbury Tales* leaves the impression of a work unified in spirit as well as diverse in riches. A cluster of varied and vivid personalities and a sequence of delightfully contrasting stories are together put before us, and the mixture is so winningly contrived that the reader forgets the missing machinery and the imperfect fabric. The design seems to be such that groups of tales are concerned with specific human problems and contrasting attitudes are juxtaposed. The Knight, model of chivalry and gentility, as 'meeke as is a mayde' in his bearing, who 'nevere yet no

<sup>2</sup> *rhyme royal*: a seven-line stanza of decasyllabics, rhyming *ababbcc*.



vileynye ne sayde / In al his lyf unto no maner wight', tells a tale of chivalrous rivalry in love, of tournament, tragedy and noble marriage. Its philosophic reflections, like those of *Troilus and Criseyde*, remind us that Chaucer was also the translator of Boethius's *De Consolatione Philosophiae*. In immediate contrast, the brawny thickset Miller, with a wart and a tuft of hairs on the tip of his nose, and a head that could batter any door off its hinges when he took it at a run, tells a tale at a level of earthiness parodic of the Knight's high seriousness. A young Oxford scholar, Nicholas, sets his heart on the wife of a carpenter with whom he is lodging, and induces the carpenter to take precautions against a coming second Flood by suspending tubs in the attic, so that the three of them can safely float. While the carpenter sleeps in his tub, Nicholas and Alison get out of theirs and go to bed together. But Nicholas pays for his deception. Absalon, the parish clerk, comes to beg a kiss from Alison and she rebuffs him by sticking her bare buttocks out of the window. In revenge Absalon returns with a red-hot iron and asks again for a kiss. This time Nicholas sticks out his buttocks, and he is branded. His shrieks waken the carpenter, who hears the desperate cry, 'Help! water! water!', assumes that the promised Flood is at hand, cuts his tub from the roof so that it can safely float, and comes crashing down.

One of the pilgrims, the Reeve, is himself a carpenter and not unnaturally the story affronts him. He responds with a story at the expense of a miller, exchanging Oxford for Cambridge. Two students deceive a miller by getting into bed with his wife and his daughters in the darkness. This tit-for-tat rejoinder indicates the potential of the whole work. Like the Miller and the Reeve, the Friar and the Summoner, two ecclesiastical rogues who are rivals for money and past masters at turning piety to personal advantage, tell crude yarns at each other's expense.

No person in the company comes more vigorously to life than the Wife of Bath, a bold, showy woman with scarlet

complexion and scarlet stockings, a hat as big as a shield and hips of comparable proportions. A hearty chatterbox and a scathing foe of celibacy, she treats her companions to a detailed account of her life with five successive husbands, pointing the forceful moral that woman must wear the trousers in married life. This formidable exponent of medieval Women's Lib tells a tale that drives the lesson home. One of King Arthur's knights is reprieved from the death penalty for rape and given a year to find out what women love most. A hideous hag gives him the answer ('Sovereignty') in return for a pledge of obedience, and then, exacting what is due, requires him to marry her. In bed she offers him two alternatives – shall she remain hideous and faithful, or shall she become beautiful and perhaps unfaithful? Exercising all his faculties at this crucial juncture, the knight asks her to make the choice herself. He is duly rewarded for his acumen: she both becomes beautiful and promises fidelity.

In strong contrast the Clerk of Oxford, an earnest, unworldly and bookish man who does not waste words but is worth listening to when he does speak, tells the story of patient Griselda, whose wifely submissiveness is the antithesis of what the Wife of Bath advocates. Her virtue and love are tested by harrowing trials, including the supposed loss of her children. A happy ending is miraculously contrived, and the touching beauty of the tale moves even the rugged Host. 'By Goddes bones, / Me were levere than a barel ale / My wyf at hoom had herd this legende ones!' The recurring theme of marriage and fidelity is taken up again by the Merchant. He tells the story of January and May, wintery old husband and fresh young wife who, by a complex contrivance, is helped up into a tree by her husband, there to enjoy her youthful lover. The Franklin ends the marriage controversy on a happy note with a tale that exemplifies married loyalty sustained by generosity of spirit. Dorigen, the loving wife of Arveragus, fobs off the persistent appeals of the devoted squire, Aurelius, with the playful

oath that she will succumb to his love only when all the rocks on the coast of Brittany are removed. The strange fulfilment of this condition by magical means produces, at the climax, a delightful interchange of magnanimities. Arveragus will not let his wife break her word: whereupon Aurelius remorsefully releases her from the commitment and in turn is released from his bond to pay the magician who served him.

Chaucer's versatility may be further exemplified by the *Nun's Priest's Tale* of Chauntecleer and Pertelote, cock and hen, whose farmyard dialogue brings the domestic situation into new focus within a delicious mock-heroic framework. Chauntecleer has had a bad dream of a fox: Pertelote puts it down to indigestion. Chauntecleer delivers a solemn lecture on dreams, well-documented by reference to the learned authorities. For there is a menacing fox; and soon he tricks Chauntecleer and captures him. A lively chase ensues, with shrill shouts reminiscent of 'Jakke Straw and his meynee'. It culminates in a cunning escape on Chauntecleer's part. From the irony and farce of this rollicking earthy fable, one might turn to the opposite extreme of earnestness and pathos, and hear the Prioress, a lady of tender-hearted delicacy who 'wolde wepe, if that she saugh a mous / Kaught in a trappe', tell a tale closely resembling that of St Hugh of Lincoln. A young Christian boy is murdered by Jews for singing a hymn to the Virgin Mary. His body is thrown into a pit, where it miraculously sings still, so that the murder is discovered and the perpetrators are executed.

Chaucer's multifarious diversity puts him among the first three or four English poets. It used to be argued that he had every literary talent except that of encompassing the tragic and that he was deficient in philosophical profundity. It is doubtful whether these two charges could stand up against a sensitive reading of *Troilus and Criseyde* and a comprehensive grasp of the *Canterbury Tales*.

There can be no question about the profundity and universality of *Piers Plowman*, a deeply religious poem by



William Langland (c.1332–c.1400). Langland came from Malvern to London, took minor orders, acquired a wife and daughter, and seems to have lived by praying for patrons. A man of fervent Christian conviction, Langland was no stained-glass-window figure. He tells us how in old age the ‘limb’ that his wife loved him for and liked to feel in bed at night could no longer be made to serve her wishes (*Passus XX*). This frank personality sets the opening scene of his great poem in the homely Malvern Hills. There he has a vision of the threefold universe, earth pitched between Heaven and Hell. There is a Field full of Folk, a packed and bustling concourse of worldly rogues, lay and clerical. In their portrayal harsh judgement upon the corrupt is intensified by compassion for the poor. Over against the bitter survey of scoundrels and hypocrites the poet presents those worthy souls who live prayerful lives in love of God; for the moral and social satire is subordinate to a vast allegorical search for Truth. A beautiful lady, Holy Church, comes to help the seeker, proclaiming that God is Love; but first she shows him the world dominated by Falsehood and Flattery. He sees the perverters of justice, servants all of Lady Meed, rich in jewelled robes of scarlet and gold. We watch her, the symbol of worldly gain and corruption, taken before the king and rebuked by Conscience. Then we return to the Field full of Folk to see Reason preaching repentance. Responsive penitents are directed to seek for Saint Truth; and the only guide they can find is the simple plowman, Piers. He can direct the pilgrims to Truth if they will lend a hand with the ploughing. The symbolical significance of ploughing takes in the whole sphere of good works meekly and faithfully performed. Some pilgrims work eagerly and Truth delivers a pardon into Piers’s hands for all who help. When the document is opened, it promises eternal life to those who do good and damnation to those who do evil. This rigorous legalism is no true pardon and Piers tears the document to pieces, quoting, ‘Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil,