

005326



An Introduction to Chaucer

Derek Brewer

AN INTRODUCTION TO CHAUCER

Derek Brewer



LONGMAN
London and New York

LONGMAN GROUP LIMITED
Longman House, Burnt Mill, Harlow
Essex CM20 2JE, England
Associated companies throughout the world

*Published in the United States of America
by Longman Inc., New York*

© Longman Group Limited 1984

All rights reserved; no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the Publishers.

First published 1984

BRITISH LIBRARY CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Brewer, Derek

An introduction to Chaucer.

1. Chaucer, Geoffrey—Criticism and interpretation

I. Title

821'.1 PR1924

ISBN 0-582-49356-0

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Brewer, Derek, 1923-

An introduction to Chaucer.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Chaucer, Geoffrey, d. 1400. 2. Poets, English—Middle English, 1100–1500—Biography. 3. Great Britain—Court and courtiers—Biography. I. Title.

PR1905.B72 1984 821'.1 [B] 84–899

ISBN 0-582-49356-0 (pbk.)

Set in Linotron 202 10/11pt Times

Printed in Singapore by The Print House (Pte) Ltd

Other Books by Derek Brewer

Chaucer

Chaucer and Chaucerians (*editor*)

Chaucer and his World

Chaucer in his Time

Chaucer's Mentality

Chaucer: The Critical Heritage (*editor*)

Chaucer: The Poet as Storyteller

English Gothic Literature

Malory's Morte D'Arthur Parts 7 and 8 (*editor*)

Proteus

Symbolic Stories

The Parlement of Foulys (*editor*)

Tradition and Innovation in Chaucer

Writers and their Backgrounds: Geoffrey Chaucer (*editor*)

PREFACE

The original idea for this book was to update and combine two much reprinted books *Chaucer* (1953) and *Chaucer in his Time* (1963) still in print. Not surprisingly, so simple a plan proved impossible. The present book is newly written, with a very much larger and fresh account of all the poetry, except that some passages of later biographical documentation, and a few other passages, have been taken over with modifications from *Chaucer*; and a substantial part of one chapter, on the court, has been adapted from *Chaucer in his Time*.

Since this is virtually a new book it has a new title. I believe it to be now more useful than its predecessors, as well as up to date. My ideas about Chaucer's work have deepened, and I am conscious of the great flood of books about Chaucer to so many of which I must be consciously or unconsciously indebted, if only by my disagreements. The Select Bibliography, however extensive, could not do justice to the amount of work that has been done, and it is limited to a few basic books which if consulted will themselves lead the reader further. The interest of Chaucer's own work can only increase the better one knows it, and the more clearly one sees it in its cultural context, both English and European.

CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	viii
1. In The Beginning	1
2. Chaucer's Schooling	10
3. The Courtly Life	22
4. The English and European Literary Traditions	40
5. A Working Courtier and <i>The Book of the Duchess</i>	48
6. Diplomat and Civil Servant	62
7. From <i>House of Fame</i> to <i>Parliament of Fowls</i>	72
8. From Boethius to Venus	87
9. A Philosophical Romance: <i>The Knight's Tale</i>	106
10. A Philosophical Romance: <i>Troilus and Criseyde</i>	115
11. <i>The Legend of Good Women</i>	151
12. <i>Prologue to The Canterbury Tales</i>	161
13. <i>The Canterbury Tales</i>	176
14. The Last Years	244
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	253
<i>Index</i>	259

IN THE BEGINNING

THE NEW AND THE OLD, ARCHAIC AND MODERN

Geoffrey Chaucer, the most varied of our half-dozen greatest poets, is well documented as a courtier, customs officer, diplomat, occupant of a flat over Aldgate in London Wall, traveller to France and Italy, married, with children, and so forth. His poetry tells us about him as a poet. Put together the records, the poetry, and the history of the fascinating fourteenth century, and we find a remarkably full and interesting picture of a man and an age. It was a great creative period. Many new things were starting or, having started, were gaining strength. The modern world was beginning. Towns were established, capitalist enterprise raised standards of living, serfdom was being eroded, new inventions such as clockwork and a new numeracy and power to calculate, were developing. New feelings, for the family, for the individual, a new tenderness for suffering, were being experienced. These have to be seen against a background of special sorrows and troubles. Things went badly for England in much of Chaucer's lifetime, even when they prospered for him personally, and he was fully responsive to the sadness of life. Ancient sorrows continued: those caused by mankind, the savage warfare, the brutal rapine of cities; and those caused by nature, starvation and disease from poor harvests, illnesses unmitigated by medicine, and plague, culminating but not ceasing with the fearful Black Death which ravaged Europe 1348–9. Religion ancient and new offered consolations. The message of Christianity has always been the conquest of suffering and death, the triumph of love and significance. Religious experience increased the emphasis on the individual's internal values. The very success of Christianity in preaching higher ideals, more gentleness, more pity, led to men judging the Church unfavourably by its own divinely inspired ideals as inefficient and corrupt. On the

other hand the higher value which was being set on secular life gave that more vividness, more splendour, and consequently, because it was so swiftly passing and so full of suffering, gave it more pathos.

One of the driving engines of all these developments was the spread of schooling derived from the Church, which created literacy and the multiplication of books. Books were still in manuscript, painfully copied with many errors, for the last great medieval invention, printing, was still a century away. But there were many books, the more powerful ones in Latin – the Bible, the great theological tomes, and the classics of Antiquity themselves, still used as schoolbooks. There were also many books in French, which was still, since William of Normandy's Conquest in 1066, one of the main languages of England, though it was now more of a local dialect, limited to the upper classes, and losing its hold. There was a rapidly increasing flow of books in English; sermons, romances, encyclopaedias, works of instruction, often translated, but with more original work also. The steady advance of literacy had been at first limited to the clergy. To be literate was indeed to be a cleric, a clerk. But now in the second half of the fourteenth century the literate layman, secular, advanced in thought, appears, and his supreme manifestation is Geoffrey Chaucer.

For all his advanced interests, Chaucer was solidly a part of traditional culture. The mixture of tradition and innovation which he supremely illustrates is one of his great qualities. Literate, son of a citizen of London, numerate, secular in his occupations, and thus a part of what was new, he was also a 'courtman all his life', as one of his characters says. The court, with its fierce loyalties and betrayals, its focus on the king, its basis in the ethos of fighting, its interest in sexual love, was a flourishing example of traditional archaic patterns of thought and feeling. The court flourished partly because it was so well allied with the city. The court at Westminster, and two miles away the City of London, with the law courts on the way, sum up the spread of Chaucer's life, an axis which gave unique opportunities to a unique genius.

THE LIFE OF A PAGE AT COURT

Chaucer first appears in a court record. Medieval England is notably rich in administrative records of many kinds, but this record has survived by a marvellous accident. It is a couple of pages which were later used for binding up another book and were preserved by pure chance. They are pages from the accounts, kept as usual in a curious mixed jargon of Anglified Latin and French, mingled with actual

English words, of the household of Elizabeth, Countess of Ulster, wife of Lionel, Duke of Clarence, who was the third son of the glamorous and long-reigning King Edward III. From these scraps we learn that various people were given ribbons and robes worth so much, and that 'Galfridus' (Latin for Geoffrey) Chaucer was given, on Monday 4 April 1357 a 'paltok' or short cloak, costing four shillings, plus a pair of red and black breeches and a pair of shoes which cost his lady a further three shillings. He must have been a page, probably now seventeen years old, and was being set up in bright new clothing for Easter, which fell on 9 April. His outfit was quite expensive to the Countess. Twelve pence made a shilling, and twenty shillings a pound. One would have to multiply these sums by three or four hundred times to get their rough modern equivalents, though on the other hand labour was terribly cheap and the gap between rich and poor immensely greater than in modern Britain. A ploughman was paid about twelve shillings a year, while the Black Prince when at war drew pay of twenty shillings a day, and an archer sixpence a day.

Our sight of Chaucer in this princely household shows his connection, at his most impressionable age, with all the splendour, elegance and sophistication of Edward III's court – the most magnificent in Europe, and also the most efficiently run, to be discussed more fully in a later chapter. Chaucer's lady, the Countess Elizabeth, travelled about the country a great deal, and probably took Chaucer with her. London, Southampton, Reading, Hatfield, Windsor, Hertford Castle, Anglesey, Liverpool all saw her and her train in those four years, some places several times. State weddings and funerals held at Edward's court, as well as the normal feasts of the year, were duly kept by her, and no doubt by Chaucer in her train. As her page he helped to serve her at table, and attend her at various ceremonies, according to the strict and elaborate etiquette of a great household, which he had to learn. Some slight care would be taken of his general education, as well as of his manners. Much of what he learned, of politeness, of good manners, of noble behaviour (as well, doubtless, as scandalous talk and comic stories) came to him by watching and waiting at table, talking with his fellow pages and the older squires, and so forth. The chaplain might supervise his serious reading. He picked up an interest in music. He listened to, and read for himself, the current songs and romances, both English and the fashionable French ones. French was losing its domination as the language of the court, but the royal family spoke it. However, Chaucer learnt Continental French, the 'French of Paris', and he shows no interest in, or significant influence from Anglo-French. Chaucer had a remarkable memory for the poems of the fashionable Continental French poet Machaut, as *The Book of the Duchess* shows. The last item of this courtly education by living was instruction in military

exercises, given by the knight or gentleman in the Countess Elizabeth's household to whom this important duty was assigned. Chaucer is never cynical about fighting.

What was Chaucer's background for this courtier's life?

CHAUCER'S FAMILY

Chaucer came, like a number of other courtiers, from a well-to-do merchant family whose progress can be traced from modest beginnings in Ipswich, and whose increasing prosperity depended on being equally at home, in a modest way, in both Court and City.

Both Chaucer's father and grandfather were prosperous men, with varying amounts of property, whose principal income came from their connection with the wine trade. Apart from their own business as wholesale importers and wine merchants, they were both (like Chaucer himself) employed at various times in the collection of the king's customs. The family had property in Ipswich and had probably lived there, but before Chaucer was born his father had moved to London. He was drawn, doubtless, by that city's increasing importance as a financial and business centre, and by its nearness to the king's court and administrative offices.

About the poet's grandfather, Robert, little is known. He owned property in Ipswich, and was a vintner. In 1308 and 1310, he was deputy to the king's chief butler (an important official, who was sometimes a man of considerable wealth). Part of the butler's duties was the collection of taxes on imported wines, and this was Robert Chaucer's department. His wife Mary came from the prosperous Ipswich family of the Westhales, and when he married her she was already a widow, presumably with property.

Robert and Mary Chaucer had a son, John Chaucer (who became the poet's father), born in 1313. He inherited his father's Ipswich property and carried on the family business as a vintner. A curious sidelight is thrown on the fourteenth century by an incident in his childhood, when at eleven years of age his aunt (Robert Chaucer's sister), and others, abducted him with the intention of marrying him to her daughter Joan, thereby joining his Ipswich property to hers. This was no unusual event at the time, but fortunately for us she and her accomplices were prevented. They were then sued at law. Her principal accomplice was very heavily fined. Having escaped this early marriage, John Chaucer is next seen at the age of twenty-five, as a member of the great and splendid retinue which the king took to the Continent in 1338, though we do not know in what capacity John Chaucer travelled. Probably around this time he married a widow,

Agnes Northwell, who also owned property. John Chaucer prospered. He became one of the main vintners in the City of London; for two years he, like his father, was deputy to the king's chief butler in the collection of duty on wines, and he was also deputy to the same person in April 1347 in the collection of export duties on woollen cloths. By this time he was an important figure in the general affairs of the City. To this wealthy wine merchant, man of affairs, connected with the court, Geoffrey Chaucer was born; perhaps in his father's house in Thames Street, probably in 1340.

THE CITY OF LONDON

London was Geoffrey Chaucer's earliest experience and it will be worth pausing to imagine what it was like. London was unique among English cities, being the centre of commercial power, with a special relationship to the king. It was that square mile on the north bank of the Thames, still called in English *the City*, and thus near the main seat of the royal power, which was the city of Westminster, further along the river. London was the biggest of English cities with a population of about 45,000. (Estimates for other towns are: York, about 11,000; Bristol, about 10,000; Plymouth and Coventry, about 7,000; no other town is thought to have had above 6,000; by contrast, contemporary Florence, one of the biggest cities in Europe, had about 90,000.) London also had substantial suburbs south of the Thames, especially at Southwark, by London Bridge. From Southwark, just over the river, the Dover Road, and the Pilgrim's Way to Canterbury began. In Southwark was the Tabard Inn, at which Chaucer's pilgrims gathered, and the church (now the Cathedral) where the effigy of the poet John Gower, a friend of Chaucer, can still be seen. North of the river, the road which is still called the Strand (or Bankside) ran between London and the palace of Westminster, passing the law courts, and then the large town houses owned by rich merchants and nobles. The most famous of these was the Savoy, John of Gaunt's palace, built by his father-in-law Henry, Duke of Lancaster, crowded with beautiful treasures, and totally destroyed in the Revolt of 1381. (Its situation is now marked by the Savoy Hotel.) The houses faced the road, and had long gardens at the back running down to the river. St Martin's then, was truly 'in the fields'. To get to Westminster you could go along the Strand from London, but the Exchequer and Privy Seal clerks, like Chaucer's younger friend and poetic follower Hoccleve, who worked at Westminster and usually lodged in London, often preferred, like many others, to go by water, especially in winter when the roads were so

muddy. The River Thames was a fine highway, though the famous bridge, with houses on it (like the Ponte Vecchio still to be seen in Florence) was a dangerous hazard with its great supports which caused a six-foot drop in the water level when the tide was running strong. It also bore grim reminders of the rough punishments of the times, with its rotting heads of offenders stuck upon spikes. Within the city many houses had their gardens, often with vegetable plots and fruit trees. Since the houses were mostly of no more than two storeys it must have been easy to see the blossom in spring, and church towers everywhere, with over all the Gothic spire of Old St Paul's, destroyed in the seventeenth-century Great Fire of London. There were big markets, and masses of shops, all governed by complex laws. There was a sewage-system, advanced for the times, a number of public latrines, and despite arrangements for street-cleaning, much filth in the streets, with pigs rooting about in the rubbish, and streams that were open sewers. It must have smelt like a farmyard in summer. We cannot estimate the city by our own standards of comfort and cleanliness; the great medieval European cities, of which London was a small example, were a remarkable achievement, with all their faults, in the art of living, won against heavy odds: of physical difficulty in an age without machines; of administrative difficulty in an age when communication was slow and limited; of disciplinary difficulty in an age when men were often as violent, unruly and unstable as children; and of sheer difficulty of survival in an age of primitive medical science, ignorant of microbes. The fourteenth century saw the growth of some great cities such as Hamburg, Paris, Florence, on the Continent. London, alone of all English cities in the fourteenth century, achieved something of their quality. So at least thought one poet, writing in the later fifteenth century, when the city was much as it was in the later fourteenth century. I quote a modernised form of part of his poem (which was once attributed to Dunbar).

London, thou art of townés A per se,
Sovereign of cities, seemliest in sight....

Above all rivers thy river hath renown,
Whose boreal stremés, pleasant and preclare
Under thy lusty wallés runneth down,
Where many a swan doth swim with wingés fair,
Where many a barge doth row and sail with air,
Where many a ship doth rest with top royal.
O town! of towns patron and not compeer;
London, thou art the flower of cities all.

[*crystal; illustrious*]

[*superior; equal*]

Upon the lusty bridge of pillars white
Be merchantés full royal to behold;
Upon thy streets goth many a seemly knight

In velvet gown and chainés of fine gold.
By Julius Caesar thy Tower founded of old
May be the house of Mars victorial,
Whose artillery with tongue may not be told;
London, thou art the flower of cities all.

Strong be thy wallés that about thee stands;
Wise be the people that within thee dwells;
Fresh is thy river with his lusty strands;
Blithe be thy churches; well sounding be thy bells;
Rich be thy merchantés in substance that excels;
Fair be thy wives, right lovesome, white and small:
Clear be thy virgins, lusty under kells;
London, thou art the flower of cities all.

[caps

Thy famous Mayor, by princely governance,
With sword of justice thee ruleth prudently.
No Lord of Paris, Venice, or Florence
In dignity or honour goeth to him nigh;
He is exemplar, loadé-star and guy,
Principal patron and rose original,
Above all Mayors as master most worthy;
London, thou art the flower of cities all.

[guide

In the great cities of Europe in the fourteenth century a new urban consciousness was developing, of which we are the direct heirs. Many of the things we now take for granted in cities and towns, like the common services of street-cleaning and sewerage, and complex matters of shopping regulations, uniformity of measures, proper time-keeping, were being established: They relied on a greater communal sense, a certain amount of democratic self-government, and created more privacy, less domination of the collective over the individual.

There were many other influences encouraging the privacy of the individual. Many came from religion, and the education in literacy that the Church gave, and some came from the court, especially in the sentiment of love, 'derne' (secret) love, as the poets called it. But the sense of privacy and individuality in Chaucer must be considerably due to his rich bourgeois background. The city was the place of trade, of specialised work, of regular time, and a serious concern for this world. We shall see that Chaucer became a kind of accountant, and with this urban numeracy we can associate what eventually became his strong sense of regular metre, and his unusual sensitivity to the passage of time in his poetry. Chaucer's secular humanism and realism, which were not at all anti-religious (for the cities were very pious in their worldliness) must be related in a general way to that strand in his make-up represented by his City background, as were his rationalism, his individualism, and his self-awareness. All of these aspects will be summed up in that great original work of a series of

portraits, *The General Prologue* to *The Canterbury Tales*. Wordliness, work, social experience, a concentration on the rich centre of society (the middle classes), privacy, a loosening of feudal personal bonds, and at the end a certain loneliness; these are the gifts of the city. In addition there must have been an emphasis on vernacular English, to be discussed later.

The gifts of the city must be seen in context, especially in the case of Chaucer. The countryside with its alternating seasons of harshness and joy was never far away. There was a certain social mobility among all classes, much of it prompted by the presence of cities and towns, leading to a general mingling of country, city and court. It was becoming possible for peasants to enrich themselves and to rise in society, even apart from the Church which had for long offered the only chance of escape from the ignorant, sweated poverty which was the lot of the peasantry. Even a knight might have a serf as ancestor, while at the end of the century John Greyndor, a yeoman from the Forest of Dean, rose by his capacity as a ruthless captain (he beheaded 300 captives after a battle with the Welsh in 1405) to become Member of Parliament, sheriff of Glamorgan and of Gloucester, and constable of four border castles. In later life he turned merchant of Bristol (and was in fact guilty of something like piracy), and this is yet another example of the way in which, among the upper classes in England, trade and the professions (including that of war), merchants and the nobility, found it easy to mix. When Gaunt, the greatest noble in England (and about this time the most hated), was pursued by the mob in 1381, he was having dinner with a great merchant, Sir John Ypres. Sir John Montague, later Earl of Salisbury, was the third husband of a rich mercer's daughter. Nicholas Brembre, the grocer, was rich enough to make loans to Richard II and John of Gaunt. He was knighted for his bold behaviour during the Revolt, and was closely associated with the ruling court faction which was displaced by the barons in 1388. He paid for his social mobility and his financial and political power by being executed for political reasons.

The older upper classes often resisted the new tendency to move from class to class, and Parliament in 1363 passed a 'sumptuary' law, regulating the food and clothing that each class should have. Naturally, it was not obeyed. A chronicler says that yeomen dress like squires, squires like knights, knights like dukes, and dukes like kings. Chaucer, in his description of those social climbers *par excellence*, the city merchants, or gildsmen, describes them, no doubt deliberately, as wearing clothing above their station.

All this shows that along with much unease (there were often riots in London), and much oppression, English society by the second half of the century was reasonably well mixed and united, if not harmonious. The legal distinction between a crime committed by an

Englishman, and one committed by a Norman, introduced by William the Conqueror for holding down a defeated English nation with a small Norman-French force, had long been out of date when it was abolished by Parliament in 1340. Of this sense of unity London was a signal example. That did not mean that it was not often in conflict with the Court. But neither Court nor City could do without each other.

CHAUCEER'S SCHOOLING

There is first-class evidence that Chaucer went to school – his poetry. It is full of school-learning, like the passage from the Latin author Claudian, used as a school-text, in *The Parliament of Fowls*, 99–105, and dozens of others, including school jokes, like the reference to ‘dulcarnoun’ put in Criseyde’s mouth, with Pandarus’s tart reply (*Troilus and Criseyde*, III, 930–5). Chaucer’s references in *The Prioress’s Tale* to the ‘song-school’, that is, the primary school for choirboys attached to a cathedral, suggest personal knowledge. Chaucer’s own knowledge of Latin is likely to have been acquired at a grammar school. Unfortunately we lack documentary evidence. No school registers were kept.

There were at least three schools in London at the time; St Paul’s (a grammar school, with an almonry or song-school as a semi-independent attachment), the Arches (at St Mary le Bow), and St Martin’s le Grand. St Paul’s was nearest his father’s house in Lower Thames Street, and he may well have gone there. The hours were long, and the holidays none except the festivals of the Church, which would, however, have amounted to at least one day a week, apart from Sundays. The instruction at such a school may be summed up in one word: Latin. Latin was the language of the Church, and of much of the country’s administration (which was largely run by clerics). It was the language of the Holy Bible; it was the language of philosophy, and of science; and in it was also the most impressive single body of literature known to the Middle Ages, the Classics of Antiquity. First, however, at the most elementary level of teaching (which they were supposed to have passed through before they came to a grammar school), children were taught to read in English the Ave Maria (‘Hail Mary’, which is the beginning of the Annunciation of the birth of Christ to the Virgin Mary, Luke I, 28, used as a prayer); the Lord’s Prayer; and the Creed (the essentials of belief), with a few psalms. Such might be learnt from a primer which would contain first the alphabet in large and small letters, then the exorcism, and the

Lord's Prayer, followed by the Ave Maria, the Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Seven Deadly Sins. The child thus learnt to read Latin, often without being able to understand it – like the little boy in *The Prioress's Tale*, who had just started at such a school.

Chaucer would have learnt his 'grammar' at the grammar school. Grammar meant something more than it does nowadays. Not only did it signify grammar in the modern sense of 'the structure of the language', but also, when this was acquired, much information of various kinds. The commonest way of starting the actual Latin grammar was for the master to dictate it, and the children to write it down, and learn it off by heart. There were versified Latin grammars to help this. This method of learning and of acquiring books was in use even in the university. The extreme shortage of books in the fourteenth century has always to be remembered. Memory had to play a far larger part in all schooling and all scholarship than it need do now. Proper dictionaries were not available, and although there were several vocabularies in circulation, only one of them had an alphabetical arrangement. As soon as children had acquired some knowledge of Latin an attempt was made, in some schools, to enforce Latin speaking at all times. Some of the better pupils at any rate acquired some fluency in speaking Latin. Some simple textbooks, such as Aesop's *Fables*, were read after the elements of grammar, and then some classical authors, especially parts of Virgil and Ovid. Few classical authors were read thoroughly; apart from Virgil, who was considered to be almost a Christian, they were still looked upon with a little suspicion by some and Christian authors were often preferred. The extremely pious nature of the educational system is one of its most notable characteristics. This is noticeable in some Rules for Conduct for the boys of Westminster School, which, although written in the thirteenth century, probably applied in the fourteenth, and were similar to those in other schools.

In the morning let the boys upon rising sign themselves with the holy cross, and let each one say the creed, namely, I believe in God, etc., and the Lord's prayer three times, and the salutation to the Blessed Virgin five times, without shouting and confusion; and if anyone neglects these good things, let him be punished.

Then, after they have made up the beds properly, let them leave their room together quietly, without clattering, and approach the church modestly, and with washed hands, not running, or skipping, or even chattering, or having a row with any person or animal; not carrying bow or staff, or stone in the hand, or touching anything with which another could be harmed; but marching along simply and honestly and with ordered step. ...

Whether they are standing or sitting in the choir, let them not have their eyes turned aside to the people, but rather towards the altar; not grinning, or chattering, or laughing aloud; not making fun of another if he does not read or sing psalms well; not hitting one another secretly or openly, or