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英国

文学

选读

◎ 方笑君 主编



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# 英国文学选读

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## 出版说明

为满足全国高等院校外语专业本科学生学习的需要，对外经济贸易大学出版社联合全国重点院校的骨干教师特编写了本套“外国文学选读系列教材”。

本套教材包括英、法、德、韩、日、西班牙、意大利、阿拉伯八个国家的文学作品，所选作品都是各国文学中的名篇佳作，作家与作品大体按出生年月、发表时间的先后编排。结构安排为：a. 背景知识 b. 作者简介（c. 作品题解）d. 选文 e. 注释 f. 思考题。题解力求简明，注释力求准确详尽，减少读者在理解上的困难。

本套教材主要面向本科层次的学生，适合高等院校各类语言专业用作教材，可与“文学史”配合使用，也可单独使用。对于相关专业的教师、进入本科阶段的自学者以及文学爱好者，本套教材都不失为的一套优秀的参考读物。

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## 前 言

《英国文学选读》是高等教育英语专业教学计划中的重要一科，专为高年级学生开设。本书是根据主编方笑君多年来为英语专业高年级学生授课的讲稿，并参考国内外其他同类教材，反复筛选，多次修改，最后编纂而成。

在世界诸文学中，英国文学源远流长，在六百多年的历史发展中，出现过许多伟大的作家，如乔叟、莎士比亚、狄更斯、萧伯纳等等，可谓是名家辈出，名作荟萃，与其他文学相比，其影响之广，范围之大，实属文学经典之宝库。通过学习英国文学，可以使学生开拓视野，提高文化素养，逐渐培养自身的英语文学欣赏能力及生动的语言水平，凡此种种，正是英语文学课程的基本任务。

由于受到授课时数的制约，本书不可能涉及英国文学中所有的名家、名篇，只能按照英国文学史的时间顺序，从最重要的作家及其作品入手，同时充分考虑到他们作品的思想内容、艺术标准和历史地位，有所侧重地向读者介绍他们所处的时代背景、生平、选文，并附有必要的注释及相关思考题。希望这样的编排方式能给学生的学习过程中带来方便，相信本书能使学习者对英国文学的发展过程及其名家名篇有一个大致简明的了解，取得预期的效果，为今后更深层次地研究更为宽泛的英语文学打下一个良好的基础。

方笑君

2008年7月

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# Unit One Middle English

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## Historical Background

It is arbitrary to separate Chaucer from the writers of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Piers Plowman* and make him representative of an age. For Chaucer and William Langland and the writer of *Sir Gawain* were contemporaries; the date of Chaucer being ca. 1340 – 1400, that of William Langland being 1330? – 1400?, and *Sir Gawain* was written about 1375 – 1400. But Chaucer was such an important writer in English literature that he deserves a period of his own, especially as he was heralding the coming of a new age.

Two important historical events happened during the century in which Chaucer lived and their influence can be detected in the writings of Chaucer and Langland. The first was the Hundred Years' War between England and France, starting from the reign of Edward III (1327 – 1377) and ending during the reign of Henry VI (1421 – 1471). The second historical event was the peasant uprising of 1381, during the reign of King Richard II.

The Hundred Years' War was a series of wars fought between the English kings and the French kings for the French throne. The English kings claimed that they were legal successors to the French crown. For one hundred years after the Norman conquest in 1066, the English kings regarded themselves as vassals to the French king. The first seven English

kings were in fact living in France. They were absentee rulers. Starting from King Henry III, England became the principal concern of the English kings. The result of the Hundred Years' War was an awakening of national consciousness in England. The English kings no longer regarded themselves as the vassals to the French kings. Instead, they claimed that they had the right to succeed the French throne. With the awakening of national consciousness, the French language was gradually replaced by the native tongue.

The peasant uprising of 1381 was the direct result of exploitation and oppression of the peasants by the feudal lords. In 1377, 1379, and 1381, Richard II (1361 - 1400) in order to collect money to fight war in France and to suppress rebellious in Scotland, collected a poll tax in the country, by which each person was forced to pay twelve pence, a sum that would be as much as a labourer could earn in two weeks. A clergyman by the name John Ball became their spiritual leader. He preached and gave voice to their complaints as he said:

When Adam delved and Eve span  
Who was then the gentleman?

He gathered around him a great number of people in Kent and they marched towards London under the leadership of an old soldier named War Tyler. The king and the nobles were thrown into panic as the rebellious peasants came to the city wall of London. Richard promised to meet the peasants and made a promise to put right the wrongs. But he betrayed the peasants. In the middle of the talk between the king and Walt Tyler, an arrow was shot through the body of the latter. Thus the peasant rebellion of 1381 was treacherously suppressed.

### **Geoffrey Chaucer ( ca. 1340 - 1400 )**

Chaucer was born into a wine merchant family with rising fortunes.

He grew up in London, then already a busy port. In 1357 he served at court as a page. Two years later he joined the army, took part in the Hundred Years' War and was taken prisoner. He returned to England in 1360. He was married to a maid of honour to the queen. For the next ten years he was sent to the Continent on diplomatic missions. In 1382 he was appointed Controller of Customs at the port of London. An enormous amount of labour was involved in the job, but Chaucer seemed to have time to pursue his literary work. In 1386 he was elected Member of Parliament from Kent. It was customary in Chaucer's time for a man who was engaged in politics to adhere himself to a man of higher rank as his patron. Chaucer's patron was John of Gaunt. In his life Chaucer underwent a great variety of occupations, as courtier, soldier, ambassador, legislator, and burgher of London and was thus familiar with the lives of various classes. Chaucer died on Oct. 25, 1400 and was buried in what has since become known as the Poet's Corner in Westminster Abbey. His burial there was due, not to the recognition of his literary achievement, but to the simple fact that at the time of his death. Chaucer happened to live in a house owned by the monks in the garden of the Abbey. In his day, Chaucer was not known as a writer but as an accomplished man of affairs who wrote poetry in his spare time.

The works of Chaucer are roughly divided into three periods, corresponding to the three periods of his life.

The first period extends from 1360 to 1372, when Chaucer wrote under the influence of French literature. In this period he imitated French poetry and even translated French poems himself. The outstanding poem of this period is *The Book of the Duchess*. It is an elegy written on the death of the first wife of John of Gaunt. It has much of the conventional romance elements in it.

The second period is from 1372 to 1386 when he wrote under the

influence of the Italian literature. The most outstanding work is *Troilus and Cryseyde*. The story is adapted from a long poem by Boccaccio, the writer of *The Decameron*. The story takes place during the war of Troy, and is about the love between Troilus, son of the king of Troy, and Cryseyde, daughter of a soothsayer, who has gone to the Greek side. In an exchange of prisoners, Cryseyde is handed over to the Greeks and has to leave her lover, but promises that she will manage to come back to her lover within ten days. In the Greek camp Cryseyde finds that there is no hope for her to return. She gives in to a new lover. At battle, Troilus finds that the brooch he has given to Cryseyde is on the coat of his opponent. Finally, Troilus after killing many Greeks is killed by Achilles. Chaucer used Boccaccio's story freely to reflect the ideal of his age.

Other poems of this period are *The parliament of Fowls* and *The House of Fame*.

The third period covers the last fifteen years of his life. *The Canterbury Tales* was written in the years between 1387 and 1400. It has a general prologue and twenty four tales that are connected by "links". The work was left unfinished upon the death of the poet in 1400.

The general prologue is considered the best part of the whole work. In it the poet tells how, one day in spring, he comes to the Tabbar Inn in the southern suburb of London. He meets a group of people who are going to St. Thomas Beckett's tomb at Canterbury. There are twenty-nine pilgrims and they are from all walks of life. Chaucer is invited to join them on their journey. The host of the inn, Harry Bailey, also agrees to join them. In order to help them kill time on the journey, the host suggests that each pilgrim should tell two stories on the outward trip and another two on the way back, and whoever gives the best tale is to be rewarded a free supper at the cost of all the rest upon their return to

the inn. The host will also be a judge. According to this plan, there should have been a total of one hundred and twenty tales, but Chaucer only lived to write twenty-four tales. The pilgrims do not even reach Canterbury.

The significance of *The Canterbury Tales* is as follows:

1. It gives a comprehensive picture of Chaucer's time. The pilgrims cover a wide range of characters in the England of the time, from noblemen to peasants. They represent the whole range of 14th century society except the very top and the very bottom. The gentle class is represented by the knight, the squire, the monk, the prioress, and the franklin; the burgher class is represented by the merchant, the haberdasher, the carpenter, the weaver, the tapestry-maker, and the wife of Bath, who is a widow and has married five times. Although she is somewhat deaf and gap-toothed, she is wearing heavy and gaudy clothes. Among the professionals there are a lawyer and a physician who use their knowledge to make money. All persons connected with the church, with the exception of the poor parson, are drawn with touches of irony or satire.

It should be noted that each character is not only a typical representative of the class to which he or she belongs, but also has an individual character of his or her own. With his own wide experience and close observation of life, his characters are so vivid and particular that there can be no substitution for the very person described.

2. The dramatic structure of the poem has been highly commended by critics. This kind of a collection of tales put together was not rare in history. For example, Boccaccio's *The Decameron* is a collection of one hundred stories told by ten people of the gentry class who have retired to the countryside to escape the plague in Florence. But in *The Decameron* stories are loosely connected and there is no relation between the story and

the storyteller. In *The Canterbury Tales*, stories are cleverly woven together by links between the stories. Most of the stories are related to the personalities of the tellers. The personality of each character, his private life and habits, his mood and social status are revealed in the prologue and in the story he tells, as well as by his behaviour along the road and his remarks on the way.

The links between the tales are of great interest. Most important is the part played by the host Harry Bailey, who is a hearty, boisterous man with his frankness, his rough manner, his unconscious improper use of words about God, and his good sense. He draws the shy ones out, smooths over the differences, and keeps the company generally in good spirits.

3. Chaucer's humour: Humour is a characteristic feature of the English literature. There are many humourists in the history of English literature, such as Charles Dickens and Bernard Shaw.

It should be noticed that Chaucer wrote for the people of the circle in which he lived and his major readers were people at court. As a commoner he had a sympathy with and an understanding of the lower classes as is shown in his attitude towards the ploughman and the poor parson. But he could not offend the upper classes. For, although he was a commoner, he did not live like a commoner and he had to please the people at court. But although he was associated with proud and important personages at court he must always have been conscious of the fact that he did not belong to that society. This explains his gentle satire and mild irony. But his satire can be the bitterest in the portrayal of the pardoner and the summoner. In this sense Chaucer himself is "the smyler with the knyf under the cloke."

4. Chaucer's contribution to the English language: Ever since the Norman conquest the French language was the language of the court and



the upper classes, and Latin was the language of the learned and the church. Chaucer was taught in French when he was at school, not in English. But, like Dante (1261 – 1321), who chose Italian in preference to Latin for *The Divine Comedy*, Chaucer had enough pride and confidence in his native language to use it in his work. Chaucer wrote in the London dialect of his day, which he handled dexterously. He was at one moment serious and another light-hearted and full of fun and sometimes he could be very poetical. He proved that the English language is a beautiful language and can be easily handled to express different moods. In so doing Chaucer greatly increased the prestige of the English language.

## Selected Reading

### The General Prologue (Excerpt)

Whan that Aprill, with his shoures soote  
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,  
And bathed every veyne in Swich licour,  
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;  
Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth  
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth  
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne  
Hath in the Ram his halfe cours yronne,  
And smale foweles maken melodye,  
That slepen al the nyght with open ye  
(So priketh hem Nature in hir corages);  
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages  
And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes