

The Tale of Geoffrey Chaucer



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Who Was the Man Behind the Tales?

By Wim Coleman

In Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, a group of pilgrims swap stories on their way to visit a holy shrine. Chaucer portrays himself as one of the colorful pilgrims. When it is his turn to tell a story, he launches into a silly poem about a knight named Sir Thopas who is in love with an elf-queen and avoids fighting a vicious giant. Chaucer's tale is so bad that the pilgrims' host, Harry Bailly, puts a stop to it and asks him to tell another.

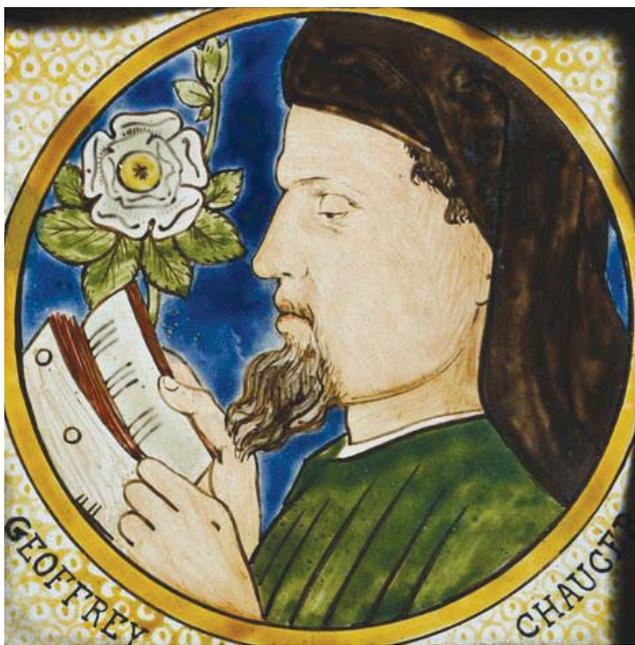
Chaucer then tells the story of a man named Melibee, whose wife and daughter are assaulted.

It is dry, preachy stuff, written in stiff-sounding prose. Worst of all, it is so long and boring that some editions of *The Canterbury Tales* leave it out altogether. Other editions include a shortened version.

The other stories in *The Canterbury Tales* show that Chaucer was a master storyteller. So why did he portray his character in the story as so dull and long-winded? He seemed to be making a joke at his own expense—and not for the first time. Chaucer often wrote himself into his works in a self-mocking way. Why was he so determined not to tell us what he was really like? And who was he really?

A Busy Man

Geoffrey Chaucer is believed to have been born sometime between 1340 and 1343 in London. He was the son of a wine merchant named John Chaucer. His family was neither noble nor peasant but part of a new class that was on the rise in Europe in the late Middle Ages. It was what we now call the middle class, or the *bourgeoisie*. The members of the bourgeoisie were city dwellers—skilled workers and business owners. Though they did not have the power and prestige of the nobles, they sometimes had more money. In Chaucer’s day, the middle class was becoming more and more powerful.



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Chaucer’s family seemed to have good royal connections. By 1357, Geoffrey Chaucer was serving as a page (a youthful servant) for Prince Lionel, a son of King Edward III. Soon afterward, Chaucer became a soldier. In 1360, while fighting the French in the Hundred Years’ War (1337–1453), he was taken prisoner, then ransomed by King Edward himself and freed. In 1366, he married Philippa de Roet, who was a lady-in-waiting to Edward’s queen. This marriage was certainly a smart

and practical match, strengthening Chaucer’s connections with royalty. Chaucer’s biographers think that the couple may have had three or four children.

Most of the rest of Chaucer’s life was devoted to official business. In 1367, he served as Edward III’s valet, or personal servant—a job that led to lots of other work. In 1374, he became a London customs official, overseeing shipments of wool from other countries. In 1386, he was elected a member of Parliament, England’s lawmaking branch of government. In 1389, he was put in charge of the king’s construction projects, which included playing fields for jousting tournaments. Later on, he also served as a deputy forester, tending to woods and wildlife in England’s Somerset county.

None of those jobs sounds glamorous, but all of them seem to have suited Chaucer well. Even so, his pay was irregular—and sometimes downright odd. In 1374, King Edward III awarded him a pitcher of wine every day for the rest of his life. This offer expired after King Edward’s death. But in 1397, King Richard II guaranteed him an annual barrel of wine, again for life. Though Chaucer always had plenty to drink, hard cash wasn’t always easy to come by. He sometimes got into trouble for debt.

Luckily, he was a **shrewd** man. He had to be, to survive in those politically troubled days. Violent rebellions broke out during his life, and he lived to see King Richard II dethroned and murdered. Civil servants like Chaucer—including some of his close personal friends—were sometimes executed simply because of who they knew or didn’t know. Chaucer apparently had a **cunning** way of quitting a job and taking another to keep himself from getting killed.

Chaucer held many high-profile jobs and was on friendly terms with three English kings in a row. He was surely well known just as a civil servant. But he would have been forgotten if it weren’t for his poetry. Curiously, poetry was the one activity that he seldom, if ever, got paid for. He seems to have written it for sheer pleasure.

Love of the English Language

Chaucer was not one of those unlucky writers who become famous only after they die. He was widely celebrated during his lifetime. But why and how did a man who was busy doing so much demanding and tedious work take the time to write poetry? Perhaps one clue is Chaucer's great knowledge and love of language.

When Chaucer was a boy around his father's wine business, he probably learned French and Italian from foreign wine merchants. That knowledge would have helped him as an adult. While serving royalty, he went on secret diplomatic missions to France and Italy. In Europe, he read French and Italian poetry. In Italy, he might have read a copy of *The Divine Comedy*, the magnificent epic poem by Dante Alighieri (1265–1321). He also read Italian poetry by Petrarch (1304–1374) and Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375), who were still writing during Chaucer's lifetime.

Those foreign poets started Chaucer thinking about his native tongue. At that time, English was not a language held in high regard, not even in England. French and Latin were considered more proper for official business, literature, and high-class social situations. Chaucer didn't think this was fair or right. He loved English deeply, calling it a language of "great diversity." Why, he wondered, couldn't great literary poems be written in English?

So Chaucer set about writing ambitious poetry in English. (Remember, this was not the English we speak today, but its precursor, what we now call Middle English.) He had to invent new techniques and forms—lines, stanzas, and rhyme schemes that suited English. He got many of his ideas from the French and Italian poems he knew so well and from the classics of **antiquity**. But the poetry he wrote was striking for its bold, original, and brilliant use of English.

A Keen Observer

Chaucer was also fascinated with everyday human life. In his different jobs, he met all kinds of people from every part of English society. They ranged

from kings and noblemen to merchants and peasants—and even criminals. Chaucer observed their appearances, ways, and manners. He also listened to their stories. Perhaps he became obsessed with writing those stories down—in language much like the tellers' own.

The Canterbury Tales, the unfinished masterpiece of Chaucer's final years, shows his command of character. Although the tales themselves are fascinating and gripping, the pilgrims who tell them are scarcely less so. The virtuous Knight, the wicked Pardoner, the fiercely independent Wife of Bath, and the drunken Miller are as colorful as the tales they tell. According to some critics, Chaucer's varied, vivid characters remain unsurpassed by any author except those of a fairly well-known chap named William Shakespeare.

Like Shakespeare, Chaucer disappears into his own work, letting his characters run the show. When he does appear, it's in a sort of disguise. He pretends to be a bit—well—dull and slow, probably to highlight his other varied and irresistible characters.



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Everlasting Fame

When he died in 1400, Chaucer was buried in London's Westminster Abbey because he had been clerk of the works of Westminster. In 1556, his remains were moved to a tomb in what would become the abbey's famous "Poet's Corner," where many of England's greatest writers have been laid to rest.

Chaucer's fame and influence grew steadily during the six centuries following his death. When William Caxton introduced the first printing press to England in the 1400s, *The Canterbury Tales* was among the first works he printed. During Shakespeare's heyday in the late 1500s and early

1600s, Chaucer was praised as the "English Homer," after the great epic poet of the ancient Greeks. Indeed, Shakespeare's play *Troilus and Cressida* is based on Chaucer's poem *Troilus and Criseyde*. *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, for which Shakespeare teamed up with another author to write, is based on *The Knight's Tale*. Shakespeare's work is scattered with many other references to Chaucer.

In the 17th century, critic and author John Dryden declared Chaucer "the father of English poetry." Dryden's judgment has stuck ever since. Whether they discover Chaucer's marvelous writings in his original Middle English or in modern translation, readers today can rarely resist the spell of his language, his characters, and his stories. ■

Some of Chaucer's Major Works

The Book of the Duchess (1368)—When the wife of Chaucer's noble friend John of Gaunt died, Chaucer wrote this sad poem (or elegy) to honor her.

The House of Fame (c. 1379)—The first of many works that Chaucer left unfinished, this is a meditation on the fickleness of fame.

The Parliament of Fowls (c. 1380)—This playful fantasy of argumentative birds choosing their mates makes one of the first references to Valentine's Day as a day for lovers.

Troilus and Criseyde (c. 1386)—This story of ill-fated lovers during the Trojan War is regarded as one of the finest love poems in any language; some critics think it is Chaucer's masterpiece, even greater than *The Canterbury Tales*.

The Legend of Good Women (c. 1387)—Chaucer dreams that the god of love takes him to task for his unfavorable portrayals of women, so the poet tries to make amends. This is far from Chaucer's best poem—but they can't all be masterpieces.

The Canterbury Tales (c. 1386–1400)—This unfinished epic with its vivid cast of storytellers is surely the most enduring and popular of Chaucer's works.

VOCABULARY WORDS

Shrewd—clever, smart

Cunning—sly, sneaky

Antiquity—ancient times