

Chaucer as a Poet

While many writers of the Middle Ages, such as Marie de France or the Gawain-poet, remain obscure or anonymous Geoffrey Chaucer is a different case. As well as being – arguably – the greatest poet of the Middle English period, he was also a public servant who worked as a soldier, diplomat, comptroller of customs, justice of the peace, clerk of works and a forest official – so his life is well represented in surviving documents.

Geoffrey Chaucer was an English poet and author. Widely considered the greatest English poet of the Middle Ages, he is best known for *The Canterbury Tales*. He has been called the "father of English literature", or, alternatively, the "father of English poetry". He was the first writer buried in Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey. Chaucer also gained fame as a philosopher and astronomer, composing the scientific *A Treatise on the Astrolabe* for his 10-year-old son Lewis. He maintained a career in the civil service as a bureaucrat, courtier, diplomat, and member of parliament.

Chaucer was born in London most likely in the early 1340s, though the precise date and location remain unknown. His father and grandfather were both London vintners,^{[4][5]} and several previous generations had been merchants in Ipswich. His family name is derived from the French *chasseur*, meaning "shoemaker". In 1324, his father John Chaucer was kidnapped by an aunt in the hope of marrying the 12-year-old to her daughter in an attempt to keep property in Ipswich. The aunt was imprisoned and fined £250, now equivalent to about £200,000, which suggests that the family was financially secure.

John Chaucer married Agnes Copton, who inherited properties in 1349, including 24 shops in London from her uncle Hamo de Copton, who is described in a will dated 3 April 1354 and listed in the City Hustings Roll as "moneyer", said to be moneyer at the Tower of London. In the City Hustings Roll 110, 5, Ric II, dated June 1380, Chaucer refers to himself as *me Galfridum Chaucer, filium Johannis Chaucer, Vinetarii, Londonie*, which translates as: "Geoffrey Chaucer, son of John Chaucer, vintners, London".

While records concerning the lives of his contemporaries, William Langland and the Pearl Poet, are practically non-existent, since Chaucer was a public servant, his official life is very well documented, with nearly five hundred written items testifying to his career. The first of the "Chaucer Life Records" appears in 1357, in the household accounts of Elizabeth de Burgh, the Countess of Ulster, when he became the noblewoman's page through his father's connections, a common medieval form of apprenticeship for boys into knighthood or prestige appointments. The countess was married to Lionel, Duke of Clarence, the second surviving son of the king, Edward III, and the position brought the teenage Chaucer into the close court circle, where he was to remain for the rest of his life. He also worked as a courtier, a diplomat, and a civil servant, as well as working for the king from 1389 to 1391 as Clerk of the King's Works.

In 1359, the early stages of the Hundred Years' War, Edward III invaded France and Chaucer travelled with Lionel of Antwerp, 1st Duke of Clarence, Elizabeth's husband, as part of the English army. In 1360, he was captured during the siege of Rheims. Edward paid £16 for his ransom, a considerable sum equivalent to £11,610 in 2019, and Chaucer was released.

After this, Chaucer's life is uncertain, but he seems to have travelled in France, Spain, and Flanders, possibly as a messenger and perhaps even going on a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. Around 1366, Chaucer married Philippa (de) Roet. She was a lady-in-waiting to Edward III's queen, Philippa of Hainault, and a sister of Katherine Swynford, who later (c. 1396) became the third wife of John of Gaunt. It is uncertain how many children Chaucer and Philippa had, but three or four are most commonly cited. His son, Thomas Chaucer, had an illustrious career, as chief butler to four kings, envoy to France, and Speaker of the House of Commons. Thomas's daughter, Alice, married the Duke of Suffolk. Thomas's great-grandson (Geoffrey's great-great-grandson), John de la Pole, Earl of Lincoln, was the heir to the throne designated by Richard III before he was deposed. Geoffrey's other children probably included Elizabeth Chauncy, a nun at Barking Abbey, Agnes, an attendant at Henry IV's coronation; and another son, Lewis Chaucer. Chaucer's "Treatise on the Astrolabe" was written for Lewis.

According to tradition, Chaucer studied law in the Inner Temple (an Inn of Court) at this time. He became a member of the royal court of Edward III as a valet de chambre, yeoman, or esquire on 20 June 1367, a position which could entail a wide variety of tasks. His wife also received a pension for court employment. He travelled abroad many times, at least some of them in his role as a valet. In 1368, he may have attended the wedding of Lionel of Antwerp to Violante Visconti, daughter of Galeazzo II Visconti, in Milan. Two other literary stars of the era were in attendance: Jean Froissart and Petrarch. Around this time, Chaucer is believed to have written *The Book of the Duchess* in honour of Blanche of Lancaster, the late wife of John of Gaunt, who died in 1369 of the plague.

Chaucer travelled to Picardy the next year as part of a military expedition; in 1373 he visited Genoa and Florence. Numerous scholars such as Skeat, Boitani, and Rowland suggested that, on this Italian trip, he came into contact with Petrarch or Boccaccio. They introduced him to medieval Italian poetry, the forms and stories of which he would use later. The purposes of a voyage in 1377 are mysterious, as details within the historical record conflict. Later documents suggest it was a mission, along with Jean Froissart, to arrange a marriage between the future King Richard II and a French princess, thereby ending the Hundred Years War. If this was the purpose of their trip, they seem to have been unsuccessful, as no wedding occurred.

In 1378, Richard II sent Chaucer as an envoy (secret dispatch) to the Visconti and to Sir John Hawkwood, English condottiere (mercenary leader) in Milan. It has been speculated that it was Hawkwood on whom Chaucer based his character the Knight in the *Canterbury Tales*, for a description matches that of a 14th-century condottiere.