

## On Geoffrey Chaucer

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Geoffrey Chaucer (about 1343–1400) has often been called “the father of English poetry.” He studied, translated, and imitated major writers of his era in four languages: Latin, French, Italian, and English. It is no exaggeration to say that Chaucer was “the first great English writer.” He was one of those rare authors, like Dante for the Italians or Twain for Americans, who can, in his writings, evoke and render forth his culture, its goals, values, and aesthetics. In its praise of Chaucer, the Poetry Foundation says the following about Chaucer’s place in the canon of British poetry and literature: “Author of the immortal *Canterbury Tales*, GEOFFREY CHAUCER . . . is the undisputed father of English poetry. His pitch-perfect, melodic versification demonstrated the riches of the evolving language’s resources, while his memorable portraits of many human types glows with warmth and humor” (“Geoffrey Chaucer”; Ganim 235).

### Chaucer the Storyteller

Chaucer, like Shakespeare two hundred years later, was a preeminent storyteller. Virginia Woolf, in her essay on Chaucer and the Pastons (a medieval family) in *The Common Reader*, speaks of Chaucer’s ability to draw us into the storytelling process: “To learn the end of the story—Chaucer can still make us wish to do that. He has pre-eminently that story-teller’s gift, which is almost the rarest gift among writers at the present day” (Woolf). While Shakespeare focused especially on drama and narrative and lyric poetry, Chaucer specialized in various genres of narrative and lyric poetry, including epic, mythological and historical tales, *fabliaux* (comic, ribald stories), medieval romances (tales of warfare and love), saints’ lives, and other literary kinds. While so many of his immediate colleagues, Langland and the *Gawain*-poet for example, wrote four-beat alliterative satire, Chaucer, in visits

to the Italian peninsula, discovered the Italian humanist writers and their imitations of classical Latin writers, especially Virgil and Ovid (Bowers). Chaucer's genius, in part, was his ability to exploit European literature for his London audience. As a poet, he emulated the (Roman) classical authors, including, in a list he himself assembled and in this order: "Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan, and Stace" (Benson, *Troilus and Criseyde* 5. 1792; 584); in translation, "Virgil and Ovid, Homer, Lucan and Statius" (Krapp 306).

By adapting medieval Latin, French, and Italian writings to his English vernacular, Chaucer inaugurates what we today call the British literary tradition, a tradition that profoundly influenced American as well as English letters. Chaucer helped inspire his fifteenth-century admirers as well as Shakespeare's great literary works (Donaldson); seventeenth-century poets, like John Donne and John Milton, learned a great deal from the Middle English author. Chaucer imported the iambic pentameter verse form from the trecento Italian humanist poets and made those pentameter lines function in rhyme royal (stanzas rhyming ABABBCC) and rhyming couplets, the latter adopted by seventeenth and eighteenth-century satirists, including John Dryden, who retold many of Chaucer's stories, and Alexander Pope.

Chaucer contemplated deeply the place and function of literature. When he declared himself on this subject, he made clear that literature—which for Chaucer and his contemporaries mostly meant poetry—should, in Horace's well known phrase, both instruct and entertain: *utile dulce*. Chaucer even builds literary values into his characters. Some, like the Host of the Canterbury pilgrimage, Harry Bailly, advocate "mirth" and entertainment, while others, mostly the clerics on the pilgrimage, emphasize morality. The Chaucerian narrator of the *Canterbury Tales* claims that in his stories, the careful reader will "fynde ynowe, grete and smale, / Of storial thing that toucheth gentillesse, / And eek moralitee and holinesse" (Benson I.3177-80). (There's plenty of all kinds, to please you all: / True tales that touch on manners and on morals, / As well as piety and saintliness" [Wright 81].)

Chaucer explores genres of tragedy and comedy in his works, especially tragedy. When Chaucer defines tragedy, he means simply the downfall of a prominent man or woman from high estate to low. This non-Aristotelian form is called *de casibus* or *casus* tragedy—tragedy based on the sudden fall (see Kelly 49-65). The sequence of “tragedies” in *The Monk’s Tale* from the *Canterbury Tales* all illustrate *de casibus* tragedies. The case of comedy is a little different. Chaucer uses the term only once, at the conclusion of *Troilus and Criseyde*, his great love tragedy. Chaucer prays that his book may be well received: “Go, litel bok, go litel myn tragedie, / Ther God thi makere yet, er that he dye, / So sende might to make in som comedye!” (Benson 5. 1786-88). (Go, little book, my little tragedy! / God grant thy maker, ere his ending day, / May write some tale of happy poetry! [Krapp 306]). Krapp’s modern translation of Chaucer’s “comedye” as “happy poetry” may strike some readers as not quite what Chaucer had in mind. Rather, they would argue as I do here that “might to make in som comedye” refers to his turning from the tragic love affair of *Troilus and Criseyde* to imagining the comic elements of the *Canterbury Tales* (see Howard 30-35).

Today Chaucer’s reputation is based especially on three things: his natural description of the time when people like to go on pilgrimage to Canterbury; his comic masterpieces, *The Miller’s Tale* and *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, both from the *Canterbury Tales*; and his scene-stealing, garrulous character, the Wife of Bath. *The Miller’s Tale* features a second Noah’s flood, a misplaced kiss, and a well-timed fart. It is a special kind of story—a French genre called *fabliau* that often includes, as *The Miller’s Tale* does, a doting old man who foolishly marries a teenage bride and oversexed young men, including a student. The Miller tells this particular story because he is trying to “pay back” the Knight for his utterly unrealistic story of courtly love. The KnT is adapted from a narrative originally told by Giovanni Boccaccio, *Il Teseida*, or *The Book of Theseus*, a work set in ancient Thebes and Athens. *The Miller’s Tale* should have a source text in Old French, but the chief source seems to be a Middle Dutch work: *Heile van*

*Beersele*. *The Nun's Priest's Tale* is a mock-heroic story about a cock and a fox, with the cock compared to Hector of Troy and the fox compared to the devil in a retelling of the fall of Adam.

### Chaucer's Colorful Characters

Chaucer's characters, including his storytelling pilgrims, are memorably presented. Donald Howard has argued that the *General Prologue* of the *Canterbury Tales* offers a memory system, with particularly remarkable lines, to help us recall each pilgrim when he or she should tell a story (Howard 139-58). The pilgrim Clerk, studying Aristotle at Oxford University, is summed up by this notable couplet: "Sownynge in moral vertu was his speche, / And gladly wolde he lerne and gladly teche" (Benson I.307-08). (Moral virtue was reflected in his speech, / And gladly would he learn, and gladly teach [Wright 9].) Of the Squire, son of the pilgrim Knight, Chaucer says in his final couplet: "Curteis he was, lowely, and servysable, / And carf biforn his fader at the table" (Benson I.99-100). (Polite, modest, willing to serve, and able, / He carved before his father at their table [Wright 3].) This couplet anticipates and clarifies the later portrait of Friar Huberd, who frequents taverns while avoiding poor and ill folk: "And over al, ther as profit sholde arise, / Curteis he was and lowely of servyse" (Benson I.249-50). / (And anywhere where profit might arise / He'd crawl with courteous offers of service [Wright 7].) The couplets involving the Squire and the Friar are very similar. The chief difference, which makes all the difference, is the word "profit." When it is profitable to behave humbly, the Friar is all attention and solicitude.

The pilgrim everyone remembers and studies especially carefully is the Wife of Bath—Alice, as we come to know her. In an age when women were often not taken seriously, the Wife speaks up and challenges male speakers. The Wife of Bath is the only secular woman on the pilgrimage traveling from Harry Bailly's tavern, the Tabard Inn, to the great cathedral in Canterbury. There are other women on the pilgrimage, but they are church figures: the Prioress and the Second Nun. Nonetheless, the Wife worries about her salvation, and in her lengthy Prologue before her tale,

she in effect tells a sermon on the importance of life experience over clerical authority concerning marriage. Her point is simple but telling: religious folk cannot know about marriage because they are clerics: they cannot marry. She, on the other hand, as she explains at length, has been married five times; she is an expert on marriage and human relationships. The Wife's Prologue explains the differences between her first three husbands (old, rich, and good) and the last two: a younger man who has a mistress, and a twenty-year-old who is, or at least was, an Oxford scholar, Jankyn. Every night, he read to her from a misogynist book of Wicked Wives. He regularly quarreled with her; eventually, he got into a memorable slug fest with her. To make things more complicated, she says she thinks she loved husband number five best even though he beat her. The abuse of her is both verbal and physical. The Wife, who sets herself up as the champion of life experience, ironically becomes an *authority* on the issues of marriage and women's place in society.

Now by myn fey I shal er p<sup>r</sup> 7 go  
 Telle of a fyny schich a tale or too  
 That alle pe folk shul lacche i pis place  
 Now ellis frere I be stherte thy face  
 Quod this fyny 2 I be stherte me  
 But 3if I telle talis too or thye  
 Of freris er I come to Sidyngborne  
 That I shal make py herte for to moone  
 For wel I wot py pacience is goon  
 oure oft cpeste pees 2 p<sup>r</sup> a non  
 and seyde lat pe wwoman telle hire tale  
 ze fare as folk dronke were of ale  
 Soth dame tellyth forth 3oe tale 2 p<sup>r</sup> is best  
 Al redy fire q<sup>d</sup> sche raghit at 3oe lest  
 3if I haue lycens of pis wwoman frere  
 3is dame telle forth 2 I shal here

Here endith pe wologe of the wyues tale of Bathe.

Here begynnith the wyf of bathe hire tale.



Fig. 1 – The Wife of Bath with a whip MS Cambridge GG.4.27

Because of her outspokenness, she disturbs some of the male clerics. When she outlines her remarks toward the beginning of her Prologue, the Pardoner sarcastically praises her, saying “Ye been a noble precour in this cas” (Benson III.165.). (You make a splendid preacher on this theme [Wright 223].) Just before she launches into her story of the rapist knight who must discover what women really want or forfeit his head, the Friar and Summoner get into an altercation, interrupting the Wife. Eventually, they allow the Wife to continue her storytelling. The Wife’s “sermon” subtopics of her Prologue include bigamy (how many husbands can she have?), virginity (did Jesus require or only recommend it?), and the use of sexual organs (are they just for urinating?). The Wife’s arguments are for the most part superior to those of the church. As the *Canterbury Tales* are structured, the Wife’s Prologue and Tale, her storytelling, elicits responses from some male clerics and even some non-clerics. The Clerk, who like the Wife’s fifth husband, is an Oxford student, fashions his tale as a response to the Wife. There is a formal “Lenvoy,” a mocking document that sums up the Clerk’s unhappiness with the Wife’s approach to life and marriage, but emphasizing the Clerk’s point that marriages work best when the husband exercise “sovereynete” or “maistrye”: power. The story after *The Clerk’s Tale*—*The Merchant’s Tale*—does not overtly take sides on the man/woman issue, but the Wife manages to appear in the story nonetheless. Justinus, brother of and counselor to old January, cites the Wife on the issue of power in marriage. A similar appearance of the Wife as an authority on marriage occurs in Chaucer’s short poem, *Lenvoy de Chaucer a Bukton* (for discussions of these textual passages see Dean’s essay within this volume).

The Wife of Bath can seem to be a person drawn from “life,” a character Chaucer or his other pilgrims on the Canterbury pilgrimage might know, even though we are aware that so many of the Wife’s details or her description originate in well-known literary figures from Ovid and Jean de Meun’s portion of *The Romance of the Rose*. In Chaucer’s composition of the Wife, he adverts to medieval antifeminist stereotypes. Jill Mann has explained the dialogue between the reality of the Wife and her construction as a clerical commonplace:

The double structure of the Wife's speech [she speaks to and for medieval women and Alice of Bath] thus has a meaning of far wider import than its role in the Wife's individual experience. And yet it plays a crucial role in creating our sense of the Wife as a living individual. For what it demonstrates is her *interaction* with the stereotypes of her sex, and it is in this interaction that we feel the three-dimensional reality of her existence. That is, she does not live in the insulated laboratory of literature, where she is no more than a literary object, unconscious of the interpretations foisted upon her; she is conceived as a woman who lives in the real world, in full awareness of the antifeminist literature that purports to describe and criticize her behavior and she has an attitude to *it* just as it has an attitude to her. (Mann 64)

The *Canterbury Tales* begin with the epic style, akin to tragedy, with *The Knight's Tale*, but very quickly, the storytelling is diverted to comedy with *The Miller's Tale* and *The Reeve's Tale*. The nineteen-year-old wife of the old carpenter John, Alysoun, resembles Alice of Bath, who was first married to an old man when she was twelve years old (see Benson III.4-7). January's young wife May in *The Merchant's Tale* also has affinities with the Wife of Bath, who knows a thing or two about managing husbands. The Wife is a large, domineering figure in the *Canterbury Tales* and also outside of it. In a certain way, the Wife resembles Shakespeare's popular and outspoken Sir John Falstaff, who by report was so beloved that Queen Elizabeth herself asked Shakespeare to write a play featuring the scheming figure (Shakespeare 252), so we now have *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. The Wife, like Falstaff, is a very human, social character, one who confesses her sins to her fellow pilgrims, as when she laments, in almost perfect iambic pentameter, "Allas, allas! That evere love was synne!" (Benson III.614). (Alas, alas, that ever love was sin [Wright 234].) She likes flirting, dancing, going to plays, and trying new clothes. She has a close friend and confidant—called a "gossib"—also named Alice, to whom she reveals all her secrets, much to the unhappiness of husband five, the sometime Oxford scholar.

## Chaucer the Narrator

A discussion of Chaucer's characters would be incomplete without exploration of the Chaucerian narrator. To a lesser or greater extent, the narrator of Chaucer's more ambitious works makes "himself" an issue. Some Chaucerians object to understanding the narrator as somehow different from the author Geoffrey Chaucer or the narrator as being a separate character. They argue that there is no objective (or subjective) correlative behind the "I" of a narrative. A. C. Spearing's useful terms are to distinguish the "experiencing self," the "I" who has the experiences that lead to the poetry, and the "narrating self," the "I" who seems to be speaking the story. (See Spearing Chap. 3, on *Troilus and Criseyde*.) This said, Chaucer constructs many of his works, including his most celebrated writings, with the aid of a narrator who relates the story.

Modern critics of Chaucer have seen Chaucer's narrators as important in themselves. A good example is the work generally regarded as Chaucer's first important writing, the *Book of the Duchess*, the elegy for Blanche of Lancaster. The first word of the 1334 line poem is "I":

I have gret wonder, be this lyght,  
How that I lyve, for day ne nyght  
I may nat slepe wel nygh nought. (Benson, BD 1-3)

(I wonder much, by this candle, how I manage to live, for day and night I can't sleep at all.)

The *Book of the Duchess*, like many other Chaucer works, is a dream vision, a French genre originally, and in the opening lines, the poet discusses sleep and the narrator's insomnia, a motif the narrator will develop over the opening sections of the poem. When someone brings him a book with old stories, the narrator selects the tale of Ceyx and Alcione, a classical story from Ovid about a woman who learns that her husband has drowned. Alcione faints, and Juno, taking pity on her, asks her messenger to visit the realm of Morpheus and to bring back the body of Ceyx to show Alcione the fate of her husband. Chaucer's narrator is delighted with the

story, and apparently because of it, he is at long last able to fall asleep himself. But now the dream vision begins and the narrator miraculously exits his bedroom and finds himself in a natural setting. He hears the sounds of hunting and comes across a man who explains that the Roman emperor Octavian is nearby. He follows a dog, which leads him to a knight dressed all in black who complains about his lady, White. The narrator asks a number of questions, and the reader understands that Lady White has died. The black knight for his part speaks in allegorical terms somewhat, explaining that he has played a chess game with Fortune and lost. Chaucer critics discuss the problem of the narrator's obtuseness; others argue that the narrator is only feigning obtuseness to draw the man in black out and help him achieve a measure of consolation in grief. It is certainly clear that the narrator of *The Book of the Duchess* and Chaucer the author are two very different characters. I would remind readers that the narrative is a dream vision, and happenings can occur in dream that will not occur in the waking state.

The *House of Fame* (late 1378s) includes a narrator who is interested in the various kinds of dreams and who, in his dream, visits places in the heavens in the talons of a talkative eagle. The eagle quizzes the narrator, who is a separate and important individual, on various scientific issues, especially the nature and properties of sound. The eagle is comic—tedious and repetitive—addressing the narrator in familiar speech as “Geffrey” (728). The *House of Fame* is unfinished; it ends just as we are about to learn the identity and importance of “a man of greet auctoritee” (2158)

A narrator frames Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls* (about 1380), which concerns dreams, love, and Valentine's Day. The narrator claims to be largely ignorant about love even though he is curious about the subject. What he knows about love he has gleaned from old books, particularly Cicero's *On the Republic*, book 6. From that book, he learns about the pagan cosmos and the fate of good and evil people. That old book helps him get to sleep, and he quickly meets Scipio Africanus, who also showed up in Cicero's book. The cosmic perspective sets up the significance and universal nature of love. The narrator or Chaucer confesses that he is unsure whether

his earlier reading helped shape his dream content; but before long, Scipio Africanus guides the narrator to a gated garden similar to the garden of love in *The Romance of the Rose* but with two Dantesque inscriptions written above the gates: one a statement about the bliss of love and the other a warning about love's hardships. The narrator cannot decide what to do, so Africanus shoves the indecisive dreamer through one of the gates. This narrator shares several characteristics with other Chaucerian narrators: concern with love, concern with dreams and dream visions, interest in flights through space, a penchant for old books, and a disposition toward indecision and deference. These narrators are more acted upon than actors. The main story occurs after the narrator has wandered around and viewed many classical gods and allegorical figures, including Priapus, Diana, Cupid, Venus, and the reigning goddess Dame Nature, who presides over the birds. Says Chaucer, "For this was on Seynt Valentine's day, / Whan every foul cometh ther to chese his make, / Of every kynde that men thynke may" (309-11). [For this was on Saint Valentine's day, when every bird of every kind that men can imagine comes there to choose its mate.] The narrative focuses on noble eagles and a court-like setting where birds can debate their choices.

Another important narrator appears in *Troilus and Criseyde*. In that poem, the narrator does not experience a dream vision, but he envisions his role as a partisan for lovers and, as the poem unfolds, a supporter of the young lovers, especially Criseyde (Donaldson, "Criseyde"). He describes himself as, like Pandarus, unlucky in love and as "a servant of the servants of love" (Benson, *Troilus* 1.15). The narrator becomes caught up in the story such that E. T. Donaldson can say that the narrator is considerably enamored of Criseyde—that he "loves" her in an avuncular way (see Donaldson, "Criseide" 68). He adds that Criseyde "seems to represent . . . Chaucer's supreme achievement in the creation of human character" (see Donaldson, "Criseyde 68, 67). He devotes considerable space in his important essay to showing how the narrator finds ways to excuse Criseyde from blame in abandoning Troilus. The author knows whether Criseyde gave her heart to Diomedes, but the narrator of *Troilus* refuses to confirm that act, which he finds painful (see Benson,

*Troilus* 5. 1050): “Men seyn—I not—that she yaf hym [Diomedes] hire herte” (Benson, *Troilus* 5.1050). (Men say, men say she gave to him her heart” [Krapp 280].) The narrator also says:

And yf I myghte excuse hire any wise,  
For she so sory was for hire untrouthe,  
Ywis, I wolde excuse hire yet for routhe. (5. 1097-99)

(And if I could condone in any wise  
Her deed, in pity’s name I would assent,  
For of her sin she did at least repent. [Krapp 282])

So the narrator of *Troilus* allows the story to be told in a way that respects the lovers and their story while still finally condemning Criseyde’s faithlessness. The ending calls for a Christian recognition of worldly meaning, although the narrator also realizes that Troilus and Criseyde were pagans living for a time in a doomed city.

At the close of the narrative, he intrudes on the progress of the poem by saying that he fervently hopes that wherever his story is told it will be presented free of scribal errors:

And for ther is so gret diversite  
In Englissh and in writyng of oure tonge,  
So prey I God that non myswrite the,  
Ne themysmetre for defaute of tonge;  
And red wherso thow be, or elles songe,  
That thow be understonde, God I biseche! (5. 1793-98)

(And since there is so great diversity  
In English, and in writing of our tongue,  
I pray to God that no man miswrite thee,  
Or get thy meter wrong and all unstrung;  
But everywhere that thou art read or sung,  
I trust all men will take thee as they should . . . [Krapp 307])

The narrator of *Troilus* allows the focus to remain on the pathos of the relationship between the young lovers.

The *Legend of Good Women* (late 1380s?) is an unfinished narrative of about 2,700 lines with two prologues introducing the main narrative concerning prominent or virtuous women. It is a dream vision. The fictional setting includes Cupid's confrontation with the narrator. Cupid accuses Chaucer of presenting women in a bad light. He singles out Chaucer's translation of *The Romance of the Rose* and *Troilus and Criseyde*.

Finally, the narrator of the *Canterbury Tales* (about 1387), the "I" of the Canterbury book allows readers to experience the pilgrimage through a pilgrim's understanding—the pilgrim Chaucer. He describes how he is present at the Tabard Inn, how he wants to set down every word the storytellers say, the roadside drama and their conversations, friendly or argumentative; and of course, "Chaucer" agrees to tell a story but is shut down by the Host, who forces him to tell another, more artful tale. Chaucer ends up narrating a longish, allegorical tale in prose. For more see Dean, "Chaucer's Reality Fiction," within this volume.

### Chaucer and His Contemporaries

An important truth emerges from a recognition of Chaucer's sources and analogues: Chaucer chose to write in his English, the English of late fourteenth-century London, but his outlook, his stance on contemporary events, was chiefly international. He looked beyond his immediate peers to the great classical poets and their Latin successors. Chaucer's colleagues, some of them (and probably including authors unknown to Chaucer), promoted moralistic writings such as *The Prik of Conscience*, early fourteenth century. *The Prik*, author unknown, consists of about 9500+ rhymed couplets, depending on the manuscript, in four-beat lines. Speaking of the pains of hell, the anonymous author describes a scene that could emerge from Dante's *Inferno* canto 19, the simoniacs:

In grounde . . . of helle dongeoun  
The hedes of synful shul be turned down  
And here feet fast uppeward knyt  
And to strong peyne so be flytte. (*Prik* 6.725-28)