

## THE AGE OF CHAUCER

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### **Chaucer's Life**

Geoffrey Chaucer (1340-1400) was born in the reign of Edward III, lived through that of Richard II and died the year after Henry IV ascended the throne. He 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 to be buried in what has since come to be called Poets' Corner, in Westminster Abbey. Chaucer also gained fame as a philosopher and astronomer, composing the scientific. He maintained a career in the civil service as a bureaucrat, courtier, diplomat, and member of parliament.

At seventeen he received a court appointment as page to the wife of the Duke of Clarence, Edward III.'s third son. In 1359 he was with the English army in France, where he was taken prisoner ; but he was soon ransomed, and returned to England. Sometime after this he married, and became valet of the king's chamber. From that time onward he was for many years closely connected with the court. He was often entrusted with diplomatic missions on the continent, two of them being to Italy. He was thus brought into direct touch with Italian culture in the days of the early Renaissance, and may even have met Petrarch and Boccaccio. Chaucer is very well known for his beautiful and exceptional metrical innovation. He is famous for Canterbury tales which is a collection of stories told by fictional pilgrims.

### **The age of Chaucer: (1340-1400)**

The 14th century is known as the age of Chaucer. He was a great writer who is not only of an age but of all the ages. It was the age of transition, a transformation of medieval to the modern times. The great age of Enlightenment and Prosperity but initially, during the middle age, the people of England were not much satisfied with the so-called religious, political and social principles.

### **The Historical Background**

It includes the greater part of the reign of Edward III and the long French wars associated with his name; the accession of his grandson Richard II (1377); and the revolution of 1399, the deposition of Richard, and the foundation of the Lancastrian dynasty. From the literary point of view, of greater importance are the social and intellectual movements of the period: the terrible plague called the Black Death, bringing poverty, unrest, and revolt among the peasants, and the growth of the spirit of inquiry, which was strongly critical of the ways of the Church, and found expression in the teachings of Wyclif and the Lollards, and in the stem denunciations of Langland.

## LITERARY FEATURES OF THE AGE

1. **The Standardizing of English.** The period of transition is now nearly over. The English language has shaken down to a kind of average--to the standard of the East Midland speech, the language of the capital city and of the universities. The other dialects, with the exception of the Scottish branch, rapidly melt away from literature, till they become quite exiguous. French and English have amalgamated to form the standard English tongue, which attains to its first full expression in the works of Chaucer.
2. **A curious 'modern' note begins to be apparent at this period-**There is a sharper spirit of criticism, a more searching interest in man's affairs, and a less childlike faith in, and a less complacent acceptance of, the established order. The vogue of the romance, though it has by no means gone, is passing, and in Chaucer it is derided. The freshness of the romantic ideal is being superseded by the more acute spirit of the drama, which even at this early time is faintly foreshadowed. Another more modern feature that at once strikes the observer is that the age of anonymity is passing away. Though many of the texts still lack named authors, the greater number of the books can be definitely ascribed. Moreover, we have for the first time a figure of outstanding literary importance, who gives to the age the form and pressure of his genius.
3. **Prose.** This era sees the foundation of an English prose style. Earlier specimens have been experimental or purely imitative; now, in the works of Mandeville and Malory, we have prose that is both original and individual. The English tongue is now ripe for a prose style. The language is settling to a standard; Latin and French are losing grip as popular prose mediums and the growing desire for an English Bible exercises a steady pressure in favour of a standard English prose.
4. **Scottish Literature.** For the first time in our literature, in the person of Barbour Scotland supplies a writer worthy of note. This is only the beginning for the tradition is handed on to the powerful group of poets who are mentioned in the next chapter.

### General Characteristics of Age:

1. **Period:** The period between 1343 and 1450 is known as the age of Chaucer. The age of Chaucer is the first significant period in the Literary history of England. It marks the beginning of a new era, new language and new literature.
2. **An Era of Transition:** Chaucer was born in a turbulent period of social, religious and political change. He was born in the reign of Edward III, lived through that of Richard II, and died the year after Henry IV ascended the throne.
3. **Growth of National Sentiment:** In this age, we come across an ardent upsurge of nationalism. The fusion of Normans and Saxons had completely taken place even before the birth of Chaucer. The consciousness of national unity was strengthened during "The Hundred Years' War" with France and the battles of Crecy and Poitiers. The victories of Edward and the Black Prince on French soil during the 'The Hundred Years' War' gave a feeling of national pride and self-respect to the people of England.
4. **Black Death:** Famine and Social Unrest: It was an epoch of natural calamities which increased the sufferings of the common people. In 1348-49 came the terrible Black Death

which carried off no less than one-third of the population. It reappeared in 1362, 1367 and 1370.

5. **The Corruption of the Church and the Reformation:** The church, which was the seat of power and prestige, was infected with corruption, moral loss and superstition. Politically, intellectually and spiritually its influence had been diminished. The ecclesiastics were corrupt and demoralized. They rolled in wealth and luxury, and indulged in sorts of vices and follies. They lived in a godless and materialistic world. Chaucer's ecclesiastical characters in the Prologue realistically depict the corruption of the church.
6. **The Dawn of New Learning:** In the age of Chaucer, the medieval habits and traditions still continued to influence the masses. The Church still continued to influence the masses and controlled scholarship, thoughts and feelings. Theology molded and affected the entire life of people and ecclesiastical ideas swayed the feelings of common people, but their sway was to some extent weakened by the spirit of new learning. The spirit of humanism, which was one of the formative influences of the age of Chaucer, engendered "the quickened sense of beauty, the delight in life, and the free secular spirit" which began to appear, though dimly, both in life and literature. *Root says: "The movement of Renaissance first assumed definite form, and our modern world began"*.

7. **Chaucer's Work in General:**

It is usual and convenient to divide Chaucer's literary career into three periods, which are called his French, his Italian, and his English period, respectively. His genius was nourished, to begin with, on the French poetry and romance, which formed the favourite reading of the court and cultivated society during the time of his youth. Naturally, he followed the fashion, and his early work was done on French models. Thus, besides translating portions at least of the then popular Roman de la Rose, he wrote, among other quite imitative things, an allegory on the death of Blanche, John of Gaunt's wife, which he called *The Book of the Duchesse* (1369), and which is wholly in the manner of the reigning French school.

Then, almost certainly as a direct result of his visits to Italy, French influences disappear, and Italian influences take their place. In this second period (1370-84), Chaucer is the disciple of the great Italian masters, for *The House of Fame* clearly owes much to Dante, while *Troilus and Cryseyde*, by far his longest single poem, is based upon, and in part translated from, Boccaccio's *Filostrato*. To the close of this period the unfinished *Legende of Good Women* may also be referred.

Finally, he ceases to be Italian as he had ceased to be French, and becomes English. This does not mean that he no longer draws freely upon French and Italian material. He continues to do this to the end. It simply means that, instead of being merely imitative, he becomes independent, relying upon himself entirely even for the use to which he puts his borrowed themes. To this last period belong, together with sundry minor poems, the *Canterbury Tales*, in which we have Chaucer's most famous and most characteristic work.

## The Canterbury Tales

The Canterbury is a “frame narrative”; Chaucer tells the story of a group of pilgrims traveling from London to Canterbury Tales to visit the shrine of the martyr St. Thomas Beckett. On their trip, each pilgrim is to tell two stories as part of the storytelling contest; the winner will be awarded dinner by Harry Bailly, the Host of the Tabard Inn. Chaucer makes himself a character on the journey, so we need to distinguish between Chaucer the poet, who wrote the Tales, and Chaucer the Pilgrim, a literary creation of the poet.

The first character introduced in the knight, the highest-ranking individual on the pilgrimage. There is some scholarly debate as to whether Chaucer’s portrait of the knight is meant to be ironic or if we are to take Chaucer’s description as serious and the knight as a humble, pious man. The knight is followed by his son, the squire, and their servant, the Yeoman.

The highest ranking woman is the next to be introduced: the Prioress, the head nun of a covenant and of noble birth and good education. There is also some scholarly controversy over whether or not Chaucer is criticizing the Prioress for her fancy dress and manners, but most critics think he is simply enamored of her. The monk who follows the Prioress is a well-dressed man and a hunter who does not care for monastic discipline; Chaucer the Pilgrim says that the Monk’s “opinion was good.” we then meet a Friar, a wandering preacher, whom Chaucer criticizes for being more interested in taverns than in poor people.

The merchant, with a forked beard, is dressed richly and rides high on his horse. The clerk of Oxford loves books more than fancy dress; he rides upon a lean horse and is more interested in learning and teaching than anything else. The man of law is well educated and well dressed, as is the Franklin, who is famous for the quality of the food at his house. Then come some members of the working class: a Hat maker, Carpenter, Weaver, Dyer, a Cook (who is a disgusting running sore on his leg), and the Shipman, a Sailor. Next comes the Physician, whom Chaucer says loves gold most of all.

Next comes Chaucer’s most famous character, the Wife of Bath, who has been married five times and has ended up very rich. She is a weaver who is dressed in extravagant clothes; her gap-tooth, mouth may indicate that she is thought to be sexually promiscuous.

Then we have the description of two characters whom Chaucer respects the most, the Parson and his brother the Plowman who both work very hard at their jobs in the and third states. Then comes the Miller, who is drunk, arrogant, and violent. He is followed by the Manciple, who is the purchasing agent for a law court and who, Chaucer says, knows how to embezzle his employers for his own benefit. The Reeve, who is responsible for managing a country estate, is old and somewhat bitter and is able to outwit his lord easily. The Summoner’s job is to deliver legal summonses for people called into ecclesiastical courts; he abuses his power to gain power over young women he meets.

The Pardoner sells pardons that people can buy to remove their sins. Finally comes a description of the Host, Harry Bailly, who proposes the tale- telling contest.

## General Characteristics of Chaucer's Poetry.

Chaucer was not in any sense a poet of the people. He was a court poet, who wrote for cultured readers and a refined society. The great vital issues of the day never inspired his verse. He made his appeal to an audience composed of the favoured few, who wanted to be amused by comedy, or touched by pathos, or moved by romantic sentiment, but who did not wish to be disturbed by painful reminders of plagues, famines, and popular discontent. Thus, though he holds the mirror up to the life of his time, the dark underside of it is nowhere reflected by him.

It is significant that his only mention of the peasants' revolt is in the form of a humorous reference in the Nonnes Priestes Tale of the Cock and the Fox. It is true that, as we have seen, he felt the religious corruptions of the world about him, and not only his satiric portraits of unworthy churchmen, to which I have referred, but also his beautiful companion study of the poor parson, who was indeed no hireling, but a real shepherd, show his sympathy in a general way with some of Wyclif's ideas. But on the whole he left burning questions alone. His was an easy-going, genial, tolerant nature, and nothing of the reformer went to its composition. The serious note is indeed sometimes heard in his poetry; as when, for example, he writes :

*That thee is sent receyve in buxomnesse  
The wrastling of this world asketh a fal;  
Here is no hoom, here is but wildernessse.  
Forth, pilgrim, forth ! forth, best out of thy stal!  
Look upon hye, and thonke God of al.*

But this is not its characteristic tone ; its characteristic tone is that of frank pleasure in the good things of life. Chaucer's temperament thus explains his relations with his age. Little touched by its religious or social movements, he responded readily to the influence of Italian humanism, and it is through him that its free secular spirit first expresses itself in our poetry. If Wyclif was "the morning star of the Reformation," Chaucer may be called "the morning star of the Renaissance." A specially charming feature of his poetry is its fresh out-of-doors atmosphere. His descriptions of the country are often indeed in the conventional manner of his time, and his garden landscape and May flowers are to some extent things of tradition only. But he has a real love of nature and particularly of the spring, and when he writes of these, as in the Prologue and the Knightes Tale, the personal accent is unmistakable.

We have already spoken of Chaucer's importance in the history of our language. His fourteenth century (or "Middle ") English looks very difficult at first, but only a little time and perseverance are needed to master it, and these will be amply repaid by the pleasure we are sure to find in the felicity of his diction and the melody of his verse.

It will be observed that he abandons altogether the Old English irregular lines and alliteration "rim, ram, roff" as he jestingly calls it and adopts the French method of regular metre and end-rimes. Under his influence rime gradually displaced alliteration in English poetry.

## Other Poets of Chaucer's Age.

**John Gower:** Chaucer's chief rival in poetry was John Gower. He was a member of a good Kentish family; he took a fairly active part in the politics and literary activity of the time, and was buried in London. Gower was a most industrious and well-meaning writer and his work is extremely voluminous, learned and careful. The three chief works of Gower are noteworthy, for they illustrate the unstable state of contemporary English literature. His first poem, *Speculum Meditantis*, is written in French, and for a long time was lost, being discovered as late as 1895; the second, *Vox Clamantis*, is composed in Latin.

**William Langland:** He seems to have been the son of a Franklin ; to have been born in the neighbourhood of Malvern ; and to have lived a life of poverty and struggle. Of his character, however, we have a clear revelation in his work, *The Vision of William concerning Piers the Plowman*, an enormous allegorical poem which in its final shape runs to upwards of 15,000 lines. Rambling, confused, and almost formless, the Vision has small claim to be regarded as a piece of literary art ; but its defects on this side are redeemed by its vigour and moral earnestness. Langland's spirit is strikingly puritan and democratic. He was not indeed a Wyclifite, nor politically was he a revolutionist. But he was profoundly moved by the misery of the masses ; he was an ardent champion of their cause ; and he sought to bring English religion back to the simplicity and purity of gospel truth.

**John Barbour:** John Barbour is the first of the Scottish poets to claim our attention. He was born in Aberdeenshire, and studied both at Oxford and Paris. His great work is his Bruce (1375), a lengthy poem of twenty books and thirteen thousand lines. The work is really a history of Scotland's struggle for freedom from the year 1286 till the death of Bruce and the burial of his heart (1332). The heroic theme is the rise of Bruce, and the central incident of the poem is the battle of Bannockburn. The poem, often rudely, but pithily expressed, contains much absurd legend and a good deal of inaccuracy, but it is no mean beginning to the long series of Scottish heroic poems. This spirited passage from the first book is often quoted:

*A! fredome is a nobill thing!  
Fredome mayss' man to haiff liking!  
Fredome all solace to man giffis;  
He levys at ess that frely levys!  
A noble hart may haiff nane ess,  
Na ellys nocht that may him pless  
Gyffe fredome failzhe: for fre liking  
Is zharnyt  
our all othir thing.  
Na he, that ay hass levyt fre  
May nocht knaw weill the propyrte,  
The angyr, na the wrechyt dome,  
That is couplyt to foule thyrdome.*

### Prose of Chaucer's Age.

Under this head there is little to record. Chaucer's own few prose writings such as his translation of Boethius and his *Treatise on the Astrolabe* are not important. Wyclif's Bible is an interesting example of vigorous artless English, and his controversial pamphlets helped to show the capabilities of the vernacular at a time when Latin was deemed the only fitting vehicle for theological discussion. But the great prose work of this period is the singular volume which goes by the title of *The Travels of Sir John Maundeville*.

According to the specific statement of the preface, this Maundeville was born at St. Albans, and set out on his journey in 1322 ; and his book purports to give a circumstantial account of what he had seen and heard during many years of wanderings in the Holy Land and the far east. It is now established, however, that no such person as the alleged author ever existed; that the work is a translation from the French of a certain Jean de Bourgogne; and that, instead of being a genuine record of travel, it is simply a compilation of fabulous stories out of Pliny, Friar Odoric, Marco Polo, and other retailers of the marvellous.

The fact that the supposed Maundeville describes a bird which could carry an elephant away in its claws, a phoenix, and a weeping crocodile, a valley in which devils were jumping about like grasshoppers, and rocks of adamant which drew the nails out of passing ships, will show that his book is at least amusing; while, even though it is only a translation, it keeps its place as the first English prose classic.

### Important Events of in the Age of Chaucer

Event	Year
Edward III's reign	1327- 1377
William Langland born	1332
Beginning of the hundred years War with France	1338
Chaucer born	1340
Battle of Crecy	1346
The Black Death (Plague)	1348-49
Battle of Poitiers	1356
Rechar d II's reign	1377-99
Wyclif's Bible	1380
Wat Tyler's Rebellion	1381
Henry IV ascends the throne	1399
Death of Langland	1400
Death of Chaucer	1400

## Source

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Hudson, Henry, William. *an outline history of English Literature*

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