

Geoffrey Chaucer

...I think some of Chaucer belongs to his time and that much of that time is dead, extinct, and never to be made alive again. What was alive in it, lives through him..._

--John Masefield

Geoffrey Chaucer's world was the Europe of the fourteenth century. It was neither rich or poor, happy nor sad. Rather, it was the intermingling of these, a mixture of splendor and poverty, displaying both worldly desire and spiritual purity. Chaucer's travels through it, mostly on the King's business, or civil service, shaped his writing, offering the readers of today a brief glimpse into the world in which he lived.

Chaucer lived from approximately AD 1340 to 1400. The world in which he lived was not one of peace or stability. Born the son of a London vintner, he remained a Londoner for most of the rest of his life, leaving the city only on the King's business.

The city of London was thus Chaucer's environment for most of his life. Aside from brief visits into other countries or areas of England, he remained in the city, and it's affects on his writing was immense.

London of that time was not the London of today. It was a walled city, guarded against invasion, but long enough time had passed since such a threat had approached that the defenses had loosened. Houses perched upon the walls, and Chaucer in fact, lived for a time in a house built over Aldgate, (one of the gates of the city).

London was a city less than three-quarters of a square mile in size: It ran east and west along the Thames less than one and a half miles, and extended northwards less than half a mile. Over 20,000 people were packed into this small area; the diversity of the inhabitants was overwhelming. Londoners ranged from wealthy to impoverished, from small to large, from shoemaker to blacksmith to minstrel to priest. The city was thus fairly close. Stone building mingled with tile, wood, and thatch. While the major streets were fairly wide, small shops and stands often spread out into the road, effectively narrowing it by up to half it's width. London Bridge (the only bridge in the city) was home to a multitude of homes and shops, perched on top of the span to conserve space.

Waste was disposed of simply. It was emptied out the windows into the alley or street and slaughtering was done in the streets as well, with scraps being tossed underfoot. Hogs were often used to keep the streets clean, but were assisted by wild dogs and scavenger birds. Open sewers ran through the streets and into the Thames.

Most of the rest of Chaucer's life was open at the courts of the king of England. Here a startling change was apparent. The filth of the streets disappeared, to be replaced by the splendor so often associated with royalty.

The royal court of England was home to many in Chaucer's time. Courtiers, pages, knights, nobles, princes, and of course the King and Queen. Chaucer rose through the ranks of the king's men, experiencing all aspects of court life. He was a page, squire, court-bard, counselor and finally courtier to various monarchs.

Many kings rose and fell in his lifetime. Chaucer began his life in the king's service in the reign of Edward III, and performed his service a long while. He was important enough to Edward that he was personally ransomed after being captured by the French in the war between Edward and Charles, an honor usually reserved for nobles. By 1378 Edward III had died, and Chaucer was the man of Richard II. The country was caught up in a political battle between the nobles of Gloucester and Lancaster. The actions of these two nobles sent Chaucer reeling, his world constantly changing about him.

The only stable item in Chaucer's world was religion. The institution of religion, the church, was quite prominent and visible. Cathedrals dotted the cities of the world, and even the smallest town had a church.

The glory of the Church may even have outshone that of the royal court. Cathedrals were brilliant with magnificent carvings, statues of precious metals murals, holy artifacts, and many other gleaming treasures. Even the smallest church was home to some splendor. The glory of the church, and the power it put forth over the population made it a major political power of the time.

Chaucer was born in the early 1340's. Very little is known about the first stage of his life. However, two items are fairly certain. It appears that Chaucer was the son of a London vintner and relatively strong evidence supports that he attended one of three grammar-schools: either St. Paul's, St. Mary-le-Bow's or St. Martin-le-Grand's.

Aside from this slim bit of information details of Chaucer's early life are few. The next reliable bit of information places him at around the age of fourteen, a page in the household of the wife of Prince Lionel, the second son of Edward III. He held this position for some time.

Chaucer's first appearance into the king's business appeared in October of 1360, when he carried letters from Calais to England during peace negotiations there. For this service he held the official title of clerk of the king attached to the person of Prince Lionel.

In this way, Chaucer began his life of service to his king. In 1368, Chaucer was awarded a royal reward for a long and valued service to his job. His actual duties during this period were apparently fairly hazy. He served as a sort of jack of all trades. The only thing we know about Chaucer's life between 1358 and 1367 is that he was imprisoned in France, during the hundred years war, and was ransomed in March of 1360, for a rather large sum. In this time Chaucer also married Philippa Roet, lady in waiting to the Queen. She bore at least two children, Thomas and Lyte Lowys, a child who was delighted in arithmetic.

Between 1368 and 1387, Chaucer undertook nearly a dozen diplomatic missions to Flanders, France, and Italy. Most were important, many were so secret that they were not mentioned in the histories of the time at all. In 1381, Chaucer was sent to deal with marriage negotiations between Richard II and the daughter of the French King. While Chaucer was not on diplomatic missions, he was performing his duties in the position for which he is best known, the King's Custom Service. From 1374 to 1386, he was the comptroller of London. When he was removed from the post in 1386 he was instead granted the title Knight of the Shire, an important Parliament post, and later was placed as the Clerk of the King's works at Westminster, the Tower, and other royal property in South England. Chaucer's final post in the

King's service was that of the keeper of the small royal forest of North Pertherton. He held this post twice, from 1390 to 1391, and from 1397 to 1398.

In 1399, he settled in Westminster. On Christmas Eve he leased, for fifty-three years, the garden of the monks of Westminster, to live in. However, he did not live long to enjoy his retirement. Geoffrey Chaucer died in October 25, 1400.

In a time when literacy was a luxury affordable only by the very wealthy and powerful, Chaucer's writings stand out as unique. The main language of literature of the time was Latin. Literacy and fluency in Latin were taught as early as literacy in English. In fact, many people could read Latin yet had treat difficulty figuring out the simplest English sentences.

What little literature was not written in Latin was written in French. Latin and French poetry was widely recognized as being the only real literature of any worth. This of course, makes Chaucer's works even more unusual. Unlike most of the other writers of the time, Chaucer wrote his works in English. It was read in English to the Royal Court upon completion.

Chaucer's writing career was not completely original nor free of influences. His first works borrowed heavily from French and Latin poems, and it was only later that some of his works became more original. For example, Chaucer's first recorded poem (the Book of the Duchess) the opening lines are simply translations of the openings of Froissart's *Paradys d'Amour*. While this is the most obvious use of the French poem, other instances reminiscent of the work appear throughout Chaucer's poem. In the first part of Chaucer's career as a writer, it can be seen that his writing is restricted by a style made popular at the time by French poetry.

As in the prominent French poetry of the time, the Book demonstrates a love for detail and description. Chaucer never quite escapes the French influences in his writing but escapes some areas of French style.

It was not until Chaucer began writing his most well-known work *The Canterbury Tales*, that he did this. Until this work, his writings were simply translations of old myths, or barely original poems written to fit the standards of French style. Chaucer wished to write something more ambitious, original, and memorable. *The Canterbury Tales* was the result. Chaucer's style of writing in *The Canterbury Tales* is quite different from his earlier works. Hidden within the stories of the Pilgrims are sermons and scoldings about the world he knew, and the evils he saw within it. *The Canterbury Tales* have no single style throughout, to which each shorter story is fit. Rather, Chaucer gives each section of the poem its own style. In fact, the over-ruling style of Chaucer's last work seems to be no style at all, each work is written to fit the subject.

Chaucer worked throughout his life to break away from the molds which society had set about poetry in general, and his work in specific. Instead of forging beautifully crafted lies and tales about society, his poetry held up a mirror to reflect reality as he saw it.

Chaucer's growth out of the mold imposed by tradition is illustrated by the steady departure of it in his writings. And his final works, escaping at last from the accepted style, set the stage for the beginnings of English literature.

Bibliography

Chute, Marchette. Geoffrey Chaucer of England. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co, 1946.

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