Geoffrey Chaucer

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Geoffrey Chaucer

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Preface

The author of a book about Chaucer finds himself the possessor of an abundance of some data and an extremely meager supply of other information. Of actual facts the writer has few indeed, and those that he has do not usually bear on the matters about which he most desires to know. All of the biographical facts about Chaucer deal solely with his official life as a civil servant; we have nothing about his personal life as a private citizen and practically nothing about his relations with his fellow writers.

While we have few facts about Chaucer himself, we do know a great deal about the age in which he lived. For this reason I have divided the book into three main sections. The first deals with the background—political, military, social, economic, and religious—against which Chaucer is seen. Although the stormy fourteenth century is yet by no means completely understood, we must make some attempt to comprehend it if we are to see Chaucer in relation to his times. This section of the book is far shorter than I wish it were.

The second part treats of Chaucer's life. In it I have restricted myself to what is actually known about the poet. It must be admitted, however, that to tread the hard and dusty road of fact and to forego wandering in the beguiling bypaths of fancy, imagination, and speculation requires great resolution. I have had to draw some conclusions from the bare facts of his life, but I am reasonably confident that they are not too farfetched.

The third and major part of the book is devoted to critical evaluation of Chaucer's works. The opinions that I have expressed concerning the various poems inevitably owe much to the multitude of commentators I have read over the years. Because I have so many forerunners, I am now unable to sort out which bit of my current opinion derives from this scholar and which from that,

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and I am therefore unable to footnote every obligation. But my debt is large.

I have tended to minimize, but by no means entirely to neglect, Chaucer's use of sources. Anyone at all familiar with his works knows that many of them derive from older works and that from the beginning to the end of his poetry there is a constant quoting and paraphrasing of lines and passages from other writers. It is well that we know these facts, but they do not go far toward explaining his genius. We must look primarily at what he did rather than what he drew from. If, however, one separates Chaucer's works into those definitely deriving from known sources and those about which we must say that no source is known, it will be found that the greater number fall into the second category. And in spite of our ceaseless source-hunting, we must admit that Chaucer was a remarkably original poet.

It is to be hoped that anyone who reads Chaucer's works and also this book will feel impelled to do further reading about the fourteenth century and about Chaucer himself. The works listed in the bibliography have, with few exceptions, been chosen not only because they are informative but also because they are interesting reading. If paperbacked editions were available at the time this book was being written, I have so indicated, but no such list, of course, can be completely current.

The items in the bibliography have been selected from thousands that have been published. Usually they are books rather than articles from scholarly journals, for I have tried to list works that give a broad rather than a highly specialized treatment of Chaucer's works.

It will be noted that I have not tried to convert the money of Chaucer's time into today's sums. The matter can never be settled, and the interested reader is referred to John M. Manly's *Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, New York, 1928, pp. 63-67, and to G. G. Coulton's *The Meaning of Medieval Money*s, Historical Association Leaflet No. 95, London, 1934.

All quotations and line numbers are taken from *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, edited by F. N. Robinson, second edition, Boston, 1957.

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Chronology

- 1340- Chaucer born in this period, probably in 1343.
- 1345
- 1346 The Battle of Crécy.
- 1348 The Black Death first appeared.
- 1351 The Statute of Laborers was enacted.
- 1357 Chaucer is recorded as a page in the household of Elizabeth de Burgh, Countess of Ulster and Connaught.
- 1359 Chaucer was captured while on military service in France and was ransomed.
- 1361 The Black Death recurred.
- 1366 The conjectural date for Chaucer's marriage to Philippa Roet.
- 1367 Chaucer received a pension of 20 marks from Edward III and was described as a valet.
- 1368 Chaucer went on a diplomatic mission to the Continent. He was mentioned as a King's esquire.
- 1369 Chaucer was on a military expedition in Picardy. Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster, died. The Black Death recurred.
- 1370 Chaucer went abroad on a governmental mission.
- 1372 Chaucer went to Italy with two Italians to negotiate a trading port for Genoese merchants in England. He also went to Florence.
- 1374 Philippa Chaucer is for the first time officially mentioned as Geoffrey's wife. John of Gaunt gave Chaucer a pension of £10; Edward III granted him a daily pitcher of wine. He moved to the house over Aldgate. He became Controller of the Customs and the Subsidy on Wool, Skins, and Hides; he was also appointed Controller of the Petty Customs.
- 1375 Chaucer obtained two Kentish wardships.
- 1376 Chaucer went to the Continent with Sir John de Burley.

- 1377 Chaucer went to Paris and Montreuil, possibly also to Flanders, with Sir Thomas Percy. He was allowed a deputy for the controllership of the wool customs. Edward III died and Richard II became king.
- 1378 Chaucer commuted his daily pitcher of wine for a money pension. He and John de Beverley were mainpernors for Sir William de Beauchamp. Chaucer went with Sir Edward de Berkeley to Milan to seek military aid against France.
- 1380 Chaucer was sued for a *raptus* against Cecilia Chaumpaigne.
- 1381 Chaucer and others were sureties for John Hende. The Peasants' Revolt occurred.
- 1382 Chaucer assumed the controllership of the Petty Customs and appointed a permanent deputy.
- 1383 Chaucer appointed a deputy for the controllership of the wool customs for four months.
- 1384 Chaucer appointed a deputy for the controllership of the wool customs for one month.
- 1385 Chaucer appointed a permanent deputy for the controllership of the wool customs. He received black cloth for the funeral of Princess Joan.
- 1386 Philippa Chaucer was admitted to the fraternity of Lincoln Cathedral. Chaucer was elected to Parliament from Kent. The Scropes-Grosvenor court of chivalry began. Eustache Deschamps sent poems to Chaucer for criticism. Chaucer probably gave up the house over Aldgate. He severed connections with both customs services.
- 1387 The traditional year for the beginning of the *Canterbury Tales*. Philippa Chaucer died. Chaucer was granted protection from debt for a year. He went to Calais with Sir William de Beauchamp.
- 1388 Chaucer assigned his pension to John Scalby. Writs were issued enjoining his attachment for debt.
- 1389 Chaucer was appointed Clerk of the King's Works for certain buildings.
- 1390 As Clerk of the Works Chaucer supervised construction of scaffolds for two tournaments at Smithfield and by special commission saw to repairs to St. George's Chapel, Windsor. He was appointed to a commission to care for walls,

Chronology

- ditches, sewers, and bridges along a section of the Thames. He was held up two or three times in four days.
- 1391 He loaned 100 marks to the Works office. He withdrew from Works office and became deputy forester of the Royal Forest of North Petherton, Somerset.
- 1393 He received £10 from the King for good services.
- 1394 The King granted him a new pension of £20.
- 1396 Henry, Earl of Derby, presented him with a valuable fur-trimmed robe.
- 1397 The King gave Chaucer the gift of an annual butt of wine.
- 1398 Chaucer was sued by Isabella Bukholt for over £14. He was given letters of protection against debt so that he could attend to royal business.
- 1399 John of Gaunt died. Henry IV, on his coronation day, renewed Chaucer's pension of £20 and the butt of wine and added an annuity of 40 marks.
- 1400 Chaucer died.

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