

Petrarch and Boccaccio,
Chaucer and Gower

The “Middle” Ages is a term created by people of the Renaissance because they were dissatisfied with the culture into which they had been born and found themselves aspiring to a better one. One main reason for that was perhaps because the 13th century in Italy had not been very inspiring, compared to the literary, intellectual, and cultural ferment found in France. People like Petrarch were naturally aspiring to something better than what they saw around them in Italian society, especially in the universities. They were eager to introduce something new, and the model they found was what they thought the glories of Augustan Rome had been like.

The word **Humanism** was first invented in the 19th century, when some historians believed that Renaissance thinkers were proposing a new philosophical doctrine opposed to Scholasticism, to which they gave this name. The word “humanist” is a word that is equally well applied to the founders of the universities in Paris and Oxford in the 12th century. They too were convinced of the dignity and potential of the human mind, when informed by good education. Italy of the 14th and 15th centuries only knew the expression *studia humanitatis* and by it they were indicating what had previously been called grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy. This was their central curriculum, already in theory part of every university’s program but now raised up in competition with the more practical studies of law, medicine, philosophy, or theology. In particular, the works of Cicero and other classical Latin writers seemed to show a refinement of style, and a vision of human existence, both far nobler than that found in writers of their own time.

The **Italian Renaissance** began with questions of Latin style, not with philosophy or educational programs, in part because it is not possible to separate “what you say” from “the way you say it”. This is not unconnected with the fact that classical Latin poetry was little studied in Italy before this time, while in Northern Europe it was already part of the basic school curriculum. Similarly, in Italy the Aristotelian method of studying philosophy by use of the *quaestio* (question for debate according to strict logic) was only introduced from France in the late 13th century, and was felt to be a useless novelty.

The early Renaissance is marked by a discussion of what university education is for. The humanist program is clearly designed for a class of intelligent citizens with some money, some power, and some leisure time, interested in developing a style of its own, and involved in the government of its city, with the problems of practical morality which that involved. From the beginning, the main question was how to educate better citizens for better cities. It is no coincidence that Italy was composed of independent city-states throughout this period, with no national unity above them. What was “reborn” in the 14th century was not classical studies but the national self-respect of the Italian intelligentsia.

Petrarch

In order to understand the position of Chaucer in English literary history, it is necessary to remember that he is the first Englishman known to have read works of Italian literature. Therefore, something must be said of the developments in Italy.

Petrarch's father was banished from his native Florence in 1302, only a few months after Dante, and for the same political reasons. So **Francesco Petrarch** was born July 20, 1304 in exile in the Italian city of Arezzo. In 1309 Avignon in French Provence had become the home of the popes and their Curia (administration) and in 1312 Petrarch's father took his family there to look for work. On the way they passed through Pisa, where the child Petrarch saw the ageing Dante, an experience he recalled fifty years later in a letter to Boccaccio.

Petrarch studied law in France and Italy, but found the study of the writings of Virgil and Cicero more interesting. He also read St Augustine's *City of God* and *Confessions*, and the letters of St Paul, and edited the writings of the Roman historian Livy. On April 6, 1327 he saw a young woman in a church in Avignon, he later claimed that her name was **Laura**, although her precise identity is not clear. Some have even doubted her reality. Petrarch could only worship her from a distance, it was a very platonic form of ideal love. At this time he was writing poems in Latin and Italian, including an epic in Latin, *Africa*, that he hoped would make him famous as a poet. In 1341 he was invited to Rome to be crowned with a laurel wreath for skill in poetry.

Petrarch had a very romantic view of Rome, it symbolized for him all the achievements of the greatest men of the Roman Empire, people whose lives he began to record in his prose *De viris illustribus* (On famous men). In 1345 he visited Verona and found in the library there a manuscript containing the letters of Cicero. This gave him the idea of publishing his own letters to various people; in many ways Petrarch is the first of the modern philosophical egotists, combining in these public letters moral and political reflexions with many details of personal experience in a form of what was later to become the literary essay.

In 1346 he wrote the *De vita solitaria* in praise of a life removed from the complicated world of church politics at Avignon. At the same time he was writing some of the most beautiful of his Italian lyrics in praise of Laura and on other subjects, especially Italian patriotism. In April 1348 Laura died of the plague during the Black Death and this inspired a new series of poems, marked by the contrast between the transience of mortal beauty and the permanence of life in heaven.

Leaving Avignon, he came to live in Milan in 1353, near the church where Saint Augustine had received baptism. He continued to write, although he had lost interest in writing Latin poetry, and most of his later work is philosophical. At this time, if not earlier, he finished his great dialogue *Secretum*, in which he and Augustine are shown engaged in deep debate about the true nature of virtuous living for a Christian humanist. In another defence of his own philosophical position, *De sui ipsius et multorum ignorantia* (On his own and many people's ignorance), he argues in favour of *pietas* (piety).

At the same time he began to revise the papers on which he had written his Italian poems, collecting them into a complete work, known as the *Canzoniere*, for which he is now most famed. This work was only finished shortly before he died in 1374. The *Canzoniere* contains 366 poems, 317 of them sonnets, 29 *canzone*, the rest other recognized forms including 4 madrigals. This was the first organized collection of lyrics by a single author since Roman times, and Laura is at the centre, although there are poems not about her, and poems in which she is rejected. The earlier poems were written during the years of Petrarch's passion for her, then there is a division after poem 263, and in the second section Laura is viewed in the new perspectives offered by her death, giving insights of Paradise quite different from Dante's, before finally Petrarch transfers his devotion to Mary.

While some of the poems of the *Canzoniere* were to become part of English literature through translation, the other great Italian poem of Petrarch's old age, the *Trionfi* (Triumphs) has never been so well known in England, yet it makes clear some of Petrarch's fundamental themes. There are six Triumphs: first is the triumph of Desire over the heart; next is the

victory of Chastity (who is Laura) over carnal desire; but Death triumphs over Laura. Fame, it is true, triumphs over Death, as is seen in the lives of the famous heroes and thinkers of the classical past, yet Time must in the end triumph even over Fame, without the Christian conviction that Eternity (which is heaven with Laura) triumphs over Time.

With this background, it becomes easier to see Petrarch's main characteristics. He was always convinced of the importance of poetry for thought, and of the need for thought to be related to action. For both these reasons, he was strongly opposed to the logical Scholasticism of the universities, where hair-splitting disputations about abstract topics never guided the students towards moral decisions. He could not consider Aristotelianism a true philosophy, because of this, and turned instead to the Stoicism he found in Cicero, with the high view of *Humanitas* he expresses. For Petrarch, the highest expression of human culture is found in the Latin classics (he only learned a little Greek); Christianity is then the revelation of ultimate Truth, confirming the highest intuitions of the old pagan writers, as Augustine was to discover.

The model Petrarch followed most was Augustine; like him, he was fundamentally attracted by neo-Platonism and mainly concerned to find the way of combining the Christian faith with the pagan virtues. In politics, he was naturally an idealist, longing not only for the return of the Papacy to Rome, but wanting to see Rome become once again the cultural centre of a united empire. In his love poems he is torn by the contradiction between physical and spiritual love, the passion human love involves being in contradiction with the higher demands of virtue and faith. The result of this tension is a process of repentance, of passing beyond the here-and-now in quest of the eternal Unchanging.

Petrarch is called the Father of Humanism because of his intense admiration for the Roman classics, and his recognition that true wisdom is better found by contact with literature than by the methods of Scholastic analysis. In addition, his life was mostly spent quietly in what humanists called *otium*: living in genteel retirement, gardening and fishing, and writing. Yet he was in contact with many of the most powerful figures of the time. It is no coincidence that Petrarch is the first person in Europe known to have climbed a mountain in order to admire the view, while he was living in southern France. Yet when he reached the top of Mont Ventoux he opened Augustine's *Confessions*, where he fell on a passage directing him to look inwards to himself!

The first person to translate a sonnet by Petrarch into English was Chaucer, in *Troilus and Criseyde*; here is the Italian original, with Chaucer's version, which is not written in sonnet form, but in the *rime royal* stanzas he uses for his poem:

Canzoniere 132

*S'amor non è, che dunque è quel ch'io sento?
ma s'egli è amor, per Dio, che cosa et quale?
se bona, ond'è l'effetto aspro mortale?
se ria, ond'è sì dolce ogni tormento?*

*S'a mia voglia ardo, ond'è'l pianto a lamento?
s'a mal mio grado, il lamentar che vale?
O viva morte, o diletto male,
come puoi tanto in me s'io nol consento?*

*Et s'io'l consento, a gran torto mi doglio.
Fra sì contrari vento in frale barca
mi trovo in alto mar senza governo,*

*si lieve di saver, d'error si carica
ch'i'medesmo non so quel ch'io mi voglio,
e tremo a mezza state, ardendo il verno.*

from *Troilus and Criseyde* (Book I, stanza 58):

If no love is, O God, what feel I so?
And if love is, what thing and which is he?
If love be good, from whence cometh my woe?
If it be wikke, a wonder, thinketh me,
When every torment and adversitee
That com'th of him may to me savoury thinke,
For ay thirst I the more that I it drinke.

And if that at myn owne lust I brenne,
Fro whence cometh my wailing and my pleynte?
If harm agree me, whereto pleyne I thenne?
I noot ne why unwearly that I fainte.
O quicke death, O sweete harm so quainte,
How may of thee in me such quantitee,
But if that I consent that so it be?

And if that I consent, I wrongfully
Compleyn, y-wis; thus possed to and fro,
All stereless within a boat am I
Amid the sea, betwixen windes two
That in contrary stonden everno.
Alas! what is this wonder maladye?
For heat of cold, for cold of heat I dye.

It is striking that love is shown by Petrarch as perplexing and paradoxical, just as it was for the troubadours and Chrétien de Troyes and Dante. The individual is taken away from life in normal society through the experience of falling in love and asked to embark on a process of self-analysis which fails to show him any clear way of dealing with the confusion he feels.

Boccaccio

Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375) first met Petrarch in 1350, although they had known of each other before, since Boccaccio too was from Florence. With the exception of his Italian lyrics, Petrarch's major works are all in Latin, mostly in the form of letters or philosophical treatises. The young Boccaccio had the art of writing in forms that had more direct audience-appeal in romances, short stories, collections of anecdotes; most were written in the vernacular, to which the future in the end was to belong. Dante had already felt that Latin was an artificial language, compared to one's mother tongue, but Petrarch seems not to have accepted that, as later Erasmus did not.

From 1325 until 1340, Boccaccio was in Naples, associated with aristocratic circles and the local court, where he was brought into contact with French literature. During this period he began to write: a prose romance *Filocolo*, a verse romance *Filostrato*, and the *Teseida*. The *Filostrato*, set in Troy, was adapted by Chaucer to become *Troilus and Criseyde*, the *Teseida* Chaucer shortened and it became the *Knight's Tale* in the *Canterbury Tales*, the story of the love of Palamon and Arcite for Emily at the court of Theseus.

In 1340 Boccaccio returned to Florence and survived the Black Death there in 1348; this provides the background for his most famous work, the *Decameron* (1349-51), where seven young ladies and three young men escape the plague in countryside villas, spending ten days (hence the title) amusing themselves by telling short stories from many different sources. After this, though, Boccaccio turned to more serious studies, influenced by his friendship with Petrarch and other humanists, and his house became a humanist centre. He turned away from Italian, even blaming Dante for not having written in Latin, but Boccaccio was the first to give university lectures on Dante's *Divine Comedy* in 1373-4 and he wrote a life of Dante.

Boccaccio, like Chaucer, was clearly a highly talented story-teller; in addition to his Italian romances, he wrote a number of Latin works which were very widely read in schools: *De genealogia deorum* (The genealogy of the gods) tells the stories of the Greek and Roman gods, and together with Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is at the origin of common readers' knowledge of the Classical myths during the Renaissance. *De claris mulieribus* (On famous women) echoes the growing awareness of the time of the question of women's place in society. *De casibus virorum illustrium* (On the fall of famous men) was the most influential of all, telling many famous tragic stories of the fall of princes showing how pride comes before a fall or simply the way in which Fortune changes. Chaucer used it in the tragedies that make up the *Monk's Tale*; Lydgate's *Fall of Princes* (1438) was modelled on it, as was *A Mirror for Magistrates* (1559), which was to influence Shakespeare's ideas of tragedy, and Elizabethan views on the shape of history.

Geoffrey Chaucer (1343? - 1400)

Although he had held positions of service in the royal household, the father of Chaucer had become a wine-merchant in London by the time **Geoffrey Chaucer** was born, the exact year is unknown. In 1357 Geoffrey was already serving in the household of Lionel, later duke of Clarence, and in 1359 he was in France with Edward III's invading army, where he was taken prisoner and ransomed. In 1366 he married Philippa de Roet, whose sister later became the third wife of the powerful magnate John of Gaunt. By 1367 he was serving the king as a Valet, and enjoyed the social rank of *esquire*, though he was never knighted. He made a number of journeys to France, and in 1372-3 he was sent to Genoa and Florence; in 1378 he again went on royal service to France and to northern Italy.

From his works, it is clear that he could read Italian, and had copies of works by Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio. After 1374 he was controller of customs in London, a job which meant he no longer had to attend at court, then he became clerk of the king's works, and he seems to have gone to live somewhere in Kent, although he may also have lived in Somerset. He seems not to have owned land, and to have depended on royal patronage for his living. He was unaffected by the 1399 abdication of Richard II, since Henry IV at once confirmed his positions and regular income, perhaps in response to the following poem:

Complaint to His Purse

To you my purs and to noon other wight
Complaine I, for ye be my lady dere.
I am so sory now that ye be light,
For certes, but if ye make me hevy cheere
Me were as lief be laid upon my beere;
For which unto youre mercy thus I crye:
Beeth hevy again or elles moot I die.

Now voucheth sauf this day er it be night
That I of you the blisful soun may heere,
Or see youre colour lik the sonne bright,
That of yelownesse hadde nevere peere.
Ye be my life, ye be myn hertes steere,
Queene of confort and of good compaignye:
Beeth hevy again or elles moot I die.

Ye purs that been to me my lives light
And saviour, as in this world down here,
Out of this tonne helpe me thurgh your might,
Sith that ye wol nat be my tresorere;
For I am shave as neigh as any frere.
But yit I praye unto youre curteisye:
Beeth hevy again, or elles moot I die.

Envoy to Henry IV

O conquerour of Brutus Albioun,
Which that by line and free eleccioun
Been verray king, this song to you I sende:
And ye, that mowen alle oure harmes amende,
Have minde upon my supplicacioun.

Chaucer died in 1400 and was buried in Westminster Abbey, where a monument to him was placed in 1555, starting the tradition of "Poet's Corner."

Chaucer was not, then, a professional writer but a courtier and a civil servant. It is not possible to know precisely what place writing had in his public life, but perhaps it offered him ways to make himself noticed by the powerful people on whom he depended for work and income? Or was it mainly a private compulsion, shared with only a few like-minded friends such as Gower? At this time, probably only five percent of the people in England could read at all, and many of them had no chance to read literary works. It seems to have been common practice, even at the court, for one person to read aloud from a manuscript book to a listening audience; there is a painting in one manuscript of Chaucer doing this himself, before the gathered court, but this may only have been a dream. One vital characteristic of Chaucer's art is the way it plays with the contrasts between oral story-telling and written literature.

The shorter works

Chaucer's earliest works (it is very hard to know exactly when they were written) may be "occasional poetry" if the *Book of the Duchess* was really written to console John of Gaunt on the death of his wife Blanche in 1369, and if the *Parliament of Fowls* was written to mark the marriage of Richard II in 1382. But nobody has found an occasion to explain the writing of the *House of Fame*, and none of these three works corresponds to a conventional kind of occasional poem.

In the *Book of the Duchess* (1334 octosyllabic lines), the love-sick narrator falls asleep as he reads the sad love story (from Ovid) of Ceix and Alcyone, and dreams he is in bed early in the morning, then out hunting. He follows a dog down a path and finds a knight dressed in black who is lamenting the loss of his lady; the narrator forces the knight to tell how good and beautiful she was, and at last obliges him to admit that she is dead. The other hunters reappear, a bell strikes, and the dreamer awakes with his book still in his hand.

The *Parliament of Fowls* (699 lines in rhyme-royal, seven-line stanzas rhyming ababbcc) begins with the narrator reading the *Somnium Scipionis* and reflecting on the nature of love; he falls asleep and the protagonist of Cicero's book, Africanus, leads him into a garden which is an illustration of the themes of the book. They reach the temple of Venus, which is full of emblems of the power and sorrows of love; finally, in a garden similar to that of the *Romance of the Rose*, the birds are gathered before the goddess Nature for a debate about the problem of a female eagle loved by three males. Lower class birds offer un-poetic, practical solutions to this impossible problem, and the debate is adjourned for a year so that the female can reflect quietly. The noise the birds make as they disperse wakens the narrator, who picks up other books in search of something he cannot find.

The *House of Fame* (2158 octosyllabic lines) consists of three books, and is incomplete. There is a Prologue on dreams and an invocation to Sleep; Book I tells of the dreamer's visit to the Temple of Glass where he finds images suggested by Book IV and other parts of Virgil's *Aeneid*. In Book II he is seized by a talkative eagle and carried up into the House of Fame in the heavens where he sees, during his visit in Book III, images of famous writers; in particular he sees how arbitrary Fame is. Beside the House of Fame he sees the Labyrinth, representing all the confused complexity of human existence, with all kinds of false tidings carried by shipmen and pilgrims. An un-named figure "of great authority" appears and the poems stops short.

To these three works should be added two other titles: the incomplete *Legend of Good Women*, which has a famous Prologue about love, then tells the stories of Cleopatra, Thisbe, Dido etc; and *Anelida and Arcite*, a strange fragment of a love story.

The most important themes of all these works are love, nature, and the literary imagination productive of books about love and nature. They are all of them (except for *Anelida*) in the form of dream-visions, and all of them play subtle games with literary references, many of them veiled or obscure. In particular, the way in which the *House of Fame* keeps echoing Dante is intriguing, for it is not sure who in England at this time could read or had even heard of Dante, except perhaps Gower and a few other friends to whom Chaucer had spoken of him. It is certain that Chaucer was an intense reader with a great thirst for discovery; in the *House of Fame* (lines 652-7) the eagle scolds him:

For when thy labour doon al ys,
And hast mad alle thy rekenynges,
In stede of reste and newe thynges,
Thou goost hom to thy hous anoon;
And also domb as any stoon,
Thou sittest at another book

and in the prologues to the *Legend of Good Women* he admits that “On bokes for to rede I me delyte/ And to hem yive I feyth and ful credence.” It is not surprising, then, that he undertook translations of two works that must have been among his favorites, a prose translation of Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy* and a version in verse of *The Romance of the Rose*, although both only survive as fragments, not all by Chaucer.

Troilus and Criseyde

In the later 1380s Chaucer wrote *Troilus and Criseyde*. This is a work on another scale altogether, 8239 lines of rhyme-royal (seven-line stanzas rhyming ababbcc) in five books, the first major work of English literature and sometimes called the first English novel on account of its concern with the characters’ psychology. The story itself comes from Boccaccio’s *Il Filostrato*, and it is most intriguing that Chaucer nowhere in his writings mentions the name Boccaccio, although he often used his works as the starting-point. Instead, in *Troilus*, he claims to be simply translating a work by a certain Lollius, wrongly assumed in the Middle Ages to have written about Troy, whereas he is in fact radically altering Boccaccio’s story to make it deeper and more poetic.

Chaucer was familiar with the writings of Ovid and Virgil, Macrobius, Boethius, Alain de Lisle in Latin, with Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio in Italian, with the *Romance of the Rose* and other French works, as well as with the native English romances. He had travelled, too, and his mind was utterly European. When he began to write *Troilus and Criseyde*, he was already fully aware of the need to make the English language into a poetic diction that would be as powerful in expressing emotion and reflexion as the other literary languages he knew. The opening lines of *Troilus and Criseyde* show what John Dryden meant when he called Chaucer the “father of English poetry” (in the Preface to his *Fables Ancient and Modern* of 1700):

The double sorwe of Troilus to tellen,
That was the king Priamus sone of Troye,
In lovinge, how his aventures fellen
Fro woe to wele, and after out of joie,
My purpos is, er that I parte fro ye.
Thesiphone, thou help me for t’endite
These woful vers, that wepen as I write.

To thee clepe I, thou goddess of torment,
Thou cruel Furie, sorwing ever in peyne,
Help me, that am the sorwful instrument,
That helpeth loveres, as I can, to pleyne.
For wel sit it, the sothe for to seyne,
A woful wight to han a drery feere,
And to a sorwful tale, a sory chere.

Consciously or not, Chaucer was following in the footsteps of Dante in his attempt to form vernacular English into a poetic language able to stand beside the language of Virgil and the classics.

Perhaps because the main interest of the work lies in the psychology of the characters, it is not easy to summarize the action of *Troilus and Criseyde*. It is set inside Troy during the

Trojan War, and the story which Boccaccio in *Il Filostrato* adapted from Guido de Columnis was originally invented by Benoit de Sainte-Maure in the *Roman de Troie* (see chapter 2).

In Book 1 of Chaucer's version, one of Priam's sons, Troilus, appears as a young warrior scornful of love, until he glimpses Criseyde in a temple. She is already a widow, and her soothsayer-father has gone to join the Greeks, foreseeing the outcome of the siege.

Love's arrow having wounded him, Troilus suddenly finds himself deeply in love with her, and sings the Petrarchan sonnet quoted above. Suffering from despair in love-sickness, he cannot sleep and withdraws from society to complain alone, not knowing what else to do. A friend of his, Pandare, overhears his groans and questions him. Troilus admits he is in love, but for a long time cannot bring himself to say with whom. At last he admits that his "sweet foe" is called Criseyde. Pandare is glad, because she is noble and virtuous, and he offers to help Troilus meet her. Troilus at once recovers his spirits and returns to fighting the Greeks, and walks around the town full of new friendliness, no longer mocking at love.

Chaucer begins Book 2 by asking for Clio's help to "rhyme well this book" saying that he needs no other art since "of no sentiment I this endite,/ But out of Latin in my tongue it write," disclaiming in this way responsibility for the many changes he in fact made to his Italian original. Pandarus goes to visit Criseyde, who is his niece, and tells her that Troilus loves her so much he may die. She is torn between preserving her honour and saving his life, both of which she insists she wishes to do. So Pandare can take away good news. Just then Troilus rides past in triumph and she can see him from her window. He so impresses her that she wonders "Who gave me drink?" and begins to reflect. Then she hears her niece Antigone sing about the joys of love.

That night she dreams that a white eagle tears out her heart and replaces it with his own. Meanwhile Pandare tells Troilus that Criseyde has granted him her friendship. He advises him to write her a letter, and he will arrange for them to see each other at a window as Troilus rides past. The next morning Pandare brings his letter to Criseyde secretly. Later, after she has read it, Pandare urges her to reply; then Troilus appears riding down the street. He greets her humbly as he passes. Pandare then leaves and brings her letter to Troilus, who finds cause for hope. The next day Pandare prepares a complicated scheme so that Troilus, seemingly lying very sick in bed in his brother's house, can speak alone with Criseyde. The book ends as she reaches his door.

The theme of Book 3 is the gladness of love. It begins with their first interview, where Troilus seems sicker than he is. He asks her mercy and she reassures him. After this, they are sometimes able to meet briefly, so that nobody suspects their secret, and Pandare also carries letters between them. At last Pandare invites Criseyde and her companions to supper in his house, hiding Troilus in a room and sure that it is going to rain. After supper it is raining so hard that they cannot leave. Pandare puts Criseyde to sleep alone in his room, then comes to tell her that Troilus has arrived in great despair after hearing that she loves another (it is not true). He comes in, and she tries to reassure him; he faints for emotion, and Pandare tells her to help him. Soon the two are together in bed and Pandare retires, leaving them to their happiness. The morning comes, they must part, but after this Pandare finds other occasions to bring them to bed together at night, and they are in great felicity. Troilus sings a song in praise of Love taken from Boethius:

Love, that of earth and sea hath governaunce,
Love, that his hestes hath in hevenes hye,
Love, that with an holsom alliaunce
Halt peoples joined, as him lest hem gye,
Love, that knetteth law of compaignie,

And couples doth in vertue for to dwelle,
Bind this accord, that I have told and telle... (III 1744ff)

The prologue to the 4th Book warns that now comes the story of “how Criseyde Troilus forsook.” Criseyde’s father, Calkas, in the Greek camp asks to have Criseyde brought out from Troy in an exchange of prisoners, and the Trojan council agrees. Troilus is appalled, and laments his coming loss. Pandare suggests he may find another woman to love! Or he could openly take her as his lover. Criseyde, meantime, can only weep. Pandare comes to her, then finds Troilus, who is in despair, reflecting philosophically on the ways of divine providence, on freedom and necessity. When they meet, she soon faints, he thinks she is dead; he draws his sword and is about to fall on it, when she recovers. Once in bed, she tells him that she will have to go, but will come back again within a week or two. Troilus accepts, but is unsure because of the skills of Calkas, and the attractions of the Greeks. He suggests that they run away together. Criseyde swears solemn oaths of faithfulness, rejecting his idea as contrary to honour. He seems to mistrust her, but she reassures him before they part.

Book 5 has no prologue, but goes straight into the departure of Criseyde. Troilus and many others accompany her out of the town. The sight of the Greek Diomedes waiting for her fills him with fury, he longs to kill him. After the Trojans have returned, Diomedes leads Criseyde’s horse, and at once begins to plan how to make her his own, talking courteously and offering to help her, adding remarks about the god of love.

She is united with her father, Troilus is back in Troy where he laments his loss, and when Pandare comes, he gives orders for his funeral, since he thinks he will die. Pandare scolds his emotionalism, but Troilus only reads their old letters, or goes to see her empty house. He is full of melancholy. Meantime Criseyde is also full of sorrow, gazing at Troy and lamenting. Diomedes notices her sorrow and on the tenth day he begins to woo her; she says that she loves Troy, and accepts his friendship, in sign of which he obtains her glove. The narrator here begins to withdraw from her, and use the style of indirect report. Soon after this, he says, she gave him the horse that had belonged to Troilus, and a brooch he had given her. Finally, after he was wounded by Troilus, “Men say -- I not -- that she gave him her heart.” She realizes that she has “falsed” him, and laments her helplessness.

Troilus goes out with Pandare on the promised day to look for her return, but although they wait for hours she does not come, although Troilus keeps thinking he sees her. One night he dreams he sees Criseyde in the arms of a wild boar, kissing it as it sleeps. He understands that she has betrayed him. Pandare persuades him to write her a letter, and she replies that she will come, but does not know when. He asks Cassandra his oracular sister to explain the dream, and she summarizes the story of the *Thebaid* as a prelude to mentioning Diomedes. Of course, since this is Cassandra, Troilus refuses to believe her!

Meantime, Troy approaches the final disaster, Criseyde writes a final letter. One day, a brother of Troilus captures Diomedes’s coat and Troilus sees in it the brooch he had given Criseyde. He laments, and even Pandare can find nothing to say. Troilus now only thinks to kill Diomedes; but although they often fight, it is not destined either should kill the other.

Suddenly the book seems to be over, since the love-tale is at an end:

Go, little book, go, little myn tragedye,
Ther God thy makere yet, er that he dye,
So sende might to make in some comedye!
But little book, no making thou n’envie,
But subgit be to alle poesy;
And kiss the steppes, whereas thou seest pace
Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan, Stace.

Chaucer sets his book within the great literary tradition, as Dante does his. To conclude, though, the narrative resumes, and it is Achilles, not Diomedes, who kills Troilus. The soul of Troilus rises up to the eighth sphere:

And down from thennes faste he gan avyse
This littel spot of erthe, that with the se
Embraced is, and fully gan despise
This wrecched world, and held al vanite
To respect of the pleyn felicite
That is in hevene above; and at the laste,
There he was slayn, his lokyng down he caste.

And in hymself he lough right at the wo
Of hem that wepten for his deth so faste;
And dampned al oure werk that foloweth so
The blynde lust, the which that may not laste,
And shoulde al oure herte on heven caste.
And forth he wente, shortly for to telle,
Ther as Mercurye sorted hym to dwelle.

The remaining stanzas have been much discussed, they offer a variety of messages that seem to suggest Christian and moralizing readings of the story at odds with the main narratorial tone. Finally comes an invitation to “moral Gower, philosophical Strode” (Chaucer’s friends) to correct the work if necessary, and a final prayer translated from Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.

The Canterbury Tales

By far Chaucer’s most popular work, although he might have preferred to have been remembered by *Troilus and Criseyde* or his translations, the *Canterbury Tales* were left unfinished at his death. The work begins with a General Prologue in which the narrator arrives at the Tabard Inn in Southwark to set out on a pilgrimage to the shrine of St Thomas Becket at Canterbury, and meets other pilgrims there, whom he describes. In the second part of the General Prologue the inn-keeper proposes that each of the pilgrims tell stories along the road to Canterbury, two each on the way there, two more on the return journey, and that the best story earn the winner a free supper. Since there are some thirty pilgrims, this would have given a collection of well over a hundred tales, but in fact there are only twenty-four, and some of these are incomplete fragments. Between tales, and at times even during a tale, the pilgrimage framework is introduced with some kind of exchange, often acrimonious, between pilgrims. In a number of cases, there is a longer Prologue before a tale begins, the Wife of Bath’s Prologue and the Pardoner’s Prologue being the most remarkable examples of this.

At Chaucer’s death, the various sections of the *Canterbury Tales* that he was preparing had not been brought together in a linked whole; his friends seem to have tried as best they could to prepare a coherent edition of what was there, adding some more linkages when they thought it necessary. The resulting eighty or more surviving manuscripts and fragments therefore offer slight differences in the order of tales, and in some of the framework links. Modern editions are usually based on one of two manuscripts, both written

by the same scribe: the Hengwrt Manuscript and the Ellesmere Manuscript. The former is earlier, probably directly copied from Chaucer's own disordered papers, but it lacks the Canon's Yeoman's Tale. The latter is more complete, but shows the work of an editor who has removed some of the roughness from Chaucer's lines.

Chaucer offers in the Tales a great variety of literary forms, narratives of different kinds as well as other texts. The pilgrimage framework enriches each tale by setting it in relationship with others, but it would be a mistake to identify the narratorial voice of each tale too strongly with the individual pilgrim who is supposed to be telling it. Chaucer plays skillfully with the tension between speaking voice and written text throughout his literary career, especially in this last work which seems to represent his attempt at a form of literary Human Comedy.

Throughout his career, a main characteristic of Chaucer's works had been a humorous tone, even in stories like that of Troilus where it would not seem to be appropriate. He could never rise to the sublime levels of Dante, as the *House of Fame* shows, because of his own limitations and those of his language. Instead, he turns those disadvantages to advantage, by making them part of his own art of comedy. The basis of humour, after all, seems to be an inability to take things completely seriously. Chaucer's vision of human existence was derived from books combined with his own direct experience, no doubt, and the *Canterbury Tales* can be seen as the culmination of his exploration of the tensions that exist between things as they are and things as they should be. Chaucer realized that we read books in much the same way as we read our lives.

The General Prologue

The most popular part of the *Canterbury Tales* is the General Prologue, which has long been admired for the lively portraits it offers. More recent criticism has reacted against this approach, showing that the portraits are typical, part of a tradition of social satire, "estates satire", and insisting that they should not be read as individualized characters like those in a modern novel. Yet it is sure that Chaucer's capacity of human sympathy, like Shakespeare's, enabled him to go beyond the conventions of his time and create images of human life that have been found credible in every period from his own until now.

The General Prologue begins with a conventional but highly skilled evocation of springtime as the setting for the pilgrimage:

Whan that April with his showres soote	
The droughte of March hath perced to the roote,	
And bathed every veine in swich licour,	
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;	
Whan Zephyrus eek with his sweete breeth	5
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth	
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne	
Hath in the Ram his halve cours yronne,	
And smale fowles maken melodye	
That sleepen al the night with open ye	10
So priketh hem Nature in hir corages	
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages	
And palmeres for to seeken straunge strondes	
To ferne halwes, couthe in sondry londes;	
And specially from every shires ende	15

Of Engelonde to Canterbury they wende,
The holy blisful martyr for to seeke
That hem hath holpen whan that they were seke.

Bifel that in that seson on a day
In Southwerk at the Tabard as I lay 20
Redy to wenden on my pilgrimage
To Canterbury with ful devout corage,
At night was come into that hostelrye
Wel nine and twenty in a compaignye
Of sondry folk, by aventure yfalle 25
In felawshipe, and pilgrimes were they alle
That towards Canterbury wolden ride.
The chambres and the stables weren wide,
And wel we weren esed at the beste.
And shortly, whan the sonne was to reste, 30
So hadde I spoken with hem everichoon
That I was of hir felawshipe anoon,
And made forward erly for to rise
To take oure way ther as I you devise.

He then begins to tell about the pilgrims, giving information about their “condition” and “degree” (social standing), as well as their physical appearance and dress.

The Knight is the picture of a professional soldier, come straight from foreign wars with clothes all stained from his armour. His travels are remarkably vast; he has fought in Prussia, Lithuania, Russia, Spain, North Africa, and Turkey against pagans, Moors, and Saracens, killing many. Yet the narrator insists:

He nevere yit no vilainye ne said
In al his lif unto no manere wight;
He was a verray, parfit, gentil knight.

His son, the Squire, is by contrast an elegant young man about court, with fashionable clothes and romantic skills of singing and dancing.

Their Yeoman is a skilled servant in charge of the knight’s land, his dress is described in detail, but not his character.

The Prioress is one of the most fully described pilgrims, and it is with her that we first notice the narrator’s refusal to judge the value of what he sees:

Ther was also a Nonne, a Prioresse, 118
That of hir smiling was ful simple and coy.
Hir grettest ooth was but ‘By Sainte Loy!’
And she was cleped Madame Eglantine.
Ful wel she soong the service divine
Entuned in hir nose ful semely
And Frenssh she spak ful faire and fetisshly
After the scole of Stratford at the Bowe, 125
For Frenssh of Paris was to hire unknowe.
At mete wel ytaught was she withal,
She leet no morsel from hir lippes falle
Ne wette hir fingres in hir sauce deepe;
Wel coude she carye a morsel, and wel keepe 130

That no drope ne fille upon hir brest.
 In curteisye was set ful muchel hir lest.
 Hir overlippe wiped she so clene
 That in hir coppe ther was no ferthing seene
 Of grece, whan she dronken hadde hir draughte; 135
 Ful semely after hir mete she raughte
 And sikerly she was of gret disport
 And ful plesant and amiable of port
 And pained hire to counterfete cheere
 Of court, and to been statlich of manere 140
 And to been holden digne of reverence.
 But for to speken of hir conscience
 She was so charitable and so pitous
 She wolde weepe if that she saw a mous
 Caught in a trappe, if it were deed or bledde. 145
 Of snale houndes hadde she that she fedde
 With rosted flessch or milk and wastelbreed
 But sore wepte she if oon of hem were deed
 Or if men smoot it with a yerde smerte;
 And al was conscience and tendre herte... 150

Finally, she has a beautiful set of beads around her arm, which must be used for prayer, but end in a brooch inscribed *Amor vincit omnia* (Love conquers all). She has a nun with her, and “three” priests (on account of the rhyme, though only one priest is counted).

The Monk continues the series of incongruous church-people; in this description the narratorial voice seems to be echoing the monk’s comments in indirect quotation. He has many horses at home, and does not respect his monastic rule, but goes hunting.

The Friar follows, and by now it seems clear that Chaucer has a special interest in these church people who so confidently live in contradiction with what is expected of them; the narrator, though, gives no sign of feeling any problem, as when he reports that the “worthy” (a word he often uses) Friar avoided the company of lepers and beggars.

The Merchant is briefly described, and is followed by the Clerk of Oxenforde (Oxford) who is as sincere a student as could be wished:

For him was levere have at his beddes heed 295
 Twenty bookes clad in blak or reed
 Of Aristotle and his philosophye
 Than robes riche or fithetele or gay sutrye.
 But al be that he was a philosophre
 Yit hadde he but litel gold in cofre; 300
 But al that he mighte of his freendes hente
 On bookes and on lerning he it spente,
 And busily gan for the soules praye
 Of hem that yaf him wherwith to scoleye.
 Of studye took he most cure and most heede. 305

The Sergeant at Law is an expert lawyer, and with him is the Franklin, a gentleman from the country whose main interest is food: “It snowed in his house of meat and drink.” Then Chaucer adds a list of five tradesmen belonging to the same fraternity, dressed in its uniform: a Haberdasher, a Carpenter, a Weaver, a Dyer and a Tapestry-maker. They have

brought their Cook with them, he is an expert, his skills are listed. The Shipman who is described next is expert at sailing and at stealing the wine his passengers bring with them; he is also a dangerous character:

If that he faught and hadde the hyer hand
By water he sente hem hoom to every land.

which seems to imply that he made his prisoners walk the plank!

The Doctor of Physic is praised by the narrator, “He was a verray parfit praktisour,” and there follows a list of the fifteen main masters of medieval medicine; the fact that he, like most doctors in satire, “loved gold in special” is added at the end.

The Wife of Bath is the only other woman beside the Prioress and her companion on this pilgrimage. Again the narrator is positive: “She was a worthy womman al hir live” and he glides quickly over the five husbands that later figure in detail in her Prologue, where also we may read how she became deaf. She is a business woman of strong self-importance, and her dress is a sign of her character:

Hir coverchiefs ful fine were of ground 455
I dorste swere they weyeden ten pound
That on a Sondag weren upon hir heed.
Hir hosen weren of fin scarlet reed
Ful straite yteyd, and shoes ful moiste and newe.
Bold was hir face and fair and reed of hewe... 460

From this bold woman, we pass to the most clearly idealized portrait in the Prologue, the Parson. While the previous churchmen were all members of religious orders interested in things of this world more than in true christianity, the parson represents the opposite pole:

A good man was ther of religioun 480
And was a poore Person of a town
But riche he was of holy thought and werk.
He was also a lerned man, a clerk,
That cristes gospel trewely wolde preche;
His parissshens devoutly wolde he teche.
Benigne he was, and wonder diligent, 485
And in adversitee ful pacient...

It is probably no accident if he is accompanied by his equally idealized brother, the Plowman, “a true swinker” (hard-working man) “Living in peace and perfect charity.” If the Parson is the model churchman, the Plowman is the model lay christian, as in *Piers Plowman*, one who is always ready to help the poor.

The series then ends with a mixed group of people of whom most are quite terrible: the Miller is a kind of ugly thug without charm. The Manciple is praised as a skillful steward in a household of lawyers, clever men but he is cleverest, since he cheats them all. The Reeve is the manager of a farm, and he too is lining his own pocket.

Last we learn of the Summoner and the Pardoner, two grotesque figures on the edge of the church, living by it without being priests; one administers the church courts, the other sells pardons (indulgences). Children are afraid of the Summoner’s face, he is suffering from some kind of skin disease; he is corrupt, as the narrator tells us after naively saying “A better

fellow should men not find.” But it is the Pardoner who is really odd, and modern critics have enjoyed discussing just what Chaucer meant by saying:

A vois he hadde as smal as hath a goot; 690
No beerd hadde he, ne nevere sholde have,
As smoothe it was as it were late yshave:
I trowe he were a gelding or a mare.

With his collection of pigs’ bones in a glass, that he used as relics of saints to delude simple poor people, he is a monster in every way, and he concludes the list of pilgrims.

The narrator of this Prologue is Chaucer, but this Chaucer is not the author Chaucer. He now explains that in what follows, he is only acting as the faithful reporter of what others have said, without adding or omitting anything; he must not then be blamed for what he reports. Neither must he be blamed if he does not put people in the order of their social rank, “My wit is short, ye may well understand.” This *persona* continues to profess the utter naivety that we have noted in his uncritical descriptions of the pilgrims.

It is in this way, too, that we should approach the conclusion of the Prologue. Here the Host of the Tabard Inn (Harry Bailey, a historical figure) decides to go with them and it is he who proposes the story-telling contest that gives the framework of the *Tales*. He will also be the ultimate judge of which is the best: “of best sentence and most solas.” At the end of the Prologue he obliges them all to pick straws to decide who will begin, and the lot falls to the Knight.

After the General Prologue, the Tales follow. In the many manuscripts there are a variety of linking passages and the order of the tales varies. Yet certain tales are always grouped together in a number of “sections” in the main manuscripts, although the order of the sections may vary. The following is a brief outline of the different tales in the order found in the Hengwrt Manuscript:

Section 1

The Knight’s Tale: a romance, a condensed version of Boccaccio’s *Teseida*, set in ancient Athens. It tells of the love of two cousins, Palamon and Arcite, for the beautiful Emelye; the climax is a mock-battle, a tournament, the winner of which will win her; the gods Mars and Venus have both promised success to one of them. Arcite (servant of Mars) wins, but he dies of wounds after his horse has been frightened by a fury, and in the end Palamon (servant of Venus) marries Emelye. The tale explores the themes of determinism and freedom in ways reminiscent of the use of Boethius for the same purpose in *Troilus and Criseyde*.

The Miller’s Tale: a fabliau (coarse comic tale), about the cuckolding of John the Carpenter by an Oxford student, Nicholas, boarding with him and his wife Alison; Absolon, a young man from the local church, also tries to woo her, but is tricked into kissing her behind instead of her lips. Nicholas has deceived John into believing that Noah’s Flood is about to come again, so John is asleep in a tub hanging high in the roof, ready to float to safety. Meanwhile Alison and Nicholas are in bed together. The climax of the tale is one of the finest comic moments in literature, when Absolon burns Nicholas’s behind with a hot iron, Nicholas calls for water, John hears, thinks the flood has come, cuts the rope holding his tub, and crashes to the floor, breaking an arm. Only Alison escapes unscathed. The narrator offers no morality.

The Reeve's Tale: a fabliau about the cuckolding of a miller told by the Reeve (who is a carpenter, and very angry with the Miller for his tale); two Cambridge students punish a dishonest miller by having sex with his wife and daughter while asleep all in one room. Again, the end involves violence, as the miller discovers what has happened but is struck on the head by his wife because his bald pate is all she can see in the dark.

The Cook's Tale: only a short fragment exists.

Section 2

The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale: in her Prologue, the Wife of Bath tells the story of her five marriages, while contesting the anti-feminist attitudes found in books that she quotes; indirectly, she becomes the proof of the truth of those books. Her Tale is a Breton Lay about a knight who rapes a girl, is obliged as punishment to find out what women most desire, learns from an old hag that the answer is "mastery over their husbands" and then has to marry her. She is a "loathly lady" but suddenly becomes beautiful when he gives her mastery over him after receiving a long lesson on the nature of true nobility. The tale is related to the ideas the Wife of Bath expresses in the Prologue, it is also a kind of "wish-fulfillment" for a woman no longer quite young. (see below, for Gower's version of the same story)

The Friar's Tale: a popular comic tale about a summoner (church lawyer) who goes to hell after an old woman curses him from her heart.

The Summoner's Tale: a coarse joke told in revenge about a friar who has to find a method of sharing a fart he has been given equally among all his fellow-friars.

Section 3

The Man of Law's Tale: a religious romance about the adventures of the Roman emperor's christian daughter Constance, who goes to Syria, floats to England, and finally returns to Rome.

Section 4

The Squire's Tale: a fantasy romance. King Cambuscan of Tartary receives on his birthday gifts from the king of Arabia: a brass horse that can fly, for his daughter Canace a mirror that shows coming dangers and King Solomon's ring by which she can understand birds, and also a magic sword. After Canace has heard a falcon tell the sad story of her love, the mysterious story breaks off, unfinished.

Section 5

The Merchant's Tale: a bitter fabliau-style tale of an old husband, Januaris, with a young wife, May; at the end, the blind old man is shown embracing a pear-tree, in the

branches of which May is having sex with a young man. The gods suddenly restore his sight and he sees them, but May convinces him that it is thanks to her exertions that he can see, that it is a form of prayer.

Section 6

The Franklin's Tale: a Breton lay. The lady Dorigen is wooed by a squire, and she says she will accept him when all the rocks in the sea are gone. By the help of a magician he achieves this, and Dorigen's husband, told of her promise, says that she must keep her word. Touched by such sincerity, the squire releases her from her promise.

Section 7

The Second Nun's Tale: a religious legend of the miracles and martyrdom of St Cecilia and her Roman husband Valerian. She instructs people to the end, even when her head has been almost completely cut off.

Section 8

The Clerk's Tale: a pathetic tale of popular origin, adapted by Chaucer from a French version of Petrarch's Latin translation of a tale in Boccaccio's *Decameron*. The unlikely and terrible story of the uncomplaining Griselda who is made to suffer appalling pain and humiliation by her husband Walter. Griselda is of very humble origin; Walter chooses her like God choosing Israel. Suddenly he turns against her, takes away her children, sends her back home, and years later demands that she help welcome the new bride he has decided to marry. Without resisting, she obeys, and at last finds her rights and children restored to her by Walter who says he was just testing her! The narrator cannot decide if she is a model wife for anti-feminists or an image of humanity in the hands of an arbitrary destiny.

Section 9

The Physician's Tale: a Roman moral tale from Livy, about Virginia, who is killed by her father to save her from the dishonouring intentions of a corrupt judge.

The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale: in the Prologue, the Pardoner reveals his own nature as a covetous deceiver; his Tale is a sermon, showing his skill, but he concludes by inviting the pilgrims to give him money and they get angry.

In the Tale, a great showpiece of moral rhetoric quite unfitted for such a rogue, he tells an *exemplum* against greed about three wild young men who set out to kill Death; a mysterious old man they meet tells them they will find him under a tree, but they find there gold instead. One goes to buy wine, and is killed by his two friends on his return; they drink the wine, that he has poisoned, and also die.

Chaucer's Tale: a romance of the English kind, it mentions heroes such as Horn, Bevis, Guy. It is written in what seems to be a parody of English popular romance, in rattling tail-rhyme stanzas (an four-stress couplet followed by a three-stress line, twice, the third and sixth line rhyming). The hero is called Sir Thopas, he is eager to love an elf-queen but as he arrives in fairy-land he meets a giant, whom he avoids. Soon after this, Harry Bailey, the inn-

keeper, stops the tale: “Namooore of this, for Goddes dignitee!” And Chaucer the pilgrim explains that he can do no better in rhyme!

Instead “Chaucer” offers to tell a “little thing” in prose, the so-called *Tale of Melibee* translated from French and covering twenty pages! It contains a vague story, but mostly consists of moral debate full of moral advice in pithy *sententiae* about the best way of dealing with problems and how to take advice.

Section 10

The Shipman’s Tale: a fabliau in which a merchant’s wife offers to sleep with a monk if he gives her money; he borrows the money from the merchant, sleeps with the wife, and later tells the merchant (who asks for his money on returning from a journey) that he has repaid it to his wife! She says that she has spent it all, and offers to repay her husband through time together in bed. The tale seems written to be told by a woman, perhaps it was originally given to the Wife of Bath?

The Prioress’s Tale: a religious tale, in complete contrast to the Shipman’s. A little boy is killed by wicked Jews because he sings a hymn to Mary as he walks through their street. His dead body continues to sing the hymn, so the murder is found out.

The Monk’s Tale: a series of seventeen “tragedies” of varying length, in the Fall of Princes tradition. The stories come from various sources, including the Bible and Boccaccio, and tell of “the deeds of Fortune” in the unhappy ends of famous people, including some near-contemporaries. At last the Knight stops the series, which claims to illustrate the power of Fortune, but becomes a list of pathetic case-histories.

The Nun’s Priest’s Tale: a beast-fable told in a variety of styles, mock-heroic and pedantic mainly. In place of the brevity of the ordinary fable (cf Aesop) there are constant digressions and interminable speeches. The main characters are Chauntecleer and his lady Pertelote, a cock and a hen in a farmyard; Chauntecleer dreams of a fox (he has never seen one) and this leads to a debate on the meaning of dreams. A fox then appears, flatters Chauntecleer, then grabs him but the cock suggests he insult the people chasing him and escapes when the fox opens his mouth to speak. The moral of the tale for the reader is left unclear.

Section 11

The Manciple’s Tale: a well-known tale found in Ovid about why the crow is black; it used to be white and could talk, until it told Phoebus that his wife was unfaithful. He kills her, then repents and punishes the bird. The tone of this tale is puzzling, it is neither pathetic nor comic.

Not found in the Hengwrt Manuscript:

The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale: suddenly two new characters come riding up to join the pilgrims, a rather dubious Canon who knows alchemy, and his companion who boasts about

his master's science and knavery, then tells a bitter story about a canon who tricks a priest out of a lot of money by pretending to teach him how to make precious metals. The Prologue and Tale make up a vivid portrait unlike anything else found in the Tales, shifting as they do between the Yeoman's admiration for his master and his hatred of him and his devilish arts.

Section 12

The Parson's Tale: clearly designed to be the last tale in the collection, this is no "tale" but a long moral treatise translated from two Latin works on Penitence and on the Seven Deadly Sins.

At the end of the *Parson's Tale*, the "maker of this book" asks Christ to forgive him: "and namely my translations and enditings of worldly vanities, the which I revoke in my retractions: as is the book of Troilus; the book also of Fame; the book of the xxv ladies; the book of the Duchess; the book of St Valentine's Day of the Parliament of Birds; the tales of Canterbury, thilke that sownen into sin...". Yet this *Retraction* serves to publicize Chaucer's works and had no effect on their later publication and distribution.

There is no doubt that *The Canterbury Tales* has always been among the most popular works of the English literary heritage, partly because of its great variety in character and setting, its combination of humour and pathos. The Tales move between forms of realism and the most complete fantasy, between fierce satire and immense generosity. When Caxton introduced printing into England, it was the first major poem that he printed, in 1478, with a second corrected edition following in 1484. This was in turn reprinted three times, before William Thynne published Chaucer's Collected Works in 1532.

In the Reformation period, Chaucer's reputation as a precursor of the Reform movement was helped by the addition of a pro-Reformation Plowman's Tale in a 1542 edition. In 1561 even Lydgate's *Siege of Thebes* was added. The edition by Thomas Speght in 1598 was the first to offer a glossary; his text was revised in 1602 and this version was reprinted several times over the next hundred years, although Chaucer was not really to the taste of the Augustan readers. The first scholarly edition of the *Canterbury Tales* was published by Thomas Tyrwhitt in 1775.

In the last year of his life (1700) John Dryden wrote a major appreciation of Chaucer, based mainly on his knowledge of the General Prologue and certain tales which he had adapted into his own age's style:

In the first place, as he is the father of English poetry, I hold him in the same degree of veneration as the Grecians held Homer, or the Romans Virgil. He is a perpetual fountain of good sense; learned in all sciences; and, therefore, speaks properly on all subjects. As he knew what to say, so he knows also when to leave off; a continence which is practiced by few writers, and scarcely by any of the ancients, excepting Virgil and Horace...

Chaucer followed Nature everywhere, but was never so bold to go beyond her....

He must have been a man of a most wonderful comprehensive nature, because, as it has been truly observed of him, he has taken into the compass of his *Canterbury Tales* the various manners and humors (as we now call them) of the whole English nation in his age. Not a single character has escaped him.... there is such a variety of

game springing up before me that I am distracted in my choice, and know not which to follow. 'Tis sufficient to say, according to the proverb, that here is God's plenty.

John Gower

Because of the fame of Chaucer, **John Gower** (1330-1408) is largely neglected. The two were probably friends, at least for a time, though Gower was older. Gower (Chaucer called him "moral Gower" in *Troilus and Criseyde*) wrote works in French, Latin, and English. In French he wrote 50 ballades, and the *Mirour de l'Omme* (mirror of man), a moral reflection on the virtues and vices of fallen humanity. In Latin he wrote *Vox Clamantis*, a dramatic poem in apocalyptic tones about the political and constitutional issues of the time. In English he wrote a long poem (33,000 lines) called (in Latin) *Confessio Amantis* (The Lover's Confession). It exists in almost 50 manuscripts, compared to 80 for Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, which it resembles in some ways.

The *Confessio* is a huge anthology of stories about love taken from classical sources, especially Ovid, and from the medieval romances and folklore. The overall structure (a dream-vision) is that of a Confession of sins with the narrator making his confession to a priest of Venus, but examining his conscience in the traditional Christian way, against the Seven Deadly Sins. The priest instructs him about love by telling stories that serve as examples of various love-sins and love-virtues. In the end, the narrator finds he is too old to be interested in love any more.

The poem begins with a Prologue that helps understand Gower's view of literature (spelling slightly modernized):

Of them that writen us tofore
The bokes dwelle, and we therefore
Been taught of that was write tho: (then)
Forthi good is that we also
In oure time among us here
Do write of newe som matiere,
Exampled of these olde wise
So that it mighte in such a wise,
When we be dead and elleswhere,
Beleve to the worldes eere (remain; good)
In time comende after this.
But for men sayn, and soth it is,
That who that all of wisdom writ
It dulleth oft a mannes wit
To him that shall it allday reade,
For thilke cause, if that ye rede,
I wolde go the middle waye
And write a book between the twaye
Somwhat of lust, somewhat of lore, (pleasure; instruction)
That of the less or of the more
Som man may like of that I write.
And for that fewe men endite (write poetry)
In oure english, I thinke make
A book for Engelondes sake...

Among the stories told by Gower there are several that are also found in Chaucer, such as that of Florent (= The Wife of Bath's Tale) or the story of Constance (= The Man of Law's Tale). The lively style of Chaucer, and the games he plays with narratorial strategies, are today so popular that Gower's work seems dull. This is not fair to Gower, and it must be remembered that until the 17th century Chaucer and Gower were always named together as the founding fathers of English literature. The two of them together first established familiarity with the multiple mythical stories found in Ovid and the whole literary tradition as a basic part of the educated writer's and reader's mental equipment. This is a fundamental feature of the style of Renaissance writers such as Spenser, Marlowe, and Shakespeare.

It may be interesting to compare Gower's story of Florent with Chaucer's. The story tells how a young knight is sent to find out what it is that all women most desire; in a forest he meets a very ugly old woman, from whom he learns that all women want control (sovereignty) over their husbands. But in return he is obliged to marry her. Then comes their wedding night:

(Gower I 1774ff)

His body mighte well be there,
But as of thought and of memoire
His herte was in purgatoire.
But yet for strength of matrimoine
He mighte make non essoine,
That he ne must algates plie
To gon to bed of compaignie.
And when they were abedde naked,
Withouten sleep he was awaked,
He turneth on that other side,
For that he wolde his eyen hide
From looking on that foule wight.
The chamber was all full of light
The curtains were of cendal thinne
This newe brid which lay withinne
Though it be not with his accord
In armes she beclipped her lord
And prayed as he was turned fro
He would him turn againward tho:
'For now,' she saith, 'we been both one.'...
He heard and understood the bond
How he was set to his penance
And as it were a man in trance
He turneth him all suddenly
And saw a lady lay him by
Of eighteen winter age,
Which was the fairest of visage
That ever in all this world he saw.

She asks him to choose: he can have her beautiful either by day (for people to admire) or by night (when they are in bed), but not both. He finally tells her to decide which is better (giving her the mastery) and as a reward she declares she will always be lovely.

(from Chaucer's "Wife of Bath's Tale" 1089ff)

Greet was the woe the knight hadde in his thought,
When he was with his wife abedde brought,
He walweth and he turneth to and fro,
His old wife lay smiling everemo,
And said, 'O dear husband, benedicite,
Fareth every knight thus with his wif as ye?
Is this the law of King Arthure's house?
Is every knight of his thus dangerous?
I am your owene love and your wif.
I am she which that saved hath youre lif;
And certes yet ne did I you never unright.
Why fare ye thus with me this firste night?
Ye faren like a man hadde lost his wit.
What is my guilt?...'

(A long discussion on nobility follows, at the end of which she gives him a choice:
she can be ugly and faithful, since no man will want her, or beautiful, and he will
never be sure. He tells her to make the choice, giving her the mastery)

'Kisse me' quod she, 'We be no longer wrothe.
For by my trothe, I wol be to you bothe --
This is to sayn, ye, bothe fair and good.
I praye to God that I mote sterven wood, (*die mad*)
But I to you be all so good and trewe
As evere was wif sin that the world was newe.
And but I be tomorn as fair to seene
As any lady, emperisse, or queene,
That is bitwixe th east and eek the west,
Do with my lif and death right as you lest:
Cast up the curtain, look how that it is.'
And whan the knight saw verrily all this,
That she so fair was and so young therto,
For joy he hente her in his armes two...

Chaucer's version of the story is made more dynamic by its use of dialogue; the lines are longer, since Chaucer has realized that the ten-syllable pentameter (5-stress line) is better adapted than the French-style eight-syllable tetrameter (4-stress line) for English narrative. The main point that the two writers share, though, is the relative simplicity of their vocabulary and the way their narrative adopts the normal speaking voice. In this they follow the model of romances like *Sir Orfeo* or *Havelok*. The option they make is the opposite to that made by the poets of the alliterative revival, for whom poetry seems to demand ornate and unusual vocabulary, lengthy, digressive descriptions, and patterns of alliteration that are far from any usual speaking style. The rhyming couplets remain in both Chaucer and Gower as the mark of the poetic text; blank verse narrative first appeared in the 16th century, in Surrey's *Aeneid*, and was only established by Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

Further Reading

Piero Boitani and Jill Mann eds., *The Cambridge Chaucer Companion*. Cambridge University Press. 1986.

Derek Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales*. Unwin Critical Library 1985.

Derek Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*. Blackwell. 1992.

Helen Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales*. Oxford Guides to Chaucer. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1989

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