

CC 4 Semester II

British Poetry and Drama : 14th to 17th Centuries

The Wife of Bath's Prologue

Knowing Geoffrey Chaucer - The Writer of The Canterbury Tales

Geoffrey Chaucer

Biographical context

Chaucer is an acclaimed English poet and is widely regarded as the first English writer. John Dryden, poet and critic of the seventeenth century referred to Chaucer as "the father of English poetry". As with Shakespeare, there are unknown areas in Chaucer's life. He was born about 1340 and died in about 1400, living through the reigns of Edward III and Richard II. Although a commoner, he was born into a relatively affluent family that owned a wine business but he and his family had aristocratic connections: in his earlier years he served as a page to the Countess of Ulster. He fought during the Hundred Years War and later acted in various roles as a diplomat, esquire and administrator to the monarch at the time. He was also highly connected through his marriage to Philippa Roet, daughter of Sir Payne Roet and sister-in-law to John of Gaunt.

Chaucer's travels to Europe brought in him into contact with the works of the influential writers of the period such as Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio who wrote in Latin and Italian. The language of the court at home was French whereas English was the crude and common language which had developed from Anglo-Saxon. Chaucer chose to write in the English vernacular using the dialect that was spoken in the capital. Much scholarly attention has been given to Chaucer's contribution to the development of English and the way in which the writer transformed the dialect into a language (see Christopher Cannon's *The Making of Chaucer's English: A Study of Words*). English Literature does not begin with Chaucer; for example *Beowulf* which predates Chaucer's work by several centuries is written in Old English (Anglo-Saxon) and is the oldest surviving text in English Literature. *The Canterbury Tales* is written in what is called Middle English.

Despite a very busy career in public life Chaucer found time to write, with his most notable works including *Troilus and Criseyde*, *The Book of the Duchess*, *the House of Fame*, *The Legend of Good Women* and of course *The Canterbury Tales*.