Chaucer and the *Canterbury Tales*

A Short Introduction

John C. Hirsh

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Canterbury Tales

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For
Douglas Gray

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Note on Illustrations

The illustrations in this book reflect two different ways of reading the *Canterbury Tales*, one responsive to a representational, the other to a socially constructed, interpretation. The cover illustration is an extraordinarily popular early nineteenth-century painting by the British artist Thomas Stothard (1755–1834), *The Pilgrimage to Canterbury*, painted between 1806 and 1807. It is preserved in the Tate Gallery, London, and is Number 1163 in the Tate Catalogue. Stothard's painting brilliantly reflects the Romantic assumptions of his age, and, though it does not ignore the pilgrims' social roles, it is far more responsive to them as individuals, and represents in the first place their individuality and their implied relationships, and only then their relative social standing.

The illustrations within the text are William Caxton's woodcuts in the 1483 edition of the *Canterbury Tales* (*Short Title Catalogue* 5083), Caxton's first illustrated edition of the work, which he first published in 1477 (*Short Title Catalogue* 5082). They are listed in Edward Hodnett, *English Woodcuts 1480–1535*, revised edition (Oxford, 1973). They privilege the function and status of the pilgrims, and encourage a reading of the *Canterbury Tales* in which social reality is mediated rather than described, and the distinction between text and context becomes less apparent. The Caxton woodcut numbers in Hodnett are these:

The Knight	214
The Squire	215
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All woodcuts © British Library, London.

Preface

This book seeks to encourage beginning students and others to read the *Canterbury Tales* with interest, knowledge and, so as not to dodge the issue, pleasure. Its focus is on the tales more than the tellers, but it seeks to respond to both, while also remaining attentive to recent developments in Chaucer studies. It is aimed at alert beginning readers who have not read Chaucer much, but who, for whatever reason, are about to do so, whether for the first time or again. I have not tried to say the last word about anything, or to write a little essay on individual tales, though that may be the office of some of my readers. If it is, I have tried to help you write a good one, whether by beginning a line of thought which may lead elsewhere, indicating an origin or a development, or simply offering a target for dissent. A select list of books relevant to Chaucer and the *Canterbury Tales* appears in the Bibliography, which is annotated. Mindful of my audience, I have kept the footnoting as light as possible, though I hope the annotated Bibliography will prove of use and interest.

My greatest debt is to the dedicatee, Professor Douglas Gray, the first J. R. R. Tolkien Professor of Middle English Language and Literature at Oxford, for many things, but primarily for keeping many of us reminded that literature in general, and medieval literature in particular, need not be regarded as an affectation of the privileged – the *Canterbury Tales* itself is witness too – but that it is still an art which both reflects and illuminates, even as it evokes pleasure and response. I am grateful to him as well for a careful and considered reading of the typescript of this book, and for useful and perceptive comments upon it. I have debts to other Chaucerians as well, to my

late father, Edward L. Hirsh, of Boston College; to the late J. Burke Severs and Albert E. Hartung of Lehigh. I record too more general gratitude to my present medieval colleagues, Sarah McNamer, Penn R. Szittya and Kelley Wickham-Crowley, who have, by example, collegiality or advice, speeded my way, but bear no responsibility for anything which follows. Charles Tung of Berkeley has kindly read parts of the volume, but he is guiltless too. Much of this book, together with certain other medieval projects, was written while I was a Keeley Visiting Fellow at Wadham College, Oxford, and I am most grateful to the Warden and to all the fellowship both for my election, and for warm cordiality while I was resident in Oxford. I am indebted as well, for good advice and good company, to Andrew McNeillie, poet, diarist, founder of the series in which the book appears, and Literature Editor at Blackwells; to Alison Dunnett, Deputy Managing Editor at Blackwells; and to Juanita Bullough, my able desk editor, for expert advice and assistance during the editorial process.

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1

Who Was Geoffrey Chaucer?

Sometime not very long before 1344, or perhaps in 1344 (the exact year is unknown), a well-connected London wine merchant called John Chaucer celebrated the birth of his first child, a son whom he named Geoffrey. John was about thirty years old, so no longer young by the standards of his time, but thanks in part to a socially advantageous marriage to Agnes, daughter of John de Copton, his years had brought a fair measure of accomplishment, respect and prosperity. Not that John Chaucer's was an old London family. His roots were in Ipswich, where Geoffrey's great-grandfather owned property, including an inn, and in a 1991 *Chaucer Review* article Lester Matheson plausibly suggested that it was probably his grandfather, Robert de Dynyngton, who both made the move to London and changed the family name to Chaucer, a word which had lost its original French association with shoemaking, and that he may have done so out of respect for a London mercer named John le Chaucer for whom he had worked, and who had left him a generous bequest in his will.

Robert Chaucer, Geoffrey's grandfather, had flourished in London as he had in Ipswich, where successful merchants were respected equally for their knowledge of their trade and for their entrepreneurial acumen, both of which could be useful to the crown. He entered the king's service in 1305, beginning an association which was concerned both with supplying wine to the royal table and overseeing the tax revenues which came from wine imports, an activity in which Geoffrey would follow him. Robert's stepson John maintained his father's courtly, and no doubt also his business, connec-

The Knight (Hodnett No. 214)

tions, including those in France and Italy. Thus, Geoffrey Chaucer was born into an able and prosperous family, one in which there was no question that, whatever else he did, when the time came for the young man to make his way in the world, he would have a well-connected and sharp-eyed family behind him.

He was also born into a London which was virtually an education in itself. It had a population of perhaps 50,000 people, at a time when only a small handful of English cities (four or five) had over 5,000. It was the center of commerce for the country as a whole, which was still largely agricultural, deeply attached to sheep-grazing, but no longer content simply to export sheep's wool to Europe: clothmaking was a growing activity. But closer to home what mattered was the court. Chaucer was born into one of the most active and flourishing parts of a city which was, in anyone's eyes, the most important in the country. He was probably born in a house on Thames

Street, in a part of the city called Vintry Ward or simply the Vintry, a block or so north of the river Thames, where other wine merchants, including some from Italy, also lived and worked. The house was not far from Old St. Paul's, and, like many London properties, was owned by a religious order to whom 60 shillings a year was due in rent, but it was altogether appropriate for his wine-merchant father, which, as Derek Pearsall has perceptively pointed out in his *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*,[1] probably meant that it had a spacious cellar for wine, and one or more well-appointed rooms above in which business transactions could take place. It was by no means a poor man's dwelling, but neither did it isolate young Geoffrey from the life of the city as a whole.

In his excellent biography of Chaucer to which I have just referred and to which, as to the 493 direct references to his public career printed in Martin M. Crow and Clair C. Olson's *Chaucer Life-Records*,[2] I am indebted throughout this chapter, Derek Pearsall remarks that, although 30 years ago we might have found remote parts of Spain which could replicate something at least of the "atmosphere" of medieval London, today we should have to travel to Morocco to do so. In a way Pearsall is right, since some of the features of medieval London, its mixture of farmyard and city, of animals in the unpaved streets and the sound of church bells, find no convenient parallel near at hand, but for other aspects of the medieval, or at least pre-industrial, city, we need not go so far afield.

Very close to Aldgate, where Chaucer spent his most productive years, runs Whitechapel High Street, which gives into Whitechapel Road, until it becomes Mile End Road and escapes the city. But for the better part of a mile it is possible to notice, indeed it is difficult to escape, a sense of a self-contained, connected and active community, one in which self-interest mixes easily with religious precept and commercial advantage, and in which an apparently disconnected past seems somehow to account for a quick and vibrant present. Since the 1980s, the area has attached itself to the East London Mosque, built with support from Saudi Arabia, whose call to prayer seems to unify the motions of the streets, and is, in its way, as culturally powerful as any medieval church bell. A vibrant street-market operates most days, echoing in their way the many export—import "trade-only" storefronts which dot the street. Mixed in with these are the legends of the past: the 1888 "Whitechapel" or

"Jack the Ripper" murders, which for five months convulsed these streets and reminded other Londoners that there were those whose lots were hard indeed; the Royal London Hospital (as it now is) which for four years, until his death in 1890 aged just 27, was the residence of Joseph Merrick, the so-called "Elephant Man," much visited by the wealthy, by Queen Alexandra and others; even, since 1884, Toynbee Hall, built to encourage Oxford and some Cambridge students to visit the East End, and, like Chaucer's Clerk, to learn as well as to teach, so advancing continuous learning for everyone. Today Toynbee Hall, much expanded, is an active community center. This is a place whose Jewish immigrant past seems to have prepared the way for its Bangladeshi present, but it has, too, something of the medieval mix of sales on the street and imports from afar, of felt ecclesiastical presence and barely restrained commercial energy, of power quietly exercised elsewhere in the city and a parliament not quite connected to these realities, of a mix of peoples, languages, attitudes and advantages, and these are everywhere present.

Many of the children here have some knowledge of five or more languages and dialects – Seleti, Bengali, Arabic, Hindi, and English – a fact which is worth keeping in mind when reflecting upon Chaucer's knowledge of French and Italian, and though two of these they may owe to mosque school, a third to grandparents or to videos from India, they are all somehow connected to the varied, intense, and active lives they lead, filled with wonder, like the one which, in an earlier London, youngish Geoffrey Chaucer may have led, not a mile away. One other aspect of the language which these children speak has a certain relevance for one other Chaucerian debate, for the occasional or frequent mixing of languages in Whitechapel may echo, if imperfectly, the interplay of Middle English and Anglo-French forms of speech which, if scholars like W. Rothwell are not mistaken, informed, even charged, his poetry, and changed the English language forever.[3]

Probably the one thing which contributed most to the social mobility which Chaucer's family, among many others, enjoyed, was the appearance of the Black Death, the devastating plague which, transmitted by fleas on rats, first appeared in England in 1348. John Chaucer took his family to Southampton in 1348, and did not return to London until it was safe to do so, but it is interesting that, in his later poetry, Chaucer mentions the Black Death hardly

at all. The appearance of the plague was unpredictable, and its effect differed greatly from place to place. Some towns and villages were devastated, others hardly touched by it. It may have brought with it, momentarily at least, an increased interest in religion, but it also seems to have contributed to the wealth of some. As often happens in times of hardship, the rich became richer. In 1349 Chaucer's mother, Agnes, inherited London shops and gardens from an uncle, Hamo de Copton, who may very possibly have died in the plague.

It was during the period of the Black Death that Chaucer's schooling, such as it was, came about, and that circumstance may help account for the fact that there seems to be virtually no record, anywhere, of when or where that education took place. It is possible that, as an only child, special efforts were made, and private tutors engaged, to keep him away from any possible contagion. There was a well-supplied Almonry School for young children at St. Paul's, minutes away from Chaucer's home, and the best guess is that he went there. He should have, but we don't really know. As he was going to make his way in court what he needed was the education of a gentleman, and, however he obtained it, that seems to be what he received. It is generally agreed that he was not attached to the Inns of Court, and, in spite of an implied interest in university life suggested by the inclusion of the Clerk among his pilgrims and by two tales set in Oxford and Cambridge, that he did not attend university. There are certainly no records preserved which suggest that he did so, and the only real difficulty in saying that his education was as limited as it seems to have been, was his love of books, which he read attentively, but with a certain system as well. He became acquainted with several encyclopedias and florilegia (collections of selections from other works), and his reading of Latin, Italian, and (especially) modern French literature was surprisingly wide. He was well read in classical literature, and in later years, as John M. Fyler has argued in *Chaucer and Ovid*,[4] owed more to Ovid than to other classical authors, using the *Metamorphoses* as a kind of mythological handbook while responding to Ovid's love poems with a mixture of deference and irony. While this sort or reading does not by itself point to a specific kind of education (indeed, the interest in modern French literature points instead to a kind of general well-roundedness unconnected to education), his reading was deep enough to

suggest that one of the circles in which he moved was probably quite explicitly literary, and that some of the knowledge of which he was to give evidence was probably acquired from others who shared his interests. But perhaps not. Perhaps he was an autodidact who simply followed his own lights – and they led him into libraries. As far as Chaucer's schooling is concerned, important as the issue is, much is pure conjecture, including most of what I have written here. We really know almost nothing.

Even so, it would certainly be interesting to know when his literary interests first appeared, and whether they were in any way in conflict with his parents' apparent values, attitudes and assumptions. The record of his life, bare as it is, suggests that as a very young man, and in spite of literary interests he may have had, he did what was expected of him. When he first appears in person in Crow and Olson's *Chaucer Life-Records*, it is April 1357, and he is already in service to Elizabeth, Countess of Ulster, almost certainly as a young, teenaged page, who, according to the record, received 2 shillings and 6 pence for a short jacket, a pair of shoes, and some red and black hose. We do not know when he began his service, or in what exactly it consisted. The appointment may have been a plum, something his parents had arranged carefully. Elizabeth was the wife of Lionel, Count of Ulster, and, more importantly, second son of King Edward III. A page, if that was what Chaucer was, would normally be between 10 and 17 years of age, of a good family, and with connections. But being a page could involve hard, and rather menial, work. Apart from his sometimes interesting duties in court, a page could have been called upon to perform any of a thousand simple tasks, though he would also be taught how to behave among the nobility, and would be in regular contact with its most noble members. He also would have traveled with the household when it moved, and thus become known to, and come to know, others, at greater or lesser manor houses. But being a page was not a dead-end job. In time, as the page grew to manhood, it was understood that he would move up in the household, and that his training in arms, though elementary, might one day be of use to his lord. It may have been in Elizabeth's household that Chaucer came to understand the nature of chivalric obligation, and also the ways in which both social and human relationships were constructed. Depending upon circumstances, it is just possible that he may also have deepened his book-

learning, particularly if he found a clerk, or simply a like-minded friend, who would teach him.

Two years later there is no doubt as to what Chaucer's office had become. In 1359–60, he appears at last in Lionel's retinue when the Count was campaigning in France during that interminable and destructive series of battles and conflicts known as the Hundred Years' War. Chaucer was captured at Rethel, then "Retters," near Reims, a city of real importance for the French, since it was there that they crowned their kings, and it is believed that King Edward, who then held King John of France captive, expected to be crowned King of France himself in Reims cathedral. Though the circumstances of Chaucer's capture are unrecorded, he did not remain a prisoner for very long, and there is a record that King Edward himself contributed £16 to his ransom.

It was probably during the 1360s that Chaucer, a smart and able young man in his twenties, began to write poetry. This was a period of relative stability and order in England, the result, at least in part, of a 1360 peace treaty with France, which was to last until 1369. In 1366 he undertook a journey to Navarre, for unknown purposes: pilgrimage to St. James of Compostella is possible, though court business more probable, possibly in connection with plans which Edward, the Black Prince, was entertaining. Two years later, in 1368 he again traveled abroad – this time certainly on court business, though his destination is uncertain – as he did on the following year. No less important to him was his meeting and eventual marriage to Philippa de Roet, lady of the queen's household and the oldest daughter of the Flemish knight Sir Paon de Roet, and, in spite of a recent challenge to this identification by H. A. Kelly,[5] very probably the sister of Katherine, known to history as Katherine Swynford. Soon after their marriage, in 1367, Philippa gave birth to a son who was named Thomas, the poet's first offspring, born about a year after John Chaucer's death. The boy would grow up to become a courtier and public servant of some distinction, like his father, who in the 1360s had begun traveling on the king's behalf, including one trip in 1368 which seems to have lasted more than one hundred days, and may have taken him at least to Milan, and possibly further.

But there were other and more powerful forces at work. About 1370, shortly after the death of his first wife Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster, John of Gaunt, the powerful third son of King Edward III