

Influence of Chaucer in the history of English literature

Geoffrey Chaucer, known as the Father of English literature, is widely considered the greatest English poet of the Middle Ages. He was the first poet to have been buried in Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey. While he achieved fame during his lifetime as an author, philosopher, alchemist and astronomer, Chaucer also maintained an active career in the civil service as a bureaucrat, courtier and diplomat. Among his many works, which include *The Book of the Duchess*, the *House of Fame*, the *Legend of Good Women* and *Troilus and Criseyde*, he is best loved today for *The Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer is a crucial figure in developing the legitimacy of the vernacular, Middle English, at a time when the dominant literary languages in England were French and Latin.

Chaucer's poetry falls into three rather clearly marked periods. First is that of French influence, when, though writing in English, he drew inspiration from the rich French poetry of the period, which was produced partly in France, partly in England. Chaucer experimented with the numerous lyric forms which the French poets had brought to perfection. He also translated, in whole or in part, the most important of medieval French narrative poems, the thirteenth century 'Roman de la Rose' of Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meung. The work is a very clever satirical allegory, in many thousand lines, of medieval love and medieval religion. *Roman de la Rose* embodied most of the qualities of the French love poets of the twelfth and the thirteenth century. It served as a model and inspiration to the poets of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

However Chaucer's first important poem that can be called original was *The Book of the Duchess*. It is a consoling lament for the death of Blanche, the duchess of Lancaster and the wife of John of Gaunt. Although in this poem Chaucer made use of the techniques of French poetry, its subject is native—i.e. the death of the wife of a member of the English royal family. *The Book of the Duchess* is important in part because it shows that Chaucer had developed by then an association of some importance with John of Gaunt, son of Edward III. The other poems of this period include *The Complaint unto Pity*, *An A.B.C.* and *The Complaint of Mars*.

Chaucer's **second period** (up to c.1387) is called his Italian period because during this time his works were modeled primarily on Dante and Boccaccio. This period can roughly be dated 1379-85. Major works of the second period include *The House of Fame*, *The Parliament of Fowls*, the unfinished *Legend of Good Women* *The Treatise on the Astrolabe* and *Troilus and Criseyde*. Now, *The House of Fame* recounts the adventures of Aeneas after the fall of Troy. *The Parliament of Fowls* describes the mating of fowls on St. Valentine's Day. The poem is thought to celebrate the betrothal of Richard II to Anne of Bohemia. Again, *Legend of Good Women* is a poem which introduced the heroic couplet into English verse and tells of nine classical heroines. The prose fragment *The Treatise on the Astrolabe* is written by Chaucer for his son Lewis; and *Troilus and Criseyde* is based on Boccaccio's *Filostrato*. It is one of the great love poems in the English language. In *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer perfected the seven-line stanza later called *rhyme royal*. Another important work of Chaucer which deserves mention here is a prose translation of Boethius' *De consolacione philosophiae*.

The third period of Chaucer's literary career is called the English Period. The great work of the period, and the crowning achievement of Chaucer's life, is 'The Canterbury Tales.' Before this period Chaucer had spent his strength mainly in translating and adopting the works of French and Italian authors. But in the last period of his literary career, he produced something original, which was the product of his own experience. *The Canterbury Tales* is a collection of stories. The tales (mostly in verse, although some are in prose) are told as part of a story-telling contest by a group of pilgrims as they travel together on a journey from Southwark to the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket at Canterbury Cathedral. The prize for this contest is a free meal at the Tabard Inn at Southwark on their return. Chaucer uses the tales and the descriptions of the characters to paint an ironic and critical portrait of English society at the time, and particularly of the Church. Hence Dryden comment on *The Canterbury Tales* – "Here is God's plenty"- appear to be just and appropriate Structurally, the collection resembles Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, which Chaucer is said to have come across during his first diplomatic mission to Italy in 1372. However inspite of the structural similarity there is much difference between the two works.

Chaucer has rightly been called the father of English poetry because he alone among his contemporaries and predecessors put poetry first, and did not seek to direct men, to judge events, to reform morals or to present philosophy. Poetry was his only object. He was also the father of English language as it was he who made London English, the Midland dialect the common literary language of England. During Chaucer's period, the Midland dialect was poor and barren. And he inculcated into it the delicacy and refinement of the French poetry. Chaucer did also prepare the way for secular drama. Courthope is just when he says that "in The Canterbury Tales we find all the elements of Elizabethan Comedy." Chaucer may also be called the father of English satire as well. Interestingly, in *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer skillfully conveys moral and literary judgments, sometimes by means of contrast and sometimes through irony.

Chaucer has been rightly called the first of the great moderns. Realism is a distinguishing mark of all modern literatures, and it is conspicuously absent in the poetry of Chaucer's contemporaries and predecessors. Until Chaucer's day literature had

essentially been romantic, dealing with the gods and heroes of a golden age. And it was Chaucer who first created men and women who were at once recognized as true to life. Truly, "the merry host of the Tabard Inn, Madame Eglentyne, the fat monk, the parish priest, the kind ploughman, the poor scholar with his 'books black and red'- all seem more like personal acquaintances than characters in a book." (Long). Hence in conclusion, it may be put forth that Chaucer can be justly considered to be the first national poet of England. Though the feeling of nationality is not always prominent in his poetry, "still in his picture of the Canterbury pilgrimage one may truly find the image of an organized nation." (Courthope)