

CHAUCER'S LIFE AND WORKS (© AJ SCHUTH, 2003)

born **c. 1340**; son of John Chaucer, a wealthy merchant (vintner) of London; little is known about his early life

1357 (April): Page in the household of the Countess of Ulster, wife of the King's (Edward III) son Lionel -> access to the court / contact with highly influential people; in particular acquaintance with John of Gaunt, the 'Black Prince', Grand Duke and advisor at court, his lifelong patron and friend

1359/60: he went on a campaign to France with the English army (100 Years' War), where he was taken prisoner. How do we know? Royal financial records: in March 1360 Edward contributed £ 16,- to his ransom, so GC could return to England

by 1366 he is already married to a Philippa (de Roet?), lady-in-waiting/damsel to the Queen, (presumably daughter of Sir Payne de Roet and sister of Katherine de Swynford, mistress and later wife of John of Gaunt) -> family politics!

1367: valet/page to Edward III in the King's household, later as an esquire; from then on his name occurs pretty regularly in the records

from 1370 onwards GC was sent frequently abroad on the King's business -> diplomatic missions to the Netherlands and Northern France (secret negotiations), later at least twice to Italy

1372/73: first Italian journey to Genoa and Florence; became acquainted with Italian literature there, especially with the works of Dante, Boccaccio (-> Canterbury Tales!) and Petrarch, whom he probably met in person in Padua

c. 1374: GC received the first of several appointments to the civil service: Controller of the Customs and Subsidy on Wool, Skins and Hides in the port of London -> lucrative post; GC freed from his attendance upon the king, took an apartment above Aldgate

1376-8: again on diplomatic missions abroad; ever closer acquaintance with French culture and literature

1378: second Italian journey; during this period he seems to have enjoyed considerable prosperity, received various grants and ward-ships

1385: GC appointed Justice of the Peace in Kent

1386: he became 'Knight of the Shire' of Kent, i.e. Kent's representative in Parliament (House of Commons) and saw his patron and friend John of Gaunt stripped of most of his power; also conflict between Parliament and Richard II -> probably in the course of these political events GC resigned or lost his positions (a losing streak!); GC turned to writing on a more 'professional' level / started Canterbury Tales

1387: presumed death of his wife Philippa

1388: GC had to sell his annuity, but one year later

1389: Richard II appointed him ‘Clerk of the King’s Works’ (task: the upkeep of the royal residences and other properties), again a fairly lucrative position

1390 (September): GC robbed three times - twice on the same day (!?) - of money belonging to the King; the thieves were caught and GC was forgiven the loss of the money

1391: GC loses his clerkship but becomes ‘Sub-forester’ of the Royal forest-park in North-Petherton (Somerset) -> honourable retirement from public life (!?); the King grants him an annuity of £ 20 – nevertheless he seems to have gotten in financial difficulties: in 1398 he was sued for debt

Afterwards he got attached to Henry of Lancaster, John of Gaunt’s son, and when Henry was declared King in 1399 (Henry IV -> coronation-speech delivered in English!), GC sent to him the famous *Complaint to his Empty Purse*. Four days later Henry responded by granting him an annuity of 40 marks. The poet promptly leased a house, but

October, 25th, 1400: GC died; buried in Westminster Abbey (today’s ‘Poets’ Corner’)

Obviously, he was an active man of affairs and business. He must have had a highly developed practical and diplomatic side. Most of the time writing was ‘only’ a pastime to him – he did not always take it too seriously

He spent his life in association with the people at court and in government circles; their tastes were French and so was his – he is completely continental in his literary affiliations.

-> Chaucer’s works

GC works reveal highly continental literary affiliations; he is remarkably indifferent to English writings (past and contemporary)

division into periods a matter of severe discussion in literary criticism:

his first period is called the 'French period' (French influenced literary period); he is highly indebted to Ovid and recent French poets, e.g. Deschamps, Froissart (Romance!); major works:

'The Roman de la Rose' (translated from the French original); 'The Book of the Duchess'

the so-called 'Italian period' (Italian influenced literary period) follows: influenced by Dante and Boccaccio; during this period he builds on French poetry with new matter from Italy major works:

'The Hous of Fame'; 'The Complaint unto Pity'; 'A Complaint to his Lady'; 'The Parlement of Foules'; 'Troilus and Criseyde'; 'The Legend of Good Women'

his third and last period: the 'English period' (also: literary period of maturity); now he has learned everything his teacher's could hand down to him; complete mastery of his art!

major works: 'The Canterbury Tales'; 'The Astrolabe'; 'The Complaint to his Empty Purse'