Chaucer Essay, Research Paper

Geoffrey Chaucer

Geoffrey Chaucer led a busy official life, as an esquire of the royal court, as the administrator of the customs for the port of London, as a participant in important diplomatic missions, and in a variety of other official duties. Before William Shakespeare, Geoffrey Chaucer was the distinguished English poet, and still retains the position as the most significant poet to write in Middle English.

Geoffrey

Chaucer was born in 1342, but historians are uncertain about his exact date of birth. Geoffrey’s well-to-do parents, John Chaucer and Agnes Copton, possessed several buildings in the vintage quarter in London. Not much is known about Geoffrey’s school career, but most historians feel that he was fluent in Latin and Greek.

(Thompson, 2)

Chaucer first appears in public records in 1357 as a member of the house of Elizabeth, Countess of Ulster. This was a conventional arrangement in which sons of middle-class households were placed in royal service so that they may obtain a courtly education.(Singman, 76) Two years later Chaucer served in the army under Edward II and was captured during an unsuccessful offensive at Reims, although he

was later ransomed. Chaucer served under a number of diplomatic missions. By 1366 Chaucer had married Philippa Pan, who had been in service with the Countess of Ulster. Chaucer married well for his position, for Philippa Chaucer received an annuity from the queen wife of Edward II. Chaucer himself secured an annuity as yeoman of the king and was listed as one of the king’s esquires.

Geoffrey Chaucer pursued many occupations during his life: soldier, diplomat, intelligence officer, construction supervisor, Controller of Customs, and member of Parliament. (Norman) Yet, it is for his literary accomplishments that he has achieved enduring fame.

Chaucer’s first published work was The Book of the Duchess; a poem of over 1,300 lines that is an elegy for the Duchess of Lancaster. (The Catholic Encyclopedia) For this first of his important

(Thompson, 3)

poems, which was published in 1370, Chaucer used the dream-vision form, a genre made popular by the highly influential 13th-century French poem of courtly love, the Roman de la Rose, which Chaucer translated into English. Throughout the following decade, Chaucer continued with his diplomatic career, traveling to Italy for negotiations to open a Genoa port to Britain as well as military negotiations with

Milan. During his missions to Italy, Chaucer encountered the work of Dante, Patriarch, and Boccaccio, which were later to have profound influence upon his own writing. In 1374 Chaucer was appointed administrator of the customs and subsidy of wool, skins, and tanned hides for the Port of London, his first position away from the British court. Chaucer’s only major work during this period was House of Fame, a poem of around 2,000 lines in dream-vision form, but this was not completed.

In a dead of May 1, 1380, Cecily Chaumpaigne charged Chaucer with rape. Rape (raptus) could at the time mean either sexual assault or abduction; scholars have not been able to establish which meaning applies here, but, in either case, the release suggests that Chaucer was not guilty as charged. (The Catholic Encyclopedia)

(Thompson, 4)

This charge had little effect on Chaucer’s political career. In October 1385, he was appointed a justice of the peace for Kent, and in August 1386 he became knight of the shire for Kent. Around the time of his wife’s death in 1387, Chaucer moved to Greenwich and later to Kent. Changing political circumstances eventually led to Chaucer falling out of favor with the royal court and leaving Parliament, but when Richard

II became King of England, Chaucer regained royal favor. During this period Chaucer used writing primarily as an escape from public life. His works included Parliament of Foules, a poem of 699 lines. This work is a dream vision for St. Valentine’s Day that makes use of the myth that each year on that day the birds gathered before the goddess Nature to choose their mates. This work was heavily influenced by Boccaccio and Dante.

Chaucer’s next work was Troilus and Criseyde, which was influenced by The Consolation of Philosophy, written by the Roman philosopher Boethius in the early sixth century and translated into English by Chaucer. Chaucer took the plot of Troilus from Boccaccio’s Filostrato. This eight thousand-line poem recounts the love story of Troilus, son of the Trojan king Priam, and Criseyde,

(Thompson, 5)

widowed daughter of the deserter priest Calkas, against the background of the Trojan War.

He began work on The Canterbury Tales about 1387, and intended for each of his thirty pilgrims to tell four tales, two while traveling to Canterbury and two while traveling from Canterbury.

However, only twenty-three pilgrims received a story before Chaucer’s death in 1400.

The Canterbury Tales secured Chaucer’s literary reputation. It is his great literary accomplishment, a compendium of stories by pilgrims traveling to the shrine of Thomas a Becket in Canterbury. Chaucer introduces each of these pilgrims in vivid brief sketches in the General Prologue and intersperses the twenty-four tales with short dramatic scenes with lively exchanges. Chaucer did not complete the full plan for the tales, and surviving manuscripts leave some doubt as to the exact order of the tales that remain. However, the work is sufficiently complete to be considered a unified book rather than a collection of unfinished fragments. The Canterbury Tales is a lively mix of a variety of genres told by travelers from all aspects of society. Among the genres included are courtly romance,

(Thompson, 6)

fabliau, saint’s biography, allegorical tale, beast fable and medieval sermon.

Chaucer’s Tales quickly spread throughout England in the early fifteenth century. Scholars feel The Canterbury Tales reached their instant and continued success because of their accurate and

oftentimes vivid portrayal of human nature, unchanged through 600 years since Chaucer’s time. George Macy, founder of The Limited Editions Club wrote on The Canterbury Tales:

. . . it has been said of The Canterbury Tales that all of humanity moves through its pages. The stories are full of an inimitable humor, at once friendly and shrewd. The points are often made casually, often with bludgeon strokes, but they are always human and illuminating.

Geoffrey Chaucer died in London and was buried in Westminster Abbey. It was during this last period, of his intriguing life that he wrote his most famous work, the unfinished Canterbury Tales, which is unique for its variety, humor, grace, and realism. Chaucer was the first great poet of the English nation, and in the Middle Ages he stands high.