Geoffrey Chaucer And His Works Essay, Research Paper

Known as the Father of the English Language, Geoffrey Chaucer, after six centuries, has retained his status as one of the three or four greatest English poets. Throughout his assiduous life as a courtier and civil servant under the royalty of Edward III and Richard II, Chaucer has written many famous pieces that are still admired and praise today. His life serving royalty in which he undertook multiply positions that allowed him to engage with various people of difference statuses has greatly swayed his writings. Furthermore, Chaucer himself and the success of this works have placed great influence on the English language.

Geoffrey Chaucer was born in Vintry Ward, London around 1343.1 He was the son of Agnes de Copton and John Chaucer, a prosperous wine merchant. The name, from chaussier (French term for shoes), indicates ancestors who were shoemakers.2 In 1357, when he was approximately 14 years old, he was old enough to enroll as a page in a noble household- the household of King Edward’s son Prince Lionel and his wife Elizabeth. This is known from an entry in Countess Elizabeth’s household account book, which records the purchase of a suit of clothes for Geoffrey Chaucer, including a pair of red and black hose and a pair of shoes. 1 This being his first connection with royalty, he was trained to be a civil servant and a diplomat; at the same time he leant the ways of the court and the use of arms.2 Those days must have been lively days for the young page, for old records show that the countess and her household were constantly on the move from one palace or great mansion to another. 1 Two years later Chaucer was with a European army that Edward III led into France during the Hundred Years’ War. He was taken prisoner by the French but was soon ransomed by the king for a sum equivalent to about U.S. $2,400 in 1360. 3

Of his next seven years, nothing definite is known; but there is reason to believe that he may have been studying law in London.1 It is believed that from this time forward, Chaucer began accumulating information and details through his experience for his later work the Canterbury Tales .

By 1367, he was a member of the royal household with the rank of yeoman and later of squire, with a regular pension, or salary.1 He also had a wife, Philippa, the daughter of Sir Poan Roet of Hainauut and sister of John of Gaunt s third wife; she was a member of the queen’s household.3 Thus, some time in his 20s, Chaucer was launched on the official career that he followed for the remainder of his lifetime.

For the next 30 years, or thereabouts, Chaucer traveled aboard on numerous diplomatic missions because of his training in diplomacy and he also held a number of positions at court and in the king s service. He served two kings, Edward III and Richard II, in important offices and diplomatic missions abroad.3 Between 1370 and 1378, he was sent on seven missions to France, Flanders, and Italy. From 1374 to 1386, he was controller of the customs in London.1 In 1385, he was appointed justice of the peace, and in 1386, in addition to his one term position in Parliament, he was made knight of the shire of Kent.1 From 1389 to 1391 came a succession of responsible posts. He was clerk of the king’s works, in charge of Westminster Palace, the Tower of London, and other palaces and manors. He was given a commission to survey the roads, bridges, and ditches along the Thames near London, and he was put in charge of repairs to St. George’s Chapel at Windsor.3 A less demanding post fell to him in 1391, when he was made sub-forester of one of the king’s parks.1 He may have held this position until his death.

During the 12 years that Chaucer was controller of the customs (1374-86), he and his wife lived in a house built on the city wall above the gate called Aldgate. His wife died in 1387.3 Nothing is known about where Chaucer lived after this tragedy until December 1399, when he leased a house in the garden of Westminster Abbey in London.3 October 25 1400, Geoffrey Chaucer died and was buried where he had spent his last year of life. It was there in later years that other men of letters were buried near him, and gave recognition to this part of the Abbey as the Poets’ Corner.4

Soldier, diplomat, justice of the peace, Member of Parliament, and man of affairs, Chaucer lived a full and busy life. Born soon after the beginning of the Hundred Years’ War, he lived through the terrible years of the Black Death, through John Wycliffe’s dramatic challenge to the established church, through the Peasant’s Revolt of 1381, and through the deposition of Richard II. Geoffrey Chaucer lived to the age 57.

With his association with the royal family, from boyhood to his death, Chaucer s multiple positions probably caused him to be fascinated with people s characters, to have knowledge of English lifestyle and to develop the irony in his works. His life, which has greatly influenced his ideas in his works, in addition to his love for poetry, gave him a title as one of greatest poet every known.

London was then a rural city. Garden, orchard, and meadow were in sight of Chaucer’s window; moor, heath, and forest were within easy walking distance. As a boy, he skated across the frozen ponds, but shared with most others a dislike of the cold; and, though responsive to the beauty of stars on a frosty night, he preferred showers of April, garlands of May, and melody of birds. He is the poet of dawn and spring. 4

He throve on literature, both classic and recent. Ovid, Vergil, Livy, Boethius, Petrarch, Dante, and Jean de Meun are among the authors of whom his pages are generously reminiscent; some of them he converted into living English.5 Literature of the past was frequently captured by word of mouth, since printing was yet to be invented and books were scarce. Taking what he needed from others, he remolded and immortalized it, with narrative skill still unsurpassed. His foremost characteristic is humor, twinkling, quietly glowing, or loudly robust. 4

Chaucer s brilliant ideas for his famous piece of work, the Canterbury Tales , evidently evolved from his associations. In his England of expanding trade with all nations- England under that Edward who has been called the Father of English Commerce- he met shipman, merchant, overseer, and plowman. In an era of changing religious ideas, he met the members of the various clerical orders- from parish priest to abbot- and he may have known John Wyclif, who wanted to reform the church. Even though his sharp eyes detected abuses in the church, he was not deeply concerned nor was he particularly sympathetic with reformers.3 In his old age, he made begging God’s forgiveness for songs-written, thanking God for lives of saints he had told. By that time, however, he felt old, his thoughts no longer fixed on Earth.2

In his fundamental state he wrote sanely, heartily, about men as he saw them, leaving the reader to draw conclusions. He knew men of law and, in that period of his life about which nothing has been revealed, he may have studied law. He knew doctors, and may have studied medicine in those same hidden years.1 He knew innkeepers, at whose inns he doubtlessly drank the wine they had bought from his own father.3 On trips to the continent he mingled with men of high estate who directed national and international affairs.2 In Italy was where he may have met his great literary friends Petrarch and Boccaccio. While at home he knew the poet John Gower.1

As a page, and later as a courtier, Chaucer became acquainted with the nobility and with royalty. His wife was a lady in waiting. As a soldier he knew hardship in the field, and at least once he experienced life as a prisoner in a foreign land. He was familiar with the practice of chivalry and satirized them as dying customs.3

His knowledge of people, broadened by travel, was deepened by work at home and lengthened in his writings. As controller of the customs in London he met all types of people, native and foreign. As deputy forester he knew cottagers.2 As knight of the shire for Kent, he sat with parliamentarians. As clerk of the king’s works in charge of repairing royal residences and state buildings, he supervised carpenters and masons. Several times he was robbed of the money he was carrying to pay off laborers; once he was severely beaten.2 Chaucer also knew women of all classes. Queens, duchesses, nuns, middle-class women, and lower-class women are all faithfully portrayed in his works.5

Thus, Chaucer s familiarity with different people of different status has assisted him in his writings, especially in the Canterbury Tales . The Shipman, the Clerk, the Man of Law, the Nun, the Priest, etc. all appear as important character s in his poetry.

Although Chaucer s works were written for his fellow courtiers, officials and for members of the royal family, his works have followed time and are well known, read and studied by many today.

Since the culture of the English upper class was still predominately French, Chaucer s earliest works were influenced by the modish French poets of that time, Guillaume de Machaut and Jean Froissart, and by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, who wrote the famous 13th-century poem Le roman de la rose 2 which Chaucer later claims to have translated. The common theme of these works is courtly love.

His first important original work, The Book of the Duchess , is a poem written for John of Gaunt’s first wife, Blanche, who died in 1369.4 In a dream, the poet encounters a grieving knight in black Gaunt- who describes his love and loss of “good fair White” -Blanche.6 Other dream poems, The House of Fame and Parliament of Fowls show the influence of Dante and of Giovanni Boccaccio, whose works Chaucer probably encountered on his first journey to Italy.2 The unfinished House of Fame gives a humorous account of the poet’s frustrating journey in the claws of a giant golden eagle -an idea from Dante- to the palace of the goddess Fame. The Parliament of Fowls reads an inconclusive debate about love among the different classes of birds. All three dream visions, written from about 1373 to about 1385, contain a mixture of comedy and serious speculation about the puzzling nature of love.6

In this period, Chaucer also translated and adapted religious, historical, and philosophical works: a life of St. Cecilia; a series of medieval tragedies, brief lives of famous men cast down by adverse fortune; a translation of De Consolatione Philosophiae , written by the Roman philosopher Anicius Boethius to proclaim his faith in divine justice and providence.4

Troilus for Criseyde , a poem of more than 8000 lines6, is Chaucer s second major work next to The Canterbury Tales . It is the tragic love story of the Trojan prince, Troilus, who wins Criseyde, but then loses her to the Greek warrior Diomede. The love story turns into a deeply felt medieval tragedy, the human pursuit of transitory earthly ideals that pale into insignificance beside the eternal love of God. 6 The poem ends with the narrator’s solemn advice to young people to leave vain loves and turn their hearts to Christ. Chuacer s characters are psychologically so complex that the work is known as the first modern novel. 6

The Canterbury Tales is a collection of stories set within a story of a pilgrimage to Canterbury Cathedral, the shrine of St. Thomas a Becket. The poet joins a group of pilgrims, described in the General Prologue, who assemble at the Tabard Inn outside London for the journey to Canterbury. The Host at the Inn proposes a storytelling contest to pass the time; each of the 30 or so pilgrims (the exact number is unclear) is to tell 4 tales on the round trip. Chaucer completed less than a quarter of this plan. The work contains 22 verse tales (2 unfinished) and 2 long prose tales; a few are thought to be pieces written earlier by Chaucer. The Canterbury Tales , composed of more than 18,000 lines of poetry, is made up of separate blocks of one or more tales with links introducing and joining stories within a block.6

The uniqueness and skillfulness presented in this piece of work lies in the dramatic interaction between the tales and the framing story. After the Knight’s courtly and philosophical romance about noble love, the Miller interrupts with a deliciously bawdy story of seduction aimed at the Reeve; the Reeve takes revenge with a tale about the seduction of a miller’s wife and daughter. 6 Thus, the tales develop the characters personalities, struggles, and various opinions of their tellers. The prologues and tales of the Wife of Bath and the Pardoner are the peak of Chaucer s art.4 The Wife, an outspoken defender of her sex against the traditional anti-feminism of the church, initiates a series of tales about sex, marriage, and nobility. The Pardoner gives a chilling demonstration of how his persuasiveness in the ministry turns the hope of salvation into a vicious confidence game. Although Chaucer in this way satirizes the abuses of the church, he also includes a number of moral and religious tales. This is followed by a personal confession in which Chaucer retract all his secular writings, including Troilus for Criseyde and those Canterbury tales that incline toward sin. 4 Like the ending of Troilus for Criseyde the retraction is a reminder that Chaucer s genius was always subject to accepted godliness.4

Chaucer had distributed influence on the English language. In Chaucer’s time no printed books existed, and contacts between various parts of England were few.3 There were, therefore, striking differences in the English language as spoken in various regions. Furthermore, the language of the court was French, and the language of learning was Latin. Chaucer was the first court writer to use the English tongue. Because he lived in London, he naturally used the English of the Midland counties rather than the Northern or the Southern dialects.2 His writings did much to set the language in the form it has today. Chaucer greatly increased the prestige of English as a literary language and extended the range of its poetic vocabulary and meters. He was the first English poet to use iambic pentameter, the seven-line stanza called rhyme royal, and the couplet later called heroic. 4 His method of versification, which depends on sounding many E s in final syllables that are silent, in modern English, was no longer understood by the 15th century. Nevertheless, Chaucer s writing dominated English poetry up to the time of Shakespeare.4

Chaucer lived a very full and diligent life, a life that defined the extreme meanings of outspokenness. The multitudinous of life experiences that enable him to grasp the terms of heterogeneous in a society, benefited his distinguished works of poetry. Chaucer himself and his fine works exhibit great influence on the English language. His contribution to great literature has definitely earned his permanent title as the Father of the English Language.