

JRF SPECIAL PDF

Geoffrey Chaucer



1 Chaucer's Biography

1.1 Who He Was

Geoffrey Chaucer is called the **Father of English Literature** and the **Father of English Poetry**. He lived in the **Middle English** period, and an entire literary age — the **Age of Chaucer** — is named after him. His great achievement was simple but enormous: at a time when serious writing was done in **Latin or French**, he wrote major poetry in **English**,

and proved that great literature could be made in the everyday language of his country.

CONCEPT

Why is he important? Chaucer chose **English** when the court poetry of his day was in **Anglo-Norman and Latin**. His work made the **Midland dialect** (the most widely used English of the time) the basis of the standard English to come. He was also the **first poet buried in Poets' Corner** in **Westminster Abbey**.

1.2 Birth, Family, and Life

Detail	Information
Born	London , c. 1343 (between 1343 and 1345)
Died	1400 ; first poet buried in Poets' Corner , Westminster Abbey
Family	A wealthy wine-trade family
Wife	Philippa Roet (married 1366), with ties to the royal household
Served	Aided by three kings : Edward III, Richard II, Henry IV
Period	Middle English ; the Age of Chaucer

Chaucer had a varied public career as a **courtier, soldier, and diplomat**. In **1359** he went to fight in the **Hundred Years' War** between England and France, was **captured**, and was freed after a **ransom** was paid. He later joined the royal service and travelled on **diplomatic missions** to France, Spain, and **Italy** — where he met the work of **Dante and Boccaccio**. He held real official posts, including **Controller of Customs, Justice of the Peace, and Member of**

Parliament. His marriage to **Philippa Roet** helped his standing at court.

1.3 His Three Writing Periods

Scholars divide Chaucer's writing into **three periods**, each shaped by the literature he was reading and each marked by a favourite verse form.

- **French Period (c. 1343–1370):** influenced by French poetry; he translated and adapted French works. Typical form: **octosyllabic couplets** (eight-syllable rhymed lines).
- **Italian Period (c. 1370–1385):** influenced by **Dante and Boccaccio** after his trips to Italy. Typical form: **rhyme royal**.
- **English Period (c. 1385–1400):** his mature years, writing in his own language. Typical form: **iambic pentameter**.

CONCEPT

What is rhyme royal? A seven-line stanza rhyming **ABABBCC**. Chaucer was a pioneer of this form in English and used it in *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Parliament of Fowls*.

1.4 His Contribution to English Verse

Chaucer made the **five-foot line** the natural measure of English poetry. **Pentameter** means a line of **five metrical feet**; when those feet are iambs (an unstressed beat followed by a stressed beat) the line is **iambic pentameter**. Chaucer's use of this **five-foot line** in the fourteenth

century set the pattern, and it became the **commonest metre** in English poetry ever after.

1.5 The Kind of Writer He Was

Chaucer was an **observer, a storyteller, and a gentle satirist**. His satire is **subtle** rather than savage: he points out the **flaws of mankind**, especially in the clergy, yet he clearly **loves people** and enjoys their company. A recurring concern in his work is **morality**, and he often writes as a kind of **reformer**, holding human behaviour up to a fair, amused light.

2 Important Works

Work	Approx. Date	Genre	Significance
<i>The Romaunt of the Rose</i>	1360s	Dream-vision (translation)	His translation of the French <i>Roman de la Rose</i> ; survives in fragments A, B, C
<i>The Book of the Duchess</i>	1368–72	Dream-vision elegy	His first major work ; mourns Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster
<i>Anelida and Arcite</i>	c. 1370	Narrative poem	Marks his move from the French to the Italian period
<i>The House of Fame</i>	c. 1374–85	Dream-vision	Unfinished; parodies Dante's Divine Comedy

Work	Approx. Date	Genre	Significance
<i>The Parliament of Fowls</i>	c. 1380–83	Dream-vision / allegory	Earliest link of St Valentine's Day with love; uses rhyme royal
<i>Troilus and Criseyde</i>	1380s	Courtly romance / tragedy	A tragic love story set in the Trojan War ; in rhyme royal
<i>The Legend of Good Women</i>	1380s	Dream-vision	First major English use of iambic pentameter ; nine legends finished
<i>The Canterbury Tales</i>	1387–1400	Frame-narrative collection	His magnum opus ; left unfinished at his death

CONCEPT

Order they were written: *The Romaunt of the Rose* → *The Book of the Duchess* (1368) → *Anelida and Arcite* → *The House of Fame* → *The Parliament of Fowls* → *Troilus and Criseyde* (1380s) → *The Legend of Good Women* → *The Canterbury Tales* (1387–1400). *The Book Named the Governor* is a work of **Sir Thomas Elyot**.

3**Important Works in Detail**

The Canterbury Tales, his masterpiece, is covered on its own in Section 4.

3.1 The Romaunt of the Rose (1360s)

In one line: Chaucer's English version of a famous French dream-poem about the pursuit of love.

This is Chaucer's **translation** into Middle English of the French allegorical poem *Le Roman de la Rose*. It survives in **three fragments**, known as **A, B, and C**. The poem is a **dream vision**: the dreamer is advised by the **god of Love** on how to win his lady, whose love is **symbolised by a rose** that he longs for but cannot reach.

CONCEPT

Who praised this translation? The French poet **Eustache Deschamps** honoured Chaucer in a poem called "**Balade to Geoffrey Chaucer**," calling him a "**grand translateur**" ("great translator") for carrying French poetry into English.

EXAM ESSENTIAL

- A **translation** of the French *Roman de la Rose*; survives in **fragments A, B, C**.
- **Eustache Deschamps** praised it and called Chaucer "**grand translateur**" in his "**Balade to Geoffrey Chaucer**."

3.2 The Book of the Duchess (1368)

In one line: a grieving knight in a dream mourns the lady he has lost — Chaucer's first major poem.

This is Chaucer's **first major work**, a **dream vision** written to mourn **Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster**, the wife of **John**

of **Gaunt**, who died of plague in **1368**. Sleepless, the narrator reads the old story of **Ceyx and Alcyone** and falls asleep. In his dream he meets a **knight dressed in black** who says he has lost a game of chess with **Fortune** and so lost his queen. The narrator slowly understands that the "lost queen" is the knight's dead beloved. He wakes and decides the dream is worth turning into a poem.

EXAM ESSENTIAL

- Chaucer's **first major work**; a **dream poem** on the death of the **Duchess of Lancaster (Blanche)**.
- Also titled *The Death of Blanche*; the mourning **Black Knight** stands for **John of Gaunt**.

3.3 The House of Fame (c. 1374–85)

In one line: an eagle carries the dreamer to the palace of the goddess Fame to see how reputation is made and lost.

An **unfinished dream vision** in **octosyllabic couplets**. The narrator dreams he is in a glass temple covered with images of famous people, and a talking **eagle** carries him up to the **House of Fame**. The goddess **Fame** is pictured with countless **tongues, eyes, and ears**, showing how rumour and reputation spread. The poem is playful and learned, and it **parodies Dante's** *The Divine Comedy*.

EXAM ESSENTIAL

- A **dream vision** by Chaucer; **unfinished**; in **octosyllabic couplets**.

- It **parodies Dante's** *The Divine Comedy*, an **eagle** guides the dreamer to the goddess **Fame**.

3.4 The Parliament of Fowls (c. 1380–83)

In one line: on St Valentine's Day a gathering of birds debates love while three eagles court one female.

A **dream vision** and **allegory**, written to celebrate the marriage of **Richard II to Anne of Bohemia**. The narrator reads Cicero's "**Dream of Scipio**," falls asleep, and dreams of **Dame Nature** presiding over a great assembly of **birds** who have come to choose their mates. **Three male eagles** all court one female eagle; the debate is full of speeches and squabbles, and in the end she is given more time to choose. Because the birds gather to pair off, the poem is the **earliest known link between St Valentine's Day and lovers**.

CONCEPT

What is a dream vision? A poem told as if it were a dream — the narrator falls asleep and the story unfolds in the dream. It was a favourite medieval form, and most of Chaucer's early poems use it.

EXAM ESSENTIAL

- A **dream vision** and **allegory**; written in **rhyme royal**.
- The **earliest reference** linking **St Valentine's Day** with love; set among **birds** choosing mates.

3.5 Troilus and Criseyde (1380s)

In one line: a Trojan prince wins the love of Criseyde during the Trojan War, only to be betrayed when she is sent to the Greek camp.

A **courtly romance** and **tragedy** set during the **Trojan War**. **Troilus**, a Trojan knight who once scorned love, is struck by Cupid and falls for the widow **Criseyde**. They become lovers, but Criseyde is sent to the **Greek camp** to join her father, and there she gives her love to the Greek **Diomedes**. When Troilus learns of her betrayal his heart breaks; he dies fighting in the war. After death his soul rises to the **eighth sphere**, where he looks down and sees the smallness of human grief.

The story was old before Chaucer: it came from **Boccaccio's** *Il Filostrato*, and Chaucer also drew on **Boethius**. He retold it in **Middle English** using **rhyme royal**. **Hector**, the great Trojan hero, also appears in the poem.

CONCEPT

Why is Criseyde important? Criseyde is often called the **first complete heroine of post-classical Europe** – a fully drawn, complex female character rather than a flat ideal, which makes the poem a landmark in the history of characterisation.

EXAM ESSENTIAL

- A tragic love story set in the **Trojan War**; in **rhyme royal**; based on **Boccaccio's** *Il Filostrato*.
- **Hector** is a character in it; **Criseyde** is regarded as the **first complete heroine** of post-classical Europe.

- **Sir Philip Sidney** praised the poem in his *Defence of Poesie*; **Shakespeare** later wrote his own play *Troilus and Cressida*.

3.6 The Legend of Good Women (1380s)

In one line: as penance for writing badly of women, Chaucer tells the stories of famous faithful women from myth and history.

An **unfinished dream vision** and the **first major English poem in iambic pentameter** (here, rhymed decasyllabic couplets). In the **prologue**, the **God of Love** and his queen **Alceste** scold Chaucer for showing women badly in earlier work — for example, the fickle Criseyde. As a **palinode** (a poem that takes back an earlier view), he sets out to praise virtuous women instead. He completed **nine** legends, including **Cleopatra, Thisbe, and Dido**.

CONCEPT

What is a palinode? A poem in which the writer **reverses or apologises for** something he said before. *The Legend of Good Women* is a palinode: Chaucer now praises women after having criticised them.

EXAM ESSENTIAL

- **Unfinished**; the **first major English poem in iambic pentameter**; a **palinode**.
- Chaucer completed **nine** legends (Cleopatra, Thisbe, Dido, and others).

- **Tennyson** drew on it for his poem *A Dream of Fair Women*.

4 The Canterbury Tales

This is Chaucer's most important work – studied in full here.

4.1 The Big Idea

In one line: a mixed group of pilgrims ride to a saint's shrine and pass the time by holding a storytelling contest, each tale matching its teller.

The Canterbury Tales (written **1387–1400**) is a collection of stories held together by a **frame narrative**: a company of pilgrims travelling to the shrine of **St Thomas Becket** at **Canterbury** agree to tell tales along the way. The work opens in **April**, the month of spring and renewal, a fitting time to begin a pilgrimage. Because the pilgrims come from every level of society, the tales together paint a wide, lively picture of **medieval English life**. In structure the book resembles **Boccaccio's** *Decameron*, which Chaucer may have read in Italy.

Chaucer **died while still writing it**, so the work is **unfinished**.

CONCEPT

What is a frame narrative? A larger story that holds many smaller stories inside it. Here the pilgrimage is

the frame, and each pilgrim's tale is a story within it. Each tale tends to fit the **personality and class** of its teller.

4.2 Key Numbers and Structure

The Host of the **Tabard Inn**, **Harry Bailey**, proposes the game: each pilgrim should tell **four tales** — two going to Canterbury and two coming back — and the best storyteller will win a **free meal** at his inn. That plan would have produced about **120 tales**, but Chaucer finished only **24**.

Item	Detail
Written	1387–1400 ; left unfinished
Starting point	The Tabard Inn , Southwark (near London)
Destination	Shrine of St Thomas Becket , Canterbury
Host	Harry Bailey , who proposes the contest
Pilgrims	30 in all (the narrator meets 29 at the inn, plus himself)
Tales planned	120 (four per pilgrim)
Tales actually told	24
Narrative voice	First-person "I" in the General Prologue
Form	Mostly verse (iambic pentameter); a few tales in prose
Opening line	Famous opening on the showers of April

The book is **mostly in verse**, chiefly **iambic pentameter**, but it also contains **prose**: the two prose tales are "**The Parson's Tale**" and the narrator's "**Tale of Melibee**."

CONCEPT

How many pilgrims and tales? Counts vary slightly by edition, but the standard figures are **30 pilgrims** (the narrator meets 29 others at the Tabard Inn) and **24 tales** told; only about **23 pilgrims** actually tell a story, since some tell none and the plan was never completed.

4.3 The General Prologue

The **General Prologue** introduces the company and is told in the **first person** by the narrator, "I." He meets the pilgrims at the **Tabard Inn** and describes most of them in vivid detail — their looks, clothes, and habits — so that each portrait quietly reveals the person's true character. Through these portraits Chaucer **mocks the corruption** of the church and the vanity of the well-to-do, while warmly praising the genuinely good.

The pilgrims represent the **three estates** of medieval society: the **Nobility**, the **Church**, and the **Commoners**.

CONCEPT

What are the three estates? The three social groups of the Middle Ages: the **Nobility** (the Knight, the Squire), the **Church** (the Prioress, the Monk, the Parson), and the **Commoners** (the Miller, the Wife of Bath, the Plowman). Chaucer's pilgrims are drawn from all three.

One often-noted point about the book is that, instead of dwelling on England's **divisions**, it **revels in its diversity** — celebrating the whole range of people rather than setting them against one another.

4.4 The Pilgrims

The Knight

- A **noble** warrior who fights for **truth and faith**, not for personal glory.
- The narrator's **ideal of chivalry**; he tells the **first tale**.
- Comes straight from battle, his coat still stained from his armour.

The Squire

- The Knight's **son**, a young knight-in-training; fashionable and in love with **courtly love**.
- Of **noble** birth, so counted among the **upper class**.

The Prioress (Madame Eglantine)

- A nun who tries hard to seem **refined and courtly** rather than holy.
- So tender-hearted she would **weep to see a mouse caught in a trap**.
- Wears a gold **brooch** inscribed "**Amor Vincit Omnia**" ("Love Conquers All") — a motto of courtly love, unusual for a nun.
- Of high rank, so counted among the **upper class**.

The Monk

- A churchman who ignores his religious duties; he loves **hunting** and fine living and dresses richly.
- Chaucer satirises him for spending **too much time hunting and too little on religious duty**.

The Friar

- A cheerful, comfort-loving churchman who flatters the **rich** instead of helping the poor.
- Chaucer calls him a "**noble pillar of order**" — said with **irony**, since the Friar is corrupt.

The Parson

- A poor but **honest** parish priest who **practises what he preaches** and **criticises corrupt clergy**.
- One of Chaucer's two models of **deep Christian goodness**.
- Of him Chaucer writes that "**if gold rust, what shall iron do?**" — if even priests (the "gold") go bad, what hope for ordinary people (the "iron")?

The Ploughman

- The Parson's **brother**; a humble, hardworking man who helps his neighbours and pays his tithes.
- The other model of **deep Christian goodness** in the Prologue.

The Wife of Bath (Alison)

- A bold, talkative woman from Bath who has had **five husbands** and claims to know all about marriage.
- Chaucer shows her as **crude and vulgar, outspoken and boastfully licentious, and bubbling with vitality**.
- She is **strong and keenly aware of her own rights**, defending a woman's freedom in marriage.

The Pardoner

- A corrupt churchman who makes his living by **selling indulgences** (pardons for sin) to those who had sinned.

The Summoner

- A church officer with a **red face full of sores**, the sign of his coarse, corrupt nature.

The Doctor of Physic

- A **greedy** physician who insists on being paid in gold, which he excuses as needed for medicine.

The narrator ("Chaucer")

- A pilgrim in the story who describes all the others and later tells two tales himself.

CONCEPT

Upper-class and morally exemplary pilgrims: The clearly **upper-class** pilgrims are the **Knight, the Squire, and the Prioress**. The two examples of **deep Christian goodness** are the **Parson and the Ploughman**.

4.5 The Major Tales

The Knight's Tale

- The **first tale**, a **chivalric romance** about two cousins, **Palamon and Arcite**, who both love **Emily (Emelye)**.
- Set at the court of **Theseus** of Athens; the cousins fight, Arcite wins but dies, and Palamon at last marries Emily.
- Lydgate's *The Siege of Thebes* was written as a **companion piece** to this tale.

The Reeve's Tale

- A bawdy story of a dishonest **miller, Symkyn**, who steals grain and is tricked and shamed by two students, **John and Aleyn**.

The Wife of Bath's Tale

- Set in the days of **King Arthur**. A knight who has wronged a woman must discover **what women most desire** or die.
- The answer is **sovereignty** — a woman's wish for **control over her own life and husband**. An old woman gives him the answer, marries him, and, rewarded for letting her choose, becomes both beautiful and faithful.

The Pardoner's Tale

- A moral tale on the theme of **greed**. Three friends set out to kill **Death** and find a heap of **gold** under a tree.
- Plotting to keep it all, they kill one another — proving that **greed brings death**.

The Nun's Priest's Tale

- The famous **beast fable** of the rooster **Chanticleer**, his favourite hen **Pertelote**, and the flattering fox **Reynard**.
- The fox flatters Chanticleer into closing his eyes to sing and seizes him; the clever rooster flatters the fox into opening his mouth and escapes.
- Its moral is "**Never trust a flatterer**."

The Parson's Tale

- The **last tale**, told in **prose**; a long **sermon** on sin and repentance, dealing with the **seven deadly sins**. It serves as the moral close of the whole book.

CONCEPT

The seven deadly sins appear across the tales; the two that are not treated as such within the tales are **Jealousy and Homicide**.

The narrator's own tales: Chaucer the pilgrim narrates "**Sir Thopas**" (a mock-romance, interrupted by the Host) and "**The Tale of Melibee**." The tale about a **Christian child murdered by Jews** is "**The Prioress's Tale**."

4.6 Genres and Devices

The tales range widely in kind — **romance** (the Knight's), bawdy comedy or **fabliau** (the Reeve's), moral tale (the Pardoner's), **beast fable** (the Nun's Priest's), and **sermon** (the Parson's). Chaucer's favourite device is **irony**: he praises a corrupt figure in glowing words so the gap between the words and the truth exposes the fault — as when the Friar is called a "**noble pillar of order**."

EXAM ESSENTIAL

- Written **1387–1400**; **unfinished**; begins at the **Tabard Inn**, bound for **St Thomas Becket's shrine** at Canterbury.
- **30 pilgrims, 24 tales** told; **120** planned; the Host is **Harry Bailey**; opens in **April**; first-person "**I**" narration.
- Mostly **verse** (iambic pentameter); the **two prose tales** are "**The Parson's Tale**" and the narrator's "**Tale of Melibee**."
- **First tale** = the Knight's (Palamon, Arcite, Emily); **last tale** = the Parson's (prose sermon on the **seven deadly sins**).

- The **Summoner** has a **red face full of sores**; the **Prioress** wears the "**Amor Vincit Omnia**" brooch; the **Monk** is satirised for **hunting**; the **Pardoner** sells **indulgences**.
- Upper-class pilgrims = **Knight, Squire, Prioress**; deep Christian goodness = **Parson and Ploughman**.
- Three estates = **Nobility, Church, Commoners**; the sins not covered = **Jealousy and Homicide**.
- "**The Prioress's Tale**" = the child murdered by Jews; "**The Nun's Priest's Tale**" = a **beast fable**, moral "**Never trust a flatterer**."
- **Lydgate's** *Siege of Thebes* is a companion to "**The Knight's Tale**."

5 Criticism

Critic / Source	What they said
Eustache Deschamps	Praised Chaucer's <i>Roman de la Rose</i> translation and called him " grand translateur " in his " Balade to Geoffrey Chaucer ."
Thomas Hoccleve	Honoured Chaucer as " the firste fyndere of our fair langage ."
John Lydgate (<i>The Fall of Princes</i>)	Called Chaucer the " lodesterre ... off our langage " (the guiding star of English).
Sir Philip Sidney (<i>Defence of Poesie</i>)	Praised <i>Troilus and Criseyde</i> .
William Dunbar (<i>Lament for the Makaris</i>)	Mourned Chaucer among the great dead poets, alongside Gower and Henryson .

Critic / Source	What they said
John Dryden	Called Chaucer " a rough diamond, and must first be polished ere he shines. "
Matthew Arnold (<i>The Study of Poetry</i>)	By his "touchstone" standard, judged Chaucer " not one of the great classics. "

CONCEPT

What did Dryden and Arnold mean? Dryden's "**rough diamond**" is a compliment with a reservation: Chaucer has true brilliance but his early English still needs polishing. **Arnold**, applying his **touchstone method** (comparing lines against the very greatest poetry), placed Chaucer below Shakespeare and Milton and so called him "**not one of the great classics.**"