

Geoffrey Chaucer

(1343-1400)

Chaucer was arguably the foremost literary figure of the 14th century. He was a poet, scholar, traveller, courtier and a keen observer of life. He reflected his age in literature as no other, but Shakespeare has ever done. Chaucer's character, his foreign journeys, his keen observation of men and manners, his intimate knowledge of London and the English court influenced his entire poetic output. It is convenient to divide Chaucer's literary output into three stages, which show three distinctive influences on his poetry.

The French period: Chaucer's early poetry was directly influenced by contemporary French poetry. He wrote in 1369 *The Book of Duchesses* on the death of Blanche, John of Gaunt's wife. It is an allegory in the manner of reigning French school, but Chaucer gave his elegy freshness and sincerity.

The Italian period (1372-1384): Chaucer's Italian period is characterised by variety and new technical innovations in poetry. During his visits to Italy Chaucer saw a new world of art and literature which had reached astonishing excellence. The important works which he produced in emulation of the Italian masters are *The House of Fame*, *The Parliament of Fowls*, *Troilus and Cryseyde* and *The Legend of Good Women*.

The English Period (1384-1390): In this period, Chaucer "became independent, relying on himself entirely even for the use to which he puts his own borrowed themes". His monumental work, *The Canterbury Tales* belong to this period. In *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer made English a suitable medium of poetic or

literary composition. He developed the resources of the English language for literary use and set an example which was followed by a long line of poets.

Rickett remarks about Chaucer, “Frank, virile and tolerant, he is amused rather than angry with the little kinks in human nature, and in his intellectual vision, he has a wider sweep than most of our writers.”