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Geoffrey Chaucer: The Father of Modern English?

Touted as the father of modern English by his contemporaries and later (even modern) critics, Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-1400) remains one of the essential medieval writers that still has prevalence in our literary culture today. Most well known as a poet, Chaucer worked as a bureaucrat, courtier, and diplomat, which exposed him to the courtly style of life that he explores, questions, and mocks in his works. Most notably, Chaucer wrote in his vernacular English, as opposed to Latin or French, and also translated many important Continental works, such as Boccacio's *The Decameron* and Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy into English*. The popularity of Chaucer's works written in the London dialect of Middle English gave rise to this dialect's prominence and eventual status as modern English's predecessor.

In his lifetime, Chaucer's best known and most well-received work was *Troilus and Criseyde [1]*, a story of two star-crossed lovers in Troy that fall upon misfortune through the insufficiency of language to convey their love for one another. Modern audiences, however, know Chaucer best for his unfinished poem *The Canterbury Tales [2]*, which chronicles a group of pilgrims journeying to Canterbury Cathedral. The pilgrims agree to entertain themselves along the journey by telling each other tales; each agrees to tell two tales on both legs of the journey. Unfortunately, Chaucer completed only 24 tales before his untimely death. The 24 *Tales* with which we are left, however, are exemplary in their discussion of genre, authorship, reader-response, and concern with dissemination of written material. Within each of the tales, Chaucer explores a variety of issues and constructs the tales in ways that are influenced by various Continental authors, specifically Dante, Boccacio, and French romantic poets. Although other English poets from the medieval period are integral to the study of English literature, Chaucer stands as a beacon of cross-cultural literary identity, and his works and translations are an integral moment in the rise of the English literary tradition.

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[1] http://writersinspire.org/content/troilus-criseyde
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