



After reading the biography attached to this form, complete the handout.

Fill in the blank.

1. Geoffrey Chaucer was most likely born in _____.
2. He attended school at _____ where he was influenced by _____.
3. The first record of Chaucer reveals that he was a _____ in the house of _____.
4. The King ransomed Chaucer for _____ pounds which was a very large sum at that time.
5. He was only _____ years old when he was sent on a mission to France by Prince Lionel.
6. When there is no record of Chaucer for three years it is thought that he was studying to become a _____.
7. Chaucer eventually married _____ who served as a lady in waiting for the daughter of _____ and later on to _____.
8. Chaucer eventually became a royal _____.

Character Matching

- | | |
|--------------------------|---|
| ____ 1. John Gaunt | a. Tried to win favor by campaigning in France. |
| ____ 2. Geoffrey Chaucer | b. Child of Sir Payne Roet |
| ____ 3. King Edward II | c. Was born near Thames Street |
| ____ 4. Prince Lionel | d. Trusted Chaucer to go on missions. |
| ____ 5. Phillipa | e. The Duke of Lancaster. |

Short Answer

1. Describe Chaucer's original plan for the *Canterbury Tales*.
2. In what final state did *The Canterbury Tales* end up?
3. How is "pilgrimage" defined?



Geoffrey Chaucer

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The English author and courtier Geoffrey Chaucer (ca. 1345-1400) was one of the greatest poets of the late Middle Ages and has often been called the father of English poetry. His best-known works are *The Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus and Criseyde*.

The exact date and place of Geoffrey Chaucer's birth are not known. The evidence suggests, however, that he was born about 1345, or a year or two earlier, in his father's London house. This was located on Thames Street adjacent to the west bank of the Walbrook. It is probable that young Geoffrey attended school at St. Paul's Cathedral. If he did so, his early training must have been strongly influenced by men whose intellectual tastes were shaped by their association with Richard de Bury, one of the most learned Englishmen of his time and the author of a treatise on the love of books called *Philobiblon*. But our first record of Chaucer reveals that in 1357 he was a page in the household of the Countess of Ulster, the wife of Prince Lionel. From this time forward we find Chaucer associated in one way or another with the royal family.

During 1359-1360 King Edward III campaigned in France, hoping to better the terms of what would become the Treaty of Bretigny (1360), and even to be crowned king of France at Reims. But the campaign was a failure, and during it Chaucer, who was in the retinue of Prince Lionel, who was in the retinue of Prince Lionel, was taken prisoner. The King ransomed him for the substantial sum of £ 16 on March 1, 1360. Later in the year Chaucer was again in France on a mission for Prince Lionel. We should not be astonished that in the late 14th century a young man of about 15 should be entrusted with considerable responsibility—boys did not then experience the uneasy period of adolescence that we know today.

Chaucer's Marriage

After 1360 we lose sight of Chaucer for several years. There is an old tradition to the effect that he studied at the Inner Temple, where apprentices at law were trained. This kind of education would have been especially appropriate for a young man destined for

royal service. However, he may have been engaged with Prince Lionel in Ireland. He tells us in the "Retractions" at the close of *The Canterbury Tales* that he had made "many a song and many a lecherous lay." It is likely that such songs and lays were the product of his youthful years, and that he acquired an early reputation for songs and jocular tales.

Recently discovered documents indicate that in 1366 Chaucer was traveling in Spain, and it is probable that soon after his return he married a lady of the queen's chamber, Philippa, the daughter of Sir Payne Roet. Philippa later entered the service of Constance of Castile, the second wife of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster. Her sister, Katherine Swynford, had been in the service of John's first wife, Blanche. After the death of Blanche, Katherine became John of Gaunt's mistress, and many years later (1396) his third wife. Chaucer's ties with the Duke of Lancaster were thus very close. In 1368 Chaucer was again on the Continent, probably on a mission for the King. Chaucer was now a royal squire.

The Book of the Duchess

On Sept. 12, 1369, Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster, also died of the plague. John of Gaunt, who was campaigning on the Continent, did not return until December. When he did so, however, he established two chantry priests in St. Paul's Cathedral to sing Masses for Blanche, ordered a tomb to be erected for her and for himself in the choir north of the altar, and established a memorial service to be held annually for her on September 12. It seems probable that he also asked Chaucer to compose a memorial poem to be recited in connection with one of these services.

Before the death of Queen Philippa, poetry in the English court had been customarily written in French. French was the natural language of both King Edward and his queen. Her secretary, Jean Froissart, was the most prominent poet associated with the court. Chaucer's memorial poem, however, was to be in English. It is possible that he had written his English devotional poem, "An A B C," which is a translation from a French source, for Blanche at some time before her death. We must not suppose that Chaucer dashed off his new poem, *The Book of the Duchess*, in a few days. It is a complexly structured allegory suited to the rather sophisticated court tastes of the time, and a fitting memorial to one of the highest-ranking ladies of the English royal household.

The King did not allow Chaucer to remain idle. He was sent abroad on diplomatic missions in 1370 and again in 1372-1373. The latter mission took him to Italy, where he visited Genoa and Florence. He may have deepened his acquaintance with the poetic traditions established by Dante and Petrarch.

John of Gaunt was able to attend a memorial service for Blanche for the first time in 1374. It may be that Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* was read at this service. In any event, the duke granted Chaucer an annuity of £ 10, the normal income for a squire in an aristocratic household. The King granted Chaucer a daily pitcher of wine and appointed him controller of customs of wools, skins, and hides in the port of London. This position brought £ 10 annually and a bonus of 10 marks. The City of London granted Chaucer a residence above Aldgate; moreover, some wardships obtained in 1375 brought Chaucer a little over £ 175. He and Philippa were thus economically secure.

Chaucer supervised the construction of lists for an important tournament at Smithfield, where matches were held in return for the jousts at St. Ingelvert. There Henry of Derby, John of Gaunt's son and the future Henry IV, distinguished himself before departing on a Crusade. The clerkship, which required a great deal of work organizing workmen, collecting and transporting materials, and consulting with masons and carpenters, was seldom held for a long term in the 14th century, and Chaucer resigned in 1391. For a time thereafter he served as deputy forester for the royal forest at North Petherton. The King granted him a pension of £ 20 in 1394, and in 1397 an annual butt of wine was added to this grant. These grants were renewed and increased by Henry IV in 1399.

The Canterbury Tales

Between 1387 and 1400 Chaucer must have devoted considerable attention to the composition of his most famous work, *The Canterbury Tales*. Some of the tales were probably modified versions of earlier works adapted for the new collection, while others were written especially for it. The original plan demanded two tales each for over 20 pilgrims making a journey from Southwark to the shrine of St. Thomas Becket at Canterbury and back. (The shrine was a favorite site for penitential observances on the part of English royalty.) The plan was later modified to require only one tale from each pilgrim on the road to Canterbury, but even this scheme was never completed. The tales survive in groups connected by prologues and epilogues, but the proper arrangement of these groups is not altogether clear. It is clear that in his final plan Chaucer intended the collection to begin with the "Knight's Tale," a short epic, and to close with a sermon on penance delivered by the Parson. The series is introduced in a "General Prologue" that describes the pilgrimage and the pilgrims taking part in it.

Pilgrimages were regarded as penitential acts reflecting the pilgrimage of the Christian spirit toward its Creator. The spiritual pilgrimage was said to be motivated by love and characterized by self-denial and contrition. Hence the Parson's closing sermon is appropriate. Chaucer gives his pilgrimage peculiarly national overtones by directing it toward the shrine of St. Thomas, a citizen of London and a national hero. Among the fictional pilgrims the Knight, whose campaigns reflect the glories of England before 1369; the Clerk, who is an ideal scholar; and the Parson, who clearly reflects the apostolic life, serve as reminders of the ideals associated with St. Thomas. Most of the other pilgrims exemplify in amusing ways the weaknesses of the groups they represent. Chaucer's chief weapon in criticizing these weaknesses is humor. The humor is sometimes very subtle, but it is also often broad and outspoken. We shall understand the pilgrims much better if we regard them as exemplifications rather than as realistic individuals or as personalities. Moreover, we should not be misled by the poet's laughter so that we miss the seriousness of his criticism. Chaucer's vigor and sanity have won him wide acclaim ever since his own time, when he was admired for his philosophy as well as for his poetic talent.

In December 1399 Chaucer leased a house for a long term in the garden of Westminster Abbey. He had known many of the prominent men of his day—knights, merchants, scholars, and members of the royal family. He undoubtedly looked forward to a quiet retirement in the London area he knew so well, but he died in October of the following year. He was survived by his son Thomas, who had served both John of Gaunt and King Richard and who was to enjoy a distinguished career in the 15th century.