

Introduction to Geoffrey Chaucer

(A) CHAUCER'S LIFE AND WORKS

(A) Chaucer's life (1340-1400)

With Chaucer we come to the first great individual name in English literature. About his identity there can be no reasonable doubt. In the official records of the time his name appears as the recipient of various royal grants and pensions, and so we can trace his life with some accuracy.

Chaucer was born in London, entered the service of the Duchess of Clarence, served abroad as a soldier, was captured and ransomed and then entered the royal service. In succession, he served three kings — Edward III, Richard II and Henry IV. He seems to have prospered, for a large amount of royal favour came his way. He was buried in what came to be known as the Poet's Corner in Westminster Abbey.

(B) Chaucer's works

Chaucer's poems cannot be accurately dated but it is convenient and customary to divide them into three groups :-

(i) **The French Period.** During this period, he drew upon French models. The chief poems of this group are *The Book of the Duchess*, his earliest poem, which may be dated at 1369; *The Romance of the Rose*, a long allegorical poem; and *The Parliament of Fowls*.

(ii) **The Italian Period.** During the middle of his career, he paid several visits to Italy upon diplomatic business, and this may have suggested ideas for his poetry. The most important members of this group are *Troilus and Cressida*, a lengthy poem based upon Boccaccio; *The House of Fame*, shorter, and written in octosyllabic couplets; and *The Legend of Good Women*, in heroic couplets, telling nineteen tales of the famous women of antiquity.

(iii) **The English Period.** Chaucer's career closed in a fine blending of the two previous elements, to which he added his strongest and most valuable English touches. It is a sign of Chaucer's true genius that while he could assimilate much that was common to his age, he could add the last finishing touch that make his poems immortal. Of the last group, *The Canterbury Tales* easily takes the first place.