

Reference: Chaucer Biography

Chaucer's Difficult Lives

Bruce Holsinger (bwholsinger@gmail.com)

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Suppose you decided to write a biography of your all-time favorite author. Let's say she was a novelist and a poet, deceased for a number of years, with a large body of works to her credit. She was widely acclaimed, particularly in the latter half of her life, by her contemporaries, whose own writings contained subtle imitations of her style, largely without acknowledgment (though with some degree of snark). Despite the respect accorded her works, though, she was never able to make a living from her writing, and throughout her adult life until her death she held a series of day jobs that supported her lifestyle among the rich and rather more famous of her day. These jobs embraced a diverse array of vocations and allowed her to move among a variety of institutions. She was a bicycle messenger, a soldier and prisoner of war, and an ambassador; a scrap yard supervisor, a TSA inspector, and a construction boss. At one point she was even elected to the U.S. Congress, though she served only one term. There is a rumor that she might have gone to law school early on, though if she did she was expelled before receiving her degree. She liked to travel and journeyed widely as part of her various vocations, though she was born, lived, and died a New Yorker. In the wake of her death our author spawned any number of imitators, among them an angry government bureaucrat, a man of the cloth, and a disgruntled university professor.

When you start your research toward the biography you begin with the assumption that you will find a wealth of information about the relationship between the author and the body of works she left behind. This writer, after all, led a prolific literary life, a fascinating trajectory that left behind all sorts of legal, administrative, and personal records. Among other archival documents you find a deed to the house where she lived while writing her most famous novel—though the novel isn't mentioned in the deed, of course. And there's an interesting tidbit in a gossipy deposition she gave in a case concerning two businessmen squabbling over who has the rights to hang a fancy logo outside his office.

Yet your efforts to say something definitive about the relationship between the writer's recorded life and her literary works come up empty. What you quickly discover, in fact, is that the subject of your biography has left behind virtually no explicit evidence attesting to her motivations in writing literature at all. No wistful epistles to fellow authors lamenting the state of the publishing industry. No outraged e-mails to her New York editor complaining about her treatment by publicists and copyeditors. No diary entries contemplating the literary life and the meaning of it all. Why did she start writing poetry, and what does she remember about the process of composing her earliest work? How do we explain her so-called Novella Period? Was it a broken

heart that motivated that great lyric with the weird fishery metaphor—or was the thing just a joke at a close friend’s expense?

Most important of all, why did she never finish what was to be her greatest work, a cycle of narratives told from the point of view of a few dozen Manhattanites and celebrating the power of story in the modern post-industrialized world? You care about this writer, after all, only because of her work. Sure, she led an interesting and colorful life, but no more interesting and colorful than that of your average middle class New Yorker, and one would never think to write her biography if it weren’t for her literary legacy and its continuing rewards.



One of the challenges of writing an account of Geoffrey Chaucer’s life, whether a full-length literary biography or a brief chapter for a companion such as this one, is the difficult disjunction between the written record of his public and private life and the literary corpus he left behind. The same holds true for many makers of literature, of course, particularly those who lived before the nineteenth century, and even for some modern authors whose life records bear little trace of their literary pursuits. In Chaucer’s case this problem is made more acute by the complete absence of any documentary record attesting to his literary life. As Ardis Butterfield notes in an illuminating discussion of the perils of literary biography, there exists “no surviving document in the Life-Records—the collection, first published in the 19th century, of five hundred legal documents, warrants and financial records relating to Chaucer the man—[that] mentions Chaucer’s poetry. We know that writings are a treacherous resource for the life, just as life remains obdurately separate from writing” (42). The reverse doesn’t hold quite true: several of Chaucer’s shorter poems contain glimpsing mentions of friends, fellow officials, or literary companions, while certain historical events are referenced or alluded to at certain points in his verse. For the most part, however, the literary biographer must inevitably build any narrative of Geoffrey Chaucer’s poetical life on the thinnest of foundations. (The standard book-length biographies are Pearsall and Howard; a helpful concise biography is Cannon; an influential study of the relation of Chaucer and his poetry to the political and social worlds of Ricardian London is Strohm, *Social Chaucer*. Most of the documentary records attesting to Chaucer’s life are collected in Crow and Olson.)

As far as we know, the poet who wrote *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Canterbury Tales* was the same Geoffrey Chaucer born in London in the 1340s. His father, John Chaucer, was a relatively prosperous wine merchant who also spent time as a servant in the government and household of King Edward III; Agnes, his mother, came from a wealthy and propertied London family. Chaucer’s early education may have taken place at one of the grammar schools in the Vintry neighborhood, perhaps St. Paul’s Almonry School, a secular institution that would have taught him to read and write and exposed him to an array of classical and medieval Latin works that figure in his poetry in a variety of ways (Brewer 14-31; Rudd 4-5). By the mid-1350s Chaucer was serving as a retainer (or attendant) in the household of Elizabeth, Countess of Ulster, and then did a stint in the army of King Edward III.

Beginning in the late 1350s Chaucer entered a long phase of his career that involved regular and often extensive travels outside England, with many opportunities for exposure to the literary

cultures of the cities, regions, and institutions he visited. These trips included months-long diplomatic sojourns in Italy, France, and Spain in often adventurous service of the king, some of it related to the long series of conflicts between England and France that would come to be called the Hundred Years War, a period in which Chaucer emerged “as a European writer,” in James Simpson’s phrase (55). During the siege of Rheims in 1360 he spent time as a prisoner of war and was ransomed for sixteen pounds, one of the last accounts of his official life before a gap in the records beginning in the early 1360s. In 1372-73 Chaucer was in Italy, with separate missions to Genoa and Florence, then traveled there again in 1378, this time to Lombardy.

A central strand of Chaucer scholarship over the years has concerned the important role played by these relatively extensive foreign travels in the shaping of his poetry. It was surely during his Italy trips, for example, that he first encountered the writings of Dante Alighieri, Francesco Petrarca, and Giovanni Boccaccio, a triumvirate of trecento Italian writers all of whom he deliberately imitates in his verse and narrative forms (see especially Wallace; Ginsburg; Clarke). While Chaucer was far from England’s first cosmopolitan poet (numerous insular poets from the early Middle Ages wrote in Latin forms found in centers of learning on the Continent), he is the first whose English verse reflects extensive and career-long engagement with the forms and genres of other European vernaculars. In the “Complaint to His Lady” there is a provocative experiment with terza rima, Dante’s verse form in the *Divine Comedy*, while his English ballades follow the conventions of fixed-form French *chanson* embodied in the work of his French contemporaries Guillaume de Machaut and Eustace Deschamps (Muscatine; Wimsatt; Holsinger). Jonathan Hsy has identified a “polyglot poetics” at the heart of Chaucerian versifying, a trait he shared with some of his less cosmopolitan contemporaries during the Ricardian era (Hsy).

Chaucer shows less interest in the native modes of vernacular versifying, despite his immersion in the literary culture of England’s greatest city and its environs. By the mid-1370s Chaucer was settled in London, living in a house above Aldgate, one of the thoroughways in the old Roman wall that surrounded the city. Leased to him in 1374 by the Corporation of London, his house there, though described by one biographer as “a veritable town castle” (Gardner 209), must in reality have been quite small, no more than a few rooms, though its location would have afforded him an unusual vantage point at the edge of the city as well as a prestigious perch above the hubbub below (Strohm, *Chaucer’s Tale*). In Chaucer’s day London proper had a population of approximately fifty thousand, along with a complex network of parishes as well as city wards each with its own officers reporting up to the mayor at the Guildhall. At certain times London would have had the feel of a garrisoned town, given the repeated threats from France and Burgundy over a number of years (Barron). Despite the inherent interest of London as a poetic and narrative subject, Chaucer has very little to say about the city in which many of the major events of his life played out. One of the few exceptions is the fragmentary Cook’s Tale, which takes place in Cheapside; the company of pilgrims in the *Canterbury Tales* departs not from London but from the Tabard in Southwark, across the river from the city and outside its jurisdiction. London is for Chaucer an “absent city,” in David Wallace’s phrase, a site of vibrant literary production that leaves only oblique marks on his corpus of writings (156-81).

Over these decades of his life Chaucer worked in several positions that exposed him regularly to the international culture and commerce that linked London to the much wider world beyond. For

some years he served as controller of Customs for the crown, working from the customhouse on the shore of the Thames, just steps down from the Tower of London. He was also employed as Clerk of the King's Works, a position that entailed a wide array of duties detailed in numerous surviving writs, indentures, receipts, and other documents mentioning his office (Patterson 36-38; Strohm, *Social Chaucer* 24-46). These duties ranged from arranging for the wages of clerks and masons to overseeing the delivery of supplies, such as the "101 tons of stone of Stapilton, [and] 200 cartloads of stone of Reygate" brought to Windsor in July 1391 (Selby et al., 312). Both of these positions involved Chaucer in the intricacies of royal administration and bureaucratic politics in immediate and often hands-on ways.

An equally crucial factor shaping Chaucer's relationship to the English aristocracy was his marriage to Philippa de Roet, a lady-in-waiting first to Queen Philippa, wife of Edward III, and subsequently to Duchess Constance of Castile, the second wife of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster. Philippa Chaucer's sister, Katherine Swynford, was Gaunt's mistress and, following the death of Duchess Philippa, became his third wife, and thus one of the most powerful women in the realm. This proximity by marriage to the upper echelons of English nobility is a fascinating aspect of Chaucer's biography, much discussed by scholars as a key to understanding the political implications of his writing—most usually its political evasiveness, a reflection of the factionalism that characterized the high-level parliamentary and aristocratic politics of his day (see especially Strohm, *Chaucer's Tale*).

In 1386 Chaucer's long-time residence in London was interrupted for reasons that remain unclear, and thus ripe for speculation. Paul Strohm has recently suggested that this period in Chaucer's career was his moment of greatest personal and institutional crisis, from which he would emerge as a full-fledged public poet with a "new artistic resolve" that would seal once and for all "his commitment to the ambitious and startlingly unprecedented project of the *Canterbury Tales*" (*Chaucer's Tale* 6). During his time away from the city, Chaucer served as Justice of the Peace for Kent, a position that involved him at least nominally in the legal machinery of Kentish justice and its bureaucratic arm. During this same year Chaucer also served as Member of Parliament, at the rate of pay of two shillings a day for the duration of the session. He certainly attended the Parliament of 1386 (afterwards known as the "Wonderful Parliament") convened in October and November in Westminster, the royal town neighboring London though in Chaucer's day not technically part of the city. At issue in the Parliament of 1386 were King Richard's II's extravagant expenditures among the royal affinity and his favoritism toward certain nobles such as Robert de Vere, Earl of Oxford, whom the king had just recently created Duke of Ireland. The lords' anger at the king resulted in the impeachment of the Lord Chancellor, Sir Michael de la Pole, and growing unrest against King Richard by a group of nobles later known as the Lords Appellant (Roskell). Chaucer's more general investment in the creative capacities of political assemblages can be seen in works such as the *Parlement of Foules*, which, though likely predating his service as member, may derive part of its imaginative energy from the poet's familiarity with the machinery of government. Matthew Giancarlo describes Chaucer's parliamentary poetics as a unique admixture of speech, politics, and public life: "As an assembly devoted to the politics of talk and the tensions both within and between social classes, parliament provides a uniquely analogous formation to the communal structures of Chaucer's poetry for exploring communicative exchange in settings that are at once conflictual and consensual, self-interested and public-oriented" (132).

While in Westminster that autumn Chaucer also testified at the Scrope-Grosvenor matter in the Court of Chivalry, an aristocratic institution overseen by the Constable and Marshal of England that arbitrated disputes over heraldry and coats of arms as well as war matters, such as the exchange of prisoners and ransoms. The case involved a conflict between Richard Scrope (a Yorkshire baron) and Robert Grosvenor (a knight of Chester) over the rights to a particular coat of arms. A paraphrase or summary of Chaucer's testimony in the Scrope-Grosvenor matter survives, and it shows the poet firmly in Scrope's camp. When he was asked whether he had ever heard of an official challenge to Scrope's rights to the heraldic arms by Grosvenor or any of his ancestors, Chaucer "said no, but that he was once in Friday Street, London, and walking through the street, he observed a new sign hanging out with these arms thereon, and inquired 'what inn that was that had hung out these arms of Scrope?' And a man answered him, saying, 'They are not hung out, Sir, for the arms of Scrope, nor painted there for those arms, but they are painted and put there by a Knight of the county of Chester, called Sir Robert Grosvenor'; and that was the first time that he ever heard speak of Sir Robert Grosvenor, or his ancestors, or of any one bearing the name of Grosvenor" (cited in Patterson 195). As Lee Patterson among others has suggested, the deposition hints at the poet and storyteller beneath the public man, spinning a brief and locally specific narrative of surprise and confusion (the detail of "Friday Street" makes the story ring true) while reminding the audience of Chaucer's long service and experience in war, as both prisoner and combatant, dating all the way back to the siege of Rheims—over a quarter century prior to the Scrope-Grosvenor dispute.

Following the events of 1386 and the death of Philippa in 1387, Chaucer served a number of roles in royal service over the remaining years of his life. In 1389 he was appointed Clerk of the King's Works, overseeing royal building projects in London and Westminster on behalf of the crown. Two years later he assumed the position of deputy forester in North Petherton, Somerset, likely an honorific post that would not have entailed the kinds of on-the-ground involvement in land management performed by the more numerous riding foresters employed in the same jurisdiction (Pollard 84). Chaucer was still in royal service during the final years of his life, though we know nothing specific of the duties he was performing at that point. An order of protection survives from May of 1398 granted to "Geoffrey Chaucer, our beloved esquire going about divers parts of England on the king's arduous and pressing business": a remarkable testament to the durability of a long career serving the king (Saunders 3). Chaucer spent most of the final years of his life in Westminster, residing in a small house near the Abbey, where he was later memorialized, perhaps at or near the actual site of his entombment (see Dane; Pearsall).

These known facts of Chaucer's public duties and obligations (and there are dozens more) give little sense of his life as a poet, an aspect of his biography that must be gleaned from his writings themselves—a task fraught with difficulty. We get many intriguing glimpses of his poetic personality at work, as well as the dependence of his literary voice on those networks of fellow writers and intellectuals with whom he must have shared his writing or whose works influenced his own: the narrator of the *Canterbury Tales* disingenuously apologizing in the General Prologue for the lewd and frank content of the pilgrims' narratives, the nod to John Gower and Ralph Strode near the end of *Troilus and Criseyde*, the distressed narrator of the *House of Fame* with his gestures to Dante and other poets.

Yet even the dating of Chaucer's writings and the order in which he wrote them have long been matters of controversy; one of the poet's biographers, Derek Pearsall, admits that "the chronology of Chaucer's writings is a spider's web of hypothesis" (*The Canterbury Tales* 1). This has not kept biographers and literary historians from advancing numerous speculations on known details of Chaucer's life with some implicit or explicit bearing on the matters treated in his poetry. A clear case of such a link between historical event and poetic invention is the *Book of the Duchess*, perhaps the earliest of Chaucer's major works, and certainly the first of his dream visions. The *Book* is identified by Chaucer himself, in the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*, as a work on "the Deeth of Blaunche the Duchesse," leading most scholars to agree that the poem, elegiac in mode and content, was written to commemorate the death of Blanche of Lancaster, first wife of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster and brother of King Edward III (Hansen 58-86). Duchess Blanche fell victim to the plague in 1368, meaning the poem was likely composed within a short span of time following her death. Other, equally intriguing, references to contemporaneous events—the Rising of 1381, the emergence of the Wycliffite heresy—have been identified in a range of Chaucer's works, nearly all of them showing a certain degree of allusiveness or hedging, a laconic and often ironic remove from the politics of the moment (see Cole).

One of the darkest and most controversial elements of the poet's biography concerns an incident that occurred in 1380, when Chaucer was caught up and then released in a legal proceeding from an act of *raptus* against a woman named Cecily Chaumpaigne, daughter of a London baker. The term *raptus* could have any number of meanings in the legal culture of Chaucer's day, and for a long time scholars bent over backwards to untangle the poet from the clear implications of sexual violence entailed by the Chaumpaigne release, taking the less loaded connotations of *raptus* to denote a forced abduction or some other, perhaps less horrifying act against her person. While more recent scholarship has hardly clarified the matter, it does seem certain that Chaucer's *raptus* of Cecily Chaumpaigne represented an act of unquestionable offense, with clear implications for his reputation and his finances: as a condition of his release he paid her ten pounds. As Christopher Cannon puts it, whatever physical act Chaucer did or did not commit, that purported action "finally warranted the name *raptus* because, to precisely the extent that what Chaucer did seemed right and proper to him, it was an unmitigated outrage to Chaumpaigne" (Cannon, "Lives" 42; see also Cannon, "Raptus" and "Chaucer and Rape"). The Chaumpaigne documents, with all they imply, speak to the entanglement of gender, body, and violence in Chaucer's official life just as they bear on the frequent negotiation of similar themes in his poetry, from the rape of an unnamed maiden that opens the *Wife of Bath's Tale* to the eerily melodious evocation of the rape of Philomela at a crucial point in the *Troilus*. These and other episodes consolidate what Holly Crocker describes as a Chaucerian masculinity "based on difference, violence, and domination," a vision and version of violent manhood that clearly shaped a good part of Chaucer's negotiations of the world around him (65).



Ironic, mysterious, elusive, cagey: our modern comprehension of Chaucer and his public life continually butts up against the edifice of his poetry, which gives us only the barest glimpses of how he lived, the food he ate, what his physical environment looked like, how he felt about his enemies and loved ones, and even what he actually did for a living. Chaucer's lives as poet,

public figure, and literary persona are thus as much an effect of our own reconstructions as they are a product or reflection of his narrative and metrical art. To make such a claim is not to lapse into squishy relativism; it is, rather, to recognize the inevitable detachment of literary artifice from biographical intricacies and constraints. Chaucer must have devoted a significant amount of his spare time to storytelling, and it can be both liberating and challenging to understand his literary oeuvre as the eccentric product of a lifelong hobby or avocation rather than a necessarily revelatory aspect of his official biography. The obscurity and complexity of Chaucer's biography survive only through and within the fragmentary forms in which they survive. It is in this respect that Chaucer's life, such as we can comprehend it, most closely resembles the *Canterbury Tales*: a collection of intriguing glimpses, some of them fragmentary, some of them whole, at a panoply of multiple and multiply construed lives—or to use one of Chaucer's own images, the “tappe of lyf” (as the poet imagines it in the *Reeve's Tale*) that flows from birth to death in a fast and rushing stream visible only in its rushing blur, and cut off all too soon.

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