Evaluate Chaucer’s contribution to English literature and the effect of his work on the evolution of English

Steven Isaacson
Overview of Presentation

• Chaucer’s life in brief
• ‘The Canterbury Tales’
• Analysis of the language in ‘The Canterbury Tales’
• The versification in Chaucer’s work
• Chaucer’s use of characterisation
• The decision to write in English
• The effect of the printing press
• Conclusion
Who was Chaucer?

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- He fought at least one campaign in the Hundred Years war and was captured and ransomed
- In 1386 he was elected ‘Knight’ for Kent and went on to serve as a JP and was also made Clerk for King’s Works
The Canterbury Tales

• Chaucer wrote forty-three thousand lines of poetry and at least two major works of prose, but his most influential and important work is ‘The Canterbury Tales’.

Written between 1387 & 1400

Published in 1475

Genre: Anthology

Language: Middle English (Spoken & written in Britain between 1100 & 1500)
The Canterbury Tales

Brief Plot Summary

- The Canterbury Tales is a fictional account about a group of pilgrims, in a historical setting, who tell stories on their way to visiting the shrine of Thomas A Becket who is a saint of the Roman Catholic Church.

The themes of the tales include:
- Chivalric Romance
- Arthurian Romance
- Satire
- Beast Fable
- Exemplum (Concerns morals and religion)
The Canterbury Tales

Analysis of Language

Opening lines - Modern English translation

When April with his sweet showers
Has pierced the drought of March to the root
And bathed every vein in such moisture
Which has the power to bring forth the flower,
When also Zephyrus with his sweet breath
Has breathed spirit into tender new shoots
In every wood and meadow...
Then people love to go on pilgrimage.
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When that Aprill with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote
And bathed every veyne in swich (lycour = Moisture)
Of which (vertu = Power) engendred is the flour;
When Zephirus eek with his his sweete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
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*French loan words*

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**French loan words**  **Latin**  **Old Norse**  **Pro Nouns & Prepositions**

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An interesting characteristic of Middle English

- The letter ‘Y’ pronounced as long ‘e’ followed by a hyphen and a verb indicates the past tense of that verb
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  - y-draw (drawn)
  - Y-know (known)
  - Y-fall (fallen)
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- The letter ‘Y’ pronounced as long ‘e’ followed by a hyphen and a verb indicates the past tense of that verb
- Examples from ‘The Canterbury Tales’ include:
  y-draw (drawn)
  Y-know (known)
  Y-fall (fallen)
- Sometimes preceding verbs already in the past such as:
  Y-told or Y-nourished
Versification

Accentual-syllabic Meter

• Accentual-syllabic Meter was developed in the 12th century replacing the alliterative Anglo-Saxon meter
• Apart from two prose tales, The Canterbury Tales are written in verse.
• The meter used varies slightly, but the majority are written in iambic pentameter
• Iambic pentameter is when the line has ten syllables with the stress on every other syllable, it is only found in a small number of anonymous poems that pre-date Chaucer
• Chaucer invented the Rhyme Royal
Rhyme Royal

“The Prioress’s Tale”

Rhyme Royal is made of stanzas of seven lines in iambic pentameter with an ABABCC rhyme scheme:

a...Lady! Thy bounty, thy magnificence,
b...Thy virtue, and thy great humility,

a...There may no tongue express in no science,
b...For sometimes, Lady! Ere men pray to thee,

b...Thou go’st before, of thy benignity,
c...And gettest us the light, through thy prayere,

c...To guiden us unto thy son so dear
The Canterbury Tales

Characterisation

Characters depicted as the pilgrims telling the stories include:

- The learned, the religious, the romantic, the practical, the idealist, the irreverent. All from the middle classes.

The characters in the pilgrims’ tales include:

- All of humanity; commoners, royalty and everyone in-between.

- This was very rare in a time when all other stories dealt with Heroes, kings and Queens!
Why did Chaucer write in English?

- Power was moving away from Winchester to London
- Oxford and Cambridge universities were starting to move towards a standard English
- Chaucer could probably sense a paradigm shift and felt that the time was right for literature to be appreciated in the ‘new’ English
Why did Chaucer write in English?

“In no other author.... Is there better support for the view that there is an underlying correspondence between the natural rhythm of English poetry and that of English everyday conversation.” (Crystal, 2003)
Chaucer and the Printing Press

• The Canterbury Tales were hand written at first and circulated as manuscripts

• Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press in 1400, the year that Chaucer died

• William Caxton published two editions in the 1470s and 1480s bringing the work to a much wider audience

• The Canterbury Tales have never been out of print since!
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Conclusion

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- He was the first writer to write in a language accessible to all (the vernacular).
- The very fact that the art of story telling has remained almost unchanged is a testament to his art.
- He played a part in the standardisation of English which succeeded his death, although it should not be overstated.
The End

Any Questions?
List of References


