The Western Literary Canon in Context
Parts I–III

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John M. Bowers is a Professor of English at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, where he has served as chairman of the Department of English. In 1971 he received his B.A. from Duke University, and he went on to earn an M.A. in 1973 and a Ph.D. in 1978 from the University of Virginia. In 1975 he was awarded a Master of Philosophy degree from The University of Oxford, where he was a Rhodes Scholar with a specialty in medieval English literature.

Professor Bowers has published four books: *The Crisis of Will in "Piers Plowman"*; *The Canterbury Tales: Fifteenth-Century Continuations and Additions*; *The Politics of "Pearl": Court Poetry in the Age of Richard II*; and *Chaucer and Langland: The Antagonistic Tradition*. He is the author of more than 30 articles and essays on authors, including Saint Augustine, Marie de France, and William Shakespeare, as well as seven entries in the 2006 edition of *The Oxford Encyclopedia of British Literature* on writers such as William Caxton and works such as *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*. He has championed scholarship on Chaucer's contemporaries Thomas Usk and Sir John Clanvowe as well as the 15th-century Chaucerian poets Thomas Hoccleve and John Lydgate. His current book projects concern Chaucer, William Langland, and the *Gawain* Poet.

He has been a visiting research fellow at Merton College, University of Oxford, and a resident scholar at the Rockefeller Foundation's Study Center in Bellagio, Italy. He has lectured widely, with presentations in New York, Los Angeles, London, and Berlin. He has taught at the University of Virginia, Hamilton College (now Kaplan University), California Institute of Technology, and Princeton University. His regular teaching assignments include Chaucer, Shakespeare, literary theory, and world literature.

Professor Bowers has received numerous awards for his scholarship and teaching, including fellowships from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation. Among his many teaching recognitions, he is the recipient of the Nevada Regents' Teaching Award.

Lecture Seventeen
Chaucer—The Father of English Literature

Scope: Chaucer was the first Englishman to take Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio as models. He set out to create a national literature with himself installed as its founding father. England's literary tradition is configured as father-son genealogy also because the poet's son Thomas undertook the job of canon formation. Like the Bible, Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* becomes an anthology comprising nearly all genres of medieval writing—classical epic, saint's life, Greek myth, British history, Arthurian romance, and bedroom farce—staking a claim as the starting point of English literature. Chaucer's kinship with the new Lancastrian kings meant that his books benefited from royal sponsorship through the reigns of Henry VIII and Elizabeth I.

Outline

I. For 600 years, Geoffrey Chaucer has been known as the father of English literature. Where does this idea come from, and what does it mean that the English literary tradition is configured in this genealogical succession?

II. We know much more about Chaucer as a person than we know about any of our earlier writers, and even some of our later ones.

    A. We have almost 600 pages of life records concerning Chaucer. We even have an image of him from an early manuscript of *The Canterbury Tales*.

    B. From these records, we know that Chaucer saw military service during the Normandy Campaign of 1360 and was captured and ransomed.

III. The adversity that Chaucer suffered in France explains his animosity toward the French and their cultural and literary weight upon the English.

    A. Since 1066, the French had occupied England and had imposed French as the language of government.

    B. Although Chaucer may have spoken French more often than English, he elected to compose his works exclusively in English.

IV. Part of Chaucer's pushback from the French tradition was to find inspiration in another culture: the Italian tradition of the 14th century.

    A. We know from his life records that Chaucer traveled to Italy on diplomatic missions more than once.

    B. He might have actually had the opportunity to meet Petrarch and Boccaccio while he was there in 1373.

    C. Chaucer therefore became the first Englishman to be reading Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio long before the Renaissance. He used elements from all three writers in his own works.

V. Chaucer never mentions Boccaccio anywhere in his writings, despite the fact that Boccaccio was the single strongest and steadiest influence upon him.

    A. In Chaucer's adaptation of the story of Griselda, you can clearly see that revolt against a father figure. Boccaccio was an extremely powerful and domineering sort of predecessor, and Chaucer's response is to erase him from the account altogether, though Boccaccio served as an ultimate source.

    B. Chaucer's response mirrors Boccaccio's own struggle with the influence of Dante when writing the *Decameron*.

    C. One legacy that Chaucer retained from Boccaccio is the naughty story. This would become one of the most memorable things that Chaucer transmitted from the Italian tradition.

VI. As Boccaccio had done with Dante, Chaucer tried to one-up Boccaccio throughout *The Canterbury Tales*.

    A. Boccaccio had written in prose, but Chaucer decided to write his tales in verse.

    B. Chaucer has a larger cast of characters and projects a larger number of tales in *The Canterbury Tales* than Boccaccio did in the *Decameron.*

    C. Chaucer also has a wider range of stories. His work is a real compendium, an anthology of medieval genres, whereas Boccaccio focused only on love stories.

    D. Another remarkable achievement in Chaucer's rivalry with Boccaccio is the diversity of the pilgrims themselves. Boccaccio had a very homogenous group, young and aristocratic, while Chaucer presents the whole spectrum of English middle-class society at the time.

    E. The use of the pilgrimage by Chaucer is actually a political experiment.

        1. Current scholarship points to the pilgrimage as a principle of unifying the national community.

2. Despite their diversity, Chaucer's pilgrims enter into a social contract that anticipates 17th-century political theory.

VII. Part of Chaucer's agenda, so to speak, in establishing his credentials as the father of English literature was eliminating the competition.

    A. First, this means eliminating predecessors. For instance, Chaucer never mentions Anglo-Saxon literature, though he surely was familiar with it.

    B. It also means eliminating the contemporary competition, especially on the London scene.

        1. We know that the *Gawain* Poet was active in London at the time. Chaucer actually mentions Gawain as a character but never acknowledges the *Gawain* Poet.

        2. Chaucer also never mentions William Langland, whose *Piers Plowman* became the first national bestseller in the 1380s.

VIII. Another avenue Chaucer takes in establishing himself as a father figure involves reaching forward in time to invite future writers to join his enterprise.

    A. There are missing parts in *The Canterbury Tales*, so that later writers would feel the invitation to enter into this ongoing process and become Chaucerian poets.

        1. Early in the 15th century, Chaucer's great imitator John Lydgate, a monk poet, wrote a continuation of "The Knight's Tale."

        2. King James I of Scotland and even William Shakespeare used "The Knight's Tale" as inspiration for their own work.

    B. Later writers and scholars also had a hand in the formation of the Chaucerian canon, eliminating works by other Chaucerian authors and sometimes even excluding works by Chaucer himself.

IX. The real magic of Chaucer's emergence as the father of English literature is, as is often the case, a matter of luck.

    A. For example, Chaucer's first major poem was an elegy on the death of the Duchess of Lancaster, whose son eventually became King Henry IV.

    B. Chaucer's sister-in-law was also the stepmother of King Henry IV.

    C. Chaucer's son Thomas became a diplomat and an important royal administrator in the Lancastrian court. Thomas was the force behind the creation of elegant manuscripts of his father's work.

    D. Chaucer's sister-in-law later became the link of legitimacy for the powerful Tudor dynasty. King Henry VIII personally supervised the first collected works of Chaucer.

X. When Chaucer came on the scene, there was no English literature, only the crushing influence of French literature. Chaucer clearly had something in mind for creating a new literature in English only, and so he cleared the ground.

    A. He rejected French influence left and right, though he faced enormous personal and cultural pressure to write in French.

    B. He also refused to link himself to the Anglo-Saxon tradition. He did not use the alliterative verse form like the *Gawain* Poet had done.

    C. Instead of French or Anglo-Saxon forms, Chaucer adapted the Italian stanza form.

XI. In the Italian tradition, Chaucer also found a model for the patriarchal literary succession, a succession that Chaucer, with a great deal of luck, was able to establish in English literature.

    A. Chaucer's emphasis on storytelling and dynamic characters was passed down through Shakespeare and Dickens, among others.

    B. Chaucer's humor not only endeared him to his readers; it also became a hallmark of the English literary tradition.

Suggested Readings:

Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*.

Bowers, *Chaucer and Langland*.

Edwards, *Chaucer and Boccaccio*.

Questions to Consider:

1. English literature as a genealogy descending from Father Chaucer seems strange only when compared to other national traditions. Can you identify a father of French literature? A father of American literature?

2. Chaucer is primarily a humorist. As a result, his posterity in English literature shows a strong comedic strain even in its great canonic authors like Shakespeare and Jane Austen. Can you think of a major English writer who is *not* witty, humorous, and fond of eccentricity?