Chaucer (1340 A.D. – 1400 A.D.)

- Geoffrey Chaucer was born in 1340 A.D.
- He was of the bourgeois class
- He descened from an affluent family who made their money in the London wine trade.
- He attended the St. Paul’s Cathedral School, where he probably first became acquainted with the influential writing of Virgil and Ovid.
- In 1357, Chaucer became a public servant to Countess Elizabeth of Ulster, the Duke of Clarence’s wife, for which he was paid a small stipend enough to pay for his food and clothing.
- In 1359, the teenage Chaucer went off to fight in the Hundred Years’ War in France, and at Rethel he was captured for ransom.
- King Edward III helped pay Chaucer’s ransom.
- After Chaucer’s release, he joined the Royal Service.
- He travelled throughout France, Spain and Italy on diplomatic missions throughout the early to mid-1360s.
- King Edward granted Chaucer a pension of 20 marks.
- In 1366, Chaucer married Philippa Roet, the daughter of Sir Payne Roet, and the marriage conveniently helped further Chaucer’s career in the English court.
- By 1368, King Edward III had made Chaucer one of his esquires.
- The death of the queen in 1369, served to strengthen Philippa’s position and subsequently Chaucer’s as well.
- From 1370 to 1373, Chaucer went abroad again and fulfilled diplomatic missions in Florence and Genoa, helping establish an English port in Genoa.
- Chaucer familiarized himself with the work of Italian poets Dante and Petrarch.
- He was rewarded for his diplomatic activities with an appointment as Comptroller of Customs, a lucrative position.
- Philippa and Chaucer were also granted generous pensions by John of Gaunt, the First duke of Lancaster.
- In 1377 and 1388, Chaucer was on a diplomatic mission with the objective of finding a French wife for Richard II and securing military aid in Italy.
- Owing to his duties, Chaucer had little time to devote to writing poetry.
- In 1385, he petitioned for temporary leave and spent the next four years in Kent as a justice of the peace and later a Parliament member, rather than focusing on his writing.
- In 1387, Philippa passed away and Chaucer stopped sharing in her royal annuities and suffered financial hardship.
- He needed to keep working in public service to earn a living and pay off his growing accumulation of debt.

Works of Chaucer

Parliament of Fouls

- It is otherwise known as the Parlement of Foules
- It was written in 1380, during marriage negotiations between Richard and Anne of Bohemia.
- Critic J.A.W. Bennet interpreted the Parliament of Fouls as a study of Christian love.
It had been identified as peppered with Neo-Platonic ideas inspired by the likes of poets Cicero and Jean De Meun, among others.

The poem uses allegory, and incorporates elements of irony and satire as it points to the inauthentic quality of courtly love.

Chaucer was well acquainted with the theme firsthand—during his service to the court and his marriage of convenience to a woman whose social standing served to elevate his own.

**Troilus and Criseyde**

- It was written sometime in the mid-1380s.
- *Troilus and Criseyde* is a narrative poem that retells the tragic love story of Troilus and Criseyde in the context of the Trojan War.
- Chaucer wrote the poem using rime royal, a technique he originated.
- Rime royal involves rhyming stanzas consisting of seven lines apiece.

**The Legend of Good Women**

- The period of time over which Chaucer penned *The Legend of Good Women* is uncertain.
- Chaucer seems to have abandoned it before its completion.
- The queen mentioned in the work is believed to be Richard II’s wife, Anne of Bohemia. Chaucer’s mention of the real-life royal palaces Eltham and Sheen serve to support this theory.
- In writing *The Legend of Good Women*, Chaucer played with another new and innovative format: The poem comprises a series of shorter narratives, along with the use of iambic pentameter couplets.

**The Canterbury Tales**

- *The Canterbury Tales* is by far Chaucer’s best known and most acclaimed work.
- Initially Chaucer had planned for each of his characters to tell four stories a piece.
- The first two stories would be set as the character was on his/her way to Canterbury, and the second two were to take place as the character was heading home.
- Apparently, Chaucer’s goal of writing 120 stories was an overly ambitious one.
- In actuality, *The Canterbury Tales* is made up of only 24 tales and rather abruptly ends before its characters even make it to Canterbury.
- *The Canterbury Tales* continues to be acknowledged for the beautiful rhythm of Chaucer’s language and his characteristic use of clever, satirical wit.

**A Treatise on the Astrolabe**

- *A Treatise on the Astrolabe* is one of Chaucer’s non-fiction works.
- It is an essay about the astrolabe, a tool used by astronomers and explorers to locate the positions of the sun, moon and planets.
- Chaucer planned to write the essay in five parts but ultimately only completed the first two.
- It is one of the oldest surviving works that explain how to use a complex scientific tool.
Later Years of Chaucer

- From 1389 to 1391, after Richard II had ascended to the throne, Chaucer held a draining and dangerous position as Clerk of the Works.
- He was robbed by highwaymen twice while on the job, which only served to further compound his financial worries.
- To make matters even worse, Chaucer had stopped receiving his pension.
- Chaucer eventually resigned the position for a lower but less stressful appointment as sub-forester, or gardener, at the King’s park in Somersetshire.

- When Richard II was deposed in 1399, his cousin and successor, Henry IV, took pity on Chaucer and reinstated Chaucer’s former pension.
- With the money, Chaucer was able to lease an apartment in the garden of St. Mary’s Chapel in Westminster, where he lived modestly for the rest of his days.
- He died of unknown causes and was 60 years old at the time.
- Chaucer was buried in Westminster Abbey.
- His gravestone became the center of what was to be called Poet’s Corner.

Chaucer’s *The Book of the Duchess*

Key Informations

- *The Book of the Duchess*, also known as *The Deth of Blaunche*
- the earliest of Chaucer's major poems
- preceded by his short poem, “An ABC
- preceded by his translation of *The Romaunt of the Rose*
- the date of composition after 12 September 1368 (after the death of Blanche of Lancaster) and 1372
- 1,334-line long poem
- It exists in several manuscripts of varying accuracy
- Written in *octosyllabic rhyming couplets*
- *The Book of the Duchess* is an elegy for Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster
- Blanche, of Chaucer's patron, John of Gaunt, died 12 September 1368 of plague
- Blanche was the first wife of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster (son of King Edward III of England & father of King Henry IV)
- handwritten notes from Elizabethan antiquary John Stowe indicating that the poem was written at John of Gaunt’s request
- This is an example of a “dream poem” or “dream-vision” or “dream allegory”

A “dream poem” or “dream-vision” or “dream allegory”

- A “dream poem” or “dream-vision” or “dream allegory” is a mode of narrative common in the age of Chaucer and his contemporaries
- The dream or vision is experienced in the mind of the narrator of the poem (often voiced in the first person) allowed a certain kind of message or theme to be communicated in a highly stylized manner.
• Often the dream is about a kind of wish-fulfillment, or the elevating or honoring (The Book of the Duchess is in fact an elegy) of something that would not be possible in the course of a realistic telling of a story.

• It also gives the poet ample space and scope to play with allegories and metaphors of all kinds.

The French octasyllabic couplet can easily lead to doggerel but Chaucer avoided it by using

• Sentencing to break the couplets (e.g., 15-16, 21-22, 27-28, 29-30, etc.)
• enjambment (e.g., 6-7, 34-35, etc.)
• irregular lines (e.g., 905, 942, etc.)
• rime riche, or rich rhyme (e.g., 27-28, 93-94, 615-660)
• jingling effect (e.g., 265-266 -- Morpheus / moo fees thus)
• wordplay

Influences

• The Book of the Duchess was heavily influenced by the style of the French “love poets”, such as Guillaume de Lorris, Jean de Meun, Froissart, and Machaut who were the makers of courtly love poems.
• Chaucer lifted entire lines from Machaut’s Jugement dou Roy de Behaingne.
• Chaucer borrowed the form of elegy and much of the imagery from him.

Important Points

• The lady's name is given as "White" (948) in The Book of the Duchess
• There are repeated instances of the word “White,” which is almost certainly a play on “Blanche”
• In addition, at the end of the poem there are references to a ‘long castel’, suggesting the house of Lancaster (line 1318) and a ‘ryche hil’ as John of Gaunt was earl of Richmond (mond=hill) (line 1319) and the narrator swears by St John, which is John of Gaunt’s saint’s name.

Narrator

➢ The narrator of the poem suffers from insomnia
➢ The problem of the speaker is announced in the opening lines
➢ Sorrow is presented as a symptom of insomnia (21) instead of vice versa

Plot

• At the beginning of the poem, the sleepless poet lies in bed, reading a book (a collection of old stories)
• the book tells the story of Ceyx and Alcyone
• The story tells of how Ceyx lost his life at sea, and how Alcyone, his wife, mourned his absence.
• Unsure of his fate, she prays to the goddess Juno to send her a dream vision
• Juno sends a messenger to Morpheus to bring the body of Ceyx with a message to Alcyone.
• The messenger finds Morpheus and relays Juno’s orders.
• Morpheus finds the drowned Ceyx and bears him to Alcyone three hours before dawn.
• The deceased Ceyx instructs Alcyone to bury him and to cease her sorrow, and when Alcyone opens her eyes Ceyx has gone.
The poet stops relaying the story of Ceyx and Alcyone and reflects that he wished that he had a god such as Juno or Morpheus so that he could sleep like Alcyone and describes the lavish bed he would gift to Morpheus should he discover his location.

Lost in the book and his thoughts, the poet suddenly falls asleep with the book in his hands.

He states that his dream is so full of wonder that no man may interpret it correctly.

He begins to relay his dream.

The Hunt & The Knight in Grief

The poet dreams that he wakes in a chamber with windows of stained glass depictions of the tale of Troy and walls painted with the story of The Romance of the Rose. He hears a hunt, leaves the chamber, and inquires who is hunting. The hunt is revealed to be that of Octavian. The dogs are released and the hunt begins, leaving behind the poet and a small dog that the poet follows into the forest. The poet stumbles upon a clearing and finds a knight dressed in black composing a song for the death of his lady. The poet asks the knight the nature of his grief. The knight replies that he had played a game of chess with Fortuna and lost his queen and was checkmated. The poet takes the message literally and begs the black knight not to become upset over a game of chess.

The Knight's Story

The knight begins the story of his life, reporting that for his entire life he had served Love, but that he had waited to set his heart on a woman for many years until he met one lady who surpassed all others. The knight speaks of her surpassing beauty and temperament and reveals that her name was “good, fair White.” The poet, still not understanding the metaphorical chess game, asks the black knight to finish the story and explain what was lost. The knight tells the story of his fumbling declaration of love and the long time it took for the love to be reciprocated and that they were in perfect harmony for many years. Still the narrator does not understand, and asks the whereabouts of White. The knight finally blurts out that White is dead. The poet realises what has occurred as the hunt ends and the poet awakes with his book still in hand. He reflects on the dream and decides that his dream is so wonderful that it should be set into rhyme.

Character List of The Book of the Duchess

Narrator
A man, who is an insomniac and dreams the vision of the story in this poem
The personal details are probably conventional rather than idiosyncratic, for similar details are found in other narrators of the Continental love poems.
Seys
The king in the story in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*
In some editions the spelling of his name is modernized to Ceyx or sometimes Ceys

Alcyone
The queen in the story in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*
The narrator of *The Book of the Duchess* reads this book while lying awake one night. Chaucer also spells it, within the same poem, as "Alcione."

Morpheus
The Roman god of sleep in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

Black Knight
The man the narrator meets in his dream vision. He tells the story of the loss of his wife, Lady White.

Lady White
In the text of *The Book of the Duchess* referred to as "White."
The lost love of the Black Knight.

Fortune
Lady Fortune, the allegorical representation of chance against whom the Black Knight rails in *The Book of the Duchess*.