MEDIEVAL LITERATURE
(1066 - 1510)
Chaucer at the Court of Edward III, Ford Madox Brown (1856-1868)
Geoffrey Chaucer

Geoffrey Chaucer is generally regarded as one of the greatest poets of all time and the “father of the English language” and yet, oddly enough, we do not know any details of his early life and education. So far as we know, he was born between 1340 and 1345, probably in London, into a middle-class family. His father John was a prosperous wine merchant and held minor court office as Butler, if only intermittently. At seventeen, he presumably attended St. Paul’s Almonry where he acquired more than a smattering of Latin and appreciated Ovid’s poetry, which was to be a major source of inspiration for him.

He lived an extremely active life, having been a soldier in the English army in France, a commercial agent for the English government in Italy, a customs controller of the lucrative London customs, a country justice of the peace, a member of parliament, Clerk of the King’s Works, and a deputy forester for the crown.

As a squire serving in Edward III’s army, when the king invaded France in 1359, Chaucer was captured at the siege of Rheims. Three months later the King ransomed him and once in England appointed him crown valet. Through his retentive mind he heaped up curiosity significant first-hand experiences which he would skilfully have used in his mature writings. Chaucer married Philippa Payne Roet, the sister-in-law of John of Gaunt (the King’s fourth son) whose patronage and friendship he enjoyed throughout his lifetime.

He may have studied Law at the Inner Temple (now lost) and became a secret agent and attached to various embassies. Of special significance were the journeys to Italy as they led him to admire Dante and Boccaccio, then at pinnacle of their European literary reputation.

Chaucer shrank from the influence of the French and nourished an enthusiastic admiration for Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio.

A series of misfortunes, including the deprivation of all his preferment, preceded his death, which occurred on the 25th of October 1400. He was buried in Westminster Abbey, in the spot later called The Poets’ Corner.

Biography card

1340 - Born in London into an originally French family. His father John was a merchant with powerful connections and his mother, Agnes de Copton, was a rich heiress.
1357 - Served with Lionel, Duke of Clarence.
1359 - Went to France with Edward’s army; he was taken prisoner.
1360 - Ransomed by the King.
1366 - Got married.
1369 - Travelled extensively.
1369 - Fought in Picardy for his patron John of Gaunt.
1370 - As a squire he was sent on diplomatic missions.
1372 - With Sir Edward de Berkeley, he came to Milan and asked Barnabò Visconti and his son-in-law, commander Sir John Hawkwood, for help against the French. He visited Genoa and Florence and fell under the literary influence of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio.
1374 - Moved to Aldgate, London. Appointed controller of Customs for the
Port of London and superintended the building of St. George’s Chapel
at Windsor.
1377 - Sent on mission to Flanders to negotiate peace with the French king.
1385 - Appointed Justice of the Peace for Kent.
1386 - Elected to Parliament as a Knight of the Shire for Kent, but only for
one year.
1387 - His wife’s death.
1389 - Clerk of the King’s Works.
1394 - Was granted a royal pension.
1400 - Took a lease on a house in the garden of Westminster Abbey. Died and
was buried in Westminster Abbey.

**Why is Geoffrey Chaucer studied?**

Geoffrey Chaucer is considered the greatest literary figure of his age and
revered as the chief ancestor of modern standard English.
His enduring world-wide appeal stems from his capacity to dignify the
melting pot of dialects - Anglo-Saxon, French, and Latin - as a suitable
vehicle for literary purpose, freed from any foreign influence.
Furthermore, for his ability to create true-to-life characters, his sense of
humour, his psychological insight, the accuracy of his observation, and the
grace and technical excellence of his narrative vein, Chaucer is properly
recognised as the forerunner of the English novel as well.

**Works**

*Translation of the Roman de la Rose.* It is a poem of nearly 23,000
verses, begun by Guillaume de Lorris. Set in a courtly and scholastic allegory,
the poem is the personification of human virtues and vices. Some forty years
later, Jean de Meung added many new characters, notably Reason and
Nature, which convey more interest for the social issues.
Chaucer decided to take up translations of famous works as a literary
career. His first experiment was with this influential French poem of the
previous century. Its vision of idealised love, satire influenced enormously
Chaucer’s huge literary output.
Only the 1705 first lines of the original can be attributed to him with any
certainty.

*Book of the Duchess* (c. 1369). As a dream-poem of some length in
octosyllabic couples in the French allegorical poetry of courtly love, it is a
heartfelt commemoration of the duchess Blanche of Lancaster who died of
plague in 1369.
There is no mention of Gaunt’s personal grief. The treatment of a series of
contrasting images clearly reveals Chaucer’s genius for inventiveness and
vivid characterization.
This work alone would give Chaucer the foremost place among English
writers.
The House of Fame (1379). This unfinished dream-allegory containing some classical memories was his first experiment in the handling of the heroic couplet in the Italian manner.

It recounts how, during an imaginative journey, an eagle takes the frightened narrator to the Palace of Fame, where he encounters famous characters of both classical and biblical times.

In the course of this exciting but puzzling experience he visits the temple of the goddess Fame and the House of Tidings. Despite the presentation of fame and love, the poet develops a sense of disorientation and mutability of earthy things.

The Parliament of Fowles (1380). Chaucer composed this delightful dream-poem on the occasion of an important wedding. It revolves around a conference of birds, symbolising different social classes and surrounding the goddess Nature, to choose their mates on St Valentine’s Day. It also contains colourful descriptions of summer as the season of love.

Troilus and Criseyde (1385). This poem of over 8,000 lines is in iambic pentameters in stanzas of seven lines, rhyming ababbc (Trolius stanza, or rhyme royal, in homage to James I of Scotland, king and poet, who made a huge use of it).

Despite some indebtedness to Boccaccio’s Il Filostrato, Troilus and Criseyde is commonly regarded as the first great and intense love-story in English narrative poetry.

The prologue sets the scene for the burning and plunder of Troy by the Greeks.

This elaborate poem deals with the courtly love between the valiant warrior Troilus, son of Priam, king of Troy, and the beautiful widow, Criseyde, the daughter of Calchas, a Trojan soothsayer.

Her uncle Pandarus prompts her to requite his love by arranging secret meetings. Their union is interrupted after three years of supreme happiness by her father’s leaving for Greece.

Criseyde is torn between the love she feels for her father and for her husband. At length, she is transferred to the Greek camp in exchange for the Trojan prisoner Antenor. She promises to rejoin Troilus in ten days and vows eternal constancy.

Once in the Greek camp, Criseyde is alone and desperate and becomes the lover to the Greek Diomede as a way out. Troilus feels betrayed and seeks vengeance, but is killed by Achilles on the battlefield. His soul rises to the heavens from where he can laugh at earthly vanity and praise the eternal love of Christ.

Though composed in verse and crammed with philosophical reflections, the work paves the way for the psychological novel owing to its psychological acuteness and subtle analysis of characters.

The Legend of Good Women (first transcribed 1380-86). Chaucer composed this poem at the command of the Queen (the god of love) for having belittled the image of women in Troilus and Criseyde.

As to the narrative framework, it anticipates Canterbury Tales as it is composed of a collection of stories, prefaced by a dream-vision prologue.
Following the tradition of medieval love poetry, it celebrates the women from history and myth who had suffered for their sincere love.

The long prologue, which concerns nature and the spring, is unquestionably the most compelling and delightful part of the whole work.

Of the 20 legends provided for the scheme, Chaucer wrote only nine, the last unfinished.

**Canterbury Tales** (begun about 1387). This miscellaneous collection of stories, told by a company of pilgrims to amuse one another on their journey from London to the shire of the “holy blissful martyr St. Thomas Becket” in Canterbury, is one of the finest English achievements.

It is written for the most part in **heroic couplets** (10-syllable iambic lines rhyming in pairs), whose subtlety and richness give a vivid sense of living characters. Chaucer’s originality is not undermined by his supposed indebtedness to Boccaccio for the general idea of the work.

In his monumental work, which has captured the reading public’s imagination and interest since its first publication in about 1748 by Caxton, Chaucer gave vent to his flair for literature by creating a gallery of irresistible characters with their virtues and vices typical of English fourteenth-century life.

The work can be read as if it were a reliable document of contemporary life on the corruption of the church and social institutions.

**The Canterbury Tales** entitles Chaucer to rank with the greatest writers of all time. It has outlived all changes of literary taste, and is even more popular today than it was six centuries ago.

---

**Canterbury Tales**

**First transcribed:** 1380–90  
**Fictional time:** remote antiquity to fourteenth century  
**Literary genre:** poem  
**Type of plot:** a collection of over 20 stories, written in Middle English  
**Setting:** England

The **Canterbury Tales**, the most outstanding piece of literature of the Middle Ages, won Chaucer an enduring literary reputation.

We are not sure of the exact date of its composition even though the general plan may be dated about 1387, when Chaucer spent some time in Kent.

The internal references even give no help for its chronological position among his poems as it contains many features shaped after his previous writings.

Chaucer expounded his original project in the famous General Prologue, one of the best pieces of English literature of eighteen lines describing the time of year, April, when the pilgrimage begins, the scene and introducing the pilgrims. Each character sketch includes some or all of the following details:

a) the pilgrim’s background and significant experiences;  
b) his or her physical appearances - age, dress, mannerisms;  
c) the kind of horse he or she rides;  

---
d) the pilgrim’s attitude and manner of speech;
e) a general evaluation of the “worthiness” of the pilgrim.

The solid unity of the scheme is assured by narrative exchanges among the pilgrims, by short “links” connecting the tales, by prologues and epilogues of the same, following a specific framing device, amply used by Gower in his *Confessio Amantis*.

In the *Prologue*, Chaucer accurately and amusingly describes the events preceding the setting-out of the twenty-nine pilgrims for the Canterbury Cathedral, site of the martyrdom of Thomas Becket, murdered two centuries earlier for his assertion of Church authority over King Henry II. Chaucer chances to join the assorted company at Tabarn Inn in Southwark, opposite the City of London.

It may be thought that they planned the visit to the holy spot in order to ask for Thomas Becket’s protection from the devastating plague.

Chaucer resorts to his power of describing the appearances of nature to begin the Prologue. He says that April represents the stillness and joyful reawakening of nature and for this it is the most suitable period of the year for pilgrimages.

The jovial landlord Harry Bailey (a pilgrim himself and records testify to his real existence) welcomes the pilgrims with dinner and jokes. In order to help the time pass, he proposes that the pilgrims should tell four tales each, two on horseback to Canterbury and two on the way back to London. If Chaucer had finished his work there would have been about 120 stories and it would be the longest poem in the English language. He wrote only 24 tales and two are no more than fragments.

The person who tells the best tale is to be treated by the rest to a supper at the Tabarn on their homeward journey.

He proposes to be the judge and the pilgrims cheerfully agree to the unusual story-telling competition (we will never know who won it). Early next morning, they set out on their journey to the tomb of the popular saint. He chooses the valiant Knight to be the first teller. He has just come back from war and is going to Canterbury to give thanks to God because he is safe and unhurt.

The priority of his choice follows closely the threefold hierarchical feudal order of society - knighthood, clergy, and peasant - which Chaucer soon abandons as a sign of its abolition.

One by one all the pilgrims from any social rank, but for the highest and the lowest, tell their fictional stories, which are commonly grouped in nine selections. There are no representatives of the top and the bottom parts of society. This is because in that period the upper classes did not like to mix with other people and preferred to go on pilgrimages on their own while poor people did not have the money to afford the journey.

While narrating, Chaucer describes their characters with humour, pathos, and the subtlest delicacy, giving a vivid and exhaustive panorama of his time.

No other author until Shakespeare had Chaucer’s talent and ability to describe characters which express not only their small world but entire society.
The Knight’s Tale. The Knight is the embodiment of the romantic spirit of chivalry and courtesy. His ideas are frequently mocked at in the actual world, now governed by down-to-earth values.

Disloyalty and selfishness, as the most suitable means of social advancement replace nobility and bravery, once dominant values. It is a romance about the rivalry in love between two sworn brothers, Palamon and Arcite.

Long ago there was once a Duke called Theseus who was the Lord and Governor of Athens, and a valiant soldier. Among his victims was a realm once known as Scythia, ruled by women called Amazons. Returning home with his Amazon wife Hippolyta and her sister, Emelye, Theseus met a group of women dressed in black who were weeping and wailing. They told how each had been a queen or duchess, but had lost their husbands during the siege of Thebes. The cruel tyrant Creon now plans to dishonor the dead bodies.

The Duke, smitten with rage and pity, ordered Queen Hippolyta and her beautiful sister Emelye to return to Athens where they were to dwell in peace. Then, in anger, the Duke and his army marched on Thebes. There, on a chosen field of battle, King Creon was slain and the bones of their dead husbands were restored to the mourning ladies.

After the battle was over, two young warriors of Thebes, fearfully wounded, were brought before Theseus. He recognized them as young men of noble birth and was informed they were royal knights named Arcite and Palamon. In appearance, the two knights were very similar, being the sons of two sisters. Theseus ordered that they be returned to Athens as prisoners who could not be ransomed for any sum. They were, he said, to be his prisoners in perpetuity.

Several years passed by, and Arcite and Palamon lay in the prison tower in grief and anguish. On a fair morning in May, however, the beautiful Emelye arose and wandered happily about in her garden, which was adjacent to the prison tower.

At that moment, Palamon, the sorrowful prisoner, glanced down through the prison bars and saw the beautiful Emelye. He cried out in pain.

Arcite, alarmed, asked him what evil had befallen him. Palamon replied that the beauty of the young lady had caused him to cry out. Arcite's curiosity was aroused and he peered from the tower window. When he saw the fair Emelye, he cried out that unless he could see her everyday he would die.

When Palamon heard this, he was enraged. After all, he cried to Arcite, I found her first. To counter his argument, Arcite maintains that he loved her first. Thus, even though they are kin and had sworn eternal friendship, they decide that in love it is every man for himself. And so the argument continued until their friendship gave way to hostility.

About this time, a famous Duke called Perotheus, a friend of both Theseus and Arcite, arrived in Athens. He implored Duke Theseus to release Arcite on the condition that Arcite would leave Athens forever, and if he happened to return, he would be immediately beheaded.

Arcite then bemoans his fate. Even though he is now in prison, he can catch a glimpse of his beloved, but in banishment, he will never again see the fair Emelye. He acknowledges that Palamon is the winner since he can remain in prison and near to Emelye. But Palamon is equally disturbed because he thinks that Arcite can raise an army in exile, return to Athens and capture
the fair Emelye. Chaucer then asks the reader which position is worse, that of Arcite or Palamon.

Arcite returned to Thebes where he lived for two years moaning his hard fate. His lamenting began to change his physical appearance. One night a vision appeared before him and urged him to return to Athens and the fair Emelye. Arcite arose and looked at himself in the mirror and realized that his grief had drastically changed his appearance. So he took the name of Philostrate and returned to Athens where he was employed as a page in the house of Emelye. Several years passed, and Philostrate rose to a high and well-to-do position in the Court of Theseus, even becoming a trusted friend of Theseus himself.

Meanwhile, Palamon languished in the prison tower. One night, however, he escaped. He hid in a field the next morning to escape detection. That same day, by chance, Arcite arrived at the same field. Arcite was so changed in appearance that Palamon did not recognize him. Arcite, thinking himself alone, began to recite his entire history aloud. Palamon, hearing the confession, jumped out of hiding and cursed Arcite as a traitor.

In a tournament, arranged at the impressive and decorative Temple of Mars, Arcite was fatally wounded by falling off his horse onto his head. Gasping for breath, Arcite protested an eternal love for Emelye and then adds that he knows no person better than Palamon and begs for accept him in marriage. So his brother got the hand of Emelye.

**The Miller’s Tale.** In the general prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, we learn that a miller used to abuse his monopoly of grinding the corn, by charging a high price.

Chaucer wrote this bawdy story to mimic the courtly-love tale. In Oxford, Nicholas the Gallant, a young man versed in astrologic and geomancic studies, dupes an old carpenter, named John, into sleeping in a tub by making him believe the second flood imminent.

When this quaint ploy progresses, Alison, his wife of eighteen years of age, betrays her gullible husband with the sly scholar.

Alison has another love-stricken suitor, the clerk of the parish, named Absalon. He is less lucky than Nicholas as he manages to kiss only her “nether eye”. He plans to avenge himself and goes to Gervase, his friend who is a smith, to borrow a sharpened coulter. He smites Nicholas in the “middle of the rump”. The wretched Nicholas starts crying “Help! Water! Water! Help! For Heaven’s love”. The nocturnal noise wakes the foolish carpenter and interrupts his young wife’s betrayal.

**The Reeve’s Tale.** Oswald the Reeve (in medieval England, a high administrative officer formerly holding authority over landed areas), a carpenter, starts to tell his tale when the company of twenty-nine pilgrims reach Deptford.

It is about a Miller who lives in a village neighbouring Cambridge. He boasts of his hideous deeds and is feared by his friends. His wife and his daughter are so beautiful as to attract every young man’s attention.

The inmates of Solar Hall (now merged in Trinity College) patronize the Miller. Weary of his outrageous trickeries, two young Bible-clerks, John and Alan, scheme to take revenge on him. They carry out their plan by hitting the swindling Miller and sleeping with his wife and daughter.
The Cook's Tale. The cook was not held in great esteem and for this reason Chaucer devotes only 58 lines to his tale. It is about the easy-going Revelling Peterkin, an apprentice to a shop. He is very fond of sport, music and dice. Eventually he is dismissed and sometimes cast into prison with minstrelsy because of his quarrelsome conduct.

The ribald story is abruptly interrupted with some hints at his young wife, who runs a shop “but was just for giving Her countenance; she went whoring, for a living ...”.

The Man of Law's Tale. The tale, patterned on a medieval story from Breton lays, is introduced by a 35-lines prologue in which we learn that a merchant used to tell it long ago. The gloomy story revolves around the ups and downs of Lady Constance, daughter of a Christian emperor of Rome.

She is the mirror of all courtesy,
Her heart the very chamber of holiness,
Her hand the minister to all distress.

The young Sultan of Syria is enthralled by her rare beauty even to the extent of abjuring his Mahometry for Christianity to marry her. On the wedding day, his mother, overwhelmed with jealousy, orders her hangers-on to slay him and obliges her newly widowed daughter-in-law to quit Syria for Italy.

For some three years Lady Constance has faced the stormy waters until, with the help of Divine Providence, she reaches the coast of Northumberland. She is accused of killing Hermengild, her benevolent host's wife.

A providential mysterious voice exculpates her from the charge and reveals the culprit who is sentenced to death. He is a knight who had vainly courted Lady Constance.

The Christian endurance she exhibits to cope with the groundless accusation arouses in the benevolent King Alla more compassionate and tender feelings. With other courtiers he becomes a Christian and even chooses her as his bride.

Unfortunately, their happy marriage comes abruptly to an end as he is charged with a military mission to Scotland. Filled with raging spite at her son's decision to marry a foreign lady, Donegild, the King's mother, sets her devout daughter-in-law and her new-born child, named Maurice, adrift in a ship and “charged her never to return”.

The grief-stricken King is utterly unaware of her mother's treacherous conduct. When all the truth is told he decrees that his mother must die “for false allegiance, treason and dishonour”. Meanwhile Lady Constance and her little son live in Rome as guests of a senator and his wife.

The climactic point in the story is reached some time later, when, by sheer coincidence, King Alla is reunited with them in a moving episode.

The Wife of Bath's Tale. Chaucer's immediate sources were Jean de Meun's la Vielle in the Roman de la Rose and the romance the wedding of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell. This tale is preceded by a long prologue, which is a cheerful account of the Wife of Bath’s life. She describes marriage as a “a
misery and a woe” and yet she boasts of her four late husbands and of falling in love with the fifth, young Johnny.

In order to justify her attitude towards the advisability of marriage and condemn celibacy, she refers to the wise King Solomon and two holy men, Abraham and Jacob, who had more than one wife.

Later the Wife dwells upon virginity and concludes that it is a moral matter to be left to individual choice, as there is no commandment but only advice in the bible.

At last she tells her tale which occurred under King Arthur’s reign and develops the theme of female sovereignty or mastery over man.

One day a knight is sentenced to death for raping a woman.

A knight who raped a girl. For this offence he was condemned to death. The Queen and other ladies persuade the sovereign to grant a pardon to the condemned young man on condition that he could answer the question, within a year and a day, the answer “What is the thing that women most desire?”

The wretched knight sets out to look for someone who could help him to find the right answer. He hears of several things that women love best, including wealth, honour, pleasure, gorgeous clothes and the pleasures of love, but could not find the right answer.

At last as he rode beside a forest, he saw a group of ladies dancing. As he approached, they vanished, leaving only a very ugly old woman. This old woman told him the answer, on condition that he would grant her the next thing she asked of him.

Armed with this answer, the knight went before the queen and told her that the thing women desire most is to exercise dominion over their husbands and lovers. All agreed that this was correct. The ugly old woman then asked the knight to marry her, and in accordance with his promise he was forced to do so.

On their wedding night, as if by magic, the mortified groom resigns sovereignty and in return for her unselfishness she is transmuted to a lovely, charming and faithful wife, and they live their lives in perfect bliss ever after.

**The Friar’s Tale.** It is an original version of a fabliau whose source is unknown.

The tale is a scathing story about the Summoner. The Friar tells that once in his own district a Summoner used to surround himself with dubious characters to extort money from people through bribery and blackmail. No one could interfere with his treacherous deeds.

On day he met a yeoman who turned out to be a devil. The devil acted under many shapes, being in turn a man, an ape and even an angel to play his subtle tricks on his victims. They swore an oath of brotherhood and to share their earnings.

On their way they encounter the devil in disguise who refuses to cheat a carter, who curses his horse for refusing to pull his farm-cart loaded up with hay and invokes the devil to take his hay, his cart and his horse.

The fiend in disguise refuses to cheat him as he thinks his curse is insincere. Instead, the devil takes the Summoner’s body and soul to Hell when he pleads for the fiend’s intervention to swindle twelve pence from an old tight-fisted woman on account of a forged summons-bill.
The Summoner's Tale. Ecclesiastical law, which settled civil suits alike, invested the Summoner with large powers. As an influential officer of the court, he managed to squeeze money from weak and simple-minded persons.

The skeleton plot of the tale is fairly simple. It occurred in the marshy district of Holderness (Yorkshire) and is about the greedy Friar John. One day he gets around an ailing man, called Thomas, with flattery to obtain his possessions:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Thomas, you know it's not that I desire,} \\
\text{Your treasure for myself; it should be spent,} \\
\text{Seeing our convent is so diligent} \\
\text{In prayer for you, to build the church of Christ.} \\
\text{Thomas! If you would learn or be enticed} \\
\text{To learn what good there is in building churches,} \\
\text{Your name sake's life will further} \\
\text{you researches, St Thomas of India.}
\end{align*}
\]

The sick old man realizes the Friar is cheating him and as legacy he blows a fart onto his hand, to be divided equally among the twelve members of his community.

In a towering rage, Friar John leaves Thomas’s house and bends his steps towards the manor house of a worthy man. The disappointed Friar expounds the imaginative device of dividing the queer deathbed legacy to him.

The Clerk's Tale. For this tale, Chaucer is probably indebted to a story from Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, translated into Latin by Petrarch.

The plot is quite even. Upon his friends' suggestion, Sir Walter, Marquis of Saluzzo resolves to be a wedded man. He singles out as his bride the pretty Griselda of humble origins, living in the neighbouring village.

Despite their belonging to different social classes, their union is a success and long after she bears a fair daughter. One day, without any reason, the Marquis decides to test her wife's love and faithfulness.

As the first trial, he instructs one of his cruel servants to take the new-born baby to be murdered. Griselda kisses and marks it with the cross of Christ before delivering it to the servant. She sheds no tears, as it is her husband’s will.

As agreed, the servant secretly takes the baby to Bologna where the marquis’ sister, the Countess of Panaro, is entrusted with its upbringing. Four years later, Griselda bears a boy “as delicate in grace and beauty as the child before”.

In his early childhood, he undergoes the same feigned murder as his sister. The patient wife submissively lowers her eyes and comments: “You are our sovereign, do with what is yours\(\text{)'just as you please} \ldots\)”. Sir Walter perpetrates the last cruel trial on his meek wife. He makes her believe that he intends to divorce and remarry by producing a forged papal bull. Upon request, Griselda even decorates the chambers for the imminent wedding.

Sir Walter is deeply amazed at his wife's steadfastness and constancy. Eventually, in piteous joy, he explains why he has subjected his wife to such harshness, “took her up into his arms to kiss” and reunites the whole family.
The Merchant’s Tale. The merchant, who never reveals his name, is very upset by Griselda’s submissive and subservient behaviour towards her husband. Prompted by The Clerk’s Tale, the merchant recounts the story of an over sixty-year-old knight, named January. He lived at Pavia and was an obdurate bachelor.

One day he unexpectedly discovers that wedlock “is a very paradise on earth”. Against his brother Justinus’ advice, the ageing January marries May, a pretty young girl. The squire Damian is enthralled by May’s beauty and starts a whirlwind courtship. His love is requited. The wretched January is struck blind and becomes suspicious of his wife’s fidelity.

The climactic point in the story is reached when they are walking hand in hand in the garden. She manages to deceive him and make love with her suitor in a pear-tree heavily laden with fruit. Pluto, the king of Fairyland, abhors their shameful lust and gives back sight to the cuckolded husband.

May is inspired by the queen Proserpina to convince her husband that she had to wrestle with a fellow in the tree to restore his sight to him “I have helped you back to sight when you were blind!”. She jumps down from the tree and January

*Kissed her and clasped her in his arms - how often!*  
*And stroked her breast to soften*  
*Her indignation .*  
*He led her home.*

The Squire’s Tale. At the outset we meet Cambuscan, the wise and brave King of Tartary, while was at war with Muscovy.

His wife Elpheta bore him two sons, Algarsyf and Cambalo, and a beautiful daughter Canacee. The King was celebrating the twentieth anniversary of his coronation and on the occasion the king of India and Araby, through an envoy, gave him some magical objects as presents.

Among them there was a mysterious ring which allowed the daughter to converse with any birds in their natural speech. One day in the garden, Canacee finds a faint female falcon, whose nobility and rare plumage attracted her interest.

Her distressing plight aroused Canacee’s compassion and pity. She besought the bird to fall to earth and promised to soothe her. Taken into her lap, the falcon starts telling her story.

Some time ago, she was approached by a tercelet (the technical term for a male falcon or hawk), “who seemed a very well of gentle breeding”. Amazed at his seemingly sincere courtship, she requited his love. After some two years’ intense joy, the tercelet deserted her for a kite.

*Although of gentle birth, though fresh and gay,*  
*Handsome, adoring, good in everything,*  
*One day he saw a kite upon the wing*  
*And suddenly he felt a love so hot*  
*For this same kite that mine was clean forgot,*  
*And thus he broke his faith in foul delight*  
*And thus my love is servant to a kite*  
*And I am lost and there’s no remedy.*
The sympathetic Canacee took her home and “lavished on her all the care she might”. One day the tercelet unexpectedly rejoined his lover, providing the story with a happy end. The concluding lines of the squire’s tale hint at some other events, which are never recounted as Chaucer, determined to leave the tale unfinished.

**The Franklin’s Tale.** In his brief prologue to the tale, the Franklin implores his fellow pilgrims to disregard the insubstantiality of his style as he has never studied Cicero and his “figures” and “colours”. The story is an adaptation from Boccaccio’s *Filocolo* and from one of the famous *Breton Lays* (short stories of the Middle English period).

Once in Brittany, once called Armorica, Sir Arveragus and his wife Dorigen, “the loveliest under the sun’, lived in a blissful joy until he left for some time in search of “high deeds of arms and reputation”.

Parting is a bit like dying, and Dorigen plunged into the blackest despair. Even her bosom friends and the whirlwind courtship of the clerk Aurelius were ineffective to ease her continual lament and sorrow. Aurelius was

> The handomest man alive,  
> Young, strong and wealthy, mettesome, discreet,  
> And popular as any you could meet.

He suffered the miseries of unrequited love for her and was ready to dare everything to win her. Harassed by his wooing and moved by his pangs of love, he playfully promised her love provided that he managed to clear the coasts of Brittany of all the rocks.

The squire Aurelius, aided by his anxious brother, conjured a magician who spirited away the rocks from Brittany. Dorigen heard of the fulfilment of the monstrous miracle and felt distressed for the sake of her husband. She wailed and swooned every day and even planned to commit suicide.

> Her husband, in his nobleness,  
> Would have preferred to die in his distress  
> Rather than that his wife should break her word.

Eventually, the tender-hearted Aurelius realizes that Dorigen vowed:

> In innocent confusion,  
> She’d never heard of magical illusion,

and he discharged her from her obligation to him.

**The Physician’s Tale.** It is the tragic story of the fourteen-year-old Virginia, the daughter of the honourable knight, Virginius. Her distinguished bearing, matchless beauty, and kindliness attracted the attention of the corrupt judge, nicknamed Appius, in charge of the nearby village.

He planned to win her heart through shifty intrigues and machinations. He enlisted the notorious blackguard Claudius to carry out his mischievous scheme.

Upon the judge’s instructions, Claudius claimed his fatherhood of Virginia before the court through a forged document. The wretched lady realized that
the judge was motivated by bad intentions and chose to be killed by her father rather than yield to Appius.

\[ I \text{ take my death rather than take my shame ...} \]
\[ I \text{ her father sorrowful in heart and will} \]
\[ Smote off her head ... \]

The treacherous iniquity was disclosed and Appius was cast into prison where in a fit of remorse and grief he slew himself. Claudius’s death penalty was commuted to banishment from the village, thanks to Virginus’s leniency.

**The Pardoner’s Tale.** This tale comes from an Oriental source through the Italian *Cento Novelle Antiche*. An outline of the fourteenth-century figure of the pardoner is extremely useful to an overall understanding of the tale. The pardoner, as the name suggests, is the person who is given authority normally by the Pope to sell pardons and indulgences, though he is not necessarily in holy orders.

He could be either a priest or layman who acted on the behalf of the Church. He was also entrusted with the collection of the money or gifts the sinners offered for their absolution.

As he acted without any Church control and restriction, he was susceptible to abuse his position and deceive simple-minded people with forged documents and phoney relics. In so doing, he disgraced the whole Catholic Church, which abolished his office at the Council of Trent, in 1562.

In the prologue, the Pardoner dissipates any doubts about his right to preach by showing the listeners the seal of the local church authority and some other fake credentials. He has them believe that he came straight from Rome, the centre of Christianity, largely because he gains importance in the eyes of other from such a claim.

Through gestures, eloquence and fluent imagery, and few Latin words in the sermon, he persuades the naive audience to believe that old rags and bones are relics of saints and bring about miraculous effects. In his daily sales talk, he has no concern with the sinners’ souls but only winning their money. He avows his boundless greedy - one of the Seven Deadly Sins - and usually cheats the simple or foolish country people

\[ \text{But let me briefly make my purpose plain;} \]
\[ \text{I preach for nothing but for greed of gain} \]
\[ \text{And use the same old text, as bold as brass,} \]
\[ \text{Radix malorum est cupiditas} \]
\[ (“\text{the love of money is the root of all evils”).} \]

He spends the proceeds on earthly things, making a good living, and deliberately neglects their shady source. When the prologue is over, the Pardoner starts to tell his “moral tale”. He opens it in a tavern in Flanders, once a notorious place for its drunkenness, debauchery and gambling. His warning against these vices precedes the introduction of three lecherous and pleasure-seeking men into the story.

While sitting in a tavern drinking, they learn that one of their companions has been killed by a secret thief, called Death, a frequent personification in medieval literature. He is now being buried. It is also said either that Death has killed many men, women in a nearby village.
In their drunken rage, they burst out of the tavern to seek out and to kill Death. The three rioters swear violent oaths in the fulfilment of their murderous plan. After walking less than a mile, they meet a mysterious old man who directs them down a crooked path towards a grove where they may find Death under a tree. Off go the three rioters, but when they come to the tree they find instead a heap of gold florin coins, which they agree to divide equally.

Henceforth they give up looking for Death and consider how to avoid arousing suspicion. They cast lots to determinate who is to carry the treasure home, and the lot falls to the youngest, who is sent to the village to buy food and wine. While he is gone, the two who are left agree to kill him and so increase their share.

In his turn, the youngest is scheming to poison them. So he enters an apothecary’s shop, buys the potion, and pours it into two large bottles. On his return with his store, the two set upon him and mercilessly slay him. Then they sit down and drink to be merry together. But the wine is poisoned and all the three rioters find Death, under the tree, as the old man predicted. The Pardoner tells this odd story to convince his listeners to offer devoutly a shilling for their absolution if they want to gain the bliss of Heaven.

At last he turns to the Host and invites him to kiss his holy relics. The host stubbornly refuses and indeed he gets so angry that he cannot speak. The Knight manages to pacify the angry men before they take up their journey.

**The Shipman’s Tale.** Amply based on a story from *The Decameron*, this brief tale is laid at St. Denys and is about a misery merchant. He lives in a luxurious house and is surrounded by many friends. The monk Sir John, who claims to be his cousin, is the most regular visitor.

One day the merchant’s wife is granted a loan of a hundred francs by the monk, who in turn borrows it from her husband. She readily agrees “to requite Sir John by lying in his arms all night”. It happens when his husband goes to Bruges on business.

When he returns, the monk tells him he has already paid the debt to his wife. She cannot deny receiving it but she thought it a gift and spent it on finery. So the merchant is cheated and cuckolded by one of his closest friends.

**The Prioress’s Tale.** With the Monk and the Friar, the Prioress is worthy representative of the influential religious orders. She relates that once in Asia there was a ghetto, where some Jews used to live on usury with the connivance of the corrupt Crown which, in return for this, obtained heavy contributions and taxes.

The Christians, who despised the greedy Jews, could learn the rudiments of education in the local school. Among them, there was a widow’s seven-year-old son. Upon his mother’s advice, he often stopped and prayed to Christ’s mother at the foot of Her image on his way home.

One day at school, he heard other children sing the *Alma Redemptoris*, and as the little boy did not know its meaning he asked one of his schoolmates for help. He was explained that “This song in times gone by was made, they say, in prayer and salutation, to greet our blessed Lady, now on high, that she may reach to help us when we die, and be our succour. That is all I know ...”.
He promised to learn it by heart for Christmas day. Accordingly, every day he sang the song secretly while going to school and homewards with the help of one of his schoolmates. The Jews plotted against his life, hired a murderer who carried out the cruel deed and eventually cast his body into a well.

Early the following morning, his mother, anxious at his absence, reached the school but received no news of her son. After a distressful quest, she came to the well and could hear her son’s voice singing the *Hymn O Alma* from the ground even though his throat had been cut.

There was a general astonishment and all the Christian people came to the scene of the miracle. The chief magistrate of the neighbourhood came and could hear the pitiable child sing. He condemned the Jews either to be confined or to a shameful death.

The little boy was drawn up still repeating the same words and was taken to the nearest abbey in high solemnity and celebration. On the way his mother was strongly overcome by her feelings and at last collapsed near the bier.

The abbot wondered how he could do so if his throat had been cut. Surprisingly the child answered he had been given the power of speech by the mercy of the Virgin and so he could reveal his place by singing till the funeral was over. Only then was he deprived of the prodigious “grain”.

The Virgin set his mind at rest saying “Thou shalt not be forsaken”. The abbot took off the grain and let the ghost free from the little corpse. To the sound of weeping, the little Martyr was buried in a marble tomb within the convent.

**Sir Thopas’ Tale.** It is Chaucer’s first tale in the collection. It speaks

> Of mirth and game,
> About a fair and gentle knight
> In battle, tournament and fight,
> Sir Topez was his name.

The tale is preceded by a detailed account of his earnest countenance and accomplishments. One day, while riding through the forest in search of an elf-queen whom he chooses as his mistress, his “Valentine”, he meets with evil luck.

A three-headed giant, called Sir Elephant, threatens him and he promises to return to fight the following day. Back at the castle, he wears Princely armour:

> His shield was of a golden red
> Emblazoned with a porker’s head...
> His sword was sheathed in ivory...

Just as he is leaving the court, the disgusted Host who considers the story flimsy doggerel in rhyme halts Chaucer. We never know the results of the agreed duel. The tale contains a mixture of different styles, which is actually a hilarious satire on the decadent popular romance. Its target is general even though it mentions Sir Horn, Sir Hypotis, Sir Bevis and Sir Pleyndamour.
The Tale of Melibee. It extends over a thousand lines and breathes a strong sense of seriousness. It tackles the moral dispute whether it is fair to take revenge for the violent wrongs done to you. The debate arises when Melibee is out and his daughter Sophia is assaulted and wounded by three miscreants during a robbery. The homily debate involves ancient authorities, including Job, Solomon, St Paul and many others. Dame Prudence, Melibee’s wife, proves to be the wisest and most prudent. She intends to settle the matter peacefully, while her husband proposes a fine for their misdemeanour. In the end the three scoundrels are forgiven and released after a stern rebuke from Melibee who displays extraordinary loftiness of spirit towards them.

The Monk’s Tale. It is a kaleidoscopic pattern of biblical, mythological and historical persons who are drawn in their captivating parable from the initial “high degree” to an irretrievable downfall. Their stories are taken from different sources and modelled upon one of Boccaccio’s works. It opens with Lucifer, who:

fell through sin
Down into Hell, and he is yet therein...
Continues with Adam whose deed
Drove him to labour, Fell and misery,

and closes with the rich Croesus, King of Lydia, who first escaped the stake with the providential falling rain which quenched the fire and then was hanged.

The Nun’s Priest’s Tale. Shaped after the huge French cycle of Le Roman de Renart, or History of Reynard the Fox, the tale is a brilliant comedy on the respective abilities of a cock and a fox as unerring beguilers. The story has a cock, called Chanticleer, as a central character. His owner is an old widow who lives with her two daughters in a small village. The cock is famous in the neighbourhood for his matchless tuneful voice:

His voice was jollier than the organ blowing
In church on Sundays, he was great at crowing.

He is the master of seven hens, among whom Lady Pertelote, the most gracious, is his sweetheart. On morning the cock intends to tell her his dreadful dream but is savagely interrupted by Lady Pertelote, who considers such a human activity an empty nonsense. Indeed, she rebukes him menacingly:

You have forfeited my heart and lost my love
I cannot love a coward, come what may.

A dispute ensues on the plausibility of a dream. The cock hints at various notable personages from ancient history who were bound to meet their downfalls because they disregarded the powerful admonition of a dream.
The tale proper begins with the appearance of a coal-tipped fox, called Sir Russel Fox, who beguiles the cock by praising his father's wisdom and singing.

My Lord your father...
There never was a singer I would rather
Have heard at dawn than your respected father,
All that he sang came welling from his soul
And how he put his voice under control!

The cock is carried off by the cunning fox and taken into a wood to be devoured. When the rape is noticed, the Lady Pertelote, who refused to listen to the dream, has problems of conscience and feelings of guilt.

Eventually, she agrees to die while her sweetheart manages to free himself from the enemy's claws by a subtle ploy.

Following the teaching of St Paul “a saint of great discerning”, the tale finishes with a strong exhortation for the reader to grasp the didactic purpose out of any writing whether it is ludicrous or tedious.

**The Second Nun’s Tale.** Composed in rhyme-royal, this tale is about St Cecilia, a Roman by birth who was brought up according to the strict Christian teachings. On her wedding day she besought her husband Valerian not to mar her purity as it is constantly watched by a relentless guardian angel. She informs:

That you had touched me either in love or lust
He instantly would bring your death on you.

She gives two pieces of evidence (Valerian is enabled to meet Saint Urban - the Pope Urban I, martyred by beheading 25 May, A. D. 230 - and an angel at home). Valerian, his brother Tibure, and Cecilia meet martyrdom for their steadfast dedication to the Christian faith. They do not yield to the threats of Almachius, the Roman officer, who has been

**Given ordinance...**
That every Christian shall have punishment
Unless he will deny his Christian creed,
And that denying it he shall be freed?
... St. Urban buries Cecilia’s body among the Holy persons and her
... Mansion came to be
The Church of St Cecilia, hers by light.

**The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale.** Chaucer exhibits solid knowledge of chemical practice in the 200-line introduction to the tale proper. An unidentified character with his master, the “accursed crook” Canon, join the company of pilgrims at this stage of their journey.

The mysterious character tells with wealth of details how the treacherous Canon tricks a foolish priest out of forty pounds by promising to reveal to him the miraculous practice of changing mercury and copper into silver through the use of alchemy and science.

In the concluding lines of the tale, the narrator broods on the futility of this art which “has made many people mad”.

19
The Manciple’s Tale (Manciple, a steward of a college or inn). At the outset of Manciple’s slender tale we learn of Phoebus’ melodious voice, noble and lofty deeds and chivalry. He has a white crow, which he fosters tenderly with food and drink. He teaches it to speak, mimic any tone, and sing sweetly like a nightingale. Phoebus feels a mixture of love and jealousy for his wife.

One day he is away and his wife betrays him with a blameworthy man. On his return, the white crow discloses to him the adultery, which casts “shame on him and villainy”. With a sorrowful heart and in a fit of rage, he slays his wife. Later he feels remorse for his ill doing and vents his wrath upon the “traitor-bird”. He grasps it and

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Tore} \\
\text{The fair white feathers out that once it bore} \\
\text{And made it black, and took away its song} \\
\text{And power of speech, and flung it forth headlong} \\
\text{Down to the devil, nor do I wish it back.} \\
\text{And that's the reason why all crows are} \\
\text{Black.}
\end{align*}
\]

The story is simple enough but contains didactic purposes:

Never tell anyone in all your life
That any other has enjoyed his wife,
For he will hate you mortally, believe it

and the concluding line:

Refrain your tongue and think upon the crow.

The Parson’s Tale. Upon the Host’s request, the virtuous Parson tells his tale, which is the last in chronological order before the pilgrims reach the Saint’s shrine. The Parson refers contemptuously to the alliterative style of composition for an immense prose treatise; but as he sneers at rhyme as well, perhaps we should not take him too seriously.

He dwells upon meaningful preparation for Confession and at most length upon the true nature of the Seven Deadly Sins (Pride, Envy, Anger, Accidie, Avarice, Gluttony, and Lust).

In his sermon, the Parson maintains that spiritual Penitence, i. e. a sincere regret for both venial and deadly sins committed, is the safest and most direct way to the celestial city.
Everyman

**Earliest extant version:** 1508  
**Author:** Anonymous  
**Composed:** c. 1500  
**Literary genre:** morality play  
**Type of plot:** moral allegory  
**Fictional time:** any time  
**Setting:** any place  
**Main characters:**  
- God  
- Death  
- Everyman  
- Good-Deeds

**Introduction**

If the earliest extant *Morality Play* - allegorical representations where real people were substituted by personifications of vices and virtues that were in conflict for man’s soul - is *The Castell of Perseverance* (c. 1405), *Everyman*
is one of the latest and probably the best. It survives in a printed edition of the beginning of the sixteenth century and is still moving.

*Everyman* combines rhymed couplets and stanzaic forms that may seem rhythmically crude at times but rarely impede the dramatic movement and melancholic mood, which make it the perfect type of Morality Play. The play has a simple elegiac style and dignity and is certainly impressive in its grave ecclesiastical way. Like other dramas of this type, it was written to teach a lesson, its characters being personified abstractions of virtue and vice.

*Everyman* is almost the only morality play to appeal to modern audiences, and it has been produced several times within our century. One of the most interesting of which was performed in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City in 1938.

**Summary**

At the opening of the play, God feels discouraged by Mankind's neglect of spiritual matters. He says all living creatures are unkind to Him. They live with no spiritual thought in their worldly possessions. The crucifixion was a lesson they have forgotten. Man has turned to the seven deadly sins, and every year his state grows worse. Therefore, God decides to have the day of reckoning, fearing that mankind becomes more brutish than the beasts. He sends Death to bring Everyone to judgement. Everyone is taken aback by the suddenness of the summons, and pleads for more time to prepare for the long journey, which Death refuses him.

When Death will give him no stay, Everyman next asks for the right to ask his friends to accompany him. Death grants the request, saying that he may have the companionship of everyone who will venture forth with him.

Everyone approaches Good Fellowship, who, seeing him cast down, offers to do him any service to laying down his life. But when Everyman explains the nature of his journey and begs his company, Good Fellowship brutally refuses. Everyman then has the same experience with Kindred and Goods, who desert him.

In despair, Everyman turns to Good Deeds, who cannot rise from the ground; he is weak, weighed down helplessly by his sins. Good Deeds would go with him but cannot, so he calls for his sister Knowledge who enters, bringing Confession. By their advice, through penance, Good Deeds is allowed to rise to accompany Everyman. They are joined by Strength, Discretion and Five Wits; after Everyman has gone to a priest for the last rites, they set out upon the journey.

When they come in sight of the grave, Strength, Discretion and Five Wits abandon him. Knowledge says that he can go no farther than the grave's edge, although he has no fear. Only Good Deeds will follow him, sink with him into the grave and speak for him in front of God. Everyman, realising how misguided he has been in not loving Good Deeds most through all his life, dies serenely and an Angel announces that his soul is saved and will be sent to Heaven.
THE RENAISSANCE
(1558 - 1625)
Sir Philip Sidney

Born (1554-1586) at Penshurst Place, Kent, Sir Philip Sidney passed his childhood among the local woods and meadows, receiving year by year those impressions from rural scenery and forming that love for nature, the fruit of which was to appear in his Arcadia and in the songs and sonnet of his riper years.

When about ten, Philip was sent to school at Shrewsbury where he laid the foundation of his scholarship. In those times it was usual to enter the university at an earlier age than at present, so that there is nothing remarkable in Philip Sidney’s entering Christ Church, Oxford, at the age of fourteen.

There seems some reason to believe that Philip went from Oxford to Cambridge, and continued his studies in that university. Here he made some highly prized and valuable friendships and acquired a large measure of classical learning.

In his eighteenth year Philip Sidney completed his university studies, and started “the grand tour”. This is certainly proof both of his proficiency in his studies, and of the confidence placed in him by his wise father.

In France, Sidney witnessed the awful massacre of St. Bartholomew’s Day, 1572. The conflict between Rome and the Reformation or Huguenot party now reached its climax. In May, 1575, Sidney returned to England, enriched by the experience of three years spent in most of European countries.

He was entrusted with diplomatic missions, the most interesting being the one he carried out at the age of twenty-two to congratulate Emperor Rudolph II on his coronation.

As a man of letters, he became associated with Edmund Spenser, Fulke Greville and some other distinguished members of the Areopagus Club, whose main aim was to introduce classical metres into English verse.

In the autumn of 1583, Sidney married Frances, daughter of Sir Francis Walsingham, who bore him a daughter two years later. That same year he was knighted for reasons of court protocol.

With his uncle, the Earl of Leicester, he took part in a military expedition against the Spanish in the Low Countries.

He received a fatal bullet wound in his thigh in the Battle of Zutphen on October 7, 1586. According to a traditional story, as he was dying he was brought a bottle of water, but just as he was putting it to his lips, he saw a poor wounded soldier carried by, who cast his dying eyes towards the precious draught. Perceiving this, Sir Philip Sidney withdrew his lips from the bottle, and handed it to the soldier, with the words: “Thy necessity is yet greater than mine!” and thus he offered a classic example of Renaissance chivalry.

When the news of Sir Philip Sidney’s death reached England, there was an extraordinary demonstration of grief and a general mourning during his burial in Old Saint Paul’s Cathedral.

Biographical card

1554 - Born, eldest son of Sir Henry Sidney and Mary Dudley, the sister of the Earl of Leicester.
1564 - Attended Shrewsbury school, where he struck up a lifelong friendship with Fulke Greville.
1568 - Went to Christ Church, Oxford.
1571 - Left Oxford, without taking a degree, when the colleges were closed on account of the plague.
1572 - He was granted by Queen Elizabeth a licence to travel abroad.
1574 - Studied in Padua.
1577 - He was sent as ambassador to the Emperor Rudolph in Prague to discuss the formation of Protestant League.
1580 - Temporarily out of favour with Elizabeth I for political reasons, he retired to Wilton House, near Salisbury, where he composed the best of his writings, including Arcadia, his most famous pastoral romance.
1583 - He married Frances Walsingham and was knighted.
1585 - His daughter was born.
1586 - On October 17 he was wounded during a skirmish at Zutphen on 22nd September. Died at Arnhem on 17th October.

Why is Sir Philip Sidney studied?

Sir Philip Sidney embodied so brilliantly the spirit of the courtly literary tradition in the Elizabethan age as to be regarded by his contemporaries as the perfect Renaissance gentleman of many accomplishments, modelled on Castiglione’s Cortegiano. His writings enormously influenced the general history of the tradition of love poetry.

Despite his untimely death (he died when he was only thirty-two), he wrote a huge literary output, including first-rate poetry. He successfully experimented metrical forms, and prose, where he showed a literary critical ability uncommon for his times.

He managed to infuse his philosophical and lofty chivalric ideals into his art through striking imagery and powerful language.

Works

As Sidney’s poems were largely private, and apparently known only to a few intimate acquaintances, none of them were published during his lifetime. Accordingly, scholars are faced with the great problem of fixing their chronological order of composition.

The Lady of May (1578-99). Sidney wrote this short pastoral entertainment for the Queen’s visit to Leicester House, which was performed at Wanstead probably in 1578. It contains in nuce the high stylistic principles and concerns, which met a full achievement in his mature works.

The development of the story is regular and revolves around Lady of May, the daughter of a countrywoman. She has two suitors and asks Queen Elizabeth to help her decide which suitor to choose. The two suitors, the forester Therion and the shepherd Espicus engage in a singing match so that the Queen may judge which is worthier to possess the Lady.

The pedant Rombus, the old shepherd Dorcas and the young forester Rixus debate the best melody. Eventually, upon the Queen’s advice, Lady of May accepts Espicus as her husband.
This story is meant to ridicule those who abuse logic and rhetoric.

Arcadia (1590). It exists in two distinct versions and is the most famous and longest pastoral romance composed in English in the 16th century. Sidney wrote his Old Arcadia for the amusement of his younger sister, the Countess of Pembroke and reflects their youthful vitality. Old is a somewhat misleading epithet for Sidney’s five-book romance, for he was only twenty-two when he wrote it.

Actually, Old here means only “former” or “previous”. It circulated widely in manuscript form, in the fashion of the day, before Sidney undertook to revise it in 1584 - a task, which was interrupted by his death two years later. Though incomplete, this revised and enlarged version in five Books or Acts - New Arcadia - was published in 1590.

Three years later his sister published the third version, resulting from the combination of two previous versions with the addition of her own unexpanded concluding books.

It enjoyed enormous popularity for the ingenuous pictures of human nature, its highly elaborate prose, and vivid idyllic descriptions of nature. Yet, by this century it has acquired a very bad name for tedium, a major cause of which must have been the composite text’s prolixity and discontinuity.

As the title suggests, the story is set in an ideal pastoral environment of simple-pleasant country life. It mingle comic and tragic episodes and tackles in a serious and solemn tone various themes, such as justice, atheism and suicide. The author instils “delightful teaching”, in a wide variety of metres and genres.

Arcadia is a clear-cut romance following an approximately chronological order and abounding in lively speeches, dialogue, and quasi-dramatic tableaux.

King Basilius of Arcadia, his wife Gynecia and their two beautiful daughters Pamela and Philoclea can bear the corruption of the court no longer and in order to avoid the dangers foretold by an oracle they withdraw to the forest.

Two young Princes Pyrocles, son of the King of Macedon, and his cousin Musidorus are shipwrecked off the coast of Laconia and eventually they reach Arcadia, the embodiment of innocent, virtuous living. The former disguises himself as a shepherd and the latter disguises himself as an Amazon, Zelmane, to gain access to the king’s household and win the Arcadian Princesses’ hearts.

A train of complications, intrigues and dramatic circumstances follow. The King himself falls in love with ‘Zelmane’ and so do Gynecia and Philoclea. Musidorus and Pamela fall in love each other.

After drinking a love-potion intended by his wife for Pyrocles, Basilius goes into a deathlike trance. When the two Princes try to elope with the two sisters a trial ensues. Philoclea is consigned to a convent, Gynecia is to be buried alive and the two young strangers are sentenced to death by a jury presided over by Euarchus, the ruler of Macedon.

The judge is relentless even when a stranger reveals the identities of the two young men. He asserts:

If rightly I have judged, then rightly have I judged mine own children.
The tragedy is averted and turns to comedy when the king revives and asserts the strange workings of providence. The two young couples marry providing the story a conventional happy ending.

The Apology For Poetry, or, Defense of Poesy (c. 1583). Two different versions of the work appeared posthumously in 1595: The Defence of Poesie published by Ponsonbie and An Aopologie for Poetrie published by Olney.

The poem is particularly valued for its elegant and stylish prose and marked a major landmark in English literary criticism. It is partly an answer to an invective against poets and playwrights contained in the Puritan critic Stephen Gosson’s The School for Abuse (1579).

Sidney carefully examines poesie in its complex unity and lays no fixed laws, which can limit inspiration. He expounds how poetry may be seen as “a divine gift” which allows the poet to confer meaningful sense from ordinary things, achieving “universal truths”. Accordingly, the poet’s moral task and didactic teachings, although under the guise of entertainment, is superior even to the philosopher’s or the historian’s.

In the concluding lines, he stresses that:

As virtue is the most excellent resting-place for all worldly learning to make his end of, so Poetry, being the most familiar to teach it, and most Princely to move towards it, in the most excellent work, is the most excellent workman.

Sidney surveyed contemporary English poetry and found that it had lost its moral strength and wisdom since Chaucer.

In his impassioned “defence”, he considers a poet’s mission as a sacred one leading to immortality and concludes with an optimistic prophecy for major achievements in any sort of literary genre.

Astrophel and Stella (1591). It is the first great love sonnet sequence (108) in English. These sonnets are systematically interwoven with eleven songs in other forms and several references to literary theory, which provide a complete organic whole.

Written about 1582 and circulated in manuscript until the pirated editions of 1591, it appeared the same year with an Epistle by the prose-writer and playwright Thomas Nash.

The complete text was printed at the end of the 1598 Folio of the Arcadia, seemingly under the supervision of the Countess of Pembroke.

Astrophel and Stella developed the literary taste for the Elizabethan sonnet cycles, which became the height of courtly fashion. As a pioneer in the field of sonneteering, Sidney displays a matchless grace, ease, and command of language and universality in emotion.

He dedicated Astrophel and Stella to Penelope Devereux, the lady whom he loved intensely but vainly as she had already married against her will to Lord Robert Rich. Sir Philip Sidney worked on them from 1580 to 1583, mostly in imitation of the Italian tradition, celebrating the poet’s beloved through a series of conventional sonnets.

This indebtedness does not belittle Sidney’s wit and balanced orchestration of verse. Partly autobiographical, the sonnets tell no regular story but relate
tournaments, and meetings and loosely tell of the poet/lover Astrophel's miseries over his unsatisfied passion for Lady Stella ("star"), who was known to be Penelope Devereux.
The whole story is pervaded with the Lover's various swings in mood, from admiration to conflict and from hope to despair and resignation. Stella has no feeling of pity, or sympathy for the lover's anguish.
From the male point of view, Stella's virtue is considered a form of ingratitude since the traditional courtly love expects by right a reward for his constant love, a reward which Stella's virtue denies him. On the matter, it is worth noting that the frustration of passion has been, together with its fulfilment, the great subject of love poetry.
This is a highly committed form of poetry which, taking its origin from Ovid, came down through the centuries picking up refinements and elaboration on its way.
Astrophel makes the point but ruefully shows, at the same time, that he is fully aware of the sophistry of his plea. If we allow ourselves for a moment to look at this great poem simply as a piece of technique, it is clear that Sidney has succeeded in overcoming all the difficulties of the Italian sonnet-form, thus creating a near-perfect example of it.
Sonnets I and XXXIX, two of the most famous of Sidney's cycle of sonnets, are analysed in the following pages.

Astrophel and Stella

Published: posthumously in 1591
Literary genre: a sequence of 108 sonnets and 11 songs

Introduction

It is well known that sonnet writing became something of a fashionable pursuit among educated gentlemen towards the end of the sixteenth century. During the Renaissance an awareness of an interest in European literature had resulted in Petrarchism, an attempt to imitate the form and many of the thematic conventions of Petrarca's Sonnets. Writers began to explore the possibilities of the sonnet form in the English language. They were attracted to Petrarca's treatment of unrequited love and to the formal discipline imposed by the sonnet form. These poets began to attempt to reproduce something of the melodic decorum of Italian on the vernacular English language. Instead of exploiting the harshness present in English, writers started to discover that English could sound almost as elegant and refined as Italian.

The development of the English sonnet

The story of the English sonnet starts with two important poets from the earlier part of the sixteenth century: Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (c.1517-47) and Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-42). Both these poets were important in the part that they played in bringing the poetry of Petrarca through translation to the attention of English readers. Wyatt’s free and imaginative adaptations of Petrarca revealed the potential offered by the sonnet form in English.
Sidney’s importance and the narrative of the sequence

Sir Philip Sidney’s role in the history of the sonnet is a crucial one. His sequence of sonnets marks the triumph of an English *idiom* in which a smooth style is prominent and in which Petrarchan features are not only fully assimilated but are given an individuality.

Sidney owes to Petrarca the stylised treatment of unrequited love in the sequence, yet at the same time Sidney is concerned to re-create Petrarca, not just to imitate him. Sidney’s *Astrophel and Stella* is the production of an English poet with a strong intellectual motivation. In imitating Petrarca, Sidney wishes to follow in the grand tradition of imaginative adaptation of poetic models.

We can sense this inventive response to Petrarca and his tradition in the way that Sidney amusingly plays with the conventions of Petrarchan love. For instance, in *Sonnet II* Sidney argues with the Petrarchan tradition that lovers should fall in love at first sight; for Sidney this does not match up to his own experience of love (“Not at first sight, nor with a dribbled shot / Love gave the wound”).

We can also note that the way that Sidney confidently argues with literary discussions of love: the reference to Pindar, Plato and Cato within the first few sonnets marks Sidney’s aspiration to intellectual stature in the genre of love poetry. Sidney is after all perhaps the ultimate example of the well-educated and highly accomplished Renaissance man: soldier, poet and courtier.

It is part of his self-image to show confidence in learning, an ability to argue with the great thinkers and writers on their own terms.

Summary

The sequence explores a whole variety of experiences in which the lover presents himself as a very self-conscious poet eager to investigate intelligence and poetic wit, the repercussions of his passion. The first sixty-three sonnets reveal a debate within the poet between the demands of public life and his passionate love for Stella. A key to the characterisation may be found in the names of the lovers: Astrophel means “star-lover” while Stella signifies the distant and pure beauty of a shining star. Stella is a figure of pure chastity and is unwilling to yield to Astrophel’s advances despite her love for him.

The love between the pair is platonic in its ideal state, yet passion in the fallen world demands fulfilment.

The concluding lines of the sequence tell a story of mutual respect: Stella remains a figure of spiritual love who refuses to fulfil physical passion. Astrophel instead simply maintains his admiration for her and the values that she embodies while undergoing bleak changes of mood as he longs for a more physical expression of his love.
Sonnet I

Detailed commentary

This sonnet forms Sidney's witty opening to the narrative of the two lovers. Astrophel begins his story by talking of the difficulty of writing love poetry. Love poetry exists to speak eloquently to the beloved woman; it must move her emotions to love.

The poet needs to find out the best way of writing love-poetry and imitation of other poets seems to be the way forward. Yet for Astrophel a study of great love-poems yields nothing - he is still unable to write effectively to Stella. The answer to his problem comes from Astrophel's muse who tells him simply to put away his study of books and to write from the heart.

Experience must form the starting-point for a good love-poem, not an intellectual study of other poets.

We should start by noting the way that Sidney constructs an elegant and reasoned argument within the poem. The constraints of the sonnet form are exploited as a framework within which a logical progression of ideas is expounded.

The first eight lines of the poem make up the first “sentence”, the story of the poet’s thoughts that move from love to the decision to write love poetry. The sentence starts with a profession of true love and moves on to proclaim a desire to write as a tribute to that love (“fain” in line I means “willing”).

The purpose of writing the poem is to influence the beloved man; she should in reading the poem “take some pleasure” from the poet’s “pain”, the pain both of loving and of writing the poem. The poem will inform the woman of the poet’s love and from that knowledge the woman will start to feel pity for the man.

The poet thus wants to make the most forceful impression on his beloved and so he looks for the right words to describe his unhappiness over his (as yet) unrequited love. He studies the beautiful and accomplished writing by other poets “inventions fine”) with the aim of producing similar work that will give pleasure to the mind of Stella (line 5).

Yet the poet's studies do not result in what he wants: as much as he turns the pages of other poetry books (“others leaves”) (line 7) he is unable to find inspiration. The metaphor describing this lack of inspiration is taken from weather: no “fresh and fruitful showers” fall on the “sun-burned brain” of the weary poet (line 8).

The poet does put words onto paper, but the results are very inconsistent indeed: “but words came halting forth” (line 9). The writing is slow, laborious and ineffective, lacking true originality and force (“invention” line 9 and 10). It is as if “invention” (personified as a child of “Nature”) has run away from the punishing blows of the bad-tempered crone “Study”.

In line 11, we have an excellent example of the kind of word play that delighted Sidney and his contemporaries. The word “feet” has here two possible meanings: the first is the usual; the second denotes poetic feet, the metrical units in a line of verse.

The work of other writers has made the poet’s task especially difficult, as if their lines have crowded the way and impeded progress. Word-play and changing metaphors were much loved by writers of this period – in line 12
Sidney changes his metaphor so that Astrophel’s desperation to communicate to Stella is compared to a pregnant woman “great with child”. In his frustration, Astrophel bites his insubordinate “truant” pen.

With a cunning twist, Sidney finds a solution straight from the conventions of poetic writing. The muses existed in classical poetry to inspire and guide all great poets - here Astrophel’s muse points him away from his books and into his heart. Astrophel must learn that in order to write truly effective love-poetry he must look first into his heart and recount the intensity of his own experience.

We misread the poem if we think that somehow Sidney is suggesting that imitating other poets is in itself a futile procedure. What Sidney does argue in this poem is that good love-poetry will start from experience, not from imitation.

**Sonnet XXXIX**

**Detailed commentary**

In this sonnet we sense the restlessness of love as Astrophel begs sleep to come and release him from the torment of his emotions. The first four lines of the sonnet address sleep personified in an elegant succession of metaphors.

Astrophel asks sleep to come and then goes on to range over what sleep means to different people in different predicaments. Sleep offers a welcome and an effective refuge from the pressures and difficulties of the real world.

In line 1, it is compared to a “knot” of peace, while in line 2, it becomes a resting-place for the mind (“wit” denotes lively and informed intelligence; a “baiting place” was an inn where travellers could rest on a long journey).

Sleep is like a healing ointment to the soul in times of trouble “the balm of woe” and is thus a rich resource that is available even to the poorest person (line 3) and to prisoners. Line 4 is slightly enigmatic: it suggests that sleep can act as an impartial judge between great and unimportant people.

Astrophel asks sleep to perform a special function for him in his troubled state. It must be a strong and effective shield against the “darts” of despair (“proof” simply indicates purity and integrity in the metal of the shield. “Prease” means an attack – the darts in this sonnet sequence are not only those of Cupid).

Astrophel longs for the internal conflict of emotions “civil wars” to cease and pleads for sleep to aid the process. He promises that he will pay sleep “good tribute” if he is released from his turmoil.

Sidney suggests two meanings here. The “tribute” could simply be a good night’s sleep, the ultimate tribute payable to sleep; more directly Astrophel is referring to the written tribute of the poetry. The last four lines of the sonnet are rather obscure.

Sidney’s complexity of wit can threaten the clarity of his argument as he gives his readers something over which to puzzle. Astrophel bids sleep take away the comforts of the bedchamber: the pillows, the “sweetest bed”, the silence and darkness of the room; and the natural weariness that leads to sleep. If these comforts are removed in an attempt to prompt sleep to come,
then Astrophel threatens sleep with the sight of him more awake than ever, reflecting “livelier than elsewhere” (line 14) the image of his beloved Stella. Sleeplessness is one of the symptoms of unfulfilled passion, yet Sidney’s use of this conventional theme reveals his interest in intellectual debate within the framework and constraint of the sonnet form.