Most readers know Geoffrey Chaucer only as the author of *The Canterbury Tales*, his most popular and famous work. Chaucer wrote a number of other significant works of poetry, including **The Legend of Good Women**, **The House of Fame**, **The Parliament of Fowls**, **and Troilus and Criseyde**. He also wrote many shorter poems and translated a number of works in a long and active career as both writer and civil servant. During his lifetime, Chaucer was a soldier, diplomat, and courtier who served three kings (Edward III, Richard II, and Henry IV).

Chaucer was born into a family belonging to the rising middle class, and was a page in a household closely associated with the court of King Edward III. Chaucer was fluent in Latin, French, and Italian, which obviously would serve him well in his work as a foreign diplomat. In addition to this, he served England as a civil administrator, translator, Comptroller of Customs for the Port of London, Member of Parliament, Justice of the Peace, Clerk of the Works at Westminster Abbey, the Tower of London, and elsewhere, and as a sub-forester of one of the king’s forests.

It cannot be overstated that Chaucer almost single-handedly made English a language of dignity and respect. To this point, the language of the educated continued to be Latin, while French was used primarily for literary purposes and was, of course, spoken by the nobility. English was still considered the language of the lower classes and, while a few earlier poets had written in English, very little skillful or accomplished literature existed. Through his diplomatic travels to places like Italy and France, Chaucer had the chance to become exposed to a wealth of European literature, and these literary traditions served as inspiration for his work in English.

At the time of The Canterbury Tales’ composition (1386), one of the most popular works of literature was **The Decameron**, by the Italian poet **Boccaccio**. As the title suggests, The Decameron is a group of 100 tales (written in poetic form) all within a “**frame story**.” This was a very popular form, which was also used in the ***The Arabian Nights’ Entertainment***. In the frame story, short story selections are built around a general frame story. Today, we see this form used all the time on television. Any regular T.V. series with a reoccurring group of characters that you see engaging in connected episodes every week is using the frame story model.

As the frame around which to group his tales, Chaucer chose a springtime pilgrimage to Canterbury Cathedral, the site of the shrine to St. Thomas a Becket, who had been murdered there two centuries before. The yearly pilgrimage was a custom of people in medieval England, and the trip to the Shrine of St. Thomas was the most popular.

Chaucer’s choice of frame for *The Canterbury Tales* demonstrates quite beautifully his gifts as a narrator, philosopher, dramatist, and observer. In his work, Chaucer is also able to present us with a wonderful cross-section of medieval society, drawing his characters from the three most important groups of his day – feudal, ecclesiastical, and urban.

Chaucer’s plan for *The Canterbury Tales* was for each pilgrim to tell two stories on the way to Canterbury and two on the return journey to London. Unfortunately, Chaucer died before this plan was realized, so, instead of the proposed 124 stories, he managed to complete only 24. Still, the historical significance of what was completed cannot be overstated. Scholars call the “Prologue” our best picture of life in 14th century England. Although written in poetic form, the tales themselves are considered to be the first set of short stories in English literary history. Chaucer’s use of the five-beat **iambic** line in rhymed pairs was popularized three centuries later in the Neoclassical Age by poets like John Dryden and Alexander Pope.

Geoffrey Chaucer, the “Father of English Literature,” died in 1400. He was buried in Westminster Abbey, the first English poet to be interred in what has come to be known as the Poet’s Corner.