

The Architect of Consciousness: Justifying Geoffrey Chaucer's Place in the Proto-Modern Literary Canon

I. Introduction: Reconciling the Medieval Poet with Modern Sensibilities

The task of categorizing Geoffrey Chaucer, the preeminent English poet of the 14th century, as a modern writer appears, at first glance, to be a chronological contradiction. The criteria for literary modernity—typically characterized by pervasive individualism, acute psychological depth, radical self-reflexive narration, and profound critique of traditional authority—are generally associated with the centuries following the Enlightenment. Yet, a rigorous analysis of Chaucer's complete corpus, including the monumental scope of *The Canterbury Tales* and the psychological intensity of *Troilus and Criseyde*, reveals a radical departure from established medieval literary norms. Chaucer's work did not merely chronicle the Middle Ages; it fundamentally anticipated the intellectual and aesthetic sensibilities that would define the Renaissance and subsequent centuries.¹

Chaucer is strategically situated at the fulcrum of historical and intellectual transition, embodying what scholars term the "uneasy transition between Middle Ages and Renaissance".³ His literary career was marked by a sophisticated intellectual synthesis. He absorbed and adapted the allegorical structure and moral frameworks of his time, yet simultaneously embraced emerging humanistic attitudes and fostered a critical curiosity toward newly discovered or translated classical texts.³ This deliberate grafting of new intellectual approaches onto the established medieval literary structure provides the critical evidence necessary to classify him not as a purely medieval artist, but as the foundational architect of the **proto-modern** English literary canon.

This extensive report asserts that Geoffrey Chaucer's lasting influence and claim to proto-modern status are predicated upon three interconnected, revolutionary contributions: first, his deliberate, institutionalized effort to standardize and elevate the English literary medium; second, his unprecedented focus on psychological individualism, shifting the

paradigm from the allegorical Type to the complex Subject; and third, his employment of sophisticated, self-reflexive narrative structures, particularly the mastery of irony and the unreliable narrator, which laid the technical and philosophical groundwork for the modern English literary tradition. His writings, spanning poetry and narrative fiction, demonstrate a consciousness acutely aware of its own craft and the complexities of human nature, a hallmark of the modern era.

II. The Foundational Modernity: Linguistic Standardisation and the Elevation of the Vernacular

The structural prerequisite for the emergence of a truly modern national literature is the establishment of a standardized, prestigious language capable of bearing the weight of high art and intellectual complexity. Chaucer's greatest contribution to future generations of writers was his conscious engineering and subsequent validation of the English medium.

2.1 Engineering the Literary Medium: The East Midland Dialect

While Geoffrey Chaucer is often bestowed the title "Father of English Literature," a title partially true but acknowledged by scholars as an overstatement given the major contributions of contemporaries such as John Gower and William Langland, his specific choice regarding language proved decisive for the linguistic future of England.⁵ Chaucer chose to compose in Middle English, deliberately favoring the East Midland dialect, which was the lingua franca of London and the governmental apparatus.⁷ In making this choice, he contributed significantly to the "literary standardisation of a local vernacular," a critical stage in the evolution towards Modern English.⁷

The selection of a vernacular dialect for major literary production in the 14th century was a powerful political and cultural assertion, countering the long-standing historical and cultural dominance of Norman French, the language of the elite, and Latin, the language of the Church and scholarship.⁸ The significance of this decision is amplified when considering Chaucer's institutional standing. His employment in the English court, chancery, and bureaucracy—official centers of political and administrative power—exerted a substantial influence on linguistic development.⁵ By combining the artistic prestige of monumental works like *The Canterbury Tales* with the institutional authority inherent to the court, Chaucer effectively accelerated the standardization process of the London dialect. This demonstrated

that English was a language capable of both elegance and power, establishing a crucial foundation for subsequent English literary production.⁸ The strategic deployment of linguistic choice for cultural and political assertion, effectively institutionalizing literary prestige, is a fundamentally modern characteristic of authorship.

2.2 Innovation in Poetic Form and Meter

Chaucer's modernization extended beyond mere dialect choice into the very formal structure of English poetry. He pioneered the successful introduction and popularization of the accentual-syllabic meter, a sophisticated technique adapted from continental models, particularly French and Italian poetry.⁵ This structured versification provided a regular, measured cadence that superseded the older, often irregular, alliterative traditions characteristic of poets like Langland. This formal discipline paved the way for the iambic foundations that would support the great poetic movements of the Renaissance and later periods. Chaucer's meticulous technical execution proved that the vernacular language could bear the weight of complex metrics and high artistry, establishing a formal rigour and musicality expected of writers seeking to achieve literary permanence.⁹ The introduction of these foreign poetic techniques and their integration into the nascent English literary tradition demonstrated a cosmopolitan and innovative spirit, characteristic of transitional figures who shape modern literary landscapes.

III. The Invention of the Character: Psychological Realism and Individualism

Perhaps the most compelling argument for Chaucer's proto-modern status lies in his revolutionary shift from the static, morally pre-determined figure to the dynamic, psychologically complex individual. This focus on interiority marks a profound ideological break from medieval convention.

3.1 The Departure from Allegorical Type

Traditional medieval literature frequently employed allegorical figures, such as the personified

vices and virtues found prominently in works like *Piers Plowman*, which, while having a "strong dramatic impact," are often not "individuals in the modern sense at all".¹⁰ These characters often serve as fixed moral placeholders, representing abstract concepts rather than manifesting genuine internal conflict or individual history. Chaucer's pilgrims and protagonists, by contrast, are defined by an intense focus on "psychological complexity," establishing the crucial distinction between "individual identity versus individual type".¹¹ Chaucer moved beyond the didactic function of merely providing moral exempla to presenting human beings as complex, contradictory subjects whose actions are rooted in their own subjective psychology and lived experience.¹²

3.2 Psychological Accountability and the Author-Function

This transformative approach to characterization generated a novel relationship between the writer, the text, and the audience. Chaucer is recognized for embodying a "proto-modern conception of the Author".¹ According to critical theory, this conception of authorship brought with it a "new sense of moral, political and psychological accountability" for the author's creations.¹ The author is venerated, but simultaneously held to account for the content of their works, both in the eyes of society and in their own conscience. Chaucer's famous *Retraction*, often analyzed as an ambiguous final gesture, demonstrates his self-consciousness and ambivalence regarding this new literary role, acknowledging the weight of his own creation.¹

When characters are rendered with such psychological realism, their actions assume deeper ethical significance than if they were mere vehicles for vice or virtue. Chaucer utilizes profound irony to leverage this realism, transitioning the text's function from simple moral presentation to ethical diagnosis. For instance, the character of the Miller attempts to assert a purely "naturalistic vision of reality" through his tale, yet the narrative ironically serves to "reveal the dark ignorance of his own soul".¹ This method compels the audience to engage critically with the character's interiority, scrutinizing the subjective moral flaws revealed through their own words. This critical, diagnostic function applied to human psychology is a characteristic that fundamentally underpins modern literary critique.

3.3 Case Study: The Wife of Bath's Psychological Interiority

The Wife of Bath, Alison, stands as the most compelling testament to Chaucerian modernity. Her extensive Prologue is not a passive recitation of doctrine but a complex, self-justifying

autobiography, signaling a critical transition from the stylized mode of medieval theological debate toward subjective self-disclosure.¹³ Alison's famous emphasis on *experience* (*proef*) as superior to *auctoritee* (scholastic authority) is recognized as a foundational assertion of intellectual individualism in English literature, directly foreshadowing the independent spirit of Renaissance humanism.¹³ Chaucer demonstrates a penetrating insight into this worldly woman's mind, exploring her "vivacity and laughter" with "humour and with sympathy," while revealing her fundamental contradictions.¹ This exhaustive exploration of her subjective life, desires, and passions positions her as a "timeless creation on a time determined stage," whose universal psychological attributes transcend her 14th-century context, making her perpetually relevant to modern readers.¹⁴

IV. Narrative Distancing and the Complex Labyrinth of Voices in *The Canterbury Tales*

Chaucer's innovations in narrative structure and technique represent a dramatic philosophical and aesthetic rupture from the linear, often monolithic narratives favored by his predecessors. His framework—using a diverse group of subjective tellers, a layered frame narrative, and radical skepticism toward authority—are structural devices commonly associated with the development of the novel.

4.1 The Theatrical Frame and Structural Sophistication

The Canterbury Tales is structured around the pilgrimage to Thomas Becket's shrine, but this framework is much more than a convenient device for compiling disparate stories, unlike the simple *Sammelband* tradition sometimes associated with manuscript collections.⁷ Instead, the frame serves as a complex, "theatrical" stage for intense "interplay" and dramatic tension among the pilgrims.¹¹ Scholars have noted that the structure, sometimes analogized to the intricate design of a Gothic cathedral, allows Chaucer to investigate various socioeconomic strata using dramatic irony and satire to expose pretensions.⁷ The narrative focus increasingly pivots away from the tale itself (the *sentence*) toward the tellers' interactions, arguments, and personalized reactions (the *solaas* or *how* of the telling).¹¹ This pivot toward dramaturgical realism and character interaction over pure didactic function is a powerful indicator of proto-modern literary concern.

4.2 The Divided Author and Narrative Persona

Chaucer's sophisticated self-awareness regarding his role as author is most effectively channeled through the distinction between the controlling intelligence of **Chaucer the Poet** and the fictionalized perspective of **Chaucer the Pilgrim**. E. Talbot Donaldson's seminal work established that the Pilgrim persona is a deliberately created fictional reporter—often portrayed as wide-eyed, naive, and dull—who is functionally separate from the intelligent author (the Poet) and the historical civil servant Geoffrey Chaucer.¹⁷

The deployment of this naive Pilgrim persona achieves a profound degree of narrative distancing. By mediating the reality of the pilgrimage and the characters through an apparently uncritical observer, Chaucer strategically invites the reader into a critical, discerning role. The reader is compelled to recognize the Poet's subtle judgments and ironies that the Pilgrim narrator conspicuously misses.¹⁷ This dual perspective introduces narrative skepticism and critical awareness, requiring the audience to actively co-create meaning rather than passively accepting a single, delivered truth. This polyphony and rejection of a monolithic authoritative voice are essential, differentiating features of modern literature.

4.3 Mastery of Subjectivity: The Unreliable Narrator

The zenith of Chaucer's narrative artistry is his consistent utilization of the unreliable narrator. The Prologues, particularly those of the Wife of Bath and the Pardoner, are remarkable "experiments in narrative as self-disclosure or, perhaps more accurately, narrative as confession".¹⁸ These self-expressions draw critically upon sources such as the *Romance of the Rose* and *Piers Plowman*, yet Chaucer transmutes them into something entirely new.¹⁸

The Pardoner's Prologue, a brazen and detailed admission of his own financial fraud and spiritual corruption, forces the reader to analyze the gap between the teller's stated moral function and his exposed psychological reality.¹⁹ This intense, dramatic focus on a conflicted, self-condemning individual consciousness moves far beyond the static confines of the established medieval allegorical tradition.¹⁰ The fact that modern scholarship utilizes sophisticated frameworks—such as debating whether the Wife of Bath is telling the truth or practicing "retrospective revision" or analyzing the Pardoner's sexual peculiarity—confirms the texts' enduring, layered complexity and their anticipation of modern critical sensibilities.¹⁹

The structural and character-driven attributes that define Chaucer's departure from

contemporary medieval literature are summarized in the following table:

Chaucer's Modernity: A Comparison of Proto-Modern Attributes

Attribute of Modern Literature	Medieval Default (e.g., Langland)	Chaucerian Proto-Modern Technique	Supporting Evidence
Characterization Focus	Allegorical type; moral personification ¹⁰	Psychological realism; complex, contradictory individualism ¹	Wife of Bath's complex autobiography; Pardoner's conflicted consciousness ¹³
Narrative Stance	Didactic, singular, authoritative voice	Self-conscious, skeptical, multi-layered, unreliable narration ¹⁷	Distinction between Poet/Pilgrim; Pardoner's self-confession ¹⁸
Aesthetic Goal	Moral instruction (sentence) with pleasure (solaas) ¹⁶	Ironic social diagnosis; comedic exploration of dark ignorance ¹	Use of dramatic irony (Prioress); Miller's tale revealing character ignorance ¹
Literary Medium	Multilingual (Latin, French) or regional dialect	Standardization of the vernacular (East Midland/London dialect) ⁷	Elevated prestige of English; foundation for later English literature ⁸

V. *Troilus and Criseyde*: The Model of the Modern Psychological Novel

If *The Canterbury Tales* showcases a mastery of the dramatic frame narrative, *Troilus and Criseyde* (circa 1380s) demonstrates Chaucer's ability to create extended fiction centered on

intimate psychological study, a work often cited as the true genesis of the modern English psychological novel. The long narrative poem, although drawing heavily on classical romance traditions of the Matter of Rome, defies simple categorization, having been compared not just to five-act tragedy and epic poetry, but pointedly, to "a modern psychological novel".²⁰

5.1 Genre Transgression and Tragic Realism

In retelling the story of the Trojan lovers, Chaucer radically transformed his source material by focusing intensely on the interior emotional and moral dilemmas of his protagonists, shifting the narrative gravity from external, historical conflict to internal, subjective struggle. The central tragedy does not stem from battlefield fate, but from the characters' psychological response to external forces, notably the unpredictability of Fortune. Critics argue persuasively that the deepest tragic dimension lies not in Troilus's destiny, but in Criseyde's psychological "career," specifically her internal failure to maintain moral and emotional stability.¹³

The philosophical tension inherent in the poem, derived in part from Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* (which Chaucer translated), is the struggle to achieve a state of emotional and psychological stability amidst worldly unpredictability.¹³ This struggle is deeply internalized within the characters. Criseyde's ultimate decision to abandon her loyalty to Troilus and descend into what one scholar calls "the realm of the Many" ¹³ is interpreted not as a predetermined epic downfall, but as a failure of individual agency and will—a breakdown rooted in psychological vulnerability and subjective ethical decision-making. This crucial shift, centering the tragic force on internal causality, marks a definitive movement from the literary determinism of the medieval worldview to the psychological realism required by the modern novel.

5.2 Narrative Self-Reflection and Extradiegetic Stances

The complex psychological depth of the characters is mirrored by the self-conscious, layered narration of the poem. The narrator's active, often anxious, engagement with the audience and the source material elevates the work far beyond simple romance. The narrator frequently inserts "extradiegetic statements"—asides and comments directed to the audience that occur outside the story's main action.¹² These stances compel the reader to analyze the narrative process itself. Chaucer also explicitly foregrounds his role in the proems preceding each book, sometimes identifying himself as a "writer" (Book IV), sometimes as a "speaker" (Book III), and

sometimes as both (Book II).¹²

This high degree of meta-textual awareness compels the audience to critique the narrative transmission and the sources themselves. When the narrator expresses profound ambiguity, such as acknowledging historical accounts of Criseyde’s betrayal but inserting skepticism—"Men seyn—I not—that she yaf hym hire [heart]" ¹⁸—Chaucer introduces radical uncertainty about historical fact and moral certainty. This self-reflective critique regarding the limitations of simple moral judgments and the uncertainty of reality forces a sophisticated critical awareness in the audience, a practice that aligns *Troilus and Criseyde* firmly with the psychological and structural complexity expected of the modern novel.¹²

***Troilus and Criseyde*: Antecedents of the Modern Psychological Novel**

Novelistic Element	Manifestation in <i>Troilus and Criseyde</i>	Scholarly Implication
Psychological Depth	Detailed internal monologues and emotional struggles (Troilus's grief; Criseyde's dilemma) ²⁰	Focus on emotional causation and subjective response to external events (Fortune) ¹³
Tragic Realism	The tragedy hinges on individual choice and moral failing (Criseyde's psychological shift) ²¹	Transgression of romance genre into profound human tragedy ²⁰
Meta-Narrative	Explicit narrative asides (extradiegetic statements); narrator alignment with Criseyde ¹²	Self-aware narrative process, compelling the reader to critique the narrative transmission and source reliability ¹²

VI. Synthesis and Legacy: Chaucer as the Forefather of English Modernism

Chaucer’s proto-modern designation is secured not just by his individual innovations but by his synthetic approach to intellectual heritage and his conscious effort to build a lasting

literary tradition.

6.1 The Humanist Synthesis and Canon-Building

Chaucer possessed a singular ability to synthesize vast and often conflicting intellectual traditions. He consciously absorbed and adapted classical mythology and continental literary sources, drawing deeply upon works like the allegorical *Roman de la Rose* and integrating themes and structures from Boccaccio, Virgil, and Ovid.³ This method involved blending complex philosophical inquiry, such as the Boethian themes influencing his major works¹³, with a robust, developing native vernacular style. This process of incorporating emerging intellectual attitudes, sometimes "awkwardly," onto a self-sufficient medieval structure indicates that he actively worked in the liminal space between the two eras.³

This synthetic process culminated in a bold, modern authorial ambition: the establishment of an English literary canon capable of rivaling classical tradition. By explicitly placing himself in the lineage of the great classical poets, referencing "Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan and Stace" at the conclusion of *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer demonstrated a conscious, deliberate movement toward literary permanence and international prestige.⁴ This goal of elevating the vernacular to the level of classical high culture is a fundamentally modern characteristic of authorship.

6.2 Timelessness Confirmed by Critical Trajectory

The most conclusive justification for Chaucer's designation as a proto-modern writer is found in the enduring trajectory of his critical reception. His works are not confined to historical analysis; they actively invite and sustain modern and post-modern critical frameworks. For decades, scholarship concerning the Wife of Bath has utilized historical and psychoanalytic criticism, focusing on the "psychological forces" driving her character.¹³ Similarly, analyses of the complex, divided narration in *The Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus and Criseyde* rely heavily on concepts such as narrative unreliability and meta-textual critique.¹²

The utility and appropriateness of these sophisticated critical tools for interpreting 14th-century material confirm that Chaucer's literary techniques anticipated these critical sensibilities by centuries. His capacity to create characters that are understood and analyzed as complex "human subject[s] carrying a degree of psychological complexity similar to our own" confirms his profound artistic achievement and justifies his enduring relevance.¹² His

literary achievements paved the way for the Renaissance focus on humanism, demonstrating that the individual mind—not just the soul or the abstract type—was the richest territory for literary exploration.

VII. Conclusion: Justifying the Proto-Modern Canon

Geoffrey Chaucer's unparalleled contribution to English literature transcends his role as a historical chronicler. He was not only instrumental in the linguistic project of standardizing the English vernacular, thereby providing the foundation for future national literature, but he was also the primary innovator in transitioning the focus of narrative art from outward allegory to inward psychological realism.

Through his sophisticated structural mastery in *The Canterbury Tales*, utilizing the theatrical frame, irony, and the device of the naive pilgrim-narrator, Chaucer rejected a singular, authoritative truth, inviting the audience into a critical dialogue with the text. In *Troilus and Criseyde*, he mastered the extended psychological study, anticipating the novelistic tradition by centering tragedy on subjective choice and internal causality. His relentless dedication to exploring human consciousness, contradiction, and individuality, often with a delicate blend of "humour and with sympathy" ¹, firmly distinguishes him from his medieval peers.¹

The profound and enduring appeal of his characters—their universality and their modern psychological depth—confirms that Chaucer's work possesses the structural, thematic, and technical sophistication of the proto-modern era. He provided a unique literary "method of his own"—touching upon every human problem with delicate precision, incorporating pathos and humor ¹⁴—a method that set the intellectual and artistic standard for every major English writer who followed. Thus, Chaucer is justifiably celebrated not merely as the "Father of English Literature," but as the foundational architect of the proto-modern canon, a writer whose genius remains timeless.⁷

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