Introduction

Life and historical contexts

Geoffrey Chaucer was born in London, probably shortly after 1340, into a family of prosperous merchants. The Chaucers were upwardly mobile. Geoffrey's great-grandfather Andrew may have kept a tavern in Ipswich, but his son Thomas became a distinguished parliamentarian and rich landowner, while his granddaughter Alice married particularly well, first to Thomas Montagu, Earl of Salisbury, and subsequently to William de la Pole, Earl of Suffolk. Alice gained some notoriety as an astute wheeler-dealer, who accumulated an extraordinary number of wealthy estates, enjoyed a lavish lifestyle, and shifted her political allegiances when necessary. She sounds like an upmarket version of the Wife of Bath.

Would that we had so much information about the doings of Alice's grandfather Geoffrey. His life records are sparse, insubstantial, tantalizing.[1] Our first scrap of evidence (dated 1357) names Geoffrey Chaucer as the recipient of a minor benefaction from Elizabeth de Burgh, Countess of Ulster and wife of Prince Lionel, the second surviving son of King Edward III (1312–77). Chaucer was involved in the English invasion of France in September 1359, probably serving in Prince Lionel's company. He was captured but soon released; King Edward made a modest contribution to his ransom. During the peace negotiations at Calais in October 1360, Chaucer carried letters back to England. Perhaps this marks the beginning of his career as an international emissary.

We lose track of Chaucer until 1366, evidently an important year for the family. His father died, and his mother married again, to another London vintner. A grant made on 12 September to one Philippa Chaucer, of the queen's household, indicates that by this time Geoffrey Chaucer was her husband, although we have no idea of when the nuptials had taken place. This Philippa is usually identified with the 'Philippa Pan' named in the earlier records as being in the service of the Countess of Ulster (where, presumably, she had met Chaucer) and believed to be the same person as Philippa Roelt, daughter of Sir Payn Roelt, a knight of Hainault, who had come to England with Edward's Queen Philippa. Philippa Roelt was the sister of Katherine Swynford, the mistress and later the wife of John of Gaunt, King Edward's fourth son. Chaucer's first major

poem, *The Book of the Duchess*, commemorates the death of Gaunt's first wife, Blanche of Lancaster. The love affair between Gaunt and Katherine Swynford is often assumed to have begun after Blanche's death in 1368, and early during his second marriage, to Constance of Castille, but we have no way of knowing. Neither can we know if the family association benefitted Chaucer's career. But surely it cannot have harmed it.

Yet another record from 1366 names Chaucer as the recipient of a safe conduct permitting him to travel through Navarre, probably on some diplomatic mission. Other enigmatic references to his travels follow. In 1368 Chaucer was given a royal warrant to pass through Dover; in 1369 he may have accompanied John of Gaunt on an ineffectual military campaign in Picardy; in 1370 he was sent to 'parts beyond the sea', those 'parts' and indeed the purpose of the mission being unspecified. In 1372 Chaucer visited Italy to participate in negotiations with the doge of Genoa concerning the expansion of trade with England. It is unclear which other areas of the country he included on this trip, which lasted the best part of six months, but Florence was certainly one of them. Dante Alighieri (d.1321) had been born in Florence, and his fame there was assured. There is no evidence that Chaucer met Giovanni Boccaccio (d.1375) during his stay in the city or that his itinerary included Padua or Arquà, where he might have met Francis Petrarch (d.1374), the writer he was to laud as the 'lauriat' who had 'Enlumyned al Ytalie of poetrie' (*CT* IV.33). In 1378 Chaucer made a second Italian visit, this time to Lombardy. Was his knowledge of the *tre corone* due to those visits, or had he heard tidings of them at home, from Italian merchants in London? That is the most likely explanation for Chaucer's knowledge of the Italian language. Whatever the success of his commercial and political enterprises in Italy may have been, there is no doubt that the time he spent with its literature was of the first importance for his own creative development. Chaucer amassed a rich treasure trove of sources that were little, if at all, known in fourteenth-century England. Thus he was uniquely well placed to bring Italian confidence concerning the 'illustrious vernacular' to bear on his own vulgar tongue. But he did this in his own, highly individualistic if not plain eccentric, way.

On 8 June 1374 Chaucer's circumstances changed dramatically. He was appointed to an administrative position of considerable status, the comptrollership of the customs for the port of London. This entailed a return to the city of his birth, where he resided in a rent-free dwelling over Aldgate Bridge and a significant shift from a life centred on the royal court (a mobile and amorphous entity in itself), although Chaucer remained an esquire of the king's household, a position he had held since at least 1367. It was in London that Chaucer wrote *The House of Fame*, *The Parliament of Fowls* and at least part

of *Troilus and Criseyde*. In recent criticism the impact of the city on Chaucer's cultural formation has been afforded more significance than hitherto. With mixed results. London's slander-filled space may indeed be reflected by the chaotic confusion of truth and falsehood that characterizes *The House of Fame*. But the poet did not need to have lived in London to have created those textual conditions, and, indeed, specific reference to the place is notably absent from his work.

What research on 'urban Chaucer' does particularly well, however, is to challenge long-established, although often misleading, distinctions between court and conurbation, region and capital, centre and periphery, mainstream and marginal – and indeed between town and gown. Take for instance the fascinating case of Ralph Strode, the 'philosophical Strode' respectfully named at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde* (V.1857), along with the poet John Gower (d.1408). Strode's early career was as an Oxford don. By 1359 he had become a fellow of Merton College, and we know that he debated with that most turbulent of priests, John Wyclif (d.1384), on the vexing subjects of necessity, contingency, and the freedom of the human will (subjects addressed by Chaucer himself in the fourth book of *Troilus and Criseyde*). On 25 November 1373 Strode was elected as common serjeant or pleader of the city of London, an office he held until 1382. It seems that he had left Oxford for London, having chosen to pursue a secular career; we know that he got married because a wife and at least one child survived him when he died in 1387. Some have wondered whether we are dealing with one and the same man, but the combination of professional interests indicated here was by no means uncommon in Chaucer's day. This was a period in which many of the brightest and best students were choosing a career in law rather than in theology. Strode lived at Aldersgate from 1375 until 1386. In 1381 he stood surety for John Hende, a merchant who became mayor of London in 1391 (and served as the leading royal financier during Henry IV's reign). Geoffrey Chaucer's name appears on the same document, as another surety. All Londoners together.

And yet in 1386 Chaucer left London, giving up his jobs and the Aldgate house, to move to Kent, possibly Greenwich. Why? As a government employee, Chaucer was in the service of King Richard II (who had ascended the throne in 1377), and this was not a good time for the king's servants. The deteriorating relations between Richard and parliament came to a head in November 1387, when he was presented with an indictment of treason against several of his supporters; executions followed the next year. Those who perished included three men whom Chaucer must have known well, by dint of one or more of his appointments: Sir Nicholas Brembre, who had served three terms as mayor of London; Chief Justice Sir Robert Tresilian; and Sir Simon Burley, constable

of Dover and Warden of the Cinque Ports since 1384. (Tresilian and Burley served with Chaucer on the commission of the peace for Kent, to which he had been appointed in 1385.) Yet another victim of the 'Merciless Parliament' was the best documented of all of Chaucer's early readers, Thomas Usk, who had shifted his allegiance to Brembre at the worst possible time. In his prose allegory *The Testament of Love*, Usk praises Chaucer as 'the noble philosophical poete in English'[2] and displays extensive knowledge of *The House of Fame*, *Boece* and *Troilus and Criseyde*. Usk was hanged and brutally beheaded at Tyburn in 1388.

Meanwhile 'the noble philosophical poete' himself may have been lying low in Kent. It is tempting to speculate that the bookish and bumbling persona that he sometimes presents in his poetry concealed a man with a fine instinct for survival. This hypothesis is strengthened by the fact that when Richard II regained his royal authority in 1389, Chaucer's fortunes also rose. On 12 July of that year he was appointed clerk of the king's works, with responsibility for the accounts relating to building and maintenance at Westminster, the Tower of London and several other castles along with seven manors (including Eltham and Sheen). A supplementary position followed in 1390 when Chaucer was made clerk of the works for St George's Chapel, Windsor. He was now a man of some power and influence in 'Greater London' (if that anachronism may be allowed), having gained entry into the higher echelons of the new profession of 'civil servant' that had emerged as secular bureaucrats took over the administration of government from the clerics who previously had performed this function.

But in 1391 something seems to have gone wrong. Chaucer's clerkship of the works was transferred to one John Gedeney. Was Chaucer removed because of a lack of zeal or efficiency, or was this a voluntary retirement? On 3 September 1390 he had been robbed by highwaymen, presumably while he was on official business; perhaps the stresses and strains of the job were proving too much for a man of declining years. (Assuming he was born *c.*1340, Chaucer would have been around fifty by this time – old by medieval standards.) What is clear is that certain (albeit relatively minor) marks of royal favour continued. At some point during the 1390s Chaucer was appointed as deputy manager of the royal forest of North Petherton in Somerset (a typical sinecure for good service). In 1393 Richard II awarded him a gift of £10; an annuity of £20 followed in 1394, and, in 1397, the grant of a tun of wine (252 gallons) annually. More puzzling is a two-year warrant of royal protection, issued in 1398, for going on the king's 'arduous and urgent business' in diverse parts of England. Was Chaucer still performing important administrative or diplomatic services, or was this a general protection against lawsuits lingering from the time when he had held high public office?

In December 1399 Chaucer, aged around sixty, leased a house near Westminster Abbey, although he may well have moved back to the metropolis before that date (and his work as clerk of the king's works would have necessitated some sort of base there). A month earlier, King Richard II had been deposed, and Henry Bolingbroke claimed the throne. These tumultuous events probably made little difference to the writer's then-current circumstances. For a large part of his life Chaucer had enjoyed powerful political connections with the house of Lancaster, as did his highly successful son Thomas, who managed to retain Henry IV's favour during all the king's political machinations – no small feat. King Henry renewed various grants that Richard II had made to Chaucer and even added an extra annuity. Unfortunately, the payments seem to have been slow in coming, and it has been suggested that at this time Chaucer wrote (or adapted) a begging poem (the *Complaint to his Purse*), to be presented to the king. However, there is no way of knowing whether the poem was a conventional witticism or prompted by genuine need. Whatever the state of Chaucer's finances may have been, given Thomas Chaucer's secure social and financial situation around 1400, it seems highly unlikely that his father spent his last months in genteel poverty.

After June 1400 the records of payments of Chaucer's royal grants cease; according to a sixteenth-century tradition he died on 25 October of that year. Chaucer's burial in Westminster Abbey, initially at the entrance to St Benedict's chapel, was for reasons quite unconnected with his poetry, although in 1556 his remains were moved to a new tomb, in a part of the abbey that subsequently became known as Poets' Corner.

Public honour for the poet Chaucer's mortal body came rather late; what may be said about the recognition and reputation his literary corpus enjoyed during his lifetime? The attempt to answer that question takes us into difficult territory. In the first instance, we are faced with general problems of determining the extent and cultural significance of the courtly patronage of learning and literature in late-medieval Europe, together with a specific scholarly controversy concerning the part that Richard II played, or failed to play, as a patron of literature and the arts.

The English court of his predecessor, Edward III, seems to have been a stimulating place for an aspirant poet. The king and his inner circle were familiar with a wide range of figures from *chansons de geste* and romances, as well as devotional and encyclopaedic works. Edward's queen, Philippa of Hainault, had brought her family's sophisticated cultural tastes to England and was regarded as an enthusiastic recipient of poems. Jean Froissart (*c.*1337–after 1404), who was working as Philippa's secretary at the time of her death, celebrated a splendid court presided over by a feared king and a noble queen

whom he served with beautiful songs and treatises of love. Philippa was the addressee of *Li Regret Guillaume* (a lament on the death of her father), which was composed by another writer who enjoyed some favour at Edward's court, Jean de la Mote, praised as one of the greatest 'makers' (*faiseurs*) of the day. Although there is no evidence that Jean was still alive when Chaucer entered the outer fringes of Edward's court in the late 1350s, it seems reasonable to assume that some of his poetry still circulated in that milieu. We are on safer ground in the case of Oton de Graunson (*c.*1340–97), praised as the 'flour of hem that make in Fraunce' at the end of Chaucer's *Complaint of Venus*, which is an adaptation of three ballades by the French knight-poet. Graunson was a retainer of John of Gaunt's, and his name, like Chaucer's, appears on several occasions in Gaunt's register; on two occasions they appear together in records of gifts. They may have known each other personally.

How does the court of Richard II compare with this? Not very well. Such patronage as may be associated with the king himself is largely confined to the sphere of architecture, the extensive rebuilding of Westminster Hall (undertaken during Chaucer's tenure of the clerkship of the king's works) being the grandest project. John Gower's 'book for King Richard's sake', the Middle English *Confessio Amantis*, seems to have been the consequence of a chance encounter on the River Thames rather than a formal royal commission (however much Gower tried to exalt the occasion). According to a colophon to one of the items included in Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley 581, it was prepared for the 'consolation' of the most noble king in 1391; alongside is what seems to be a portrait of Richard II. However, there is no evidence that he had commissioned it or any of the other texts in this manuscript.

If we move from the king himself to his circle of associates, a more positive picture emerges. Two of Richard II's chamber-knights, Sir John Clanvowe (*c.*1341–91) and Sir John Montagu (Third Earl of Salisbury, *c.*1350–1400), were poets. None of Montagu's poems – written in French – have survived, but they were praised by Christine de Pizan (d. *c.*1430), a precociously proto-feminist author whose writings were popular at Charles VI's court and who met the earl in Paris in 1398. Another French member of the Montagu household was Jean Creton, who went on to write a metrical history of Richard II's deposition. A poem by Clanvowe, *The Book of Cupid*, has survived, and a devotional prose treatise, *The Two Ways*, has been attributed to him. The former text displays parallels with at least three of Chaucer's poems. Of their friendship there is no doubt: Clanvowe is on record as having supported Chaucer in a mysterious legal case involving one Cecily Champain, who in 1380 brought the charge of *raptus* against him. (The term may mean either abduction or physical rape.)

Another of Chaucer's supporters on that occasion was Sir William Neville, also a knight of the king's chamber.

It may be assumed that Chaucer knew the chamber-knight Richard Sturry because the two men were part of the negotiating team sent by Edward III to pursue peace talks with the French at Montreuil-sur-Mer in 1376. Sturry was involved in arranging an audience at which Froissart presented Richard II with an anthology of his love poems. Yet another chamber-knight, Lewis Clifford, brought from France a poem by Eustache Deschamps (*c.*1346–1406) which praises Chaucer as a 'Grant translateur'; Clifford himself is mentioned in it. Elsewhere Deschamps gives Clifford the epithet 'amorous', which we may take to mean that he was well versed in the fashions of *fin' amors*, a reader of fashionable love poetry. Clifford's son-in-law, Sir Philip de la Vache, seems to have been the addressee of one version of Chaucer's ballade *Truth*.

All of this evidence takes us to the very centre of the court, the *camera regis*, and to position Chaucer within or at least near it. This is not, of course, to claim that the cultural interests of some of Richard's familiars were encouraged by the king himself. But at the very least it can be supposed that he shared some of them. Perhaps King Richard should be seen as a typical, if somewhat unadventurous, aristocratic consumer of courtly culture who shared, in however basic a form, the interests of his more intellectual courtiers but did little if anything to reward them.

Higher estimations of the king's role have been put forward. But even the most generous valuation pales into insignificance when compared to the enterprise of the French king Charles V (d.1380), who commissioned more than thirty French translations of authoritative works, including several by Aristotle. The scale of Charles' patronage is extraordinary, yet he was following in the footsteps of several regal predecessors who also had promoted the production of works deemed to serve the public good (as the self-promoting rhetoric had it). Special mention may be made of two books dedicated to the ruthlessly brilliant King Philip IV 'the Fair' (d.1314), Giles of Rome's *De regimine principum* (written originally in Latin but soon translated into French) and Jean de Meun's *Livres de confort*, a French translation of Boethius' *Consolatio philosophiae* which is of special interest to readers of Chaucer because it formed the basis of the *Boece*.

How exactly does Chaucer's *Boece* fit in to his career? Its lack of a preface is intriguing – particularly given that his primary source, Jean de Meun's *Livres de confort*, had provided him with a nicely up-to-date model (complete with a prestigious initial citation of Aristotle) which he could easily have adapted. The French preface addresses King Philip IV. Could it be that Chaucer had

written a similar dedication, perhaps to John of Gaunt or even King Richard II himself, which had to be excised due to political expediency, and hence the entire prologue was lost? What is quite clear is that the *Boece* meets the highest standards of its time with regard to academic-style translation of authoritative texts – texts which for generations had been studied in medieval schools and universities. A literal translation is provided, together with explanatory glosses for the reader's benefit. By including them, Chaucer was proceeding in the best academic manner of his age – and acknowledging, indeed respecting, the abilities of an audience that was not narrowly academic and may have been predominantly lay.

We should also appreciate the masterly way in which Chaucer, in his *Treatise on the Astrolabe*, rendered in English the Latin version of an Arabic work by Messahalla (Masha'allah ibn Atharī, an eighth-century Persian Jewish astrologer), which he supplemented with material from John of Holywood's *De sphaera*. The *Astrolabe* treatise is as much of a public text as the *Boece*, intended for an audience far wider than the mysterious 'Lyte [little] Lowys my sone' to whom it is addressed. It was here that Chaucer chose to invoke the concept of *translatio studii*: knowledge has been transmitted from one culture to another and translated from one language to another, and therefore English people should have 'trewe conclusions' made available to them 'in her owne tunge [tongue]'.[3] (Charles V's translators had frequently cited this concept, in commending their French renderings.) The fact that this work has survived, wholly or partially, in thirty-one manuscripts (in contrast with the sixteen extant manuscripts of *Troilus and Criseyde*) is telling.

Chaucer would have fitted in well at Charles V's court, where there were many intellectuals who shared his interests in literature and what then counted as science. In comparison, Richard II's court may seem rather dull, even parochial, despite the king's love of the more ephemeral aspects of French fashion – clothes, cuisine and ceremonial. But the poet had some people to talk to; the 'Chaucer Circle' was fairly extensive. Several of its members have already been named (the knights John Clanvowe, William Neville, Richard Sturry, Lewis Clifford and Philip de la Vache); the literary interests of Sir John Montagu have also been noted. Which brings us to a historical fact of considerable importance: several of those personages were accused of being adherents of heretical doctrines (known as 'Lollardy') deriving from the radical thought of the Oxford theologian John Wyclif. This raises the question of Chaucer's own attitude to Lollardy.

In 1395 the so-called *Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards* was nailed to the doors of Westminster Abbey and St Paul's Cathedral, an action which,

according to the chronicler Thomas Walsingham, was made possible by the support of Sturry, Clifford and Montagu, along with Sir Thomas Latimer.[4] This extraordinary document allows us some insight into what Wycliffite teaching meant for learned laymen. It begins with the claim that the English Catholic Church, following the example of 'her stepmother, the great Church of Rome', has fallen into the dotage of 'temporality', a major symptom of which is the maintenance – at great cost to the people of England – of a 'proud prelacy' for which there is no precedent in the New Testament. The imposition of celibacy on men and women who are unable to cope with it allegedly results in a horrifying range of sins, including homosexuality. Priestly powers are denigrated, particularly those relating to the confection of the Eucharist and confession, and suspicion is expressed concerning such practices as paying for indulgences (on which see pp. 105–6 below), saying special prayers for the dead, and making offerings to crosses and other material images.

On one level, this manifesto expresses a desire for a simpler, more authentically New Testament, form of worship, free from the ostentation, materialism and decadence its authors saw in religious practices of their time. On another, it evinces lay unease concerning the activities of a vast ecclesiastical establishment, which uses 'feigned' powers and miracles to assert its authority, extorts money from the people of England and encourages rather than controls sin by imposing on men and women vows of celibacy which they find impossible to keep. The 'temporality' into which the church has fallen has resulted in confusion between the relative powers of church and state.

Many of these attitudes can be traced back to Wyclif himself, who during the 1370s was acting as a sort of spin doctor on behalf of the English ruling élite. Temporal lords had the right to use church property in time of need, he argued, and the state should police the church, acting to curb its excesses and punish its transgressions. Little wonder that temporal lords, including the Lollard knights, approved of this theologian. John of Gaunt enlisted Wyclif as an ally in his own disputes with the church, and when (in February 1377) this prompted a summons for Wyclif to appear before Archbishop Simon Sudbury at St Paul's, Gaunt accompanied him and became involved in a heated argument with Sudbury. Later that same year, Wyclif defended his view that in time of national crisis, taxes due to the pope could be withheld. In the early spring of 1378 Wyclif's views were investigated once again, this time at Lambeth. And once again a secular lord stepped up to defend Wyclif, ordering the prelates not to pass any formal decision against him. This time it was Sir Lewis Clifford, Lollard Knight and friend of Chaucer.

It would seem, then, that in the 1370s at least some aspects of Wycliffite thought were seen as supportive of the state's best interests. But that situation did not last. Richard II bit the hand that sought to feed him, having decided that a tough line with Lollardy was necessary for the maintenance of royal power. Following his return from Ireland in 1395, he made it quite clear that anyone who gave aid or comfort to the Lollards would suffer dire consequences. Sir Richard Sturry was threatened with a most shameful death if he failed to renounce his heterodox views.

Where did Chaucer stand in relation to all of this? His extant works contain only one direct allusion to Lollardy. When Chaucer's idealized 'povre Persoun of a toun' (*CT* I.478–9) takes Harry Bailly to task for his virulent swearing, Harry retorts, 'I smelle a Lollere in the wynd' and warns the Canterbury pilgrims that this 'Lollere' is going to 'prechen us somwhat' (II.1173–7). This is said in jest. Harry is not claiming that the Parson *is* an actual Lollard, merely that he sounds like one (given Lollard aversion to oaths of any kind, including blasphemy). The Shipman then fantasizes that the Parson will preach exclusively from biblical quotations and introduce 'difficulte' (hard and/or controversial material), thereby sowing cockle (a weed) 'in our clene corn' (1180–3), the implied comparison being with the way in which the clean corn of orthodoxy was infiltrated by the weeds of Lollardy. Here two inveterate swearers have joined forces to ridicule what they regard as extreme religiosity. It might be concluded that, for Chaucer, Lollardy was a bad thing to be accused of, rather than a movement with which he wished to be associated.

Attempts to move beyond Chaucer's Lollard joke to uncover a measure of sympathy with Lollard doctrine have met with limited or highly qualified success. The counter-argument has been that Lollardy never gained a monopoly on, for example, attacks on church corruption and systemic failure; so Chaucer's attacks on money-grubbing friars and pardoners did not make him a follower of Wyclif. A poet can be radical, abrasive, contentious, in ways which ultimately manage to be supportive of the prevailing religious and social orthodoxies.

There we must leave the debate. It may be a cliché of literary criticism to term Chaucer 'elusive', but that is no more than the simple truth, evident in both his life and his writings. 'He was a townsman and yet a courtier, a Londoner and yet a country gentleman. . . . He frequented court, but managed to distance himself from court politics'.[5] Of bourgeois origins, he served the most powerful aristocrats in the land and enjoyed the friendship of some of the most ideologically radical among them. He had seen military service during the Hundred Years War with France, yet his most extensive treatment of warfare, *The Knight's Tale*, is heavily dependent on an Italian source, which