

## Myth

# 1

## CHAUCER IS THE FATHER OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

Chaucer is regularly named as the father of English poetry, the father of English literature, the father of English literary history,<sup>1</sup> the father of the English language, even the father of England itself.<sup>2</sup> This first “myth,” with all these associations, is probably the most foundational one for this book, as it sits behind many of the conceptions and emotional investments readers have in the familiar figure of Geoffrey Chaucer. It is also the myth that exemplifies the ways in which this concept in literary history is both instructive and yet also potentially confusing. The idea of fatherhood over a literary tradition is a powerful metaphor that is intimately tied up with ideas of nationalism, masculinity and poetic influence, but we can fruitfully unpack its significance and its history. We may also observe that this kind of praise can be a mixed blessing in the changing fashions of literary study.

It was Chaucer’s immediate successor Thomas Hoccleve who first wrote about Chaucer as a father figure. In several stanzas of his *Regiment of Princes*, written in 1412, just twelve years after Chaucer’s death, Hoccleve laments the death of his “maister deere and fadir reverent.”<sup>3</sup> He praises Chaucer as “universel fadir in science” (“science” is best glossed as knowledge, or wisdom),<sup>4</sup> and twice calls him his “worthy maistir,”<sup>5</sup> suggesting a close link between fatherhood and authority. Hoccleve also describes Chaucer as “The firste fyndere of our faire langage.”<sup>6</sup> This is a tricky phrase to analyze, as “fyndere” in Middle English can mean “poet” as much as “discoverer” and “first” can mean “pre-eminent” as well as “first.” But the praise is unequivocal: Hoccleve compares Chaucer to Aristotle in philosophy, to Cicero in rhetoric and to Virgil in poetry.

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30 *Great Myths About Chaucer*, First Edition. Thomas A. Prendergast and Stephanie Trigg.  
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Other writers who did not know Chaucer personally were quick to take up this description of Chaucer as father and laureate poet, moving on from the elegiac mode that dominated Chaucerian reception in the first decades after his death in 1400. Indeed, during the fifteenth century, much writing in English was “Chaucerian” in style and voice, leading to considerable uncertainty – or perhaps we should say fluidity – about the authorship of many texts that appear in the early printed “Works” collected under the name of Geoffrey Chaucer. For many of these editions, the commercial incentive of adding works “never before printed” was an invitation to include poems by Lydgate, Usk and other writers under the “Chaucerian” banner.

By the late sixteenth century, however, Chaucer was already being seen as a figure from a distant or “antique” past. For example, in his *Faerie Queene* (1596), Edmund Spenser addressed him in old-fashioned terms as “Dan Chaucer, well of English undefyled” – that is, as the source of pure English – and worthy of being listed on “Fame’s eternall beadroll.”<sup>7</sup> In his *Shepheardes Calendar* (1579) and the *Faerie Queene*, Spenser combined neo-classical genres (eclogues and epic) with medievalist diction to pay homage to Chaucer. At the same time, Thomas Speght was presenting Chaucer in his editions as an “ancient and learned poet” whose work needed the full apparatus of scholarly introduction, commentary and glosses to be intelligible to modern readers.

It is important to recognize, too, that Chaucer was not always singled out as the *only* father figure from the medieval period. For example, Richard Baker wrote, in 1643, “The next place after these, is justly due to *Geoffry Chaucer*, and *John Gower*, two famous Poets in this time, and the Fathers of *English* Poets in all the times after.”<sup>8</sup>

By far the most influential naming of Chaucer as a father, however, appears in John Dryden’s *Preface to Fables Ancient and Modern* (1700). This was a collection of Dryden’s own translations of Chaucer, Boccaccio, Homer, Virgil, Ovid and others, prefaced with a long essay in which he describes Chaucer as “the Father of English Poetry.” Yet Dryden acknowledges the imperfections of Chaucer’s poetry: “Chaucer, I confess, is a rough diamond, and must be polished ere he shine.”<sup>9</sup> Dryden also pairs this statement about Chaucer’s paternity with the admission that he lived “in the Infancy of our Poetry” and that “We must be Children before we grow Men.”<sup>10</sup> We will return to Dryden’s *Preface* several times in this book: it is one of the single most influential texts in the making of several myths about Chaucer.

Veneration of the medieval past is often paired with this sense that modernity offers a vast improvement on these faltering first steps towards sophistication. Nevertheless, it is an important aspect of a powerful literary

tradition to name its origins and forebears, and Chaucer's paternity looms large over most standard histories of English literature. If canons of authors and literary histories are structured around the names of individual authors, there is an obvious reason why this might be so: Chaucer is simply the most famous name to pre-date Shakespeare. But Chaucer's status as father is significantly bolstered by ideological structures and the particularities of English literary history, especially in the fifteenth century.

Seth Lerer takes a lead from Michel Foucault's theories of authorship to argue that the ideological and genealogical structures of Chaucer's authorship are firmly grounded in the dominant conditions shaping literary production in the early fifteenth century:

Like the originary authors Marx and Freud, who would produce a discourse and a form of writing for a culture, Chaucer produces in his own work the "rules of formation for other texts." The genres of the dream vision, pilgrimage narrative, and ballad, and the distinctive idioms of dedication, patronage, and correction that fill those works, were taken up by fifteenth-century poets, not simply out of imitative fealty to Chaucer but instead largely because they were the rules of formation for poetry.<sup>11</sup>

Lerer also suggests that the desire to find an influential and authoritative father figure in Chaucer, in a world where poets and writers actively sought patronage from powerful court figures, is also informed by "the great social anxieties of fifteenth-century dynastic politics."<sup>12</sup> It is a curious historical accident that the year of Chaucer's death, 1400, was the same year in which Henry Bolingbroke, having deposed Richard II in 1399, inaugurated the Lancastrian dynasty, which would be subjected to many challenges and result in violent civil warfare, especially in the second half of the fifteenth century. But even the first decades after Chaucer's death were shadowed by political instability and anxiety about Henry's succession; and in literary circles, this anxiety seems to have been felt more deeply through the lack of an obvious successor to Chaucer's poetic authority.

The scholarly narratives of literary history thrive on such coincidences (Chaucer's death, the end of the century and the last of the Plantagenet kings); but even more significantly, this pattern suggests that the original idea of Chaucer's fatherhood is intimately connected with the shadows of mortality and melancholy, as much as with the glory of origins. That is, the metaphorical language of many myths is itself quite telling, and indicative of deeper structures and assumptions about the way we read literature.

For example, the historical context of deep transition from one cultural authority to later imitators finds a methodological echo in the darker, Freudian aspect of literary paternity famously proposed by Harold Bloom in the 1970s.<sup>13</sup> His concept of “the anxiety of influence” explains literary history and literary tradition as a dynamic, creative struggle fueled by anxiety and defensiveness: to find his own voice, a poet must displace the poet who is his greatest influence, by absorbing but somehow diverging from that voice. (In his first formulations, Bloom wrote only of male poets.) Poetic influence is seen as an agonistic, even Oedipal, struggle for the “strong” poet to displace the poetic father figure by misreading him, and re-appropriating the imaginative space he occupies, as the best strategy for negotiating the inevitable influence of an admired predecessor.<sup>14</sup> While Bloom was not initially concerned with pre-Romantic poetry, A.C. Spearing offers a powerful reading of John Lydgate’s *The Siege of Thebes*, written between 1420 and 1422 (and including the story of Oedipus), as Lydgate’s own Oedipal response to Chaucer: “It is tempting to suppose that in the early part of the *Siege* Lydgate was unconsciously dramatizing precisely the innocent destructiveness he had to engage in himself in order to survive a father as powerful yet benevolent as Chaucer.”<sup>15</sup>

Much of the discussion around Chaucer’s fatherhood is necessarily somewhat circular. He is *perceived* as a father for a number of reasons: because there is no earlier named candidate for the role in English tradition; because his poetry strikes us as so original and inventive; because his poetic presence and authorial personality seem so benevolent; and, of course, because we often approach him with the expectations of authority and originality that the metaphor of “father” implies. And as many critics point out, his successors sometimes felt infantilized by his greatness. But of course, to name this early influential figure in this gendered language sets up a powerful dominant image of what constitutes poetic authority.

We discuss in Myth 2 the question of whether Chaucer was the first writer of poetry in English; a question that is much easier to resolve at a factual level. There were certainly other poets writing in Middle English before Chaucer (let alone the substantial body of poetry in Old English), and contemporaneously with him. Yet as with Chaucer’s fatherhood, his early followers heavily promoted the idea that English poetry had all begun with him. So, for example, the anonymous author of *The Book of Courtesy* (1477) wrote:

O fader and founder of ornate eloquence,  
 Than enlumened hast alle our Bretayne,  
 To soone we loste thy laureate scyence.  
 O lusty lyquour of that fulsome fontayne!<sup>16</sup>

Like Spenser's "well of English undefyled," this imagery draws on the classical tradition of Mount Parnassus, the mythic source of poetry and learning.

Similarly, in the 1532 edition of Chaucer's works, Sir Brian Tuke also marvels how, during the medieval period, "when doubtless all good letters were laid asleep throughout the world," nonetheless "suche an excellent poete in our tonge, shulde as it were (nature repugnyge) sprynge and aryse."<sup>17</sup>

Ironies abound even here, though. The idea of a poet "illuminating" a land itself comes from Chaucer, whose Clerk introduces his translation of Petrarch's tale of Griselda (itself a translation from Boccaccio) with praise of Petrarch's "rethorike sweete" that has "Enlumyned al Ytaille of poetrie" (IV.33–34).<sup>18</sup> Many of the metaphors and myths of origin we discuss in this book have at least two temporal dimensions: sometimes, as here, we look back through the past to see the shape of each myth as it has developed; in others we also try to examine the conditions that give rise to each idea about Chaucer. We consider here the myth of Chaucer's "fatherhood" as it has been perceived and expressed by his literary "children" who claim him as forebear; in Myth 2, we will consider the reception of Chaucer in contrast to other, earlier English poets.

Was Chaucer the father of English literature? Perhaps perversely, we suggest that indeed he was, if only because so many writers have thought and written about him in this way. A literary tradition constitutes itself by choosing its own forebears, and by very selective processes of ideological and national interest. Chaucer has held this position in the scholarly and popular imaginary for so long that his position is no longer disputed, though this is not to say that the idea of literary paternity has not come under severe critique from a number of quarters. Many literary scholars over the last forty or so years have worked hard to destabilize such self-affirming genealogies, critiquing the exclusions and ideological assumptions about the *kind* of poetic voice and attitudes that are normalized through precisely this sort of self-selecting tradition. Like other white, male writers, Chaucer is subject to critiques of the canon he seems to inaugurate. If Chaucer is the father of English literature, then he should be the first place we go to in order to re-think the kinds of literature we want to study. This book is another step in that project, as we turn to examine the origins and implications of many of our ideas about the poet that some have named "Father."

## Notes

- 1 A.C. Spearing, *Medieval to Renaissance in English Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 34, 59.
- 2 "Shakespeare and Milton were the greatest sons of their country; but Chaucer was the Father of his Country, rather in the style of George Washington." G.K. Chesterton, *Chaucer* (London: Faber and Faber, 1932), 15.

- 3 Thomas Hoccleve, *The Regiment of Princes*, ed. Charles R. Blyth (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999), l.1961.
- 4 *Ibid.*, l.1964.
- 5 *Ibid.*, ll.2080, 4983.
- 6 *Ibid.*, l.4978.
- 7 Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. Thomas P. Roche, Jr. (London: Penguin, 1978), IV.ii.32.
- 8 Richard Baker, *A Chronicle of the Kings of England* (London: Printed for Daniel Frere, 1643), 45.
- 9 John Dryden, *The Poems of John Dryden*, vol. IV, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), 1457.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 1452–3.
- 11 Seth Lerer, *Chaucer and His Readers: Imagining the Author in Late-Medieval England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 11.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 16.
- 13 Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 1973, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
- 14 Spearing, *Medieval to Renaissance*, 108–9.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 109.
- 16 J.A. Burrow, ed., *Geoffrey Chaucer: A Critical Anthology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 44.
- 17 *The Workes of Geffray Chaucer newly imprinted*, ed. William Thynne (London, 1532), A2v.
- 18 All quotations from Chaucer's works, unless otherwise specified, are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), and are cited by fragment or book and line numbers.