

William Langland, John Gower, and Thomas Hoccleve

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John Gower, William Langland, and Thomas Hoccleve are all major poets from fourteenth century England. One way or another, they all have a link to Geoffrey Chaucer. Gower tended to always be in Chaucer's shadow and was a close, personal friend. Chaucer was believed to have been the writer of William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, and many of Hoccleve's works were also believed to originally be written by Chaucer.

John Gower lived in London and was born c. 1330 and died in 1408 (Peck). By 1385, he was becoming an increasingly important poet. Although there is not much biographical information on his life, there are at least eighty different historical documents, like a marriage license and documentation of property inheritance, which have helped to create some aspects of Gower's life (Peck). There also is some concrete evidence that Gower and Chaucer were personal friends. Not only did they live right near one another, but in one example, Chaucer mentions Gower in his famous work, *Troilus and Criseyde*:

O moral Gower, this bok I dicrete

To the, and to the, philosophical Strode,

To vouchen sauf ther need is to corecte

Of youre benygnites and zeles good (Peck).

It is also believed that Gower and Chaucer began to write Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* together sometime around the 1380s. Unfortunately, Chaucer decided to begin working on *The Canterbury Tales* instead of finishing the other. In *Confessio Amantis* from around 1390, Gower

wrote his first attempt at a vernacular poem, in what is believed to be him telling Chaucer to finish *Legend of Good Women* that they were writing together. Russel A. Peck of the University of Rochester writes:

At the end of Gower's poem, the goddess Venus, as she departs from Amans, the lover-poet for whom the stories are told, says to him: 'And gret wel Chaucer when ye mete, / As mi disciple and mi poete.' Venus asks Amans to tell Chaucer to 'sette an ende of alle his werk' as Venus's "own clerk" (Peck).

Some of Gower's most popular works are *Speculum*, *Vox Clamantis*, *In Praise of Peace*, *Confessio Amantis*, *Mirour de l'Omme*, *Traitié pour Essampler les Amantz Marietz*, and *Cinkante Balades*. He also wrote a few shorter, Latin poems including "Carmen Super Multiplici Viciorum Pestilencia," "O Deus Imennense," and "De Luis Scrutina" (Peck). *In Praise of Peace* is one of Gower's several poems written in English that is directed towards the king of England at the time, begging him to avoid war ("Gower, John"). It was common for Gower to express his detest towards war and his other personal opinions through his work.

Chaucer and Gower are considered to be the originators of English poetry and both introduced "mellifluous" voices into English vernacular poetry. Many of his poems, "rich in proverbial lore and wise sayings," gave a deeper understanding of everyday life around London, as well as moral and social issues of the fourteenth century (Peck).

William Langland was born c. 1330, died around 1390, and probably spent most of his life in London (Putter). *Piers Plowman* is the only literary work that Langland has ever been attributed to being the author of, and it took roughly thirty years for him to write (Gasse). Because of the detail in which this piece was written with, that was the only way anyone was

able to document any information about Langland at all. Because Langland appears to be so knowledgeable by the way he wrote his name into the piece, it is thought that he had “some higher education...[that] probably came from the numerous handbooks and manuals that collated such material into convenient sources” (Gasse). According to his writing, it is also possible to come to the conclusion that Langland was from the western Midlands and then went to London, since that is where the poem starts off and then ends (Gasse).

Unfortunately, Langland wasn't always the only author given credit. Geoffrey Chaucer was originally appointed credit for *Piers Plowman*. Considering Langland and Chaucer's similar interest in poetry, the English vernacular, and their use of dream and allusion, it was an easy misconception to make (Warner). Once it became aware that there was an A-text, B-text, and C-text, and that they were all from the same author, a few lines stood out over others. “I have lyved in londe, ...my name is Longe Wille,” which was then eventually translated and read that the true author's name was William Langland (Gasse).

Langland was considered to be such an incredible writer because of his use of literary forms, specifically allegory. Ad Putter from the University of Bristol wrote:

Students of allegory are usually advised to look out for the congruities between the allegorical situation and the human truth to which they point...but Langland seems rather to be enjoying the incongruities between the two, and the fantastic labour that is required to make allegory out of [the main character's] misery (Putter).

Even the use of verbs in the poem are written in the literal sense instead of the allegorical sense.

There was an example given of the phrase “sitting in sorwe” that was used in the poem. In

Middle English, this would typically mean “to be specified physical, spiritual, or emotional condition,” and Langland meant it simply as that the main character was sitting because he was pushed down (Putter). William Langland was a literary genius, and Chaucer almost had all the credit for it.

Thomas Hoccleve lived in Hockliffe, Bedfordshire, which is a little over thirty miles northwest of London. He was born in 1368 or 13369 and died around 1437 (McMillan). Hoccleve only has five famous poems of which are “The Letter of Cupid,” “The Regement of Princes,” “How to Die,” “Prologue and a Miracle of the Blessed Virgin,” and “Mother of God.” These five stood out because of their “artistic and aesthetic merit” (McMillan). He was an imitator of Chaucer, which led to many of his works originally being believed to be written by Chaucer himself (“Hoccleve, Thomas”). The only ironic difference is that Hoccleve is “orthodox and naïve” to comedy while Chaucer “saw through hypocritical surfaces to reality” (McMillan).

“Prologue and a Miracle of the Blessed Virgin” is said to have appeared in at least one version of Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* as “The Ploughman’s Tale,” which is also why many believed Chaucer to be the original writer of Hoccleve’s work (McMillan). “Mother of God” also is in only three manuscripts that are known today, and two of them give Chaucer credit as the true author, and it is sometimes even called “Chaucer’s Mother of God.”

“The Regement of Princes” was written towards Henry, the Prince of Wales, and in honor of Chaucer (“Hoccleve, Thomas”). In this, Hoccleve portrays himself in a real manner with some humor along side. He asks the Prince for support “now and in the future”. He then meets a beggar and calls him “father” and the beggar calls Hoccleve “son.” It is believed that this beggar is supposed to signify Chaucer. Hoccleve also includes a portrait of Chaucer in this section

("Hoccleve, Thomas"). This poem also includes many "lines of praise" towards Chaucer directly:

O, maister deere, and fadir reverent!

Mi maister Chaucer, flour of eloquence,

Mirour of fructuous entendement,

O, universel fadir in science!

Allas! that thou thyn excellent prudence,

In thi bed mortel mightist naght by-quethe;

What eiled deth? allas! whi wolde he sle the?

Later on in life, Hoccleve begins to write in a more literal way "that presents a clear picture of time" ("Hoccleve, Thomas"). As a writer, Hoccleve excels, mainly because of his literary forms. The structure of his poems is careful and moving, just as his characters are very well thought-out. He tends to have "high themes" and "brevity" that adds to the "intensity and depth" of his work, making Hoccleve's poems some very famous and inspiring literary works that are still read today (McMillan).

John Gower, William Langland, and Thomas Hoccleve all are famous writers from an area either in or around London in the fourteenth century. All three men also have a direct link to Geoffrey Chaucer, another famous literary writer from the fourteenth century. John Gower was a personal friend of Chaucer, and he made a straight-forward reference to Chaucer in his piece *Confessio amantis*, and Chaucer referenced Gower in *Troilus and Criseyde*. William Langland

was only known by the one and only work he had ever written, *Piers Plowman*, which Chaucer was originally thought to be the writer of because Langland and Chaucer both have the same type of writing styles and interests. Thomas Hoccleve's "Prologue and a Miracle of the Blessed Virgin" was originally thought to be written by Chaucer, also, because this piece appears in a few manuscripts of *The Canterbury Tales*. These three men either idolized Chaucer or lived in his shadow during the time in which they lived, which is reasonable considering Chaucer is one of the most well-known writers from the Medieval Era.

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