



**Marion Turner, *Chaucer: A European Life* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019). Print. 624 pp., £34 ISBN: 9780691160092.**

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*Review*

Marion Turner's biography of Geoffrey Chaucer is an epic, both physically (at 624 pages) and in the scope of the material that she includes. The title, *Chaucer: A European Life*, sets the scale of the project, but her analysis of Chaucer's life goes both further than the European continent, exploring the Crusade lands, Arabic trading ports, and the known medieval world from England to Japan, and much closer to home, with a hugely detailed and intricate exploration of life in fourteenth century London. The volume aims to appeal not only to an academic audience, but also to the interested non-specialist. Given that Chaucer is one of the few names in medieval literature that the general public tend to recognise, he is a good subject for an appealing biography; Turner, to her credit, does not water down her rigorous and thorough exploration of Chaucer's life – she has created an academically challenging biography that is such a joy to read that it will appeal to anyone inclined to pick it up.

The biography is structured 'through spaces and places, rather than through strict chronology' (p. 3) but it is designed so well that the chronology flows regardless. The three parts, 'Becoming', 'Being', and 'Approaching Canterbury', are further divided into spaces and places from the specific, 'Chapter 1: Vintry Ward, London' and 'Chapter 6: Genoa and Florence', to the abstract, 'Chapter 13: Empire' and 'Chapter 18: What Lies Beneath'. Within each part and each chapter, Turner deftly weaves together information about Chaucer's life events, the people in his life, the political and social climate, and Chaucer's literary output to create a holistic analysis not

only of his poetic works but also of the influence of his environment and his involvement in society and politics.

‘Part I: Becoming’ focuses on Chaucer’s early life, from growing up as the son of a vintner in a busy, mercantile area of London to entering service in elaborate and moveable noble and royal courts to the beginnings of his diplomatic European travel. This analysis of his formative years shows a myriad of international and social influences on the young Chaucer. The ring of foreign voices throughout the docks, the royal court where he was only technically a servant, and the responsibility of his missions on the continental mainland all had significant effects on his social perspective. This section lays the groundwork for later analysis of Chaucer’s socially eclectic literary works, but, given that he was not writing in his childhood and early adulthood, the focus is largely on his life. Turner evocatively conjures up the lifestyle of the court and makes astute comments on the political relationship between England and the rest of Europe.

‘Part II: Being’ sees an adult Chaucer embroiled in both mercantile concerns in his job in the counting house of the wool industry and huge political and social changes in his role within the royal households of John of Gaunt and Richard II. His earlier, more courtly poetry is analysed against this backdrop of political uncertainty, as well as his personal concerns about family life, class, and gender. Turner provides deep and nuanced readings of *Troilus and Criseyde*, the *Legends of Good Women*, and the *Parliament of Fowls* that not only account for the influences of Chaucer’s environment but also how Chaucer was attempting to use his literary influence to affect, if not social change, an awareness of the changing society of fourteenth century London, England, and Europe.

‘Part III: Approaching Canterbury’ focuses on the *Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer had left London and was living in Kent, but his various roles as MP and royal retainer kept him connected to the capital city. This section, more than the preceding two, is hugely concerned with space; while the first two parts analysed the influence of places on Chaucer’s life and literature, this section opens the concept of space to social influences, reflecting the class-inclusive nature of the *Canterbury Tales*. Turner’s explanation of the differences between ale-houses, brew-houses, taverns, and inns in fourteenth century England really illuminates the social structure and Chaucer’s straddling of many social influences. The *Canterbury Tales* could be seen as a move from courtly poetry to a new genre of socially inclusive poetry, but Turner’s reading shows that Chaucer had always been influenced by socially diverse experiences and that his poetry reflected that.

This is a beautifully written biography that illuminates much more than the life of a single poet. Turner recreates the fourteenth-century London for her readers, as well as the fractious and volatile royal court and England’s troubled and complicated relationship with continental Europe. In doing so, she provides the material for nuanced and innovative readings of some of the most well-studied literary works of the Middle Ages. This book is a biography, a history book, and literary criticism in one. There is some assumed knowledge that may have the general reader bringing up Google, such as the unexplained terms ‘Wonderful Parliament’, ‘Merciless Parliament’, etc., but those moments are few and far between, as Turner strikes a balance between rigorous scholarship and accessible prose. I thoroughly enjoyed reading and reviewing this book, and it has already found its way into my thesis citations!

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