



***The Canterbury Tales* Introduction**

Geoffrey Chaucer began writing *The Canterbury Tales* sometime around 1387 A.D.; the uncompleted manuscript was published in 1400, the year he died.

Having recently passed the six hundredth anniversary of its publication, the book is still of interest to modern students for several reasons. For one thing, *The Canterbury Tales* is recognized as the first book of poetry written in the English language. Before Chaucer's time, even poets who lived in England wrote in Italian or Latin, which meant that poetry was only understandable to people of the wealthy, educated class. English was considered low class and vulgar. To a great degree, *The Canterbury Tales* helped make it a legitimate language to work in. Because of this work, all of the great writers who followed, from Shakespeare to Dryden to Keats to Eliot, owe him a debt of gratitude.

It is because Chaucer wrote in English that there is a written record of the roots from which the modern language grew. Contemporary readers might find his words nearly as difficult to follow as a foreign language, but scholars are thankful for the chance to compare Middle English to the language as it is spoken now, to examine its growth.

In the same way that *The Canterbury Tales* gives modern readers a sense of the language at the time, the book also gives a rich, intricate tapestry of medieval social life, combining elements of all classes, from nobles to workers, from priests and nuns to drunkards and thieves. The General Prologue alone provides a panoramic view of society that is not like any found elsewhere in all of literature. Even readers who are not particularly knowledgeable about medieval England can appreciate the author's technique in capturing the variations of human temperament and behavior. Collections of stories were common in Chaucer's time, and some still exist today, but the genius of *The Canterbury Tales* is that the individual stories are presented in a continuing "framing" narrative, showing how all of the various pieces of life connect to one another.

The Black Plague

During Chaucer's lifetime, the Black Plague swept across Europe, causing hundreds of thousands of people to die in a gruesome way and changing the way that common citizens looked at mortality. The plague originated in the north of India during the 1330s and spread quickly, affecting much of Asia by the mid-1340s. Its spread to Europe was no accident. Mongol-Tartar armies, in an attempt to discourage Italian trade caravans from crossing their territory on their way to and from China, catapulted bodies of infected victims over the walls of their fortresses at the caravans, who carried the virus back to the west.

Chaucer and his Style

Until Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales* he was known primarily as a maker of poems of love -- dream visions of the sort exemplified in *The Parliament of Fowls* and *The Book of the Duchess*, narratives of doomed passion, such as *Troilus and Criseyde*, and stories of women wronged by their lovers that he tells in *The Legend of Good Women*.

The General Prologue begins with the description of Spring characteristic of dream visions of secular love. Chaucer set the style for such works. His first audience, hearing the opening lines of the General Prologue, may well have thought they were about to hear another elegant poem on aristocratic love. Indeed, the opening lines of the General Prologue seem to echo the most famous dream vision of the time, *Le Roman de la rose*, which Chaucer translated into English as *The Romaunt of the Rose*, one of his first surviving works:

*That it was May thus dremed me
In time of love and jollite
That al thyng gynneth waxen gay
For there is neither busk nor hay
In May that it nyl shrouded ben,
And it with new leves wryen.
These greves eke recoveren grene,
That dry in wynter ben to sen,
And the erthe waxeth proude withal
For swete dewes that on it falle . . .*

And the birds begin to sing:

*To make noyse and syngen blythe
Than is blisful many sithe
The chelandre and popinjay
Then yonge folk entended ay
For to ben gay and amorous*

The General prologue begins with the same tone, even some of the same details, but where the audience expects to hear that it is the time for gay and amorous thoughts, they hear instead:

Then longen folk to gon on pilgrimages.

The focus changes from secular love to religion, to a pilgrimage, and the texture shifts from the elegant abstractions and allegorical personages to a very real London in the fourteenth century, populated by apparently real people, some of whom -- Harry Bailly, the host, and Chaucer himself -- were well known to Chaucer's audience. These characters, we learn, are going to tell one another stories to pass the time on their way along the Road to Canterbury and to the shrine of Thomas á Becket in Canterbury cathedral.

This initiates the "framing narrative", consisting of the "connecting links" which hold the groups of tales together, as the pilgrims amuse themselves by telling stories "to shorten with our way". The idea of writing a collection of stories for a specific fictional audience was not new; it was common in the later Middle Ages. The structure of *The Canterbury Tales* is easy to find in other contemporary works, such as Boccaccio's *Decameron*, which likely was one of Chaucer's main sources of inspiration. Chaucer indeed adapted several of Boccaccio's stories (the Miller's Tale, the Reeve's, the Clerk's, the Merchant's, the Franklin's, and the Shipman's) to put in the mouths of his own pilgrims, but what sets Chaucer's work apart from his contemporaries' is his characters.

The First Day of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, which more closely resembles *The Canterbury Tales* than the works of Gower or the Knight, begins with a chilling description of the Plague, which provides the impetus for the journey in which the tales are told. The Preface defines an audience somewhat different from Chaucer's, as does the Conclusion, which includes a defense of broad speech and indecorous stories somewhat similar to that which Chaucer offers in the General Prologue.

Compared to Boccaccio's main characters - seven women and three men, all young, fresh and well-to-do, and given Classical names - the characters in Chaucer are of extremely varied stock, including representatives of most of the branches of the middle classes at that time. Not only are the participants very different, but they tell very different types of tales, with their personalities showing through both in their choices of tales and in the way they tell them.

The idea of a pilgrimage appears to have been mainly a clever and useful device to get such a diverse collection of people together for literary purposes. The Monk would probably not be allowed to undertake the pilgrimage and some of the other characters would be unlikely ever to want to attend. Also all of the pilgrims ride horses, there is no suggestion of them suffering for their religion. None of the popular shrines along the way are visited and there is no suggestion that anyone attends mass, so that it seems much more like a tourist's jaunt. It may be that Chaucer's intent was to ridicule the sort of people who unthinkingly went on such pilgrimages.

Chaucer does not pay that much attention to the progress of the trip. He hints that the tales take several days but he does not detail any overnight stays. Although the journey could be done in one day this speed would make telling tales difficult and three to four days was the usual duration for such pilgrimages.

Chaucer explicitly points out that he does not observe the expected social decorum:

Also, I prey yow to foryeve it me
Al have I nat set folk in her degree
Here in this tale, as they shold stonde.
My wit is short, ye may wel understonde.

There are some problems raised by the characters in the General Prologue; it is a collection of nonpareils, each a master of his or her trade, but it is also a great gathering of scoundrels. The rascals far outnumber the admirable figures. Chaucer seems to admire them all, without regard to their moral status. There is no doubt that Chaucer's contemporaries interpreted the General Prologue and its characters in ways that sometimes differ surprisingly from ours.



Canterbury Tales Woodcut 1484

Literary Genres found in the Tales

From the heroic romance of "The Knight's Tale" to the low farce embodied in the stories of the Miller, the Reeve, and the Merchant, Chaucer treated such universal subjects as love, sex, and death in poetry that is simultaneously witty, insightful, and poignant.

Estates Satire -- a work which satirizes the abuses that occurred within the three Estates: clergy, nobility and peasantry (in particular, the Clergy). The General Prologue is an example.

Dream-visions -- a distinctly medieval genre. They are very often, though not necessarily, allegorical. Their subjects can be religious or secular, and in tone they can be serious or comic. An ignorant dreamer is accompanied and instructed by a guide or mentor through some supernatural or surreal content. An example is the Nun's Priest's tale.

Beast tale -- Medieval European beast tales were dominated by the Reynard cycles (fox tales) composed in French from the 11th century onwards. These stories were popular in England, and typically took the form of a fable. The Nun's Priest's tale is an example.

Romance -- refers to a style of heroic prose and verse narrative current in Europe from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. Romancers wrote many of their stories in three, thematic cycles called "Les Trois Matières" :

1. "Matière de Rome": Classical material; Troy, Thebes, Alexander legends.

2. "Matière de France": Charlemagne cycles (derived from *Chanson de Roland*, etc.)

3. "Matière de Bretagne": Celtic myth and legend; primarily Arthurian
An example from the Canterbury Tales is the Squire's tale.

Breton lai -- Lais are short (typically 600-1000 lines), rhymed tales of love and chivalry, often involving supernatural and fairy-world Celtic motifs. An example is the Franklin's tale

Sermon (or **exemplum**) -- an oration by a prophet or member of the clergy. Sermons address a Biblical, theological, or religious topic, usually expounding on a type of belief or law. These can be satirical, as in Chaucer's Pardoner's tale.

farce -- a form of comedy designed to provoke laughter through highly exaggerated caricatures of people in improbable or silly situations. Traits of farce include (1) physical bustle such as slapstick, (2) sexual misunderstandings and mix-ups, (3) broad verbal humor such as puns. The Miller's tale is an example.

fabliau -- (plural **fabliaux** or "fablieaux") is a comic, usually anonymous tale written by jongleurs in northeast France circa the 13th Century. They are generally bawdy in nature, and several of them were reworked by Geoffrey Chaucer for his Canterbury Tales (ex. the Summoner's tale).

Typical fabliaux concern cuckolded husbands, rapacious clergy and foolish peasants. The status of peasants appears to vary based on the audience for which the fabliau was being written. Poems that were presumably written for the nobility portray peasants (vilains in French) as stupid and vile, whereas those written for the lower classes often tell of peasants getting the better of the clergy.

The fabliau gradually disappeared at the beginning of the 16th century. It was replaced by the prose short story. Famous French writers such as Molière, Jean de La Fontaine and Voltaire owe much to the tradition of the fabliau, in their prose works as well as in their poetry.

The Four Humours

A traditional theory of physiology, widely believed in the Middle Ages, in which the state of health--and by extension the state of mind, or character--depended upon a balance among the four elemental fluids: blood, yellow bile, phlegm, and black bile. These were closely allied with the four elements (air, fire, water, and earth). Their correspondence is described as follows:

Humor:	BLOOD	YELLOW BILE
Element:	Air	Fire
Qualities:	hot and moist	hot and dry
Descriptor:	"sanguine"	"choleric"
Personality:	(amorous, happy, generous)	(violent, vengeful)

Humor:	PHLEGM	BLACK BILE
Element:	Water	Earth
Qualities:	cold and moist	cold and dry
Descriptor:	"phlegmatic"	"melancholic"
Personality:	(dull, pale, cowardly)	(gluttonous, lazy, sentimental)

The humours supposedly gave off vapors which ascended to the brain; an individual's personal characteristics (physical, mental, moral) were explained by his or her temperament, or the state of that person's humours. The perfect temperament resulted when no one of these humours dominated. By 1600 it was common to use humour as a means of classifying characters; knowledge of the humours is not only important to understanding later medieval work, but essential to interpreting Elizabethan drama. An illustrative quotation from the final lines of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (V.v.74-76), in which Antony eulogizes Brutus:

*His life was gentle, and the elements
So mix'd in him that Nature might stand up
And say to all the world, "This was a man!"*

Social Class in Chaucerian England



In feudal times, medieval society was viewed as being made up of three categories of peoples, or "estates" (from the Latin word "*status*"):

- 1) the Clergy (those that prayed = the First Estate),
- 2) the Nobility (those that fought = the Second Estate),
- 3) the peasantry (those who produced the food which supported those who fought and prayed = the Third Estate).

The second and third estates (Aristocracy and peasantry) are a matter of birth, while the first (the Church) is entered into by individuals of varying social origin. While the medieval estates are not the exact equivalent of modern social classes, high status within the Church *was* frequently a matter of birth: no matter how saintly or pious, a peasant was unlikely to end up an abbot, a bishop, or a high ranking Church official.

By the later middle ages, the rigid division of feudal society into these three traditional "estates" has begun to break down. The late fourteenth century -- the time of Chaucer -- witnesses the rise of a new urban middle class made up of merchants and tradesmen. In addition to this new mercantile class, there is also new sub-division of the clergy: intellectuals or men of letters, men who have been trained in the Church-controlled disciplines of scholarship and writing, but who will *not* end up with a career within the Church as monks or priests. Geoffrey Chaucer arguably belonged to both of these new categories.

Chaucer was highly conscious of the social divisions known as the "estates." The *General Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales* are examples of Estates Satire, that is, a work which satirizes the abuses that occurred within the three Estates (in particular, the Clergy).

Assignment for The Canterbury Tales -- General Prologue

For each character described in the Prologue, write the following in the margin, circling words that give support to your interpretation:

1. To which social class does the character belong? (one of the three estates described above or one of the newer classes?)
2. Pay attention to physical descriptions. Is one of the four humors emphasized?
3. Write three descriptors alongside the lines that conveys those impressions

Fourteenth-Century History

I. The Hundred Years War (1337-1453)

A. Beginnings

1. England, 1327: Edward III becomes king
2. France, 1328: Philippe VI (de Valois) ignores better claim of Edward of England, ascends throne
3. 1337: Edward claims French throne, war begins

B. Major Battles

1. Crécy, 26 Aug. 1346: English bowmen defeat a far superior force led by Philippe VI; French losses (ca. 11,000, incl. 1,200 knights) exceed entire English army.
2. Poitiers, 19 Sept. 1356: 6,000 English under Edward the Black Prince vs. 20,500 French under King Jean II; bowmen throw French chivalry into confusion, English mounted flanks converge, 4,500 French killed, King Jean and his sons captured. English losses light.
3. Agincourt, 25 Oct. 1415: 5,700 English (mostly archers) under Henry V defeat 25,000 French under the Constable d'Albret; French losses exceed 8,000; English: 400.

II. The Black Death

A. Chronology

1. Begins in Sicily, October 1347
2. Reaches France, January 1348; rages in Paris until 1349
3. Reaches England, August 1348, continues until early 1350
4. Recurrences: 1360, 1369

B. Death Toll

1. European total estimated at 1/3 of population, or ca. 20,000,000
2. Cities worst hit: Avignon 50% (ca. 25,000), Paris 50% (50,000), London 1/3 (ca. 18,000), Siena, Venice 2/3, Hamburg, Bremen 3/5.
3. Countryside: 200,000 villages wiped out in Europe

C. Social Consequences

1. Economic: inflation, shortage of labor, peasant strikes, Statute of Laborers 1351; later, rebellions (Italy: Ciompi 1378, France: Jacquerie 1358, England: Wat Tyler 1381)
2. Behavioral: lawlessness, debauchery, despair, obsession with death (*Danse macabre*)

III. Papal Schism (1378-1417)

A. The Avignon Papacy

1. 1303: King Philippe IV of France abducts Pope Boniface VIII, who dies
2. 1305: Pope Clement V, French, installed in Avignon, beginning what Petrarch would call the "Babylonian Captivity"

B. The Return to Rome and Onset of Schism

1. 1367: Pope Urban V returns to Rome, meets resistance; returns to Avignon 1370, dies
2. Gregory XI goes to Rome Jan. 1377, also meets resistance; dies there March 1378

3. 9 Apr. 1378: Cardinals elect Urban VI (Roman); he's not to their liking so:
4. 20 Sept. they elect Clement VII (Robert of Geneva), who heads for Avignon
5. Battle lines: England for Urban, France for Clement; all others play hard to get.

IV. Chaucer's political career

A. Diplomatic service

1. 1367: first royal mission abroad
2. 1372-'73, 1378: missions to Italy

B. Royal Functionary

1. 1374: Appointed to Customhouse
2. 1376-'77: on "king's secret business" in France
3. 1381: Royal marriage negotiations in France
4. 1385-'86: Member of peace commission in Kent
5. 1386: end of Customs post; elected "Knight of Shire" from Kent
6. 1388: Survives Appellants, Merciless Parliament (Thomas Usk does not...)
7. 1393-'98: favor of both Richard II, Henry of Derby
8. Richard II deposed, accession of Henry IV; Ch's grants renewed, increased

Fourteenth-Century Kings

England:

- Edward I (r. 1272-1307) b. 1239
- Edward II (r. 1307-deposed 20 Jan. 1327; died 12 Sept. 1327) b. 1284
- Edward III (r. 1327--personal rule 1330--d. 1377) b. 1312,
- Richard II (r. 1377-1399--personal rule May 1389) b. 6 Jan. 1367.

France:

- Philippe IV "le Bel" (r. 1285-1314)
- Louis X (r. 1314-1318)
- Philippe V (r. 1318-1323)
- Charles IV (r. 1323-1328)--END OF CAPETIAN DYNASTY
- Philippe VI (r. 1328-1350)--BEGINNING OF VALOIS DYNASTY
- Jean II "le Bon" (r. 1350-1364)
- Charles V "le Sage" (r. 1364-1380)
- Charles VI (1380-1422); bn. 1358.

The Canterbury Tales are written in Middle English.

Two of the tales are written in prose, the rest in verse. Some of the tales are originals and others not; all are contained inside a frame tale and told by the group of pilgrims on their way from Southwark to Canterbury to visit the shrine of Saint Thomas à Becket's at Canterbury Cathedral.

People have sought political overtones within the tales, particularly as Chaucer himself was a significant courtier and political figure at the time, close to the corridors of power. There are many hints at contemporary events, although few are proven, and the theme of marriage common in the tales is presumed to refer to several different marriages, most often those of John of Gaunt. Aside from Chaucer himself, Harry Bailly of the Tabard Inn was a real person and the Cook has been identified as quite likely to be Roger Knight de Ware, a contemporary London cook.