

The Canterbury Tales – Background Information

Courtly Ideals (Ruling Class)

- Devout Christians
- Chivalric (display courtesy and good manners; protect the weak)
- Knowledge of singing, dancing and poetry
- Males – military prowess
- Romance tales based on their lives (brave, chivalric knights; fair, coy maidens)
- Breton lays often deal with this class

Ecclesiastic Ideals (Clergy Class)

- Committed to serving God
- Modesty, humility, obedience
- Deny selves material, earthly pursuits in favor of spirituality
- Serve needy; exhibit charity and mercy
- Supposed to be celibate
- Typical tales: sermon, hagiology, exemplum

Lower Class Ideals (Merchant/Trade/Peasant Classes)

- Devout Christians; therefore, tithe to church
- Loyal subjects; therefore pay taxes to the king
- Be productive in order to satisfy obligations
- Do good works to assure a place in heaven
- Eschew usury (using money to make money)
- Typical tales: fabliaux

Female Ideals (women of all classes)

- No political rights because not part of military system
- Always subservient to men (father, husband, brother)
- Social standing depended entirely on husband
- Main obligation: childbearing
- Peasant women also had housework and fieldwork
- Upper class women also managed household and occasionally managed husbands' estates when husbands were away.

The Genres of the Tales

TERM	DEFINITION
Chivalric Romance	A non-scholarly narrative in metrical verse; tales of love, adventure, knightly conflict and pageantry
Myth	Retelling of a classical Greek or Roman myth
Breton Lay	Set in the Brittany region of France; tales, Celtic in origin, of magic, faeries, folk lore and courtly love
Beast Fable	Animals are given human qualities and involved in clever tales that preach a moral lesson
Prose Allegory	Non-poetic tale in which people and things represent abstract qualities
Mock-Heroic	Ridicules the chivalric romance by parody
Mock-Romance	Ridicules, by imitation, chivalric literature and heroic characters
Fabliau	Humorous stories based on clever tricks involving infidelity
Sermon	An oratory preaching a Christian message
Exemplum	A story that includes a sermon illustrating a known moral lesson
Hagiology	Tales of inspirational acts of a saint's martyrdom

Physiognomy

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTIC	PHYSIOGNOMIC INTERPRETATION
ramlike appearance	strength
sowlike appearance	dirtyness
foxlike appearance	slyness
goatlike appearance	lechery
thin, fastidious type	bad temper, irritability
gap in teeth	boldness; especially suited for love
flaring or open nostrils	passion
pus-filled sores	lechery; drunkenness
high forehead	intelligence, good breeding
white neck	immorality