The Canterbury Tales

Study Guide by Course Hero

What's Inside

Book Basics

AUTHOR
Geoffrey Chaucer

YEARS WRITTEN
c. 1387–1400

GENRE
Satire

PERSPECTIVE AND NARRATOR
The Canterbury Tales begins in first-person point of view, as Chaucer the pilgrim—often thought of as a distinct character in the story rather than the author himself—relates the formation of the storytelling company. This first-person point of view reappears on occasion throughout the frame story of the tales. Prologues are mostly told in first person, from the perspective of the storyteller. The stories are typically in third person, except when the narrator interrupts.

TENSE
The stories of *The Canterbury Tales* are told primarily in the past tense.

ABOUT THE TITLE
A group of pilgrims is on its way to Canterbury Cathedral, and the pilgrims engage in a storytelling game on the road. The "tales" are their stories.

In Context

Chaucer's time was one of great change in Europe. Upheaval in the church, as well as the emergence of a middle class that challenged the old social class structure, gave rise to the tensions apparent in *The Canterbury Tales*.

The Church

In Chaucer's day the Roman Catholic Church, led by the pope, was the sole Christian authority in Europe. Corruption among the representatives of the Catholic Church, such as pardoners, who were paid fees for absolving sins, was widespread. In reaction to such corruption and other church excesses, new religious leaders and scholars, such as John Wycliffe (c. 1330–1384), began calling for reform. Wycliffe translated the Bible from Latin to English and promoted the idea that Christians should commune with God directly, without priests as intermediaries. He also promoted the idea that salvation was only achievable through piety, not to be bought from a

pardoner. These ideas infuriated the Catholic Church. Church leaders burned at the stake many of Wycliffe's followers, disparagingly called Lollards.

The church was also in conflict with the nobility. Many of the best government posts went to clergymen, reflecting the power of the church in government affairs. The nobility resented this influence, and so two political factions emerged: pro-clergy and anti-clergy. Chaucer, who owed his government postings to his noble connections, may have had an anti-clergy bias.

Anti-clergy sentiments aside, Chaucer's contemporaries were deeply faithful. Many people made pilgrimages, or journeys to sacred sites, as an expression of their faithfulness. A popular destination was Canterbury Cathedral, where Thomas Becket (c. 1118–1170), the sainted archbishop of Canterbury, was murdered. Pilgrims went to see his relics, which were believed to have miraculous properties.

Changes in Social Structure

The three traditional social classes—or estates—were still an important part of the social structure of the late Middle Ages. The first estate included people who worked for the church, the second estate comprised the nobility, and the third estate were made up of peasants. However, there was also an emerging middle class composed of tradespeople, merchants, business owners, and financial professionals. These new classes did not fit easily into the three-estate structure. The idea that gaining wealth or education could propel a person into a higher social status was taking hold. While this may have seemed threatening to those used to the old order, it offered opportunities to ambitious men and women. These changes in class structure were helped along by the terrible Black Plague of 1348–1349. The plague reduced the population of Europe by about two-thirds, creating a labor shortage that resulted in higher wages for skilled workers.

Women

Church teachings had a powerful influence on attitudes toward women in the Middle Ages. According to these teachings, the Virgin Mary was the image of female perfection; but Eve, who tempted Adam to eat the forbidden fruit in Eden, brought sin into the world. As a result women were alternately placed on a pedestal, like the Virgin, and blamed for the entire sinful state of the world, like Eve.

Although men were expected to control their wives, wives were also expected to temper their husband's impulses, exerting influence if not power. Moreover, some women did manage to wield considerable power—when their husbands allowed them to or when a wealthy husband died. (The latter seems to be the case with the *Tales*' Wife of Bath, who owns her own textile business.) These competing understandings of a woman's role come to life in *The Canterbury Tales.*

Anti-Semitism

Despite the fact that medieval popes, such as Pope Gregory X (c. 1210–1276) and Pope Martin V (1368–1431), taught tolerance for Jewish people, Christians at this time were quite anti-Semitic. The Prioress's Tale reflects disturbing anti-Semitic themes, such as the blood libel. The blood libel involved the false belief of many Christians that Jews ritually murdered children in order to drink their blood. This belief originated in England and spread throughout medieval Europe. Critics have debated whether Chaucer himself was anti-Semitic or whether, by creating a grotesquely anti-Semitic nun, he was leveling yet another critique at the clergy.

Chaucer's Audience

It's a bit of a miracle that *The Canterbury Tales* exists because there was no substantial audience for such a major work at the time of its composition. English was not yet widely accepted as a written language. Printing with movable type was not invented until several decades after Chaucer's death. The only real audiences (in the sense of a large group of people) for entertaining manuscripts were the friends who gathered for poetry readings. In Chaucer's case he probably shared some of his tales orally with fellow civil servants and scholars. However, Chaucer began *The Canterbury Tales* in a time of change, and he might have anticipated possibilities for a wider audience in the future.

One change was the use of Middle English as a written language. Middle English is very different from Modern English, but it was the vernacular, or everyday language. Before the

1380s Latin, Anglo-Norman, and French were the languages used for writing. But in the 1380s people were beginning to write in their common tongue; as a result literacy rates grew. Writing *The Canterbury Tales* in Middle English, Chaucer was on the cutting edge of this change. In fact, modern scholars credit Chaucer with developing the first Middle English masterpiece.

With the growth of written English, a class of professional scribes emerged as they found wider markets for their skills. At the same time, paper—lighter than parchment—became more widely available, making manuscripts more portable. Wealthy readers could commission scribes to copy a manuscript for them. Some authors even ordered a set of manuscripts in anticipation of selling them. In the decades after Chaucer's death, around 100 copies of his *Tales* were created, making it a best seller by the standards of the time. Yet Chaucer died before he could personally oversee the compilation of his tales into one volume. In fact, modern scholars continue to argue about the order in which Chaucer intended the 24 tales to appear.

Author Biography

Geoffrey Chaucer was born in London in the 1340s, though the exact date is not known. As a teenager he worked as a royal page. Later, as a diplomat, he traveled widely throughout Europe as an emissary for the king. These positions gave him the opportunity to meet people from all social classes and many different countries. He also became fluent in several languages, including French and Italian.

The Canterbury Tales, with its diverse cast of characters and countless literary and historical allusions, reflects Chaucer's colorful background. Most of the tales are based, at least in part, on existing stories. But Chaucer broke new ground in *The Canterbury Tales.* As one of the first authors to write a complex literary work in English, he set a precedent that generations of other authors would follow. He established the use of pentameter, a verse line consisting of five 2-syllable units. After its publication, *The Canterbury Tales'* pentameter became the stock-in-trade of English verse for the next 500 years—in epic poetry, narrative poems, and the works of William Shakespeare (1564–1616).

Furthermore, Chaucer was able to create distinct characters, all with their own voice and style, giving readers an overview of society across classes and occupations. Although none of Chaucer's original manuscript (written between 1387 and 1400) has survived, medieval scribes had copied various compilations of the work. These manuscripts, often beautifully illustrated, were popular even before the first printed version was published in 1478. By this time scholars agreed on Chaucer's brilliance in weaving together a rich tapestry of characters and genres. *The Canterbury Tales* is still considered one of the greatest works of English literature, and its popularity as a work that both entertains and teaches has not faded.

Characters

Chaucer

In general the character Chaucer, who narrates the frame story and tells his own tales on the road to Canterbury, is considered separately from Chaucer the author. He is a keen observer, providing detailed descriptions of the other pilgrims. He has a flair for satire and characterizes the pilgrims in unflattering ways while maintaining an earnest, even admiring, tone. When his turn to share stories arrives, he tells a silly story and then a tedious one.

Harry Bailey

The Host, Harry Bailey, is a cheerful and impulsive man. He is so taken with the assembled pilgrims at the Tabard Inn that he decides to accompany them. He is the one who suggests the storytelling contest and sets the rules; he also plans to judge the stories and provide the winner's reward. He is quick to make peace when a quarrel breaks out, and he often steers the stories away from the overly somber and toward merriment.

Knight

Chivalrous and wise, the Knight has achieved great honor for his noble deeds and success in many battles. He is the ideal knight in every way: courteous in his manners, heroic in battle, and polite and gentle in speech. Chaucer describes the knight

as if he has no flaws. He is not even arrogant or proud because of his success; rather, he is modest and humble, wearing his stained cloak without pretensions.

Miller

The Miller, a strong, brawny man with a large nose and wide mouth, sports a red spade-shaped beard and a hairy wart. He loves telling filthy stories and playing the bagpipes. He's also a thief—he takes "three times his due" when he grinds grain. He hijacks the Host's role as master of ceremonies simply because he wants to tell a rude story about a carpenter.

Reeve

The Reeve is an old, frightening-looking man whose business is taking care of another person's estate. He is good at his job; he keeps track of the crops and the livestock so well that no one dares take a chance on cheating—except the Reeve, of course, who uses the money he embezzles to make loans back to his own employer. The Reeve is also a carpenter, which explains his anger when the Miller tells a story about a jealous, foolish carpenter.

Wife of Bath

The Wife of Bath is a middle-aged woman with a gap between her front teeth, a large hat, and red stockings. She's no stranger to pilgrimages, having gone on several. She's no stranger to sex, either, having had five husbands and talking freely about her prowess in bed. As a successful seamstress with her own business and as a woman who gets what she wants from men, she's used to being in charge.

Pardoner

The Pardoner is a dishonest man who sells indulgences, which were intended to take years off a person's stay in Purgatory, as well as various items he says are saint's relics but are mostly fake—animal bones and other substitutes for real bones or pieces of cloth. He is good at his job but freely admits his only motive is profit.

Character Map

- Main character
- Other Major Character
- Minor Character

Full Character List

Character	Description
Chaucer	Chaucer is a pilgrim in the company and the narrator.
Harry Bailey	Harry Bailey, also called the "Host," is the owner of the Tabard Inn.
Knight	The Knight is a noble pilgrim recently back from the Crusades.
Miller	The Miller is a rude fellow who tells an insulting story about a carpenter.
Reeve	The Reeve shows his temper when he feels insulted.
Wife of Bath	The Wife of Bath is a seamstress from the town of Bath who has strong opinions about marriage.
Pardoner	The Pardoner sells indulgences for the Church but makes himself a tidy profit as well.
Cook	The Cook travels with several guildsmen, including a carpenter and a weaver.
Man of Law	The Man (Sergeant) of Law is a discreet lawyer who seems busier than he really is.
Shipman	The Shipman is a loud man who prefers a rousing tale to a sermon.
Prioress	Madame Eglantyne, whose elegance seems a little phony, is nevertheless an entertaining companion.
Monk	The Monk, an excellent hunter, prefers modern ways to traditional ones.
Nun's Priest	Sir John, a charming priest traveling with a nun, tells a merry fable.
Physician	The Physician makes good money as a doctor and keeps to a strict diet, but he neglects the Bible.
Friar	The Friar, who has many friends and pays special attention to the young ladies, is not above accepting a bribe or two.
Summoner	A man who brings sinners before the church for trial, the Summoner uses his position to extort the poor.
Clerk	The Clerk is a university student who prefers books to fine clothes and food.
Merchant	The Merchant has become wealthy and enjoys showing off his fine clothes and talking about his money.
Squire	The Squire is the Knight's son, a youthful and accomplished noble.
Franklin	The Franklin, a landowner but not a member of the nobility, lives for pleasure, especially the pleasures of food and drink.
Second Nun	The Second Nun, a pious woman devoted to Mary, regards idleness as a destructive force.
Canon	The Canon, who joins the company briefly before riding away and leaving his Yeoman, is an inept alchemist.
Canon's Yeoman	The Canon's Yeoman joins the company after his employer, an alchemist, abandons him for giving away professional secrets.
Manciple	The Manciple, who is in charge of purchasing food for an institution, has made more money than smarter men through shrewd investments.
Parson	The most devout clergyman in the group, the virtuous parson always puts others first and gives selflessly to the poor and suffering.

Plot Summary

The Canterbury Tales start with a prologue that frames, or sets the stage for, the tales that follow. Spring has come, and with it an increase in pilgrims traveling to Canterbury to visit the shrine of the martyred Saint Thomas Becket. A group of pilgrims assemble at the Tabard Inn just outside of London to start their journey. The Host of the Tabard Inn, a man named Harry Bailey, joins the company on the pilgrimage, as does a pilgrim named Chaucer. Harry Bailey suggests a tale-telling competition to help pass the time on the long road, and the company agrees.

With the exception of Chaucer and Harry Bailey (who is often called simply the "Host"), none of the other pilgrims are named. Instead they are identified by their roles. The Knight tells the first tale. He recounts a long story about two knights who fall in love with the same woman. The men fight for her, and one wins her. However, he soon dies, and the other knight marries her instead.

The Miller decides to tell the next story. It is a funny, crude story about an old carpenter who has a young wife. Two young men fall in love with her, and she conspires with one of them to meet for sex. On the night they meet, the other young man comes to her window, and in the dark he is tricked into kissing her bare behind. Most of the pilgrims enjoy this comical story, but the Reeve, a carpenter, is offended, so he pays the Miller back by telling a story about a dishonest miller. In this story two students decide to make sure this dishonest miller does not steal any of the grain as it is being ground. In another middle-of-the-night mix-up, one of the students has sex with the miller's daughter, and the other has sex with the miller's wife.

Next the Cook begins to tell a story of a young apprentice with a weakness for gambling, but the story remains unfinished. Harry Bailey, noting that the day is getting on, calls on the Man of Law, who then tells a story about Constance, daughter of the Roman emperor. She endures many hardships, but her people are converted to Christianity, and her son becomes emperor. The Wife of Bath then tells the company about her five husbands before beginning a story about a knight who is sentenced to death for rape. To avoid this fate, the knight must go on a quest to find the answer to a seemingly simple question: What do women want?

After the Wife of Bath ends her tale, the Friar tells a story about a dishonest summoner, who makes a deal with a fiend from Hell and ends up being taken there. The Summoner is enraged by the tale and tells two crude stories—one short and one long—about the treachery of friars.

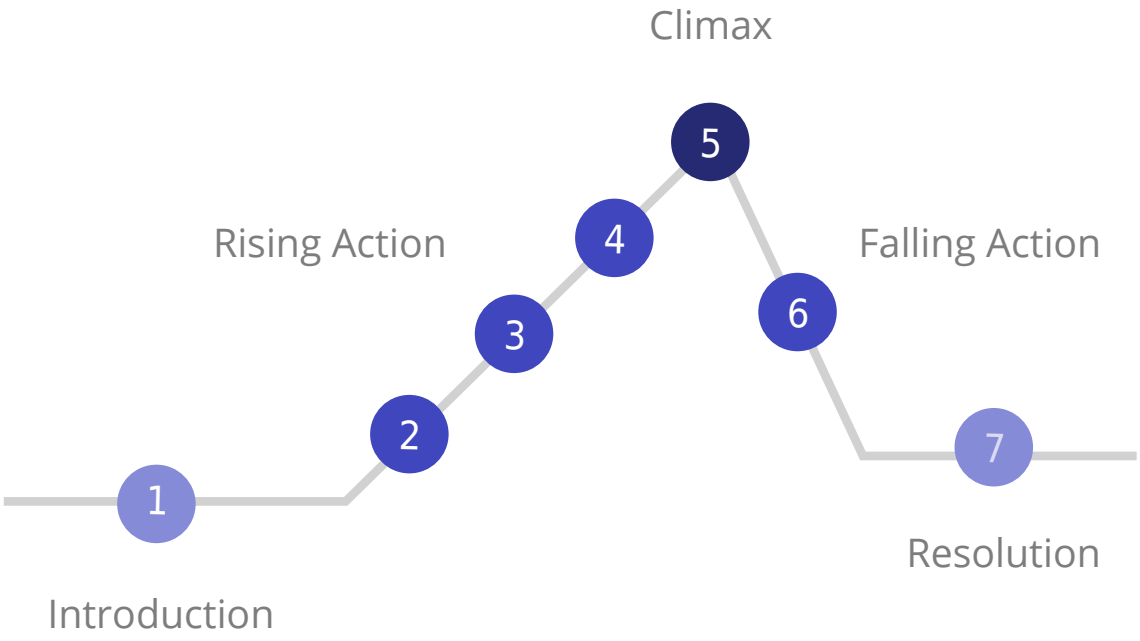
To calm everyone down, Harry Bailey then asks the Clerk to tell a more lighthearted story. The Clerk's story focuses on a wife of unending patience and obedience to her husband. In response to this, the Merchant tells a story about an unfaithful young wife. Harry Bailey then calls on the Squire, who begins a story about a beautiful young woman whose magic ring allows her to understand the speech of animals. His story is cut short by the Franklin, who interrupts to wonder at the beauty of the Squire's storytelling skills. Rather than allowing the Squire's story to be completed, Harry Bailey asks the Franklin to tell his story. The Franklin tells about a faithful wife who is nearly—but not quite—tricked into unfaithfulness.

Next the Physician tells a tale about a beautiful young woman who must choose between death and dishonor. It is such a tragic story that Harry Bailey calls on the Pardoner for a happier one. The Pardoner tells a story about three young men who meet Death, and this is followed by the Shipman's tale of a merchant whose wife has an affair with a monk. Then the Prioress tells of a young boy who sings, miraculously, after he is dead.

Chaucer is called upon next, and after Harry Bailey interrupts his first tale because its rhymes are terrible, Chaucer tells a story that is more of a long argument about whether revenge should be taken to repay a violent act. The Monk then tells a long string of short stories about how powerful people are brought low, and this is followed by a fable about a rooster and a fox told by the Nun's Priest. The Second Nun then tells the story of Saint Cecilia, a Christian martyr.

The company of pilgrims meets two more travelers on the road, and one, a Yeoman, tells a story about a treacherous alchemist who tricks a priest into giving him money. Next the Manciple tells a tale about an unfaithful wife and a talking crow. After this, instead of a story, the Parson gives a sermon about sin and forgiveness. Finally, Chaucer apologizes for his work and asks forgiveness of anyone who is offended by his tales.

Plot Diagram



Introduction

1. Chaucer, Bailey, and pilgrims meet at the Tabard Inn.

Rising Action

2. Riding to Canterbury, they have a story competition.

3. The Knight tells the first tale.

4. The Miller interrupts with the next tale.

Climax

5. As they ride, characters take turns telling their stories.

Falling Action

6. Near Canterbury, the Parson tells a final tale, a sermon.

Resolution

7. Chaucer prays for forgiveness for his less holy writings.

Part Summaries

Prologue

Summary

Chaucer's Prologue begins with a description of springtime. The April rains drench the ground, and roots deep in the soil absorb the powerful liquid, which gives rise to flowering plants. The "young sun" shines down on these new plants, and birds sing. People, too, want to go on pilgrimages to far-away places, especially Canterbury Cathedral, where the relics of the martyr Thomas Becket are kept.

Chaucer is one of these pilgrims, and he is staying at the Tabard Inn in Southwark before embarking on the journey to Canterbury. A large group of pilgrims—29 in all—arrive at the inn, and they are such a friendly group he decides to join their company. He introduces each one in turn, describing their professions, social status, and clothing.

After Chaucer introduces the company, he describes the Host, a plump, bright-eyed man who takes a liking to the company of pilgrims and decides that he, too, will go with them to Canterbury. To make the time go by more quickly on the journey, each of the company will tell two stories on the way there and two on the way back. He will judge the stories, and the person who tells the best one will win a free meal at the inn when they return. Everyone agrees to this competition, and, as they set off the next morning, they draw lots to see who will go first. The Knight draws the short cut so he must begin the game, which he does cheerfully.

Analysis

The Prologue begins with a famous description of spring, a time of year rich with the contrasting symbolism of pagan sexual energy and Christian spiritual rebirth. These elements of energy and awakening will be developed through the plots of several tales, and the features of springtime—flowers, birds singing, and the like—will crop up time and time again throughout the stories, many of which take place in the spring months. Notably it's the earthier, pagan sort of awakening—rather than the Christian sort—that energizes the vast majority of the pilgrims' tales.

The Prologue also sets up the frame story that holds the rest of the tales together. It is loosely in the form of an estates satire—a satirical analysis of the different estates of society. In the Middle Ages there were three main estates—the first estate included members of the clergy and religious orders, the second estate were made up of the nobility, and the third estate were composed of peasants. Women were part of these informal social categories, but they also had their own estates: virgins, wives, and widows. All of these estates are represented among the pilgrims.

In Chaucer's time society had changed, and people were not as easily classified among these estates, which is one reason why a satire about the estates was possible. Merchants, skilled workers, and business owners made up a growing middle class that was difficult to classify as simply *noble* or *peasant*. The Miller, Reeve/Carpenter, Cook, Wife of Bath, Franklin, Merchant, and Shipman are examples of this growing middle class. These characters are not exactly peasants, but they are definitely not nobility or clergy, whose representatives among the pilgrims do not seem to behave much differently than the others.

Chaucer's individual descriptions of the pilgrims give readers a sense of their personalities as well as social class. Some, like the description of the Knight, are idealized. Some seem more like caricature. Their clothing, whether rich or ragged, also suggests their social status and occupation. In many of the descriptions, Chaucer slyly draws attention to the characters' weaknesses—whether vanity, greed, or gluttony.

The Knight's Tale

Summary

Part I

Theseus, Duke of Athens, was a mighty conqueror, even triumphing over the Amazons and taking the queen of the Amazons, Hippolyta, as his wife. The story begins as he is returning home from this conquest. As he nears Athens, he

comes upon a large crowd of grieving women. Taken aback, he asks them what is wrong. They tell him their husbands have been killed by the forces of King Creon, who will not even let them retrieve the bodies of the dead.

Theseus is angered and swears to kill Creon. He leaves immediately to carry out his oath, sending Hippolyta and her sister Emily into Athens. Theseus and his forces then ride to Thebes, where he kills Creon, captures the city, and returns the remains of the slain men to their wives. He also takes as his prisoners two knights of Thebes: Arcita and Palamon. The two knights live as prisoners for years. One morning Palamon sees Emily through the bars of his window and falls instantly in love. Then Arcita looks out, and he, too, falls instantly in love. They argue about who saw her first.

Arcita is later released from prison and exiled. Because he loves Emily, this seems like a fate worse than prison. He thinks that Palamon, still in prison, is better off. Palamon, meanwhile, envies Arcita's freedom.

Part II

Back in Thebes Arcita continues to pine away for Emily. One night he has a dream of the god Mercury, who tells him to go to Athens. He dresses like a poor worker and goes to Athens, where he serves under the name Philostrate in Emily's household. Over the years he becomes one of Theseus's most valued men.

Meanwhile, Palamon has spent seven years in prison. One May night he is able to escape. Arcita decides to go for a ride in the woods, and it happens to be the same woods where Palamon is hiding. When Palamon finally recognizes Arcita, he bursts out of hiding enraged and challenges Arcita to a duel.

The next day Arcita and Palamon are in the midst of their duel when Theseus (providentially) gets a sudden urge to go hunting. With Hippolyta and Emily, he rides out into the woods and comes upon the men. Theseus breaks up their fight, and Palamon reveals who he is and the fact that Philostrate is really Arcita. Theseus decides to kill both of them, but the women in the hunting party beg Theseus to have mercy. Theseus agrees and proposes that, in a year's time, they each bring 100 knights and battle for Emily's hand in marriage.

Part III

Duke Theseus spends a large amount of money preparing for the tournament. He builds a large stadium with tiered rows for spectators. At the east gate, he builds a large temple devoted to Venus; at the west gate, he constructs a temple dedicated to Mars; and, at the north gate, he raises a temple dedicated to Diana.

When all is ready, Arcita and Palamon arrive with their knights. To prepare for the contest, Palamon goes to the temple devoted to Venus and prays that the goddess will allow him to win. Palamon receives a sign that Venus has heard his prayer. Emily goes to the temple of Diana and prays that she may remain a virgin rather than a wife. Diana tells her that she must be married to one of the men. Arcita goes to the temple of Mars and prays for victory. He, too, receives a sign that he will win.

The god Saturn, knowing that both men have been promised Emily, must work out a plan to solve this problem.

Part IV

Before the contest everyone is busy getting ready. Some are placing bets. Theseus declares that knives, crossbows, poleaxes, and several other weapons are not allowed. He also forbids killing an injured man and sets other restrictions.

The contest lasts until evening, when at last Palamon is wounded and unhorsed. Theseus declares Arcita the winner. Venus is angry that Palamon did not win, but Saturn reassures her that "it will be your turn soon." As Arcita rides toward Emily, his horse suddenly throws him from its back. His injury proves to be fatal, and he dies. Theseus, believing that "after grief there should be bliss," tells Emily and Palamon to marry. They do and live in contentment and "love unbroken."

Analysis

The Knight's Tale is considered a romance—a story about noble characters in distant lands or times, with themes of love and chivalry. Typically romances end with a marriage. In most ways this tale fulfills these criteria. The characters are idealized: Theseus is described as noble and manly, Emily is

beautiful and gentle, the knights are eager to fight for victory and glory. The tale does end with a marriage, although the ironic twist of Emily's engagement to two men is typical of Chaucer's sense of humor.

The theme of love, sex, and fellowship plays an important part in this tale. The nature of love is explored throughout the story. The two knights fall instantly in love (or lust) with Emily when they see her. Love trumps any other friendships, rules, or courtesies; as Arcita says, in love "each for himself alone, there is no other." Love also makes men into fools: After the two knights are found fighting over Emily, Theseus points out that they could have both lived as free men if not for the "height of folly" that is love. Later the knights who come to fight alongside Arcita and Palamon are said to be those with a "taste for chivalry" and who "loved the ladies and had strength to fight." Clearly love is seen as a force that can motivate men to do nearly anything.

The love triangle that drives the plot of this story—two men in love with the same beautiful woman—is a plot device used in several of the tales. It helps to advance the theme of rivalry, which is inherent in the friendly competition of the storytelling competition but also appears in various forms in several tales. Emily—beautiful, chaste, and passive—is typical of similar women in other tales.

The tension of a changing social class structure is developed in this tale. As in several other tales, rising and falling in the hierarchy of the estates is credited to forces beyond human ones, such as Fortune or Providence:

- The grieving woman in Part I explains that the women all used to be the wives of high-ranking nobles but have been brought low by "Fortune and her treacherous wheel/That suffers no estate on earth to feel/Secure."
- Emily is to move from the virgin estate to the wife estate due to choices made by the gods.
- Arcita blames Fortune for his exile and subsequently lives as a servant in Emily's house, moving from noble knight to a lower class: "Time was Arcita was my name by right;/Now I'm called Philostrate, not worth a mite!"

The Miller's Tale

Summary

Chaucer notes that the company, especially the "gentlefolk," enjoyed the Knight's tale. Harry Bailey then says it is the Monk's turn to tell a story, but the Miller, who is drunk, interrupts, saying he has a tale to tell—one about a carpenter and his wife. The Reeve (who is a carpenter) gets angry, but the Miller continues. Chaucer warns the reader that the tale may not be to the liking of those who prefer "morality, good breeding, saintliness."

The Miller's tale proceeds: An old carpenter named John takes a student as a lodger. The student, Nicholas, is clever and charming. John's wife, Alison, is young and pretty. One day Nicholas makes advances to Alison, and she promises that they can meet later. A young parish clerk, Absalon, also desires Alison. He serenades her and sends her gifts, hoping to win her love. But she is in love with Nicholas.

Nicholas and Alison make an elaborate plan. Nicholas pretends to be ill, and, when he is discovered in a stupor, he pretends he has had a revelation that there will be a terrible flood. He advises stocking three tubs with provisions and hanging them up with ropes so that John, Alison, and Nicholas can float in them during the flood. The carpenter believes Nicholas and makes preparations. When John falls asleep in his tub, Nicholas and Alison sneak out of their tubs to have sex.

Meanwhile, Absalon goes to the carpenter's home to see if he can get a kiss from Alison, who rejects him. He says he will go away if she will just give him a kiss through the window. It is dark, and she sticks out her naked behind. He kisses it and is enraged at her trick. He goes to a blacksmith and gets a hot iron to bring back to Alison's. This time it is Nicholas who sticks his bare buttocks out the window, letting out a loud fart, only to be branded by the hot iron. All the uproar wakes up the carpenter, who cuts the ropes of his tub and falls, crashing through the house all the way to the cellar.

Analysis

This tale is an example of *fabliau*, of which there are several in *The Canterbury Tales*. A fabliau is a humorous story that usually features sexual shenanigans and outlandish tricks. Normal moral codes are temporarily suspended in these tales, which take cheerful delight in the shocking and surprising.

This story, following the Knight's tale, is a crude and comical contrast to the genteel chivalry of the previous story. Like the Knight's tale, this story features two young men in love with the same woman. This time, however, the woman is also an older man's wife and actively participates in arranging the affair with one of the young men. Alison, a young beauty who agrees without much persuasion to have sex with Nicholas, is presented as a contrast to the virtuous Emily. Social class is also a point of contrast between this tale and the Knight's tale: The two young knights of the previous story have been replaced by two young men of the emerging middle class of clerks, scholars, and teachers.

In developing the theme of rivalry, this story features rivalry between a young, clever scholar and a simple, gullible old man, as well as rivalry between young men for the same woman.

Chaucer uses dramatic irony—in which the reader has important information not known to the characters in the story—to increase the tale's comedic effect. Readers know that Alison and Nicholas are planning an affair and that the ruse of the upcoming flood is a fabrication, but the carpenter does not know, making him seem silly. Readers also know that Absalon is bringing a hot iron back, but Nicholas does not, so the readers anticipate the branding of Nicholas's bare buttocks while Nicholas is blissfully unaware until it happens.

The sudden fall of the carpenter in his tub is the final unexpected straw in this outrageous sequence of events, and it would be a hilarious end to the story if the old man were not badly injured and then assumed crazy. This revelation about the outcome for the carpenter may stir sympathy in some readers or listeners, leaving them to wonder whether the joke was really funny after all.

The Reeve's Prologue and Tale

Summary

Everyone but Oswald the Reeve (who is a carpenter) thinks the Miller's tale is hilarious. The Reeve then says he is old and describes old age at length. Harry Bailey makes fun of him, saying he is like a preacher giving a long sermon—and not a very good one. Harry Bailey then invites him to tell a story. The Reeve says that, because the Miller's story makes fun of a carpenter, his story will "pay him back."

He begins a story about a dishonest miller with a wife, a daughter of about 20, and a baby son. Simpkin, the miller, grinds grain for a college, stealing some of it in the process. Two college students, John and Alan, decide to keep an eye on the process the next time grain is ground. They tell Simpkin they want to watch out of curiosity, but really they want to make sure he does not steal any. Simpkin, knowing it is a trick, plans a trick of his own. He sneaks away and sets their horse free, and, when John and Alan find their horse gone, they run after it. After they have left, Simpkin steals some of their flour.

The two students ask to stay the night because it has taken so long to recapture their horse. Simpkin agrees, though he says they all must sleep in the same room because his home is small. That night Simpkin gets very drunk, as does his wife. Soon Simpkin, his wife, and his daughter are all snoring loudly.

Alan decides to sneak into bed with Simpkin's daughter, despite John's warning of the risk. John is envious of his friend, so he tricks Simpkin's wife into his bed by moving the baby's cradle when she gets up in the night. He gives her such a good time in bed that she repays him by telling him where he can find the meal cake she made out of the stolen grain.

It is still dark when Alan gets out of bed later. On his way back to bed, he is confused by the position of the cradle, and groping around in the dark he ends up in Simpkin's bed. Thinking the man next to him is John, he boasts about his exploits with Simpkin's daughter, and the miller, enraged, begins to fight him. Everybody wakes up, and the two students beat up Simpkin.

The Reeve winds up his story by saying, "Tricksters will get a tricking."

Analysis

The Reeve interprets the Miller's story as an attack on carpenters, so he decides to get his revenge by telling an insulting story about a miller. This "payback" theme is echoed in the story, as the college students "pay back" Simpkin for stealing their grain with a trick of their own. Of course, the story is trick upon trick: Simpkin steals the grain, the students lie about their intentions, Simpkin releases their horse, they seduce both the miller's wife and daughter, people are tricked into getting in the wrong beds, and so on. Ultimately the original trickster does get the worst tricking, as Simpkin is

beaten and the stolen grain reclaimed.

This story, like the one before it, is a fabliau and is similar to the previous story in several other ways. Like the Miller's tale, it sets up a rivalry between youth and age—except this time the older man is dishonest rather than simple—as well as between scholars and a skilled worker. Rivalry also exists between the two students—John's envy of Alan's sexual escapade is his main motivation for sleeping with the wife. And, like the Miller's tale, this story involves a wife who seems willing to cuckold her husband without a second thought.

Yet the tone of this tale is distinct from the Miller's, emphasizing the theme of story and storyteller. The Miller, a boisterous and happy fellow, tells a tale that is cheerfully amoral, in which the young wife is won over by charm. The Reeve, in contrast, is an angry, bitter fellow who sees offense in the Miller's tale when none was intended. So he tells a tale that rests on revenge and mean-spirited tricks. The students "steal" Simpkin's wife and daughter by deception, not through seduction.

The characterization of people in this story is also significant. The miller is described as round-faced, bald, and with a pug nose. He is sly and violent, and his wife is the daughter of a "celibate" priest—who obviously broke his vow of celibacy. His daughter is young but not beautiful. Overall the family is painted in unflattering terms. The characters are also often compared to farm animals: The miller's wife runs "clucking like a hen," John and Alan come "like cattle in the rain" from capturing their horse, the miller snorts "like a cart-horse" as he sleeps, and the fighting men wallow "like two porkers in a poke." (This is a contrast with animal metaphors used in the Knight's tale, in which the knights are compared to noble wild beasts such as lions and tigers.)

The Cook's Prologue and Tale

Summary

The Cook finds the Reeve's tale funny and decides he will tell a tale of his own. Harry Bailey teases him a bit but agrees.

The Cook begins his tale, which he claims is a true story, about a man named Peter. Peter was "as full of love, as full of sin," and so fond of partying that he often left work early. He liked to gamble and visit the brothels, sometimes even taking money from the shop where he was an apprentice to indulge himself. Eventually this behavior causes the shop master to dismiss him. Now unemployed, Peter moves in with a friend, who happens to also enjoy "revelling, dice and sport," and whose wife earns money as a prostitute.

Analysis

Scholars also classify this tale as a fabliau, although it is less well developed than the two previous tales in that genre and tends to be moralizing rather than carefree. It is also unfinished, and scholars do not have a firm explanation why.

This tale follows closely on the heels of the previous one, as something in the Reeve's tale has inspired the Cook to share a story of his own. He notes that he wants to tell a "little joke" rather than elaborate on the "jest of malice" played upon the miller.

It is interesting to note the progression of women's roles thus far in the stories. The Knight's tale involved a noble, chaste lady; the next two stories involved women easily seduced; this story involves (however briefly) a prostitute.

The Man of Law's Prologue, Tale, and Epilogue

Summary

Harry Bailey notes that it is now 10 o'clock in the morning and calls upon the Man of Law to tell his story, reminding him of his promise to participate in the storytelling. The Man of Law agrees, and, although he claims to only speak in "plain prose," he proceeds in rhymed verse.

Before beginning his story, the Man of Law notes that merchants have plenty of opportunity to gain wealth as well as tales and says that the tale he is about to tell was told to him by a merchant.

Part I

A company of rich merchants lived in Syria. Traveling to Rome, they learn of the Roman Emperor's daughter, Constance, who is both beautiful and good. When they tell the Syrian sultan about Constance, he falls in love with her and tells his advisers that he will die if he does not get to marry Constance. They agree that the only way to avoid his untimely death is to get her to marry him. The sultan and his peers agree to be baptized into the Catholic Church so that the wedding can take place. Constance sets sail for Syria. The sultan's mother, meanwhile, is unhappy with the thought of her son converting to Christianity. She makes a plan, pretending she wants to be baptized too.

Part II

Constance and her company arrive in Syria, and the sultan's mother welcomes them. On the day of the wedding, there is a fabulous feast. However, the sultan's mother has all of the Christians but Constance killed at the feast, including her son. Constance is put on a boat with a little food, a few clothes, and some treasure and sent on her way alone. She prays for help and comes at last to shore after three years adrift. She is found and taken in by a constable and his wife, Hermengild, a pagan couple. Constance has lost her memory, but she makes a home among them and they come to love her. She has not lost her faith, though, and, because of her presence, Hermengild and the constable are converted to Christianity.

A young knight living nearby makes advances to Constance, but she refuses him. Angry, he sneaks into their home in the middle of the night when the constable is away and kills Hermengild, leaving the bloody knife next to the sleeping Constance. The constable assumes Constance killed his wife and reports it to King Alla. Alla says that, if the knight will swear she is guilty on a book, Constance will be executed. The book they bring contains the biblical Gospels. When the knight swears on it, a hand appears and smites him, and a voice from Heaven speaks. Many who witness this convert to Christianity, including King Alla, who then marries Constance.

The king's mother is not happy about the marriage. Constance is soon pregnant and gives birth to a boy while Alla is away at war. Letters are written to Alla with the news, but his mother secretly replaces them with her own letter, which says that Constance's child was a creature from Hell. The king writes, in reply, that his wife and child should be cared for. This letter, too, is replaced by his mother with one that says Constance should be sent back to sea with the child. Constance is again set adrift.

Part III

When King Alla comes home and learns what has been done, he figures out his mother was behind the whole plot and has her killed. But he is consumed with grief.

After five years at sea, Constance and her child come near land once again. A thief climbs aboard her boat intending to rape her, but, before he can, he is swept overboard. She sets out again across the sea.

The emperor of Rome finally learns what has happened to his daughter in Syria, and he sends a senator there with a force of soldiers to slaughter those responsible. This senator meets Constance in her boat, though he does not recognize her. He brings her to his wife, who happens to be her aunt. They take her in, along with the child.

Meanwhile, King Alla begins to feel bad that he had his mother killed and decides to go to Rome to seek forgiveness from the pope. In Rome the senator who found Constance gives a feast to honor King Alla, and Constance's little boy is invited also. King Alla, seeing the boy, asks about him, and the senator tells how he was found. King Alla suspects that the boy might be his and asks to meet his mother. The whole truth comes out, and Alla and Constance are reunited. They then tell everything to the emperor, who is overjoyed.

In a year King Alla dies, and Constance goes back to live with her father. Maurice, her son, eventually becomes emperor of Rome.

After the Man of Law finishes his story, Harry Bailey compliments it and then calls on the Parson to take his turn, but the Shipman says he wants to go next instead.

Analysis

This tale is a cross between a romance, such as the Knight's tale, and the story of a saint, such as later tales about Christian martyrs. Like a romance, the story has noble characters, involves the marriage of a beautiful lady and a noble husband,

and moves along a story arc of suffering and trials to eventual joy. Yet, like a saint's story, it revolves around a character who prays fervently for help, who is preserved from death by miraculous means, and whose behavior is so beyond reproach that people are continually converted and baptized around them. Even Constance's name suggests her "constant" faith that makes her such an exemplary person and Christian. To add to the saintly flavor of the story, a number of biblical heroes are alluded to: Daniel, Jonah, David, Moses, and Judith, just to name a few.

The structure of the tale is worth considering. There are several elements of the plot that mirror one another, including Constance's many voyages over the sea, the intrusion of a scheming and devilish mother-in-law, Constance's prayers for assistance, her miraculous survival on limited supplies, and the way she is twice found and taken in by an older couple.

Another notable aspect of this story is the interactions between Fortune and Providence. The medieval church taught that Fortune would eventually turn against the most "fortunate" individual and encouraged people not to dwell on earthly concerns. Yet Providence—God's personal intervention in a person's life—is revealed as being more powerful than Fortune: As Constance is first set adrift, the Man of Law exclaims, "He that is Lord of Fortune guide thy helm!" The many miracles that occur to save Constance from various terrible fates are further evidence of Providence.

Only a little more than half of the lines in this tale are devoted to narrating the story. The rest are made up of observations and comments of the narrator (the Man of Law), who represents a perspective outside of the story, and the prayers of Constance, whose perspective is within the story. The Man of Law's comments often revolve around how outside forces cause events in the lives of humans, and Constance's prayers echo this sentiment. The sheer number of lines devoted to the Man of Law's comments draw attention to him as storyteller, and his musings are full of rhetorical questions such as "and yet what matter?" and "alas, what could she say,/Out of her wits with terror and dismay?" In this way, in spite of the Man of Law's claim that he speaks in "plain prose," the story's style reflects the more ornate (and long-winded) voice associated with a man of law.

Unlike the women in the previous three tales, Constance is more saintly than sexual and bears more in common with Emily of the Knight's tale as well as to chaste women in later tales such as the Second Nun's tale. This story introduces the idea that sex is inherently unholy and that even wives must "do without" their holiness for a while in order to make love with their husbands.

The Shipman's Tale

Summary

There is no prologue to the Shipman's tale, but in the Epilogue of the Man of Law's tale, the Shipman objects to the Host's proposal to have the Parson go next and demands to tell his story instead. Then he begins.

There once was a rich merchant who had a lovely wife and enjoyed entertaining guests. One of their regular guests was a young monk named Sir John, a close friend of the merchant.

The merchant invites Sir John to stay for a few days. During the visit the merchant shuts himself up in his office to work on his business accounts. While he is working, Sir John walks in the garden. The merchant's wife comes out and tells Sir John that the merchant is a neglectful husband. Advancing toward Sir John, she asks him to lend her 100 francs, and he promises he will, holding her close and kissing her. Later, after dinner, Sir John asks the merchant to lend him 100 francs. The merchant willingly agrees, and Sir John sets off for his abbey.

While the merchant is off on a business trip, Sir John visits the merchant's wife. He lends the 100 francs to her, and in return she sleeps with him. After the merchant returns, he makes a friendly visit to Sir John. Sir John remarks that he repaid the merchant's loan, giving the money to the merchant's wife. Later the merchant asks his wife about the money, and she tells him she spent it on pretty clothes. She says she will pay him back in bed. He asks her to be less extravagant in the future.

Analysis

This tale is another fabliau, with the amorality characteristic of the genre. Its style—plain storytelling without much commentary from the storyteller—is similar to the Reeve's story and the Miller's story. However, there are a few differences from the Reeve's tale and the Miller's tale that are worth consideration. For one thing the "other man" this time is

a monk, not a young clerk or student. This is in keeping with the characterization of many other clergy in *The Canterbury Tales* who seem to lack morals. In addition, the merchant, unlike the carpenter and miller of the previous stories, is a generous and trusting man. In general the characters in this tale lack the rudeness of the characters in the earlier ones.

Business transactions figure prominently in this story. The merchant is consumed with tallying up his accounts, goes off on a business trip presumably to make some financial deals, and continues to talk mainly of money after he returns home. His relationship with his wife seems mostly financial. He gives her money to run the household, advises her to be thrifty, and asks her to be more careful with money after he finds out about the loan. For her part she seems to treat sex as a financial transaction, agreeing to have sex with the monk in order to secure the loan from him and then offering to repay the loan to her husband in bed.

The Prioress's Prologue and Tale

Summary

Harry Bailey now politely calls on the Prioress to tell her story, and she agrees. First she prays and dedicates her story to the Virgin Mary, Jesus's mother. Then she begins: A widow's son, a boy of seven, was a student at a small Christian school. He was a devout child and would say a "Hail Mary" (a brief prayer to the Virgin) any time he saw an image of Christ's mother.

One day at school, he overhears some other children singing a Latin hymn, "O Alma Redemptoris." He asks another student to explain the meaning of the song and is told that it is about praying to Mary for "help and comfort on our dying day." The boy learns the whole hymn and sings it often in a clear voice.

Satan, disliking such innocence and devotion, incites some of the town's Jews to do away with the boy. One day a hired murderer grabs the boy as he walks down the street, cuts his throat, and throws him into the sewer. The boy's worried mother searches everywhere for him. Finally she hears his voice singing "O Alma Redemptoris" from underground and discovers where his dead body is. The boy's body is taken to the nearest abbey, still singing. The guilty men are executed.

The dead boy continues to sing throughout his funeral mass, and finally the abbot asks him how it is possible that he sings even though he is dead. The boy tells him that, as he was dying, the mother of Christ appeared to him, placed a grain on his tongue, and told him to sing "O Alma Redemptoris" until the grain was removed. The abbot then removes the grain, and the boy dies peacefully. All of the people gathered are overcome, and they weep and give praise to Christ's mother. The boy's body is buried in the abbey.

Analysis

Scholars classify this tale as a *miracle*, an inspirational story for Christians. Many of these miracle stories (from outside *The Canterbury Tales*) focused on the Virgin Mary and the value of devotion to her. The tales tend to be sentimental and emotionally appealing rather than theological or concerned with church teachings. This tale, like many stories in this genre, features a strongly anti-Semitic tone.

Though some scholars accept the story's anti-Semitism as reflecting Chaucer's own, others suggest that the Prioress, not Jews, are the object of Chaucer's scorn in this tale. In the general Prologue, Chaucer's description of the Prioress gently mocks her vanity and affectedness. Her own over-the-top prologue, in which she protests her speaking ability in extremely flowery language, makes her seem disingenuous. Her extremely maudlin descriptions of the dead boy, juxtaposed with her vulgar description of the Jewish community, seem melodramatic at best and unhinged at worst.

The Prioress's prologue is a prayer to Mary, mirroring the prayers and devotion of the boy in the story she will tell. Clearly the Prioress identifies with and takes inspiration from the young martyr of the tale.

The intervention of supernatural powers is a feature of this story, but the Prioress suggests that faith, or its opposite, are preconditions for such interventions. The Virgin Mary performs a miracle on behalf of a deeply devout boy. Likewise, the devil is able to encourage the Jews' treachery because their hearts are the "waspish nest" of Satan.

The helplessness and innocence of the boy at the center of this tale supports the Christian idea that God shows his power in the weak and in those who suffer. The words *little* and *small* are used repeatedly throughout the tale to describe the child,

the school, the child's schoolbook, the child's throat, and so on.

Chaucer's Tale of Sir Topaz

Summary

The Prioress's tale has a sobering effect on the company, so Harry Bailey calls on Chaucer to tell a "tale of mirth." The tale Chaucer delivers is divided into *fits*, an archaic word for a division in a poem or song.

The First Fit

Chaucer begins a story about Sir Topaz, a knight so handsome, rich, and accomplished that young women longed to be with him. However, he was chaste. One day, while out riding in the forest in springtime, he hears a bird sing, and the sound of it causes him to fall into an overpowering "love-longing" for an Elf-Queen mistress. To find such an Elfin woman, he makes his way to Fairy-land, where he is confronted by a giant. He challenges the giant to a duel the next day.

Back at home Sir Topaz's friends and servants help him prepare for the duel. They give him sweet, spiced wine and clothe him in fine clothes and elaborate armor.

The Second Fit

Chaucer again asks the company to be quiet and listen to his story of battle, chivalry, and "making love in wantonry." But, as he continues to tell about Sir Topaz, knight extraordinaire, Harry Bailey interrupts him, saying his story is "illiterate" and that the rhymes are "purgatory." Chaucer agrees to tell a story in prose instead.

Analysis

The humor of this tale lies in the difference between the readers' and the pilgrims' reactions to it. Harry Bailey sums up the pilgrims' reaction: He says it is not "worth a turd!" The dramatic irony, of course, is that readers know Chaucer is a well-read, clever, versatile storyteller. While Harry Bailey may think Chaucer the pilgrim is illiterate, readers know Chaucer the writer is just having a bit of fun.

In this fragment of a story, Chaucer is at his most satirical. Common in Chaucer's time were romances full of stock noble characters and predictable plots. In telling such a tale, he uses ridiculous verse to make fun of how ridiculous the story is—a perfectly moral knight who must duel for the love of a beautiful and unattainable fairy queen. The story is filled with cliché events, characters, and figures of speech, such as "His lips were red as rose." The sheer awfulness of the entire package betrays the glee with which Chaucer writes this parody.

Springtime, with its blooming flowers and singing birds, figures heavily in the story. Sir Topaz, normally a man of self-control, is suddenly undone by a bird's song. All of the sensuality of spring gives him such a powerful longing for a woman he feels he must act immediately to fulfill it. His reaction underscores the situational irony of other pilgrims' tales, such as the Knight's, where "noble" heroes are blatantly motivated by the same base desires.

Chaucer's Tale of Melibee

Summary

Melibee was a rich and mighty young man. One day, while Melibee is away from home, three burglars break into his home and assault his daughter Sophia. This event sparks a debate among the characters in the tale: Should Melibee avenge his daughter's injuries with violence? Dame Prudence, Melibee's wife, suggests Melibee ask others for advice on the matter, which he does. Plenty of people offer opinions, quoting liberally from various ancient authorities. Dame Prudence answers their arguments and finally convinces Melibee to make peace with his enemies. Melibee wants to fine the men, but Dame Prudence says no. Instead he chastises and forgives them, pointing out what a good person he is for doing so.

Analysis

The Tale of Melibee is a translation of an earlier work by a judge named Albertanus, who wrote it in 1246. The use of an imagined debate to argue for some moral point was common in the Middle Ages. So, too, was the use of a short story or

situation that presents the basic question to be answered in the debate. In this case the question is one of revenge versus forgiveness, action versus restraint. Dame Prudence, true to her name, argues for restraint and peaceful solutions to conflict rather than war and violence.

As a translation it is only fair to ask why it was included in *The Canterbury Tales*. Is it satirical, like Sir Topaz? Is Chaucer trying to poke fun at a form of writing common at the time? Or are there themes in Melibee that resonate with the other tales? Scholars are divided on this issue, though some point out that Dame Prudence is a strong-willed woman who eventually gets her way, much like the Wife of Bath. She also represents the medieval concept of female power. Although she may not be able to wield her power in the wider world, she can use it effectively to restrain the rash actions of her husband.

The Monk's Tale

Summary

Harry Bailey is impressed with Dame Prudence's patience, noting that his own wife is not a peace-loving person. He then calls on the Monk.

The Monk begins by saying he will tell tragic stories of how those of high status were brought low: Lucifer was the "brightest of angels," but he sinned and was sent to hell, where he remains. Adam lived in Eden until he ate of the fruit of the prohibited tree, which caused him to live a life of hard work and misery. Samson was a "noble warrior," but his wife convinced him to tell her the secret of his strength—his uncut hair—and betrays him to his enemies. Hercules, famous for his many amazing feats of strength, is given a shirt made with poison, which causes his flesh to rot and fall off his bones.

The Monk continues with a long series of similar stories. Finally the Knight cannot take any more, so he interrupts. The Knight prefers stories about men "of low estate" who go on to great success instead. Harry Bailey agrees and calls on the Nun's Priest.

Analysis

The Monk's tale is not one story but many, and all have the same lesson. A story that gives an example of a moral teaching is known as *exemplum*. In Chaucer's time collections of exemplum like this one were common. The Monk's goal, as he tells the company, is to tell stories about those who were prosperous but who fell into misery. The protagonists of these stories are presented not as heroes but as victims of Fortune, despite their prosperity. His collection is impressive, beginning with Lucifer, who fell from Heaven to Hell, and encompassing heroes from the Bible, history, and mythology.

Chaucer pokes fun at this genre through the sheer tediousness of the Monk's tales. In the Monk's prologue, he says that he has "at least a hundred" of stories with the same lesson, but the Knight does not even let him get to 20. Once again, through the reaction of the pilgrims, Chaucer comments on what makes good storytelling. Clearly a collection of half-baked morality tales cannot compete with well-developed narratives.

The Nun's Priest's Tale

Summary

A poor widow keeps a few animals, including a rooster named Chanticleer—a fine specimen with a loud crow—and his seven hens. One dawn Chanticleer begins to groan as if having a bad dream. When Lady Pertelote, his favorite hen, asks him what's wrong, he tells her his nightmare: A great beast with glowing red eyes had entered their yard and tried to kill him. Pertelote tells him that he is a coward and that the dream is meaningless. She prescribes some medicinal herbs.

But Chanticleer feels that he should pay attention to the dream, pointing out that dreams often have meaning. As support, Chanticleer tells several stories he's read in books. After this discussion Chanticleer refuses the herbal remedies. The presence of Pertelote next to him makes him feel better.

Later Chanticleer is outside, singing, when he sees a fox in the yard. Startled, Chanticleer prepares to run away, but the fox reassures him that he is friendly and has only come to listen to Chanticleer's beautiful singing. Chanticleer is flattered and

begins to sing again when the fox springs on him and carries him off toward the woods. At this the hens make such an uproar that the widow and her daughters come rushing. They see the fox and race after him, accompanied by all their animals, including a swarm of bees.

Chanticleer suggests to the fox that he turn around and shout insults and curses at his pursuers. The fox does this, and Chanticleer takes the opportunity to fly into a tree. The fox then says he didn't mean any harm, so Chanticleer should come down. But Chanticleer now knows that the fox is trying to trick him, so he refuses.

At the conclusion of the story, Harry Bailey compliments the Nun's Priest and turns to another storyteller.

Analysis

As a fable, this story is in keeping with other types of stories in the genre, many of which involve a tricky fox and some sort of prey that ultimately gets the better of the fox. The legacy of this story line can be seen in modern times, in cartoon characters such as Wile E. Coyote and Roadrunner.

Only a small percentage of lines in this tale actually advance the story. For example, a large number of lines are given to Chanticleer's argument for the importance of dreams. He relates in detail many stories in which dreams and their meanings were significant, such as those from the biblical book of Daniel. Despite his own argument, Chanticleer takes no action based on the dream and is quite surprised when a fox *does* enter the yard. Chaucer may be poking fun at people who engage in debate for the sake of argument, not for a practical purpose. He may also be mocking the Monk, whose own tale was nothing but a tedious list of exempla.

Most fables end with a single lesson or moral; this story does not have just one but several. Chanticleer learns to be wary of tricksters who want you to close your eyes when you should keep them open. The fox learns that he should keep his mouth shut. The Nun's Priest adds that people should be on guard against flatterers and invites listeners to learn from this seemingly silly tale: "And if you think my story is absurd. ... Take hold upon the moral, gentlemen." With these words the Nun's Priest suggests his audience might see themselves in both the proud but gullible Chanticleer, the skeptical and disdaining hen, and the tricky and flattering fox.

The Nun's Priest's fable meets with great approval. By setting the story in a barnyard, the Nun's Priest seems to be preparing to tell a simple fable. Like the Monk, the rooster Chanticleer gives a long list of illustrative examples that reveal an astonishing breadth of learning. But unlike the Monk Chanticleer does it in a wildly entertaining way. Chaucer seems to say that this is what learning combined with a true talent for storytelling looks like.

The Physician's Tale

Summary

The Physician's tale occurs in different positions in various editions, reflecting uncertainty among scholars about Chaucer's intended arrangement. The tale begins without a prologue. The Physician says the tale comes from Livy, the first-century Roman historian.

A knight of noble birth named Virginius had a beautiful and virtuous daughter, Virginia. One morning Virginia goes into town with her mother. A judge named Appius sees and desires her, so he hires a man named Claudius to accuse Virginius of stealing his young female servant and raising her as his daughter.

The judge immediately rules in favor of Claudius and orders Virginia to be taken from Virginius's home. Virginius, rather than give her over to the judge's lust, kills Virginia and cuts off her head, giving the head to the judge, who orders that the knight be hanged. But knowing Appius is lecherous and Virginius is trustworthy, the men of the town rise up. They throw Appius into jail, send Claudius into exile, and hang anyone else who was involved in the plot.

The Physician ends by warning the company, "Forsake your sins before your sins forsake you." Harry Bailey points out that some gifts of fate, such as great beauty, are those that sometimes "least befriend us." Then he says he needs someone to tell a more cheerful story and calls on the Pardoner. Some members of the company demand a tale with a moral. The Pardoner says he will think of a good tale while he has a drink.

Analysis

This tale includes extreme examples of ideas seen throughout *The Canterbury Tales*. Virginia, the beautiful and obedient young woman whose virtue is of more importance than her life, is not unlike other passively suffering women in other tales. The corrupt and lecherous judge is similar to other men of high rank who prey on the helpless, and Virginius is an extreme example of a noble whose sense of righteousness trumps more sentimental human emotions.

The main ethical conflict of the tale provides readers with insight into the attitudes and values of the Middle Ages. A daughter at this time was essentially the property of her father until she wed her husband, who would then become both authority and protector. Appius's plan disrupts this order; he does not ask for Virginia's hand in marriage but simply wants her for sex. Going along with Appius's scheme would be disastrous for the aptly named Virginia. Medieval society placed a high value on the chastity of unmarried women; stories of female saints who committed suicide to avoid rape were popular at the time. In this context Virginius's solution has a certain logic. Dorigen, the faithful wife of the Franklin's tale, is in a situation very similar to Virginia's—and Dorigen considers suicide as a way to avoid having to commit adultery.

The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale

Summary

Before he begins his story, the Pardoner describes his preaching methods. He says frankly that he puts on quite a show, and all for the purpose of manipulating people to give money rather than any true concern for their souls. He uses the same text each time and preaches often about avarice—the sin of greed—while living a very greedy and selfish life. After describing how corrupt he is, he reassures the company that he is still able to tell a moral tale: "For though I am a wholly vicious man/Don't think I can't tell moral tales."

He begins his tale by introducing the characters and setting: In Flanders, there lived a company of young men given to every kind of vice, including gluttony and drunkenness. Having introduced them, he launches into a tirade against gluttony, saying it is the main cause of human grief and misery. He supports this claim with several examples from the Bible and from history. This leads to similar warnings against gambling, lying, and swearing in God's name.

Now the Pardoner gets back to his story. The three young men are drinking in a tavern when they notice a coffin go by. They learn from the tavern boy that the dead man is someone they used to know and that he had been stabbed in the heart by a thief named Death. The boy mentions that this same thief has killed many people in the present plague and warns them to be ready to face Death if they should meet him. Another man adds that this thief likely lives in a nearby town. The three young men decide to pursue the thief and kill him. In their "drunken rage," they start out.

On the way they meet an old man who says he has lived a long time because Death will not take him. The young men think the man knows Death's whereabouts, so they threaten him. Eventually the old man directs them to a tree in a nearby grove.

They find the tree but become distracted by coins beneath it. They believe that Fortune has given them a treasure and decide to wait until it is dark to sneak away with it. They draw lots to see who will go get food and wine for them while they wait, and the task falls to the youngest of the three. While he is away, the other two conspire to kill him and take the money for themselves. The younger man has a similar idea and poisons two bottles of wine, intending to give it to the others. When he gets back they kill him; but then, drinking the poisoned wine, they also die.

After his tale the Pardoner offers his services to the company—for a fee, of course. Harry Bailey insults him, making the Pardoner angry. The Knight attempts to make peace between them.

Analysis

The Pardoner is very conscious of himself as storyteller. Before he begins his story, he gives a surprising amount of information regarding his own preaching style. Most of this information is rather unflattering, as he describes the various ways he manipulates people into giving him money. Yet he clearly sees himself as a wordsmith capable of influencing his listeners through his language.

He then gives the listeners a taste of his preaching. The story of the three young men is embedded within this sermon as a sort of sermon illustration, or *exemplum*. He prefaces this tale by saying it is a story he would "often preach when out for winning" (in other words, motivated by greed, he would preach about the folly of greed). He ends the story by saying, "That, sirs, is how I preach," and then he attempts to make money off the pilgrims. The Pardoner's tale is integral to understanding his character and his stated goals, emphasizing the connection between story and storyteller that is an overall theme of *The Canterbury Tales*.

The lessons of the embedded story itself are fairly clear: Sinful behavior—gluttony, drunkenness, greed, murder—ultimately results in death; its moral is "You reap what you sow." The men's goal of setting out to destroy Death is tantamount to blasphemy, as the men presume to equate their own power with that of God.

Questions surround the role of the old man in this story. Chaucer could have written the story without this mysterious character because his effect on the plot is fairly minimal and could have been accomplished other ways. So why is he there at all? One explanation may be that the old man's literal quest for Death highlights the young men's foolishness in their quest for Death, whom they envision as a human thief and murderer, not as each man's inevitable fate. Another explanation may be that the Black Plague, which raged at the time the story was written, was known for its tendency to kill the young and healthy while the old and frail lingered on. Yet another explanation is that the young men's disrespect for old age further condemns them.

The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale

Summary

Before the Wife of Bath tells her story, she explains that she has been married five times. To justify her many marriages, she cites the facts that God instructed humans to multiply and that King Solomon had many wives. She also takes issue with the idea that virginity is a superior state, noting that, if no women ever bore children, there would be a lack of virgins in the world. She suggests that she must use the gifts God has given her, and he did not gift her with celibacy! She uses her "gifts" to hold power over her husbands. At this the Pardoner, who is soon to be married, interrupts with concerns that his wife might have power over him. He says he will not marry after all.

The Wife tells him to wait and hear her story before he makes this decision. She goes on to describe her husbands: two bad ones and three good ones. The good ones, she says, were rich and old and easily controlled. She gives examples of how she controlled them through false accusations and denying them sexual satisfaction. Then she discusses her "bad" husbands. The fourth one was wild and had a mistress, and she constantly tried to make him jealous. The fifth one was only 20 years old and by this time she was 40, but she fell in love with him at her fourth husband's funeral. Their marriage was full of conflict, and they even got into a fistfight one time.

The Friar comments that she is taking too long to get to her story, and so she begins a story set in King Arthur's court:

A young knight rapes a beautiful young woman and is sentenced to death. However, King Arthur's wife asks him to give the knight a second chance. Arthur agrees, and his wife makes a deal with the knight: If he can find out what women really want, he may live. He had one year to find the answer or the execution sentence stands. For a year the knight travels from place to place, asking women what they truly want. Unfortunately, he gets a variety of answers, and, at the end of the allotted time, he goes back to report his failure. On the way he comes upon a group of women and decides to ask them his question. However, as he approaches, all but one woman disappears—an old, ugly crone. She agrees to give him the answer he seeks if he swears to do whatever she asks. At court the knight reveals her answer: "A woman wants the self-same sovereignty/Over her husband as over her lover." She goes on to say that she wants mastery over him rather than the reverse. Then the crone demands that he marry her, and he is forced to consent because her answer was right and saved his life.

Later in bed the old crone asks the knight to explain why he is so down. He tells her that he is ashamed to have such an ugly wife. She does not seem offended but tells him that she can become beautiful if he wishes it—but she will also be unfaithful. Or she can remain ugly and be a good, faithful wife. She gives him this choice, but after some thought he tells her she should choose whatever she thinks is best, saying, "Whatever pleases

you suffices me." Because this is exactly what women want—to be in charge—she becomes "both fair and faithful." The knight instantly loves and desires her, and they live happily together.

The Wife of Bath then prays that "Christ Jesus send/Us husbands meek and young and fresh in bed."

Analysis

The Wife of Bath's Prologue makes the Wife one of the best-developed characters in the entire *Tales*. Readers learn about her personal history, her opinions of God and Scripture, and her ideas about men, women, and marriage. She silences critics of her several marriages by questioning the scriptural and practical basis of their arguments, and her unapologetic dominance of her husbands provides a refreshing contrast with the passively obedient women in stories told so far.

One interesting detail in the Wife's prologue is the reason for the physical fight with her fifth husband, John. She explains that he was always reading old books and then using examples from these books to justify his poor treatment of her. One book in particular was made up of stories of wicked wives, and he would read this for long periods of time and then rant about the wickedness of women. She becomes fed up with this, so she grabs the book and tears three pages out. In her prologue the Wife said experience, not Christian teaching or social custom, is her guide; therefore, her rejection of her husband's old books seems suitable.

Like the Wife herself, the genre of her story is hard to pin down. Set in King Arthur's time, it has elements of a romance, such as a knight and a happy ending. However, its inclusion of an old crone who turns into a young, beautiful woman sounds more like a fairy tale.

The ideas presented in the Wife's prologue and in her tale are tightly intertwined. Her prologue focuses on her own marriages and how she maintained her own dominance in them. Her tale, then, is a story in which a man learns the important lesson that the way to please a woman is to let her be in charge. In the story the knight is punished for rape, an act in which he asserted his dominance. However, he avoids punishment and is well rewarded for letting his wife take the lead in decision making: "she responded in the fullest measure/With all that could delight or give him pleasure."

The Friar's Prologue and Tale

Summary

After hearing the Wife of Bath's tale, the Friar says their stories should steer clear of theological topics. He says he will tell a story about a summoner, noting how unpopular summoners are. The Summoner promises to "pay him back" later with a story about a friar.

The Friar begins: There once was a scheming summoner who used his position to extort money from people. One day, as he is out riding, planning to get some money from an innocent widow based on a trumped-up charge, he meets a young yeoman. He tells the yeoman that he is a bailiff, and the yeoman says he is as well! Based on their shared occupation, they swear to be "brothers to their dying day." Then the summoner asks the yeoman about himself. The yeoman says he has to extort money from people to make a living. The summoner agrees he must do the same. Then the yeoman reveals that he is a fiend from Hell who has chosen to appear in a human shape. The summoner says that, even though the yeoman is a fiend, their partnership stands.

The two come upon a farmer with a cart stuck in the mud. The farmer, frustrated, says, "The devil take all," and the summoner thinks this means that the fiend can take all the man's belongings. However, the fiend says that the farmer didn't really mean the words. They travel on to the house of the innocent widow. The summoner lies, telling the woman that there is a charge against her but that, if she pays him, she won't have to answer for it. She replies that she does not have enough money. When he persists in harassing her, she curses him, saying, may the "blackest devil out of Hell/Carry you off." The fiend asks her if she is sincere, and she says she is. So he takes the summoner off to Hell.

Analysis

As in other tales, a strong connection between the story and the storyteller exists in the Friar's Tale. This story includes also the now-familiar plot device of "the trickster tricked." Yet it is ominous in tone and has elements similar to the Pardoner's story of the three young men whose own sins eventually cause their downfall. Avarice, or greed, is the main sin for which the

three young men of the Pardoner's tale and the summoner of this tale are condemned. The summoner is willing to make any deal that furthers his chances at a profit, and this lack of morals leads him to Hell. Because the story is a condemnation of summoners in general, it is strange that the Friar tries to extend the moral of the story to the entire pilgrim company: "The lion's always on the watch for prey/To kill the innocent, if so he may." The summoner in the story is far from an innocent victim of the devil.

The connection between the story and storyteller in this tale is also of interest. In the Prologue of *The Canterbury Tales*, the Friar is described as "an easy man in penance-giving/Where he could hope to make a decent living." Although his methods of extracting money from people are more charming than those of his story's summoner, both still represent men of the church who use their position for profit. In telling a story about the sin of avarice, the Friar preaches, unwittingly, against himself.

The relationship between the summoner and the fiend is brotherly, and the summoner agrees to continue in brotherhood with the fiend even after he finds out his true nature. This is in sharp contrast to other similar "brotherhoods" and partnerships in the tales—Palamon and Arcita forsake their brotherhood for their rivalry for a woman in the Knight's tale, the three young men of the Pardoner's tale turn on one another, Sir John and the rich merchant are "like brothers" yet Sir John seduces the merchant's wife in the Shipman's tale, and so on.

The Summoner's Prologue and Tale

Summary

The Summoner, incensed by the Friar's disrespect, tells an unflattering story about all the friars in Hell who live inside Satan's "arse." This story serves as a prologue to his longer story:

A certain friar will sing prayers to help release souls from Purgatory in exchange for money and food. He tells people that even prayers "quickly sung" can do the trick. However, the friar rarely follows through despite his promises. He writes down the names of those he promises to pay for with an elegant pen and then promptly erases them from his tablets. (At this point in the Summoner's story, the Friar protests angrily, but the Host silences him.) One day he visits the house of a sick man named Thomas, hoping for a good meal, and boasts about his regular prayers. He also greets Thomas's wife, embracing and kissing her. She tells him that Thomas is irritable and hard to please and reveals that her baby died two weeks before. The friar tells her he already knows this news because by divine revelation he and the other friars had seen the child being taken up into Heaven. He says that the friars are able to experience these revelations because they regularly fast and pray.

He continues to talk at length about how poor, humble, and chaste friars are, and then says he and the friars have been praying constantly for Thomas. Thomas says that all the praying has not done much good, and, although he's given a good deal of money to various friars, he is still unwell. The friar replies that he and his friars would do a better job and that Thomas should give them the money instead.

Then he chastises Thomas for being angry with his wife, giving several examples of bad things that happen because of the sin of anger. He again asks for a donation. Thomas tells him he does have a donation, which the friars should divide equally among themselves, but he has hidden it beneath his buttocks. The friar reaches into Thomas's pants to find the gift, and Thomas lets loose a loud fart. The friar runs off, furious, and tells the story of Thomas's rude behavior to a lord and his lady, who are very puzzled about how it would be possible to divide a fart into equal parts. The lord's squire comes up with a solution to the puzzle, which seems good to everyone but the friar.

Analysis

Like the Reeve and the Miller, the Summoner and the Friar are rivals in a game of insulting stories. Their quarrel bleeds into the Summoner's story in more ways than one: It determines the main character and the way that character is described, because clearly the Summoner wants to tell the most insulting story he can about friars. (He cannot even limit himself to one insulting story!) Like the pilgrim Friar, the story's friar is a *limiter*—a preacher who goes from place to place within a set area, preaching and begging. Also, the Friar's angry outburst mirrors Thomas's anger problem, which leads to a sermon on the consequences of the sin of anger. The Summoner seems

to be using his story not just to insult the Friar but also to chastise him for his anger.

The friar in this tale is the very picture of a con man. It was common at the time for people to pay for spiritual services such as pardoning sins, praying for health, and helping their loved ones get into Heaven more quickly. The church condoned such practices, which all too easily lent themselves to fraud and abuse. The friar makes quite a show of the services he provides: He makes outrageous promises and fails to perform the prayers that people have paid for. He enjoys abundant food and money; he even has a servant who follows him around carrying all of the donations "on his back."

The friar also has something in common with the Pardoner: both are given to the same sin they preach against. The Pardoner, who often preaches against avarice, is a very greedy man. The friar in this tale asserts that gluttony is the main sin for which Adam had to leave Eden, yet he is gluttonous himself, often taking payment in meals and sacks of food.

The puzzle that concludes this tale is ridiculous, and the way that the lord, his lady, and the squire all seriously consider how one might divide a fart 13 ways makes it all the funnier. Rather than dismissing the fart as a rude joke and nothing more, they ponder how this "contribution" might be divided equally according to the terms agreed upon by the friar ("I swear it by my faith!").

The Clerk's Prologue and Tale

Summary

Harry Bailey now calls on the Clerk to tell a story of adventure. The Clerk agrees.

Part I

In Saluzzo, a beautiful region of Italy, lives a marquis named Walter. He is noble and beloved by his people but is yet unmarried. His people urge him to take a wife lest he die with no heirs. He agrees to find a wife but makes them swear they will be devoted to whomever he chooses. A date is set for the wedding.

Part II

In a village near Walter's palace lives a poor man with a daughter named Griselda, who is virtuous, lovely, and hardworking. Walter had often seen her riding by and decides that she will be his wife but does not tell anyone—not even Griselda. On the day of the wedding, Griselda goes to see the marquis and his bride pass by but is surprised when he asks her to marry him. She consents to obey him in marriage, and they wed. All the people come to love her for her beauty and her goodness. After a time she gives birth to a daughter. The people are pleased but not as pleased as if she had had a son. They hope the next child will be a boy.

Part III

Walter decides to test Griselda's devotion to him. He reminds her of the promises of obedience she made to him, and she affirms that she will obey him in all things. Later he sends an agent to take the child from her. Griselda does not object, although she thinks her child will now be killed. Walter sends the child to live secretly with a noble family. Though he watches Griselda carefully for a sign of discontent, she never shows any.

Part IV

Years pass and Griselda gives birth to a boy. Walter decides to test her again in the same way as before. She again allows her child to be taken away. The people, believing that the marquis has now murdered two of his own children, begin to despise him. He decides to test her even more. He has a document forged saying the pope gives him permission to leave Griselda and take a different wife. He sends word that his son and daughter are to be brought to his palace, though it is not to be said whose children they are. His daughter, in fact, is to be prepared as his new wife.

Part V

Walter sends Griselda home to her father, saying a new wife is on the way to take her place. She says she will never take another husband and wishes him joy in his new marriage before taking her leave.

Part VI

The day of Walter's wedding approaches, and he summons Griselda to help him prepare the palace for the celebration. She sets to work with characteristic grace and wisdom. Then he asks Griselda what she thinks of his new bride, and Griselda agrees that she is lovely. She advises him not to test his new bride, however, because she has not been raised to endure suffering as Griselda was. At this Walter cannot continue his test. He tells her everything. She joyfully greets her daughter and son, whom she thought had been killed. A great celebration follows, as well as years of contented life together. When Walter dies his son succeeds him.

In an *envoy*, or author's epilogue, Chaucer advises husbands not to follow Walter's example and test their wives' loyalty because they will find their wives not at all like Griselda. He advises wives to be fierce, independent, and opinionated.

Analysis

This story revolves around the perfectly obedient Griselda and her increasingly cruel husband. While he is of high estate and she is of low estate (which he constantly reminds her), he is immoral while she exhibits the saintlike qualities of a martyr. The difference in their social status provides Walter with more power over her than he would have over a wife of high estate, who would have a powerful family behind her. As it is, Griselda has zero power in the relationship, as both a woman and a peasant. Evidently this is exactly how Walter wants it. The imbalance of power in this marriage is absolute.

Choosing such a powerless wife seems to stem from Walter's unenthusiastic attitude about marriage in general. He would prefer not to take a wife at all—even though wives vowed to obey their husbands, husbands were beholden to their wives in some ways. He is unwilling to accept any restriction on his independence. He only agrees to take a wife at all because his subjects demand an heir before he dies. (They rely on his estate for their own livelihood and do not want it split up or sold off.) His solution is to marry a woman who will have no leverage in the relationship, and he makes her constantly demonstrate her complete obedience.

However, Walter's anxiety about losing his freedom comes to be a kind of captivity. He is obsessed with testing her; he "longed to expose her constancy to test" and "could not throw the thought away or rest." The Clerk describes the marquis as one who is "fettered to [his] stake."

The Merchant's Prologue, Tale, and Epilogue

Summary

Prompted by all the talk of husbands and wives, the Merchant chimes in, saying he is married to a horrible woman, nothing like Griselda. He complains that the life of married men is "grief and care." Harry Bailey asks him to tell a story.

January, an old and prosperous knight, lives in Lombardy. A bachelor for most of his life, he now has a strong desire to be married and have an heir. He gathers his friends and tells them his desire. His two friends, Placebo and Justinus, disagree on whether January should get married. Placebo tells him to go for it ,while Justinus urges caution. But most of January's friends agree that his plan is excellent. January considers many women before deciding upon one, a young woman named May. The two are soon married.

A squire named Damian, who works for January, sees May and instantly desires her. He writes her a letter telling her of his love and places it in a purse. Sick with love, he lays in bed. January, feeling bad for his ill squire, sends May to comfort the man. As she sits by his bedside, Damian secretly passes her the purse containing his letter. May reads the letter and writes back, agreeing to meet him secretly.

As time passes, January goes blind, and his blindness causes him to guard his wife jealously—keeping her close to him all the time. Because she is unable to get away and meet Damian, May and the squire sadly exchange nothing but letters. Together they make a plan. May takes the key to January's private, walled-in garden and makes a wax impression of it, which she gives to Damian to duplicate.

One day January takes May to his private garden. May signals to Damian that he should sneak in the garden gate. Once inside May gestures to him to climb into a pear tree. Then she tricks January into giving her a boost up into the tree to pick a pear to eat and meets Damian in the branches. As they are having sex, the god Pluto suddenly restores January's sight,

and he looks up into the tree, becoming very angry. May tells him that his sight is not very good because she and Damian were struggling in the tree, not having sex. January believes her.

Harry Bailey exclaims that women are full of "cunning tricks" and says his own wife has many vices.

Analysis

The Merchant's tale is another example of a fabliau, but one that uses elements of romance to set up readers' expectations before descending into the trickery and adultery characteristic of the fabliau. January, the old knight "of good renown," marries a young, beautiful lady of "wise self-discipline" and "gentle ways." While other fabliaux feature less refined characters, such as members of the middle class or churchmen of questionable morals, these characters are as noble as those of the Knight's tale. Readers, then, are led to expect a romance. It is not until after the marriage feast that signs of shenanigans to come become apparent. Even then the language is lofty: "O perilous fire kindled in the bedding,/Domestic traitor, with the danger spreading!"

Yet descent into shenanigans eventually begins, with May's dissatisfaction at her husband's sexual appeal: "Wearing his night-cap, with his scrawny throat./She didn't think his games were worth a groat."

This tale is also rich with symbolism. The winter—"Old January"—is symbolic of old age, and spring—"fresh young May"—is symbolic of youth. The garden is symbolic of sexual energy but also of Eden: "so fair a garden never was there known." Into this Eden May (Eve) allows in an "adder," a snake. This is consistent with the idea, believed at the time, that Eve and women in general were to blame for the biblical Fall—being cast out of Eden. The key, of course, that unlocks the walled-in garden is a not-so-subtle sexual euphemism.

January's blindness, while a physical affliction, is also symbolic. January is so blinded by lust for his young wife he sits in the wedding feast as "in a trance." Later the narrator (the Merchant) begs him to "see your servant, Damian ... even now is meditating villainy." This fulfills what is said earlier in the tale: "love is always blind and cannot see." January's blindness is a physical manifestation of his gullibility, reflecting the medieval belief that a person's shortcomings and sins could become visible in physical illnesses.

Situational irony plays a role in the humor of the final sequence of events. First, when May asks him for a boost up into the tree, blind January complains that there is "no boy about" to lend a hand. Of course, there is a boy about—waiting for May in the tree. When January regains his sight, he wants to "behold his love"; when he does see her, she is in the arms of another man.

The Squire's Prologue and Tale

Summary

Harry Bailey now calls on the Squire to tell a tale.

Part I

King Cambuskan was a man of many good qualities, honorable and wise, and he had a beautiful daughter named Canace. On the Ides of March, he gives a splendid, lavish feast to celebrate his 20th year as king. A strange knight arrives at the feast, wearing ornate armor. Giving an elaborate speech, he presents gifts to the king: a brass horse with fantastical abilities, a mirror that can identify friends or enemies, and a magic sword. To Canace the knight presents a golden ring that will let her understand every language, even that of animals.

Part II

Canace wakes up early and goes for a walk. The birds are singing, and Canace understands what their songs mean. She hears a falcon crying in distress, so she asks what is wrong, and the falcon explains that her lover, a hawk, suddenly left her for another. Canace, pitying the falcon, takes the bird home and bandages her wounds.

At this point the Squire will tell of the magic ring and of Canace's brothers and father, but first he will tell stories about several other heroes. No sooner does he begin Part III of his story than Franklin interrupts, congratulating the Squire on his eloquent storytelling. Harry Bailey then tells the Franklin to tell a tale, and the Squire's story remains unfinished.

Analysis

The story the Squire begins to tell seems to be a romance, and it bears some resemblance to another interrupted tale—Chaucer's story of Sir Topaz. Both take place in spring among its singing birds, involve magic or magical beings, and feature characters of high rank. Yet within the romance narrative is the very unromantic story told by the lady falcon, whose lover left to be with another.

The connection between story and storyteller is clear in this tale. The Squire is a chivalrous youth who has traveled to many exotic lands and has likely heard stories of magical horses, rings, and other fantastical objects. As the Knight's son, he is familiar with the genre of epic romance and of the way one tells such a story. The Franklin even compliments the Squire's storytelling style as being very eloquent. His characters are idealized: the king is "powerful and wise and brave/Compassionate and just," while the heroine, Canace, is beautiful beyond the Squire's ability to describe.

The tone—the author's attitude toward the subject—is similar to that of Chaucer's Sir Topaz story. Both are a little silly, and the plots advance due to odd details. In Sir Topaz the song of spring bird calls sends him suddenly and forcefully into love-longing. In this story Canace gets up for her walk while everyone else sleeps off hangovers. The Squire's storytelling style is verbose and convoluted, which may be why the Franklin cuts him off. Chaucer may be making fun of the romance genre, or he may be using the Squire to mock his own ambitions as a storyteller. After all, his *Canterbury Tales* project was originally conceived of as 120 stories, many containing stories within stories—a plan that proved overly ambitious and which he ultimately pared back to 24 stories.

The Franklin's Prologue and Tale

Summary

The Franklin says he is going to tell a story of a noble Breton, and he apologizes in advance for his "untutored speech" and lack of education in rhetoric.

A knight of Brittany named Arvéragus marries Dorigen, a lovely lady. They agree to treat each other with courtesy and respect. When the knight decides to go off seeking adventure, Dorigen misses him terribly. Her friends try to cheer her up with dancing, games, and picnics.

A young squire named Aurelius is also in love with Dorigen. One day he tells her of his feelings, but she tells him she has no intention of being an unfaithful wife. However, she says jokingly that, if he clears all the stones from the coast, she will love him. Knowing this is an impossible task, Aurelius goes home.

Arvéragus finally gets home and is reunited with Dorigen. For two years they live in happiness while Aurelius stays in bed, suffering and sick. One day Aurelius's brother recalls reading that magic could do miraculous things, so the brothers travel to Orleans to find a magician. They hire a magician to remove the rocks from Brittany's shore, agreeing on a price of 1,000 pounds. The magician successfully clears the rocks away, and Aurelius goes to Dorigen to ask her to fulfill her part of the "bargain."

Dorigen, shocked, considers suicide, thinking of all the women who have killed themselves to avoid dishonor. She decides to tell Arvéragus everything, but he says she must keep her word. However, when she meets Aurelius and tells him what Arvéragus said, Aurelius decides to let her out of the bargain. The magician, learning that Aurelius has acted so nobly, does not charge him the 1,000-pound fee.

Analysis

The genre of this story is a Breton *lay*, which is a short romance focusing on one short sequence of events, rather than an epic romance, like the Knight's tale, which covers a long period of time and has a complex plot. The story is similar to an epic romance, however, in that a chivalrous knight who performs brave deeds wins the hand of a beautiful, virtuous lady. Like the Knight's tale, there are two men who desire the same lady, continuing to develop the theme of rivalry seen in so many of the other tales.

Like the Physician's tale, this story gives readers a look into medieval ideas about women's sexuality. The Physician's story suggests that virginity is an unmarried woman's key virtue. In this tale it becomes clear that a wife's faithfulness to her

husband is of similar importance, but so is keeping a promise.

One interesting feature of this story is the relationship between Arvéragus and Dorigen. The story begins as the relationship is in its courtship phase, with the knight performing noble and brave acts to serve his lady. Once she marries him, however, the power is reversed—she must take him "as her lord" and authority. So far this is a very typical scenario. However, what comes next is surprising: He agrees not to exercise his rightful authority over her "against her will." Furthermore, he promises to obey her. The story states, "Love will not be constrained by mastery." This idea of a loving marriage based on mutual obedience to each other is one many modern audiences can embrace. Even more than the Wife of Bath's tale, which claims women want to be in charge, the Franklin's tale offers a vision of equality in marriage. The love of Arvéragus and Dorigen is also the main cause of the story's conflict—Dorigen's worries about her husband's safety given the rocky shore of Brittany prompt the half-serious wish that they be removed.

The Second Nun's Prologue and Tale

Summary

The Second Nun explains that she will tell a tale of Saint Cecilia. She prays to the Virgin Mary to "amend" her tale if she makes any mistakes. Then she explains that the name *Cecilia* means "Lily of Heaven" and that the white lily is a symbol of Cecilia's chastity. She says that *Cecilia* also means "sight" and gives a few other interpretations of Cecilia's name before beginning her story.

Young Cecilia prays often to God to allow her to remain a virgin. When she is given in marriage to a man named Valerian, she tells him that she has a guardian angel that will surely kill him if he touches her "either in love or lust." He asks to see the angel. She agrees but says he must first be baptized by Pope Urban. When Valerian visits Urban, a mysterious old man appears in a vision and proclaims, "One Lord, one Faith, one God above us all"; then Urban baptizes Valerian. Returning home, he finds Cecilia with her guardian angel. The angel gives them both flowers from Paradise, and Valerian asks the angel to grant that his brother, Tiburce, could also find God's grace. Tiburce arrives, is converted, and is taken to Pope Urban to be baptized.

Later the two brothers are taken prisoner as part of a law forcing Christians to renounce their religion or be killed. Even though Almachius, the prefect of Rome, has them executed, the brothers' faith is so powerful that some of their captors convert to Christianity, including Maximus, whom Almachius also condemns to death. Almachius has Cecilia brought before him. She answers his questions rudely yet intelligently and will not renounce her faith. Almachius instructs his men to place her in a tub of water heated by a fire. After several days she is not dead, so Almachius sends a man to cut off her head. He fails to kill her but injures her grievously. For three days she teaches the people around her, then dies. Pope Urban builds a church at her grave site.

Analysis

The Second Nun's tale contains a unique twist on elements found in other tales. The initial "rivalry" for the young woman is not between two men but between a guardian angel and a man. The two brothers, unlike other men who are either brothers-in-arms or friends who are "like brothers," do not break their bond of brotherhood but go together to a martyr's death. In addition, the storyteller tells her tale less for the company of pilgrims and more because as a nun she finds it personally inspiring. This familiar story of a martyred virgin saint connects to her vow of chastity and devotion to the church.

There are important contrasts between this tale and the Pardoner's tale. The three male martyrs of this tale (Valerian, Tiburce, and Maximus), who die and go on to eternal life, contrast with the three young men who seek to vanquish Death but are conquered by their own sins. Both tales involve a mysterious old man, but, in the Pardoner's Tale, he sends the young men toward Death, while the old man in this story, who appears in Valerian's vision, prepares him for his baptism, a kind of rebirth.

Spiritual themes and symbolism are crucial to this story. The flowers given to Valerian and Cecilia are from Paradise. Unlike natural spring flowers—which are found throughout the tales—these undying flowers are visible only to those who are baptized into the church; they symbolize the eternal life

baptism promises. The spiritual transition from blindness to vision manifests itself in the baptized, who see flowers and angels; as Valerian tells his brother, "Your eyes/Shall also see if you renounce the power/Of idols and be clean." The martyrdom of the three men may symbolize the Christian Trinity.

The Canon's Yeoman's Prologue and Tale

Summary

After the Second Nun's tale, two strangers approach the company on very tired horses—a Canon and his Yeoman. (A canon is a member of the Roman Catholic clergy who lives communally with his brethren, similar to a monk.) Harry Bailey asks them to tell a tale, and the Yeoman reveals that the Canon is a "joker" who is "capable and sly." As Harry Bailey questions the Yeoman further, it becomes clear that the Canon is an alchemist. The Canon, overhearing his Yeoman give away so many secrets, flees. The Yeoman then begins a story that is based on his own experiences.

Part I

The Yeoman shares how hard his work for the Canon has been and how it has taken a toll on his health and happiness. In addition, he has so much debt he can never hope to repay it. He lists many of the chemicals and preparations the Canon's workers would make—and the dangers they faced—but says that all their expensive efforts have failed.

Part II

The Canon—who is also an alchemist "skilled in trickery"—borrows money from a priest and, in return for the favor, offers to show the priest a "miracle." The priest enthusiastically accepts. Of course, the miracle is a trick, in which a "magic" powder appears to turn mercury, a silver-colored liquid, into real silver. The Canon has the priest place mercury and the powder in a crucible (a pot for melting metal). Then through some sleight of hand, the Canon simply adds real silver to the pot while the mercury boils off. The priest buys the secret powder for a high price. Needless to say, the powder never works for the priest, and the Canon disappears.

The Canon's Yeoman ends his story by warning the company not to become involved in alchemy because clearly God dislikes the practice.

Analysis

Alchemy was a practice forbidden by the church yet practiced primarily by its employees because they knew Latin and therefore could read alchemical texts. Alchemists were supposedly trying to achieve transmutation—the conversion of one chemical into another, with the ultimate goal of transforming less valuable substances into gold. They sought a mysterious substance called Philosopher's Stone that could transform common metals into gold. However, many alchemists were frauds and con men who used their knowledge of chemicals to create the impression that they were performing miracles.

As in other tales, trickery plays an important role in the plot of this story. However, the tricks played upon the priest in Part II tend to overshadow the deception at play in Part I. While the priest in Part II is deceived by the tricky alchemist, the alchemist and his workers of Part I seem equally deceived by alchemy's false promise of unlimited riches. The alchemist and his employees are driven to continue despite financial ruin and risk of bodily harm and despite never having any success. The situational irony that the compulsive pursuit of riches actually leads to financial ruin is not lost on the Yeoman. He ruefully admits that the only transmutations alchemy seems to achieve is transmuting wealth to poverty: "it's easy to be taught/How to transmute and bring your wealth to naught." He then adds that alchemy also creates misery: "one's joy can be transmuted to despair."

In stark contrast with the Second Nun's Tale, in which the sights and scents of Heaven are prominent, the sights and sounds of Hell fill this tale. The Yeoman says that alchemists have a "pungent brimstone smell" and describes the hot fires and dangerous explosions that fill their working hours. He also observes that "although the devil didn't show his face/I'm pretty sure he was about the place." The moral of the Canon's Yeoman's Tale is that practicing alchemy will lead a person to Hell.

The Manciple's Prologue and Tale

Summary

As the pilgrim company rides on, Harry Bailey notices that the Cook is asleep and says he should wake up and tell them a story. However, the Cook has had too much to drink, and the Manciple, whose job it was to purchase and store food for his church, offers to tell a story instead.

The story takes place at a time when the god Phoebus is a man. He is handsome, talented, and chivalrous but jealously loves his wife. He believes that pleasing her with his kind attention is the best way to make sure she does not take other lovers, but she *does* have a secret lover—a young man of low rank. When Phoebus is away from home, she sends for her lover. Their actions are witnessed by a white crow—it "beheld their work"—who has the ability to talk. When Phoebus gets home, the white crow reveals what happened, and Phoebus reels in sorrow. Then, becoming enraged, he kills his wife. After a while he regrets his rash action and instead turns on the crow, tearing out its white feathers, turning it black, and taking away its ability to speak.

The Manciple then advises everyone to look at the example of the crow and keep their mouths shut, especially if they want to tell a man his wife is cheating on him.

Analysis

This story resembles a French *pourquoi* story—a folktale that explains the origin, or the "why," of something in nature, such as "How the Camel Got His Hump" by Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936). By including the line "And that's the reason why all crows are black," the Manciple keeps to the conventions of this genre. However, with its noble warrior, his unfaithful wife, and her young lover, the story itself has more in common with other *Tales* than with a typical *porquoi* story. Yet, even in these similarities, the lesson of the story is hard to pin down. On the one hand, the story, like others, stresses the wife's infidelity and the general untrustworthiness of women (though the Manciple later says he didn't mean anything bad about women, only men). Women, the Manciple says, are like birds kept in cages, given an easy life of food and comfort yet longing for freedom, or a like pet cat, which prefers a live mouse to its prepared food. On the other hand, the larger moral of the story is about not giving in to rage lest you make a rash decision such as killing your wife. A final moral of the story is to hold one's tongue and beware of saying too much or bringing bad news where it is not wanted.

Phoebus was the Greek god of music, healing, and light. Though this story does not refer to many of his godlike qualities, besides having unusual power over the crow, it does describe him as a talented musician. It is notable that, in the self-loathing that follows his wife's murder, he smashes all of his musical instruments to pieces.

The Parson's Prologue and Tale

Summary

After the Manciple is done telling his story, Harry Bailey calls upon the Parson. But the parson says he will tell no "fable or romance" but instead will give a sermon.

The sermon is intended to encourage penitence—or feeling regret for sins and amending one's life. Contrition—feeling sorry for sins committed—is the beginning of penitence. There are venial, or forgivable, sins and deadly sins. Of the deadly sins each one has a remedy: the sin of pride has the remedy of humility; the sin of envy has the remedy of loving God and others; the sin of anger is remedied by patience; the remedy of sloth is fortitude; the remedy to the sin of avarice (greed) is mercy; the sin of gluttony is remedied by temperance and sobriety; the remedy of lechery is chastity.

Confession to a priest follows contrition. Then satisfaction, or making amends, can occur. Following through on contrition, confession, and satisfaction leads a person to Heaven.

Analysis

In the Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales,* when Chaucer described various members of the company, the Parson is described in complimentary terms. He is a man who "truly knew

Christ's gospel and would preach it ... Benign and wonderfully diligent." He visits the poor and suffering no matter the weather and gives his own money to those in need. So there is no sense that the Parson is corrupt, like other servants of the church who appear in the book. Rather, he gives a solid, if long, sermon that expresses a basic medieval understanding of how a person might make it to Heaven.

The Parson's story serves as a sort of penance for all the ribaldry that has come before, from the pilgrims in the tale and from their author, Chaucer. In many ways the Parson's tale, of all the tales, relates best to the purpose of the pilgrimage to Canterbury Cathedral. The pilgrims are on a literal and spiritual journey and so the Parson maps out the "road" to Heaven—the steps one might take to achieve eternal bliss.

Chaucer's Retractions

Summary

Chaucer begs readers' forgiveness if his work displeases and asks them to consider it the fault of his ability, not his intent. He then apologizes for many of his works that concern "worldly vanities" (that is, works that provide merely frivolous entertainment), and he thanks God for his other, more moral writings. His apology includes a long list of his writings, both "worldly" and moral, not only *The Canterbury Tales.*

Analysis

Chaucer, addressing the reader, reveals himself as the storyteller behind not just the stories in this collection but also of the frame story. His retractions, then, are made in his own voice, not the voice of Chaucer the pilgrim whom readers encounter in the rest of the tales. He speaks as a medieval Christian, not as a fictional character—one who will at some point need to account for his works before God. To this end his retraction contains many of the elements that would be part of the sacrament of confession in the church. Chaucer admits his own sin, repents of it, and asks for forgiveness.

It's important to note that retractions like Chaucer's were a common feature of medieval writing and may have served more than one purpose. After all, while Chaucer, like his contemporaries, was almost certainly God-fearing, he doesn't go so far as to destroy his body of work. He simply apologizes for it. In doing so he fulfills another purpose—creating a fairly comprehensive bibliography of his writing. Some scholars suggest that Chaucer was concerned about his reputation and wanted to let his contemporary audience know that he, Chaucer, was indeed the author of these works. In his day writings were customarily published anonymously. Of course, Chaucer includes broad hints, such as making himself a character and having the Man of Law complain about an author named Chaucer; but signing one's name outright to a work was considered unseemly. Purposefully or not, by naming himself the author in his Retractions, Chaucer ensures that future readers are aware of his legacy.

“” Quotes

> *"When in April the sweet showers fall/And pierce the drought of March to the root/... Then people long to go on pilgrimages."*
>
> — Chaucer , Prologue

These beautiful opening lines of *The Canterbury Tales* give readers the setting of the frame story. It is spring, a time of year when people go on pilgrimage to Canterbury to seek the help of the martyred saint Thomas Becket. It also introduces the string symbolic meaning of springtime and flowers—not just of spiritual rebirth but also of sexual awakening.

> *"It's well to be upon one's guard, I mean,/Since all day long we meet the unforeseen."*
>
> — Knight , The Knight's Tale

The Knight, remarking on the fact that Arcita is unaware of Palamon's presence in the woods, makes this observation about life in general. And, indeed, the stories in *The Canterbury Tales* are full of surprising twists of fate, tricks, and

unexpected developments, for both characters and readers.

"Well is it said that neither love nor power/Admit a rival, even for an hour."

— Knight , The Knight's Tale

The theme of rivalry—between men for a woman or between men who use intelligence, strength, or dishonest means to outdo each other—is found throughout the tales.

"People can die of mere imagination."

— Miller , The Miller's Tale

This anxious thought, spoken by the foolish and fearful carpenter John in the Miller's Tale, also expresses the power of imagination and story.

"'Do evil and be done by as you did.'/Tricksters will get a tricking, so say I."

— Reeve , The Reeve's Prologue and Tale

This "lesson" from The Reeve's Tale suggests a plot device used in many of the tales: the trickster tricked.

"See how Dame Fortune quickly changes side/And robs her enemy of hope and pride!"

— Nun's Priest , The Nun's Priest's Tale

The fickleness of Fortune, which allows a person to thrive one minute but casts him or her into misery the next, is an idea expressed by many characters and seen in the many twists and turns taken by the plots of the tales.

"Marriage is a misery and a woe."

— Wife of Bath , The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale

These famous words appear near the beginning the Wife of Bath's Prologue, in which she states her attitude toward marriage, the basis for which will become clearer as she explains her own life experience.

"And if you take a wife into your bed/You're very likely to be cuckolded."

— Merchant , The Merchant's Prologue, Tale, and Epilogue

The Merchant offers his "wisdom" on the advisability of taking a wife. While this does not prove true in every tale, it is an important feature of several stories, in which unfaithful wives feature prominently.

"Lovers must each be ready to obey/The other, if they would long keep company."

— Franklin , The Franklin's Prologue and Tale

The balance of power in marriage and romance is a common theme in *The Canterbury Tales*.

"However, all that glitters is not gold,/And that's the truth as we're so often told."

— Canon's Yeoman , The Canon's Yeoman's Prologue and Tale

In context this refers to the practice of alchemy and how other, more common substances can have the appearance of precious metals. It can also refer to the many tricks and deceptions that occur in the stories in this collection.

Symbols

Springtime and Flowers

The Prologue begins with an elaborate and famous description of springtime, symbolic of increased sexual desire, fertility, and spiritual rebirth. Many of the stories take place in the spring, especially those that have sexual themes. Flowers, such as those that are embroidered on the Squire's clothing and those gathered by Emily in her garden, often symbolize the youth of the character.

The imagery of spring seems appropriate for the *Tales'* frame story, a pilgrimage. Each of the pilgrims is traveling to Canterbury to seek (presumably) some spiritual renewal or benefit. Part of the irony of *The Canterbury Tales,* however, is that spring does not represent the resurrection of Christ or spiritual rebirth as often as would be expected. Instead—with the exception of the Second Nun's Tale, in which heavenly flowers represent baptism and eternal life—the imagery of spring is more often parodied through stories about the follies of youth and sex.

Blood

Blood is a metaphor for family lineage and, therefore, class. The noble knights Arcita and Palamon of the Knight's Tale are "Princes of the Royal Blood." It also signifies Christ's blood. Constance, in the story told by the Man of Law, prays for Christ's blood to protect her from evil. The blood of martyrs is also a religious symbol that is present in several tales, such as those of the Prioress and the Second Nun.

Clothing

Clothes, simple or elaborate, reflect the personality of the wearer. The Knight, for example, wears clothing stained with use, reflecting his humble attitude. The Squire's clothing is covered in the flowers that represent his freshness and youth. In contrast, the Monk, who is a member of a religious order that is supposed to put aside worldly things, has fur-trimmed sleeves and a gold pin, showing his lack of piety. The Prioress, who is supposed to be above vanity, wears her wimple in a way that shows off her facial features to their best effect.

Themes

Love, Sex, and Fellowship

Throughout the frame story, character prologues, and tales, Chaucer explores human relationships. The tales discuss brotherly love and the betrayal of it, as well as the partnerships among thieves and rogues. The camaraderie and fellowship of the pilgrim company set the tone of the frame story. Most pilgrims complete their tales by directly addressing the listening company; in more than one case, a story creates friction between pilgrims.

Male-female relationships feature prominently in *The Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer lived in a time when men held all political and religious power but women retained some financial power. For example, a woman could inherit her husband's wealth after he died—a custom that evidently benefited the Wife of Bath several times over. Women had the power of sex, as so many of the tales vividly illustrate. Sex within marriage, as well as outside of it, is a topic of several stories, with examples of both faithful and unfaithful wives and an ample dose of sexual trickery and bed hopping. Women also appear to have power in the realm of courtly love, as illustrated by the Knight's tale. The courtly love tradition began in 11th-century France and soon spread throughout Europe. In this tradition a young aristocrat would (through secret signs) declare himself smitten by and pledge himself to a seemingly

unattainable woman. This woman would thus have power over her lover—as long as she remained out of reach, of course. Chaucer both invokes and subverts all of these types of male-female relationships in the *The Canterbury Tales* through the pilgrims themselves and the tales they tell.

Social Class

The diverse social classes of the pilgrims are an important part of the Prologue. As Chaucer describes the pilgrims, he gives their occupations, and many are never known beyond these designations. At the time Chaucer wrote the tales, society was moving from the estate system to a system that included a growing middle class. There are pilgrims from every class in the company—both traditional and emerging. The stereotypes about these classes and the conflicts between them emerge in the frame story and in the individual tales. Morality is still connected with the first estate: the only member of the nobility, the Knight, is treated as an honest and upright person, as is the poorest member of the clergy, the Parson. Yet not all members of the first estate meet this high moral standard, as the Friar and the Pardoner illustrate.

Story and Storyteller

The connection between story and storyteller is a crucial part of what makes *The Canterbury Tales* unique. The layer upon layer of storytelling involved is staggering and often hilarious. Geoffrey Chaucer is the author, yet Chaucer the pilgrim is the narrator, and while Geoffrey Chaucer's tales are excellent examples of narrative and poetry, Chaucer the pilgrim's poetry fails to satisfy, and his narrative is long and tedious. Most of the storytellers tell tales that match their personality or social status in some way. For example, the Second Nun tells a story about a virgin martyr; the Knight tells a romantic tale of love and battle; and the Wife of Bath, who has been married five times, tells a story about what women want.

The connection between storyteller and audience are also important in the *Tales*, as the occasional angry eruptions or approving responses indicate. These responses between pilgrims stand in for the real audience that Chaucer lacked but may have imagined. Although he wrote his tales in the common tongue of his fellow citizens, the day when the printing press would let his stories be widely distributed had not yet dawned. The pilgrims' responses also allow Chaucer to provide a running commentary—a sort of Greek chorus—about each tale as it is told. Not all tales have a response, however. Chaucer's intended order of the tales is uncertain, and interpretations of the interactions between tellers and tales have differed over the years.

Rivalry

The theme of rivalry is introduced by the storytelling competition, but this game is just one example of many rivalries in *The Canterbury Tales*. There are rivals in love, fighting for the same woman; storytellers who try to get back at or outdo one another in insults; and rivals in trickery who try to outsmart one another with their tricks. Although Harry Bailey intends the storytelling game to be friendly, many of the rivalries seem to bring out the worst in people. In the Knight's Tale, Palamon and Arcita, in competition for Emily, give up their bond of brotherhood and engage in violence as a result of their rivalry. Similarly, the rivalry between young and old men that is a feature of several tales comes to no good, and the rivalry between some members of the company—such as the Miller and the Reeve—threatens the jolly mood of the pilgrims.

Suggested Reading

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