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### Works Cited

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### The Canterbury Tales

#### Geoffrey Chaucer

**Born:** c. 1343; London(?), England

**Died:** October 25(?), 1400; London, England

#### Quick Reference

Excerpted from an article in Magill's Survey of World Literature, Revised Edition

**First published:** 1387-1400

**Type of work:** Poetry

#### The Work

The Canterbury Tales, Chaucer's best-known and most important literary achievement, consists of twenty-four tales, some with prologues and epilogues, which range over a wide variety of styles, subjects, and genres. The work avoids becoming merely a loose collection of unrelated stories because of Chaucer's ingenious development of the framing device of the pilgrimage and his ability to suit his diverse tales to the personalities of their tellers. Chaucer's ideas about the book apparently evolved over a period of decades, with some tales (the Second Nun's Tale, parts of the Monk's Tale) possibly written as early as the 1370's, and others (the Nun's Priest's Tale, the

Parson's Tale) probably written in the later 1390's, not long before his death. The imaginative breakthrough that made the work possible — his conceiving of the framing narrative that lends coherence to the stories — seems to have occurred some time in the 1380's, when he must have written an early version of the General Prologue. The work is evidently unfinished, though the flexible nature of the framing device allows for considerable diversity of opinion as to Chaucer's final plans for the poem's overall structure.

The Canterbury Tales begins with the General Prologue, which opens with a lyrical evocation of springtime in England, the time for folk to go on pilgrimages to holy shrines to thank the saints for their good fortune of the past year. It then proceeds to a series of portraits of a particular group of pilgrims assembled at the Tabard Inn in Southwark, near London, where they are preparing to leave on their pilgrimage to Canterbury. The ostensibly random assemblage of pilgrims actually provides a fairly complete spectrum of the middle classes of fourteenth century England, omitting the higher nobility and the poorer peasants but representing a substantial number of the social gradations between the Knight and the Plowman. These characters are not merely representative abstractions, however, but are provided with vividly individual traits to the degree that they become distinct characters for the reader.

One of the most interesting of the characters is the unnamed first-person narrator, who meets the group at the inn on his way to Canterbury, decides to join their party, and describes them for the reader. Critics usually call the narrator "Chaucer the Pilgrim" to differentiate him from the author, whose point of view often seems to diverge considerably from that of his mouthpiece. While the naïve narrator approves of the worldly Prioress and Monk and is amused by the villainous Shipman, the reader is able to see beyond his uncritically approving point of view to their serious faults. The technique of the unreliable narrator leaves all direct storytelling and commentary to speakers whose point of view is suspect to various degrees and calls for the reader to infer the implicit truth from the information provided. If Chaucer did not originate this method of narration, he certainly developed it to a greater extent than any other writer before him. The device of the unreliable narrator has had an influence on later narrative writing, especially in the twentieth century, that would be difficult to overestimate, and much of this influence may be traced directly to Chaucer's own refinement of the technique.

The proprietor of the Tabard Inn, Harry Bailly, is so struck by the conviviality of the group that he decides to join them on the condition that they agree to participate in a storytelling contest, with himself as leader and judge of the contest. Each pilgrim will tell four stories, two on the way to Canterbury and two on the way back, and the winner will get a free dinner at the inn at the other pilgrims' expense. The travelers agree and draw lots for the telling of the first tale. The lot falls to the Knight, who begins the sequence of tales. No pilgrim actually tells more than one tale (with the exception of Chaucer the Pilgrim, discussed below), and at one time it was thought that Chaucer

must have originally planned some 120 tales (four each for thirty pilgrims). More recently, critics have argued that the scheme for 120 tales is proposed by Harry Bailly, not Chaucer, and that *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole may be fairly close to its final form. While the work is clearly not finished in a strict traditional sense (the pilgrims never arrive at Canterbury or return, and the winner of the contest is never revealed), it does seem to have a coherence of effect that is just as satisfying aesthetically as a more rigid closure would have been.

The Knight tells one of the longest and most formal tales, a chivalric romance with philosophical overtones set in ancient Thebes, treating of courtly love and ceremonial combat among the nobility. This somewhat idealized tale of aristocratic life is followed by an abrupt change of pace when the Miller, so drunk that he can hardly sit on his horse, insists on telling the next tale, which addresses the rather less courtly love of a college student and his elderly landlord's young wife. The tale is one of the finest examples of the *fabliau*, a short comic tale, usually obscene, depicting illicit love and practical jokes among lower-and middle-class characters. The tale contains a number of parallels to the Knight's Tale and may be viewed in part as a parody of it. In addition to connecting with the preceding tale, the Miller's Tale provides the impetus for the next. The Reeve, who bears a number of similarities to the foolish carpenter cuckolded by the student, takes the Miller's Tale personally and repays him with another *fabliau*, this one about a miller whose wife and daughter are comically seduced by two college students. The Cook's Tale, which follows, is an incomplete fragment that would evidently have been another *fabliau*.

These four tales follow the General Prologue and one another in all the major manuscripts of *The Canterbury Tales* and are collectively referred to as part (or fragment) 1 (or A). Depending on the manuscripts followed, modern editions usually recognize ten distinct parts; while the order of tales within each part is fixed, the parts themselves are not always arranged in the same order. None of the arrangements offered is without its problems, and it may well be the case that Chaucer had not decided on a final order. The most commonly followed arrangement is that of the Ellesmere manuscript, and that will be observed here, as well.

After part 2, which consists of the Man of Law's tale of the saintly Constance and her several tribulations, come parts 3 through 5, a textually and thematically connected series that has come to be called the Marriage Group, as several of the tales seem to be pursuing what amounts to a running debate on the proper roles of the man and woman in marriage. In the Wife of Bath's lengthy prologue, as well as in her tale, she argues that the woman should have the mastery of the man in marriage. While most of her arguments are drawn from traditional antifeminine satire, and while the stock character type of the bawdy older woman had existed since classical times, Chaucer combines these elements to original effect. Alison of Bath is developed into a much more rounded and sympathetic character than any of her predecessors, and her humorous and lively account of her methods of outwitting and dominating men seems, at least to modern readers, more

feminist than antifeminist. After an exchange of fabliaux between the Friar and the Summoner (each telling a tale that degrades the other's profession), the Clerk tells a tale about a pure and virtuous wife, perhaps by way of replying to the Wife of Bath, and then the Merchant tells a tale of an unfaithful wife. After a short and incomplete attempt at a chivalric romance by the youthful Squire (whose tale does not measure up to that of his accomplished father, the Knight), the Franklin tells a tale of mutual respect and forbearance by a married couple, a tale that is usually seen as concluding the marriage debate with a compromise. Part 6, one of the more difficult parts to place in the sequence, contains the brief Physician's tale of Appius's sacrifice of his daughter Virginia and the justly renowned Pardoner's prologue and tale of greed and murder, frequently anthologized and often called one of the first great short stories in English literature.

Part 7 is the longest and most varied of the parts. It begins with the Shipman's crude fabliau and the Prioress's sentimental saint's legend. Chaucer the Pilgrim starts to recount an inept romance about Sir Thopas, but his story is so bad that he is interrupted and told to stop. Chaucer the Pilgrim then tells the Tale of Melibee, a lengthy prose sermon. After the Monk recounts a series of brief tragic anecdotes, and is also interrupted, the Nun's Priest tells his tale. The latter is based on the popular stories of Reynard the Fox, in which the fox tries to outwit and capture the cock, Chantecler. Chaucer fuses the genre of the beast fable with that of the mock epic, telling his story of barnyard animals in the elevated rhetoric of courtly romance, and makes the cock into a somewhat bombastic orator whose digressive and encyclopedic argument with his wife over dreams almost overshadows the plot of the story. Because of its comedy and stylistic range, the Nun's Priest's Tale is widely considered by modern readers to be the one that ought to have been awarded the prize at the end of the pilgrimage.

In part 8, the Second Nun tells a saint's legend, and the Canon Yeoman delivers an exposé of the fraudulent practices of medieval alchemists. Part 9 contains only the Manciple's version of a tale from *Metamorphoses* (c. 8 c.e.) by Ovid, Chaucer's favorite classical author. Part 10 contains the Parson's long prose sermon and, perhaps, Chaucer's Retraction, a listing and retraction of his worldly writings, which some critics see as a part of the text and an ironic advertisement for the works, and which others see as a sincere extrafictional address to posterity.

While *The Canterbury Tales* may be unfinished, the very openness of its structure has increasingly come to be seen as one of the sources of the work's complexity and richness. The poem is unified to the degree that, read as a whole, it can draw the reader into the creative process of interpretation and discovery that it demands. Yet it is designed freely enough that the tales may also be appreciated as individual works outside the context of the frame.

Essay by: William Nelles

### **Sources for Further Study**

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