

CANTERBURY TALES

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Chaucer. The Canterbury Tales

Story *The Canterbury Tales* is an epic narrative, composed in *rime royale*, and created by the English writer and businessman, Geoffrey Chaucer, starting in the early 1380's. The story concerns a pilgrimage to the shrine of Archbishop Thomas a Beckett, who was murdered in 1170 by henchmen of the English King, with whom Thomas had been in heavy disagreement. Religious tradition lay behind this pilgrimage, to a revered martyr and saint of the Anglican and Catholic Churches, and yet Chaucer has no trouble reaching to the nitty gritty of daily life, as he lets twenty two pilgrims tell their personal stories in The Tabard Inn, a well known waystop on the road from London to Canterbury. As Chaucer never completed this epic we are not confident of its ultimate point. Was he, like Dante a century earlier, leading his pilgrims toward any omega point of understanding, or was he simply painting a broad, almost sociological canvas of the people of his time and acquaintance? Chaucer's own career—a student of law, a spy and a diplomat with substantial travel in Europe, a father of several children, above all a responsible handler of funds—will lead us to consider the fact that Chaucer was above all interested in the characteristic nuances that distinguish individuals, and the tales those individuals tell, in coming to terms with their own lives.

The tale tellers, in Chaucer's world-picture, are a diverse set, many familiar from earlier mediaeval texts, all familiar from daily life in Chaucer's England: the squire, the housewife, the miller, the monk, the prioress, the knight, the pardoner, the parson. Chaucer deploys before us, through their speeches, these various familiar figures of the society of his time, so that each speaker comes before us with a distinct ID attached. Fine difference among the characters, in fact, is one of the startling skills Chaucer seems easy with, excelling in the finesse with which he outlines the attitudes of particular characters to one another, the odd character fashioning his tale to contradict that of his predecessor, the tale of one character, say the Wife of Bath, provoking counter or supporting tales from following speakers.

The General Prologue to the *Tales* features profiles of the characters who will make up the epic, and offers us an overall glimpse of the vision of the poem. Breadth and detail interweave, here, after a fashion that Chaucer makes uniquely his own. The Wife of Bath is finely chiseled: she has had five husbands, each one properly wedded at 'the church door,' in addition to 'other company' when she was young. She is robust, heavily dressed in skirts and head ties—the latter weighing a good 'ten pounds'—and well spurred on horseback. Lusty she was and well skilled in the 'olde daunce' of love. What we touch, as we 'summarize' some the Wife of Bath's features, is Chaucer's ability to nail down details—headclothes, spurs, 'bold was her face and fair and red of hue,' 'gat-toothed' was she—a sexy smile, and on her head a hat as broad as a shield. Inside the details—because Chaucer hews them so skillfully—is the living lusty sympathetic bold personality of the Lady.

Characters

The Knight was a 'very perfect gentle knight,' freshly back from fighting in the Crusades but for all his military bearing a true gentleman who had never uttered a curse word, or frightened a lady. He was himself just heading out on pilgrimage.

Nun prioress. The nun prioress is a good natured religious, cheerful to all, neat and precise—from her small well-formed mouth no morsel fell—and wore the proudest of mantra on her golden brooch, *Love Conquers All*.

A merchant is among the crowd, an upright and financially astute man. His conversation is all about successful investing, and holding a good place in society. We can really see him, in his beaverskin hat and his tightly clipped on boots!

Themes

The relevance of personal details to the whole personality. Chaucer is a master of identifying his characters in terms of clothing items, ways of dressing, ways of speaking, neatness, messiness. The theme is that the whole person is one.

The individual is part of the social whole. Not only is each individual trademarked by distinctive clothing, taste in foods, but each individual is given its particular style by its relation to others in its society.

Life on earth will transition into a realm of pure spirit, as the body fails. This Platonic view, deeply Chaucer's through his translations of Boethius, inflects the whole social-cultural world of the *Tales*.