

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Geoffrey Chaucer 1343-1400 *Canterbury Tales* (A, 168-266)

Geoffrey Chaucer was born in London about 1340, to a family of French descent who had made their fortune in the wine trade. It was Chaucer's fortune to have been brought up near the Wine-Trade docks of the River Thames, where he had a chance to watch foreigners at work and play, as well as a wide variety of English types. When he was ready for a career his father got him a job as a page at court, and from there, in a long life of business and diplomacy, Chaucer went on to form many fruitful personal connections and to observe life in its pageantry, especially as it played out into the separation among the three dominant classes of society: the nobility, the church and the commoners.

The Canterbury Tales, which draws on this broad experience of humanity, is a long poem considered by most critics to be Chaucer's greatest work. It consists of a General Prologue and twenty-four stories told by pilgrims making their way as a group to Canterbury.

Question: Literature and Society

You will be struck by Chaucer's fascination with social classes, and their typical representatives, as they gather in the Tabard Inn. Does it seem to you that Chaucer is consciously creating a portrait of his own society? If so, does that portrait spring from the narrative instinct or from the desire to portray society? In other words is Chaucer above all a story teller whose society is rich with interest for him, or is he an observer of society who has found a narrative style for characterizing that society?

Comparative Literature:

1. You see from the Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* that Chaucer is fascinated with "character types"—the Miller, the Pardoner, the Knight, The Wife of Bath. Does he conceive of these characters as abstractions, which sum up many traits in a generalized package, or are these fully developed characters, each one distinct as Chaucer conceives him or her? The question here can take us back to Theophrastus (early 3rdcent. BCE) whose *Characters* were influential in later Western literature, and who established a kind of Linnean classification system for personality types. You will find a searching modern essay on the "rounded character" in literature, in W.K.Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon* (Lexington, 1954).

2. Ian Watt, in *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), presses the idea that the origins of the novel—which took full modern form in the 17th century—lie in the growth of the middle class, which for economic reasons began to develop in the Renaissance. Couldn't it be claimed, though, that the commercial and social bustle of Chaucer's time, and of his own life, sensitized Chaucer to precisely the new realities of "man in middle class society"? To probe the relations of literature to social developments, you might be interested in the work of a Marxist historian, Gyorgy Lukacs, *The Historical Novel* (1983).