

A Student Guide

Chaucer

The Canterbury Tales

Winthrop Wetherbee
Second Edition

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Geoffrey Chaucer

The Canterbury Tales

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GEOFFREY CHAUCER

The Canterbury Tales

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Chronology

<i>Chaucer's life and works</i>	<i>Literary events</i>	<i>Historical events</i>
1340–45 Birth of Chaucer		1309 Pope Clement V begins Avignon Papacy
		1327 Edward III (aged 14) crowned
	1335–41 Boccaccio, <i>Filostrato</i> , <i>Teseida</i>	
	1337 Birth of Froissart	1337 Edward lays claim to French crown; beginning of Hundred Years' War
	1342–43 Petrarch begins <i>Canzoniere</i>	1343–44 English knights take part in siege of Algeciras (v. <i>Gen. Prol.</i> 56–57)
		1346 Victory over French at Crécy; victory over Scots at Neville's Cross
	1349–52 Boccaccio, <i>Decameron</i>	1348–49 Black Death

1357	In service of Countess of Ulster	
1359–60	Taken prisoner in Normandy; ransomed by Edward III	
1356		Victory over French at Poitiers; John II of France taken captive
1360		Peace of Breigny leaves Edward in control of one third of France
1361		Black Death reappears
1361–65		Pierre de Lusignan (Peter of Cyprus; v. <i>Monk's Tale</i> 2391–98) takes "Satalye" (Adalia), Alexandria, and "Lyceys" (Ayas) (<i>Gen. Prol.</i> 51, 57–59)
1367	Granted life annuity by Edward III	Black Prince defeats mercenary army under Bernard de Guesclin at Najera, Spain, gains throne for Pedro the Cruel (v. <i>Monk's Tale</i> 2375–90)
1367–70	Langland, <i>Piers Plowman</i> , A Text	
1367		
1368	Possible first visit to Italy	

(cont.)

<i>Chaucer's life and works</i>		<i>Literary events</i>	<i>Historical events</i>
1369–70	<i>Book of the Duchess</i>		
1372–73	Visits Genoa and Florence		
		1374 Death of Petrarch	
		1375 Death of Boccaccio	
			1371 French reclaim Gascony, Poitiers
			1376 “Good Parliament” condemns waste and profiteering by high government officials
1377	Involved in negotiations toward marriage of Richard to Princess Marie of France		1377 Rye and Hastings burned by French
			1377 Death of Edward III; succeeded by Richard II
1378	Visits Lombardy; appoints John Gower as attorney in his absence		1378 Great Schism in Papacy; Urban VI at Rome (recognized by England); Clement VII at Avignon (recognized by France)
		1380–86 Gower, <i>Vox Clamantis</i>	1380s First version of Lollard Bible
			1381 Peasants’ Revolt

1382		Wycliffe's teachings condemned by Blackfriars synod Death of Bernabò Visconti of Milan (<i>Monk's Tale</i> 2399–406)
1385	Thomas Usk, <i>Testament of Love</i>	
1386	Elected to Parliament for Kent	
1387	Begins <i>Canterbury Tales</i>	
1388	Annuity transferred to John Scalby, perhaps at instigation of "Merciless Parliament"	
1389–91	Appointed Clerk of the Works, Commissioner of Walls and Ditches	
1390	Gower, <i>Confessio Amantis</i> , dedicated to Richard II	
1393	Gower rededicates <i>Confessio</i> to Henry Bolingbroke	
1394	Richard II renews Chaucer's annuity	
1388		"Merciless Parliament"; "Appellants" gain impeachment of officials close to Richard

(*cont.*)

<i>Chaucer's life and works</i>		<i>Literary events</i>	<i>Historical events</i>
1399	Henry IV supplements Chaucer's annuity "for good service"		1396 Truce with France; England retains only Calais
			1397 Parliament undoes work of Merciless Parliament
			1398 Banishment of Henry Bolingbroke
			1399 Deposition of Richard; succeeded by Bolingbroke as Henry IV
1400	Death of Chaucer		

Chapter 1

Introduction

1 Chaucer and his poem

For most readers the *Canterbury Tales* mean the General Prologue, with its gallery of portraits, and a few of the more humorous tales. What we retain is a handful of remarkable personalities, and such memorable moments as the end of the Miller's tale. These are worth having in themselves, but it requires an extra effort to see the significant relationship among them, and to recognize that their bewildering variety is Chaucer's technique for representing a single social reality. We may compare the first part of Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, where our impressions can be so dominated by Falstaff, Hotspur and Hal as to leave Henry and the problems of his reign in shadow. The comparison is the more suggestive in that Shakespeare has recreated the England of Chaucer's last years, when a society that is essentially that of the *Canterbury Tales* was shaken by usurpation, regicide and civil war. Both poets describe a nation unsure of its identity, distrustful of traditional authority, and torn by ambition and materialism into separate spheres of interest. For both, the drives and interactions of individual personalities express a loss of central control, a failure of hierarchy which affects society at all levels.

Shakespeare's focus is always on a single "body politic," and though his characters span all levels of society, their situations are determined by a central crisis of monarchical authority. Chaucer's project is harder to define. He shows us nothing of Shakespeare's royal Westminster, and gives us only a glimpse of his chaotic Eastcheap; and though profoundly political in their implications, the *Tales* offer no comment on contemporary politics. But the Canterbury pilgrims, too, are a society in transition, their horizons

enlarged by war and commerce, their relations complicated by new types of enterprise and new social roles. What holds them together is a radically innovative literary structure, a fictional world with no center, defined by oppositions between realistic and idealistic, worldly and religious, traditionalist and individualist points of view.

The plot of the *Tales* is simple enough. In early April, the narrator is lodged at the Tabard in Southwark, ready to make a pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Thomas à Becket at Canterbury, when a group of twenty-nine pilgrims arrive at the inn. The narrator is admitted to their number and provides portraits of most of the group, each of whom embodies a different aspect of English society. The host of the Tabard, Harry Bailly, decides to join the pilgrims, and proposes a game to divert them on the road: all will tell stories, and the best tale will be rewarded at journey's end with a supper at the Tabard. The bulk of the poem consists of the tales of twenty-three pilgrims, interspersed with narrative and dialogue which link their performances to the frame of the pilgrimage journey.

The literary form of the story collection, in which narratives of diverse kinds are organized within a larger framing narrative, had a long history, and had been treated with new sophistication in Chaucer's own time. But neither the *Confessio Amantis* of his friend John Gower, which was in progress during the early stages of his own project, nor Boccaccio's *Decameron*, which he almost certainly knew, exhibits anything like the complexity of the *Tales*. The social diversity of Chaucer's pilgrims, the range of styles they employ, and the psychological richness of their interaction, both with one another and with their own tales, are a landmark in world literature. In no earlier work do characters so diverse in origin and status as Chaucer's "churls" and "gentles" meet and engage on equal terms. In the *Decameron* "churls" exist only as two-dimensional characters in stories told by an aristocratic company. In the *Romance of the Rose*, the thirteenth-century love-allegory which was the greatest single influence on Chaucer's poetry, the low social status and coarse behavior of "Evil-Tongue" and "Danger" is allegorical, defining them as threats to the progress of the poem's courtly lover. But Chaucer's churls exist on the same plane of reality as the Knight and Prioress. Some are undeniably beyond the pale in ordinary social terms, and their membership in the pilgrim company gives them a voice they