

GEOFFREY CHAUCER'S POEM "THE CANTERBURY TALES"

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Annotation. This article examines Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* as a foundational work in the development of English literary language and as a vivid representation of medieval English society. Written in the late 14th century in Middle English, the poem marked a turning point in literary history by legitimizing English as a language of high literature, previously dominated by Latin and Italian. The article also notes Chaucer's knowledge of medieval sciences such as astronomy, astrology, and medicine, as reflected in the tales.

Key words. Geoffrey Chaucer, Middle English, frame narrative, pilgrimage, medieval society, characterization, realism, narrative technique

Geoffrey Chaucer began writing *The [Canterbury Tales](#)* sometime around 1387 A.D.; the uncompleted manuscript was published in 1400, the year he died. Having recently passed the six hundredth anniversary of its publication, the book is still of interest to modern students for several reasons. For one thing, *The Canterbury Tales* is recognized as the first book of poetry written in the [English language](#). Before Chaucer's time, even poets who lived in England wrote in Italian or Latin, which meant that poetry was only understandable to people of the wealthy, educated class. English was considered low class and vulgar. To a great degree, *The Canterbury Tales* helped make it a legitimate language to work in. Because of this work, all of the great writers who followed, from Shakespeare to Dryden to Keats to Eliot, owe him a debt of gratitude. It is because Chaucer wrote in English that there is a written record of the roots from which the modern language grew.

Contemporary readers might find his words nearly as difficult to follow as a foreign language, but scholars are thankful for the chance to compare Middle English to the

language as it is spoken now, to examine its growth. The Canterbury Tales is about the gathering of people at the Tabard Inn in London. They were preparing for their journey as the pilgrims from Southwark, to the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket, at Canterbury Cathedral. The people narrated the collection of the stories at the story-telling contest organized for pilgrims. The prize for the best storyteller was a free supper. These tales included various lessons on morality, human struggles and humorous fares. The characters in the Canterbury Tales are drawn from every rank of society, from clerks to knights, from towns and country. As Chaucer portrayed the characters unevenly, there were few characters from poor class; less inclined and firm, than the characters linked by knight, squire or certain other churchmen. He was inclined to describe these characters firmly. His characters are lively, complex, and fallible human beings, interacting with each other in some way.

The Canterbury tales also reveal Chaucer's knowledge of astronomy, astrology and medicine. Chaucer opens the tales with the sun running its course through the zodiac sign of Aries. Venus and Saturn play a major role in the Knight Tales.

In the tale, the pilgrims gathered by chance. Its characters seem to come from all over England, representing experiences of their lives. As Chaucer worked as a courtier as well, some people think that Chaucer based his characters on people who he really knew, and who were at the royal court.

Harry Bailey served as the organizer of the story competition for the pilgrims. In the general prologue, Chaucer presented the ambitious scheme of having each pilgrim tell four tales apiece, two on the way to Canterbury and two on the return of Southwark. Chaucer expressed about different people discussing diverse stages they experienced. These tales have noble tales of the knights, love stories and real life incidents of the pilgrims.

Some people think that Chaucer copied ideas from other's writings because some of the tales in Canterbury were similar to them. The characters however, are different. The characters have different occupations and personalities. They all tell different stories and

in different ways. Chaucer's main idea was to show how each person narrates a story to entertain the others as they travel along a very long journey. The Canterbury Tales is incomplete for no apparent or confirmed reason.

In the same way that *The Canterbury Tales* gives modern readers a sense of the language at the time, the book also gives a rich, intricate tapestry of medieval social life, combining elements of all classes, from nobles to workers, from priests and nuns to drunkards and thieves. The General Prologue alone provides a panoramic view of society that is not like any found elsewhere in all of literature.

Students who are not particularly interested in medieval England can appreciate the author's technique in capturing the variations of human temperament and behavior. Collections of stories were common in Chaucer's time, and some still exist today, but the genius of *The Canterbury Tales* is that the individual stories are presented in a continuing narrative, showing how all of the various pieces of life connect to one another. This entry does not cover all the tales, only some of the most studied.

References.

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