

Student

Profession, Student



Discuss Chaucer's art of characterization with special reference to The Canterbury Tales. Chaucer's art of characterization. What the General Prologue offers is a brief, often very visual description of each pilgrim, focusing on details of their background, as well as key details of their clothing, their food likes and dislikes, and their physical features. These descriptions fall within a common medieval tradition of portraits in words (which can be considered under the technical term ekphrasis), Chaucer's influence in this case most likely coming from The Romaunt de la Rose. Immediately, our narrator insists that his pilgrims are to be described by 'degree'. By the fact that the Knight, the highest-ranking of the pilgrims, is selected as the first teller, we see the obvious social considerations of the tale. Still, all human life is here: characters of both sexes, and from walks of life from lordly knight, or godly parson down to oft-divorced wife or grimy cook. Each pilgrim portrait within the prologue might be considered as an archetypal description. Many of the 'types' of characters featured would have been familiar stock characters to a medieval audience: the hypocritical friar, the rotund, food-loving monk, the rapacious miller are all familiar types from medieval estates satire (see Jill Mann's excellent book for more information). Larry D. Benson has pointed out the way in which the characters are paragons of their respective crafts or types - noting the number of times the words 'wel koude' and 'verray parfit' occur in describing characters. Yet what is key about the information provided in the General Prologue about these characters, many of whom do appear to be archetypes, is that it is among the few pieces of objective information - that is, information spoken by our narrator that we are given throughout the Tales. The tales themselves

(except for large passages of the prologues and epilogues) are largely told in the words of the tellers: as our narrator himself insists in the passage. The words stand for themselves: and we interpret them as if they come from the pilgrims' mouths. What this does - and this is a key thought for interpreting the tales as a whole - is to apparently strip them of writerly license, blurring the line between Chaucer and his characters. Thus all of the information might be seen to operate on various levels. When, for example, we find out that the Prioress has excellent table manners, never allowing a morsel to fall on her breast, how are we to read it? Is this Geoffrey Chaucer 'the author of The Canterbury Tales' making a conscious literary comparison to The Romaunt de la Rose, which features a similar character description (as it happens, of a courtesan)? Is this 'Chaucer' our narrator, a character within the Tales providing observation entirely without subtext or writerly intention? Or are these observations - supposedly innocent within the Prologue - to be noted down so as to be compared later to the Prioress' Tale? Chaucer's voice, in re-telling the tales as accurately as he can, entirely disappears into that of his characters, and thus the Tales operates almost like a drama. Where do Chaucer's writerly and narratorial voices end, and his characters' voices begin? This self-vanishing quality is key to the Tales, and perhaps explains why there is one pilgrim who is not described at all so far, but who is certainly on the pilgrimage - and he is the most fascinating, and the most important by far: a poet and statesman by the name of Geoffrey Chaucer.