

# Chaucer and the canterbury tales

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



Chaucer and The Canterbury Tales I. Chaucer's Career i,§ Born into the growing middle class, son of a wine merchant (c. 1340). ii,§ Served in the royal household (page to 2nd son of Edward III) and later held a series of administrative posts under Edward and Richard II. iii,§ Visited France and Italy on behalf of the crown during the 1360's and 1370's, exposing him to the literature of Europe, particularly the French Roman de la Rose and Boccaccio's Decameron. iv,§ Chaucer's career illustrates the economic, political, and social ferment of late 14th century England (landed wealth versus moneyed wealth). v,§ Literary Chronology: Troilus and Criseyde (c. 1385) and The Canterbury Tales (c. 1386-1400) II. The Canterbury Tales: Literary Structure and Generic Complexity i,§ Originally planned for 120 stories (2 stories each way on pilgrimage from London to Canterbury for 30 pilgrims), but only 22 completed, with 2 fragmentary tales. ii,§ Chaucer left the manuscript(s) unfinished, so we don't know the final ordering of the tales, so we need to remember that all modern editions of The Canterbury Tales are, in a sense, " fictions" in themselves. iii,§ Different genres give different views of the world, different vocabularies, and different images for truth. a) Romance (Knight's Tale) deals with human emotions and relationships. b) Fabliau (Miller's Tale) deals with the basic human needs of food, sex, or money. c) Saint's Life (Second Nun's Tale, Prioress's Tale) deals with the operations of God in a holy person's life. d) Moral Tales (Pardoner's Tale, Melibee) deal with orthodox morality. e) Sermons and Ethical Treatises (Parson's Tale) deal with spiritual matters. III. The General Prologue i,§ Opening of the General Prologue (l. 1-42): when... then 1. Contraries held in tension - From the heavenly to the earthly - theological to the

biological/fleshly - supernatural to the natural - From winter to spring - sickness to health - death to life 2. Pilgrimage as a contemporary practice and spiritual ideal: the " holy blissful martyr" and the Parson ¶,§ Genre of General Prologue - Estates Satire: an analysis of society in terms of its hierarchy. Each class or profession is described to show how it fails the ideal, implying a moral judgment. - Traditional division of medieval society: begins at top of the social ladder and then moves downward through the social spectrum. - Traditional three-fold division of medieval life & ideal figures in the General Prologue a. Those who fight (Knight) b. Those who pray (Parson) c. Those who labor (Plowman) - Organization of portraits in the GPro (ll. 745-48): Narrator apologizes that " Al have I nat set folk in hir degree." a. Individuals, not groups described, but individuals are representatives of different recognizable groups b. Key Idea: the interplay of the social relations and individual identity in the tales and the Frame Tale b. 29 pilgrims (27 men, 1 woman, Host) c. Not an ordered hierarchy, because many will not stay in their respective places! ¶,§ Class Structure Aristocracy - Knight and his entourage: highest ranking layman; ideal - Squire: romance hero - Yeoman: hardworking, in tune with the earth - Prioress: coy; unconsciously pretentious - Second Nun and entourage: remain undeveloped - Monk: highest cleric - Friar : " lik a maister or a pope" (l. 263) Middle Class - Merchant - Clerk Ideal? - Sergeant of Law - Franklin - Guildsmen Belong to common craft guild - Cook - Shipman - Physician - Wife of Bath Lower Class and Ruffians - Parson: Humble origins; ideal - Plowman: Ideal - Miller: Scoundrels all - Manciple - Reeve - Summoner & Pardoner: Clerical figures, but depraved - Narrator: Chaucerian persona - Host/Harry Bailey: Owns Tabard, governing force ¶,§

The Frame Tale a) introduces pilgrims and tales b) refers to the tale-telling contest proposed by the Host, Harry Bailley, outlined in the General Prologue (ll. 771 ff.) and furthered in the " links" or transitional passages between some of the tales (i. e. the prologue to the Miller's Tale). Therefore, The Canterbury Tales function as tales within a broader tale of rivalry, conflict, appeasement, and domination and submission