

Lecture 2
***The Canterbury
Tales***



**BY GEOFFREY
CHAUCER**

(1342/43-1400)

Geoffrey Chaucer. *The Canterbury Tales* (1387-1400)

Prologue

Whan that Aprille with his showres soote
The droughte of March hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veine in swich licour,
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
Whan Zephyrus eek with his sweete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The tender croppes, and the younge sonne
Hath in the Ram his halve cours yronne,
And smale fowles maken melodye
That slepen all the night with open ye –
So priketh him Nature in hir corages –
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages.



Geoffrey Chaucer. *The Canterbury Tales* (1387-1400)



Prologue

“When the soft, sweet showers of April reach the roots of all things, refreshing the parched earth, nourishing every saplings and every seedling, then humankind rises up in joy and expectations. The west wind blows away the stench of the city and crops flourish in the fields beyond the walls. After the waste of winter, it is delightful to hear birdsong once more in the streets. The trees themselves are bathed in song. It is a time of general renewal and restoration. The sun has passed midway through the sign of the Ram, a good time for the sinews and the heart. This is the best season of the year for travelers. That is why good folk then long to go on pilgrimages.”



a modern translation of Chaucer's **Canterbury Tales**
by Peter Ackroyd

The impact of Norman Conquest (1066)

- 1066 - invasion of England by the Normans and the defeat of the Saxon king, Harold, at Hastings on the English coast;
- Unified Britain: language, system of law, class system, Parliament;
- Census – *Domesday Boke*;
- Organic connection to Europe (rich Latin heritages of Italy and France) – rhyme + syllabic verse



Tales

(1387-1400)



Chaucer's audience

- apostrophe to spring - favorite theme of the Italian poet Petrarch and of many Romantic poets since;
- science of astrology;
- reference to Zephyrus, the Roman god of wind - knowledge of Latin;
- use of French;
- cultivated audience;
- civilized tone;
- nature is not cruel;
- a new worldview emerges through this poetry, and the poetry itself emerges from this worldview

Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1342/43–1400)



- Geoffroy de Chaucer (family name derived from the French word for “shoemaker,” *chausseur*)
- a man of unusual cultivation: career as a businessman, soldier, government official, scholar, and author
- the father of English verse
- *Troilus and Criseyde*
- *The Canterbury Tales* (1387-1400)
- buried in the Poets’ Corner of Westminster Abbey



Tales (1387-1400)



- manuscript ;
- no full text of the poem - has been reconstructed from various versions, none of which is in Chaucer's hand;
- Chaucer's original design: 116 tales, two from each of the 29 pilgrims on the way to Canterbury and two on the return trip;
- what survives: Prologue and 21 tales, some of which are fragmentary

Tales (1387–1400)



- written and transcribed in *scriptoria* (copy shops) some 100 years before printing was introduced;
- initially written for recitation, learned imperfectly by some reciters;
- widely circulated;
- had a significant effect on the emergence of standard English

Geoffrey Chaucer: *The Canterbury Tales* (1387-1400)

- London, April 1389;
- The Tabard Inn;
- Harry Bailey - the pilgrims' guide;
- travel to Canterbury to the tomb of the martyr - Thomas à Becket;
- 29 pilgrims;
- framework recalls Boccaccio's *Decameron*



Geoffrey Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales (1387-1400)

Chaucer's London

- located on a great river, served as the country's main port
- the site of the monarchic court, the legal courts, Parliament, the great cathedral at Westminster
- the dialect of London was becoming the national standard, although many languages existed in England



Pilgrims of *The Canterbury Tales*

The Friar



The Knight



The Miller



The Pardoner



The Parson



The Reeve



The Wife of Bath



social diversity; stratified class system

The Knight's Tale



- The person of highest status in Chaucer's company;
- the first tale-teller;
- embodies "truth, honor, generousness, and courtesy."
- tale is told in high literary style;
- courtly love and fraternal rivalry;
- set in ancient Greece;
- one of its main characters is Theseus, a duke, a warrior, and a great lover

Stratified class system in *The Canterbury Tales*



- the lowest status: the cook, the reeve (a land agent), the miller, and a shipman;
- a little above: the merchant and the franklin, members of the emergent bourgeoisie;
- of the same class: are the doctor of physic, sergeant at law.
- churchmen and women: friars, monks, nun-priests, nuns, summoners, pardoners, a parson.
- the parson's tale - the set of sermon-like biblical precepts;
- the monk's tale - a catalogue of great people who have fallen from fortune;
- the best tales come from the least interesting people or the worst people in the company.



The Miller's Tale



- *fabliau*, or bawdy (vulgar) tale – contrast to the knight's noble tale
- the vulgar tale ends hilariously, with a couple of the characters sticking their bottoms out of windows to be kissed by an unwitting lover on a ladder, who expects to kiss his beloved's sweet lips

Geoffrey Chaucer. *The Canterbury Tales*



- Chaucer varies the tone of the tales
- the tales modulate according to the status and character of the teller
- each of the stories has a prologue, usually delivered in the pilgrim's own voice and character

The Wife of Bath, Alisoun



- a businesswoman;
- owner of a denim factory (*toile de Nîmes*);
- has had five husbands and profited by all of them;
- focused her energy on making pilgrimages;
- learned from life, not books;
- comments of finding woe in marriage

The clerk



- a student;
- possesses 20 books;
- can read and write;
- has mastered the arts of rhetoric and logic;
- meek in character but formidable in intellect;
- crosses swords with the Wife of Bath on the subject of a woman's place

The description of a student

An Oxford Cleric, still a student though,
One who had taken logic long ago,
Was there, his horse was thinner than a rake,
And he was not too far, I undertake,
But had a hollow look, a sober stare;
The thread upon his coat was bare.
He had found no preferment in the church
And he was too unworldly to make search
For secular employment. By his bed
He preferred having twenty books in red
And black, of Aristotle's philosophy,
To having fine clothes, fiddle or psaltery.
Though a philosopher, as I have told,
He had not found the stone for making gold.
Whatever money from his friends he took
He spent on learning or another book...
His only care was study, and indeed
He never spoke a word more than was need...
He thought of moral virtue filled his speech
And he would gladly learn, and gladly teach.



Pilgrims of *The Canterbury Tales*



- Each of these pilgrims is identified by his or her trade, profession, or station in life and, thus, socially **stereotyped**;
- irony and individualizing touches

The Prioress' Tale



- has a senior position in her holy order;
- very devout;
- possesses some qualities that may be at odds with her nun's vocation (wears a bracelet with the inscription "Amor vincit omnia");
- the nun-prioress is, like the reader, human

Pilgrims of *The Canterbury Tales*



- social **inclusiveness** and **elasticity** of the Christian religion;
- **dynamism** and **complexity** of English society

Why *The Canterbury Tales* is a masterpiece



- written in English in a period when all serious writing had to be done in Latin or French;
- valuable social document – gives an insight into a cross-section of fourteenth-century English society;
- includes experimentation with rhyme and rhythm patterns that greatly affected the literature that followed;
- contains a cast of memorable characters - Chaucer's superb powers of characterization.
- Chaucer is the father of English poetry

Geoffrey Chaucer. *The Canterbury Tales*



- Dryden about *The Canterbury Tales*:
“All life is here” = every generation can get something new out of Chaucer
- Chaucer established literature in the middle level of society
- After him, literature would become an important element in the emergence and progress of what we know as England