

THE
CONNELL GUIDE
TO CHAUCER'S



THE
CANTERBURY TALES

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series and I highly recommend it.”

CLAIRE TOMALIN

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE
TEXT IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

by Stephen Fender

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Connell Guide
to
Chaucer's*

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Canterbury
Tales

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Introduction

English writers have a way of invoking paternal imagery when thinking of Chaucer. "As he is the Father of English Poetry," wrote John Dryden, "so I hold him in the same Degree of Veneration as the Grecians held Homer, or the Romans Virgil" – or the Italians Dante, he might have added.

G. K. Chesterton took the figure even further. "The Medieval word for a Poet, was a Maker," he wrote, and "there was never a man who was more of a maker than Chaucer. He made a national language; he came very near to making a nation. At least without him it would probably have been either so fine a language or so great a nation. Shakespeare and Milton were the greatest sons of their country; but Chaucer was the father of his

country, rather in the manner of George Washington.”

A sweeping claim, maybe, but with a nucleus of truth. Chaucer really was a kind of English founding father. He didn't invent the language for literature but, unlike his contemporary John Gower, he chose it as his only literary language, thus limiting his fame across Europe, where authorship was assessed on literary production in Latin, French and Italian. Chaucer could read and write in all three, but when it came to his creative writing, he put his energy into exploiting and developing the English he was born with, vastly expanding its vocabulary to the extent of around 2,000 words, its rhetoric, its levels of register – not to mention its prosody.

And *The Canterbury Tales* is where it happened, more so than in the dream poems like *The Book of the Duchess*, the translation of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* or the long verse romance *Troilus and Criseyde*, all of which worked within continental conventions.

The Canterbury Tales was truly original. Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* had used the same format of many stories told within a framing narrative, but his interlocutors were all aristocratic and in the same place, a country house outside Florence. Chaucer's narrators, pilgrims on the road to Canterbury, span a broad range of social levels, from a knight, down through a wealthy landowner, a merchant, a miller and minor church officials.

They are brought to life in the General Prologue

by vivid descriptions of their clothing, bodily appearance and behaviour – and later in their tales through the wide variety of English vernacular they voice. These are the raw materials out of which Chaucer not only produces comedy both coarse and subtle, as well as more general social satire, but also more remarkably explores and develops themes that go well beyond Boccaccio's, like the condition of the church, the conflict between fate and free will, experience as against authority, and – at a deeper level – what it is that constitutes authority, whether in the Bible or the conventions of courtly-love romance.

It's no wonder that to many authors this comprehensive panorama of English types, voices and concerns should have seemed to be both a model to be admired and also a founding statement of national identity. From long before Dryden and Chesterton – in fact only a generation after his death – Chaucer was already being revered as the Aureate Laureate by poets like John Lydgate and Thomas Hoccleve. By 1478, even though the work had circulated only in manuscript, the printer William Caxton thought it to be such an English monument that he invested a fortune in time and money to publish *The Canterbury Tales* as the first ever book in English to be printed in England. It has never been out of print since.

The nature of *The Canterbury Tales*

Thirty-four travellers of varying classes and occupations meet at the Tabard Inn in Southwark, just south of London Bridge, the night before they are due to set out on horseback on a pilgrimage to the shrine of Saint Thomas à Becket in Canterbury Cathedral. At dinner the Tabard's landlord, their host Harry Bailly, suggests that he join them on their journey and that they divert themselves by telling stories along the way. Each pilgrim will tell two stories going to Canterbury and a further two on the way back. He or she who tells the "Tales of best sentence and most solas" [deepest meaning and most delight] (798), will be given a dinner at the others' expense.

That's the context, the so-called frame narrative of *The Canterbury Tales*. In the event only 24 tales get told, along with 20 prologues, including 'The General Prologue' that sets the scene. Most are verse narratives. Some are posed as fictional – that is, designated explicitly as tales or stories. Others, like the 'Wife of Bath's Prologue', or the Friar's and Pardoner's Prologues, are narratives drawn from the life of the teller – supposedly factual accounts, telling the other pilgrims something about the Narrator's customary practice or profession.

Only two tales are set in prose. The first is 'The Tale of Melibee', told by Chaucer's own persona

after he has tried his hand at the verse 'Tale of Sir Topas' and had his efforts dismissed by the host:

*"By God," quod he, "for pleyonly, at a word,
Thy drasty [crappy] rhyming is not worth a
toord [turd].
Lat se wher thou kanst tellen aught in geeste
[alliterative verse]
Or telle in prose somewhat at the leeste [at least]."
[929-933]*

This is clearly a joke, since the very same Chaucer – not as a character in the action but *in propria persona* – is the highly adept poet behind the rest of *The Tales*, including Harry Bailly's own derisive comments.

The prose of 'The Parson's Tale' is no joke, though. It reads as a sermon or treatise on penitence, and it comes at the end of *The Tales*, just before Chaucer's Retraction, his palinode, in which he begs his readers to pray for him, that Christ might "foryeve me my *giltes* [sins]" specifically for having translated 'The Romance of the Rose', and for having composed 'Troilus and Criseyde', 'The Book of the Duchesse', 'The Parliament of Fowls' and *The Canterbury Tales* themselves.

Palinodes, or retractions, were not uncommon in medieval literature, but for an author to renounce all his major works might be said to

push the convention to its extreme. And taken together – as it should be – with the serious prose of ‘The Parson’s Tale’, the retraction seems to suggest that prose is the proper medium for truth, and that verse and fiction – especially in the service of romance or social satire – were ultimately frivolous in their stimulation of laughter and the fancy: when spiritual reality had finally to be faced and told, farewell metaphor, symbolism and allegory, farewell irony, farewell stories – moral and diverting, humane and humorous – drawn from the classics, from legends and from contemporary life.

If Chaucer wished to do penance because he couldn’t un-write those great works of his, we can at least give thanks that his remorse came too late to recall them (not that he could; they had already been widely circulated in numerous manuscripts). He wasn’t the first author to use the English language for literary purposes – others included his near contemporaries John Gower, William Langland and the anonymous author of ‘Pearl’ and ‘Sir Gawain and the Green Knight’ – but he was the first to deploy its full potential to produce both “sentence” [meaning] and “solas” [delight]. At a time when Latin was used in government and the law courts, and French thought most appropriate for romances of courtly love, Chaucer seems almost to have invented the vernacular for literature, exploiting its wide lexical range running

from Latinic right through to Germanic sources, now using the French end of the spectrum for the great epics of sentiment like ‘Troilus and Criseyde’ and ‘The Knight’s Tale’, now relishing the common tongue drawn from the Anglo-Saxon for exchanges between the pilgrims, and for *fabliaux* like ‘The Miller’s Tale’ and ‘The Reeve’s Tale’. Best of all, he often brought the two levels together, side by side, for maximum comic and moral effect.

Highly varied as it is in style, substance and type of story, *The Canterbury Tales* is far from systematic in its layout. Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Il Decamerone* (ca 1353), which Chaucer almost certainly knew and used as a source, is also a collection of stories set within a framing narrative. Instead of pilgrims of all classes, Boccaccio’s storytellers are ten young aristocrats – seven women and three men – who escape the bubonic plague raging in Florence by removing to an empty villa in Fiesole for two weeks. Apart from one day per week for chores, and the various holy days when no one works at all, they must tell ten stories, one each in each of the ten days remaining (the title comes from Greek *deka*, ten, plus *hemera*, day, together with an Italian suffix suggesting “big” – hence “ten long days”). And so *Il Decamerone* is indeed a collection of exactly 100 stories.

By contrast the structure of *The Canterbury Tales* is very ragged. First of all, how many pilgrims are there? In ‘The General Prologue’ the Narrator,

Chaucer's persona, says there were "welnyne and twenty in a compaignye/Of sondry folk" (24-25). In fact, there are 34, including the four guildsmen (a haberdasher, a carpenter, a weaver, a dyer and a tapestry maker (361-362)), the Canon, who runs away when he thinks his yeoman is about to reveal his dirty secrets (702), the Host and Chaucer's persona.

Of these, only 22 tell a tale, including the two told by Chaucer's persona, the aborted verse 'Tale of Sir Thopas' and the prose 'The Tale of Melibee'. So instead of 136 tales, which we would get if all 34 pilgrims told two going and two coming back, or even 116, if the narrator's tally of 29 travellers were accurate, we have just 24. The failure to realise the Host's grand plan, together with the narrator's confusion about how many pilgrims are in the party, contribute to the general sense of haphazardness – or call it fluidity – as if the structure of the work was answering the accidents of everyday life, rather than being driven by an abstract formula in the hands of some overbearing author figure.

Yet for all that, there is little of that novelistic realism of everyday life in *The Canterbury Tales*. Character is not much developed, so there is little interest in the individual's psychology such as we get in novels. In *The Canterbury Tales* the nearest we get to complex characters are Dorigen in 'The Franklin's Tale' and the Wife of Bath – both

women, to be sure, but still a long way from the female protagonists whose development – whether emotional, intellectual, moral or humane – forms the plot of novels like *Emma* (1815), *Middlemarch* (1874) or *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881). And what look at first like realistic characters are really more like caricatures or stereotypes – whether comic or threatening, beatific or bestial – drawn not so much from "real life" as from popular social satires of the three estates of clergy, nobility and common people.

Indeed in places Chaucer seems to have been quite deliberate in suppressing character. In Boccaccio's *La Teseide* (1340-1341), Chaucer's source for 'The Knight's Tale', the personalities of the two young knights who fight for the love of Emily are quite clearly distinguished. To quote Derek Pearsall's life of Chaucer, Arcite is "the wholly admirable hero who is unlucky, and Palamon the runner-up who gets the prize when the winner is disqualified". In 'The Knight's Tale', by contrast, "it is hard to tell them apart, and neither behaves well".

So *The Canterbury Tales* are not an early form of novel, or even a collection of short stories. It's not just their (predominate) verse form that sets them off from modern fiction, but also their relationship to reality. Early theorists of the novel repeatedly defined the form as a reaction against the romance. Hence Clara Reeve in *The Progress*