

Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*

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Please Silence Cell Phones

Geoffrey Chaucer



- 1340-45 Birth
- 1372, diplomat Italy
- 1374 Controller of customs
- 1385-9 Kent Justice of Peace
- 1386 Parliament from Kent
- 87-92 Begins Canterbury Tales
- 1392-95 Writes most of C.Tales
- 1400 Dies Oct. 25

Time Line: Renaissance or Medieval?

Renaissance Traits:

- ❑ Vernacular
- ❑ Secular Themes
- ❑ Full Characters (not Types)
- ❑ Classical Allusions
- ❑ Moral Complexity
- ❑ Structural Unity instead of Medieval Medley

Pilgrimage as Setting



- Pilgrimages as Penance in Middle Ages
- 14th c., Holidays
- Commercialized
- Spared years of Purgatory
- Professional Palmers
- Sale of Relics

Language and Meter

- French and Latin formal and courtly
- English spoken
- Canterbury Tales in Middle English
- Abandoned Alliteration of Medieval Anglo Saxon
- Rhyming Decasyllables; Iambic Pentameter
- Created "Riding Rhyme" and established couplet structure: "Open"

- <http://www.librarius.com/cantales.htm>
- Whan that Aprill, with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote
And bathed every veyne in swich licour,
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his halfe cours yronne,
And smale foweles maken melodye,
That slepen al the nyght with open eye-
(So priketh hem Nature in hir corages);
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages

Knight

- 'Chivalry, truth, honor, freedom and courtesy'
- Supposedly fought in East Europe
- "fustian" is covered in rust from his armor
- Story is a chivalric romance based on a (Emelye, Palamon, Arcite and court of Theseus)
- Parody or Serious?



Chivalry, Love and Marriage

- Knight's Tale: Idealistic Love of Chivalry
- Miller's Tale: Carnal Sexuality
- Wife of Bath's Tale: Both. She married five times herself and clearly likes sex
- Is she proposing a new view of love and marriage?

- Good mannered and clean
- 'charitable as a mouse'
- Rosary has a brooch with "Amor vincit omnia" Love conquers All
- Prologue: Praise of Mary
- Anti-Semitism

Nun Prioress



Her story is Anti-Semitic: Based upon Hugh of Lincoln, 1255;

- Christian city in Asia, Jewish Quarter, “for their foul lucre, by usury gained, Hateful to Christ, by Christian folk disdained...”
- Boy who kneels when he hears Ave Maria and learns “Alma Redemptoris”
- Satan tells the Jews, “Is it right this boy sings “songs that are an insult to your faith?”

Crime

- "All the Jews plot" his death
- An assassin is hired
- Cut his throat and threw him in a pit
- "Herods of our day...Fiendish Nation"
- Mother searches fruitlessly
- Corpse sings Alma Redemptoris!
- All Jews who knew about the murder
"had to die a shameful death by torture
on the spot." Drawn by horses and
later hung

Death and Burial

- At burial, with holy water, he sings again
- He will sing as long as the pearl given to him by Mary lies upon his tongue
- The monk “pulled out his tongue, and took away the pearl; and very gently he gave up the ghost.”
- She ends her story by alluding to the more recent story of Hugh of Lincoln and asking for mercy of God

Monk

- His job is to supervise distant land owned by the monastery
- Loves hunting more than anything
- 'Why should he toil away copying books?'
- Parody of the secular side of the monastic movement



- Authorized to sell Indulgences
- "For in his male he hadde a pilwe-beer,
Which that he saide was Oure Lady veil;
He saide he hadde a boget of the sail
That Sainte Peter hadde whan that he wente
Upon the see."

Pardoner



Pardoner's Story

- Three men set out to find and kill Death
- Old Man: Beneath that tree
- They find gold
- One goes to buy food; They plan to kill him and he buys rat poison
- They kill him; drink poisoned wine
- Theme: *Radix malorum est cupiditas* - "Greed for wealth is the root of all evil"
- Moral story is undermined by the framing: clear that he has no Faith but is motivated by Greed.

- Poor parson
- Truly a Holy man
- Gives money to poor
- Practices what he preaches
- Did not “rent his benefice”
- His “story” is really a sermon on sin and redemption; ends the stories and sets up “Chaucer’s Retraction”

Parson



Conclusions

- Love and Chivalry and Marriage: new idea of Love proposed that is more physical and equal
- Criticism of Knight reflects exhaustion with 100 years war and the failure of the crusades
- Criticism of church for Greed and Spiritual Hypocrisy while presenting true holiness in form of Parson
- Many "new middle class" characters reveal the emergence of the bourgeois, although they are satirized as well.