

# The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales

## A bilingual edition

Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* are framed by a Prologue which supplies a description of the individual pilgrims (i.e., religious travellers) and give a general account of their character and appearance from the time of their meeting at the Tabard Inn to the moment of their departure next morning as they set out to visit the 'holy shrine' of Thomas à Becket in Canterbury Cathedral—a distance 70 miles along Watling Street. Today it takes only 1:73 hours by train but obviously a great deal longer by foot and horse-back in those far-off days. It is worth adding that neither the shrine nor the Cathedral are of much interest to the poet and the pilgrims seem more like tourists and vacationers than pilgrims in any strictly religious strict sense. Perhaps it is always thus!

The Prologue begins with an account of the weather: it is spring-time and nature is recovering after the winter's frosts. This opening serves as a tapestry or background, adding colour to the scene, but also suggests that the pilgrims are participating in the annual revival of energies and increase of good spirits that follows on the usual hardships associated with the winter season. The events of the poem appear to fall in May and April—the month of winds—is already over. May-time is considered the freshest month of the year in England. It really is so in the southern 'shires', to use the term introduced by the Saxons which survived the arrival of the Normans who, in fact, adopted the existing system of divisions for the country: hence Hampshire, Wiltshire, Buckinghamshire, &c., still used to this day.

Very early on, the narrator promises to describe the pilgrims as to their *condition, array, and degree* — terms which list of categories covers their trade or occupation, their clothing, and their social status (rank), all closely related aspects of contemporary social life. In medieval England what different people were allowed to wear as governed by strict 'sumptuary laws', the breach of which was taken as a kind of forgery or misrepresentation and could result in fines or imprisonment, and even execution. (The story of Dick Whittington and the Cat should be seen against this background.) Some of the pilgrims are wearing exactly what they ought to yet others have adopted garments and accoutrements proper to another class in order to look finer and satisfy their self-esteem. This fact is amusingly registered in the poem and often given as a central measure of the pilgrims' moral character. The more faithful to the dress-code of their particular rank, the more decent they appear to be in the poet's eyes.

At the end of the Prologue (l.715ff.), the narrator seeks our permission to tell the pilgrims' stories *in the very words which they have used*. This device is fundamental to the interest and the merit of the poem since it heralds a vernacular narration which seems to reflect the thoughts and feelings of contemporary men and women in very much their own language. Some of these are 'vulgar' speakers—even downright rude at times—and Chaucer amusingly expresses concern that we should not think this due to his own 'villainy' (or low rank) but to the actual speech of the pilgrims themselves. This introduces the tantalising question: were the persons in the *Tales* actual pilgrims met with by the writer on a real occasion? In other words, is the frame-story *true*? The answer is probably not, a conclusion supported by the fact that many of the tales are *fabliaux* gleaned from other story-collections or else folk-tales known in Chaucer's time. Still others are, of course, quite literary and in this respect the *Tales* serves as an anthology of stories of the time.

It seems that the chief model for the *Canterbury Tales* was Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1348)—the first work in European literature when a naturalistic explanation was offered for the exchange of stories on the part of the several narrators. But since, the narrators are high-born Florentines fleeing the Black Death in their native city, the result is an exclusively aristocratic round of stories. By contrast, in introducing his medley of pilgrims, Chaucer brought to his book an element of social diversity which is recognisably the stuff of modern fiction rather than medieval romance. And this was a revolutionary development for European literature whose germinal relation to the emergent forms of Protestant individualism and nascent democracy can hardly be overstated. Here was a man who understood the mentalities of virtually all the social classes which constituted contemporary English society, being the son of a vintner and himself a servant of the Crown. Thus, as a 'commoner' and a courtier, he could create the tapestry of character and narrative which still seems realistic to the readers of today.