OXFORD GUIDES TO CHAUCER

The Canterbury Tales

SECOND EDITION

HELEN COOPER

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FOREWORD

THE idea for a series of guides to Chaucer originated in a sense that medieval studies in general and Chaucerian studies in particular had advanced to a point where a reappraisal of his poetry was both possible and necessary. The three volumes are devoted to the shorter poetry, *Troilus and Criseyde*, and the *Canterbury Tales*. We see these books as fulfilling a role comparable to the introduction to a good edition, but at greater length than would be possible there. The kind of line-by-line expository material that the notes to an edition would contain is included only where such matters are of wider importance for an understanding of the whole text or where recent scholarship has made significant advances. We hope to provide readers of Chaucer with essential and up-to-date information, with the emphasis falling on how the interpretation of that information advances our understanding of his work; we have therefore gone beyond summarizing what is known to suggest new critical readings.

The original plan for the series was designed to provide some degree of consistency in the outline of the volumes, but it was part of the project from the start that there should be plenty of room for each author's individuality. We hope that our sense of common interests and concerns in our interpretation of Chaucer's poetry will provide a deeper critical consistency below the diversity. Such a paradox would, after all, be true to the nature of our subject.

Helen Cooper
A.J. Minnis
Barry Windeatt

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

FIVE years ago, when Oxford University Press first asked me to draw up a scheme for a series of Chaucer handbooks, I did not quite realize what I was letting myself in for. It may be that they did not realize either. My part is now complete, and I must pay thanks to their English editor, Kim Scott Walwyn, for her encouragement, patience, and broad-mindedness.

To have asked any of my medievalist friends to comment on the draft of such an extensive work would have been taking unfair advantage of their willingness, so its errors are all on my own head. It could not, however, have been written without outside help. Charlotte Morse generously agreed to take a core sample in the shape of the section on the Clerk's Tale, and if the scholarship is sharper there than elsewhere, it is to her I owe it. V. A. Kolve very kindly gave me access to his unpublished work on the Summoner's Tale. Other colleagues—John Alford, Edwin Craun, Ruth Morse—have commented on other sections; and two of my fellow Fellows from University College, Oxford, have given me the benefit of their expertise, Colin Day on the chemistry behind the Canon's alchemy, and Alexander Murray on all kinds of things from sophisms to suicide. The undergraduates who have cross-examined me on the *Tales* in tutorials, and urged fine readings of their own, have provided a stimulus to excellence of which I can only have fallen short.

My greatest debt, however, is to my husband. That there are far fewer infelicities than in the original drafts I owe to his sharp eyes. He has helped me every page of the way, and has remained sufficiently interested in the *Tales* in spite of it all to reread them at the end. The last word of thanks must go to my children, for their tolerating Chaucer as an extra member of the household for so much of their lives, and for bearing with a mother who, as the youngest described it, 'sits upstairs writing and writing and writing. Her book has taken far too long.'

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ABBREVIATIONS

ChR	*Chaucer Review*
EETS	Early English Text Society
ELH	*English Literary History*
ELN	*English Language Notes*
ELR	*English Literary Renaissance*
ES	*English Studies*
JEGP	*Journal of English and Germanic Philology*
MÆ	*Medium Ævum*
M&H	*Medievalia et humanistica*
MLN	*Modern Language Notes*
MLQ	*Modern Language Quarterly*
MP	*Modern Philology*
MS	*Medieval Studies*
NLH	*New Literary History*
NM	*Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*
N&Q	*Notes and Queries*
PMLA	*Publications of the Modern Languages Association*
RES	*Review of English Studies*
SAC	*Studies in the Age of Chaucer*
SP	*Studies in Philology*
UTQ	*University of Toronto Quarterly*

INTRODUCTION

The object of this book is to give an up-to-date summary of what is known about the *Canterbury Tales*, together with a critical reading of each tale. The whole work and each of the tales are discussed under the following headings (though I sometimes conflate sections if this makes better sense):

Date. Some of the tales are believed to have been written as independent works before the *Tales* itself was conceived; and there are various theories about the progress of composition. I give evidence where this is available, and record hypothesis where it seems plausible.

Text. There are some eighty surviving manuscripts of part or all of the *Tales*, and no two of them say quite the same thing. As it is fearfully easy to base an argument on a passage of doubtful authenticity, or on structural patterns adopted by editors on flimsy manuscript evidence, I try to note those variants that could significantly affect the sense or the style. I also indicate the kind of glosses that accompany each tale, and if these are ever likely to be Chaucer's.

Genre. The *Canterbury Tales* is unique among story-collections for its generic variety—a variety often insisted on in the links between the tales. Some of the most interesting individual tales also mix genres within themselves. A sense of genre, to judge from the many comments made on the subject within the work, was crucial to Chaucer's conception of the *Tales*, and I try to give some indication of its function and effect.

Sources and analogues. Where specific sources are known for the individual tales, I give summaries and an account of Chaucer's use and adaptation of them. I also discuss the sources of illustrative material, authoritative aphorisms, and so on. Where no sources are known, I try to reconstruct the literary context in which he was working.

Structure. The tales are often intriguingly structured, both in the arrangement of their narrative material and in their tendency to play games with fictive forms. I discuss the ground plan of each tale, how structure can affect meaning, and the interest in the process of storytelling that Chaucer shows.

Themes. Chaucer does not write full-scale allegory; he rarely writes a story that does not carry some kind of overt meaning, often expressed in digressions, comments from the narrator, and concluding *moralitees*. In this section, I look at the relation of such matters to the narratives that contain

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them, and also at the *sentence*, the inner meaning, behind the tales, whether this is made explicit or not. The ways in which tale and teller can affect each other are also discussed here.

The tale in context. The tales of the Canterbury sequence could stand as autonomous short stories or narrative poems, but they do not: they are placed within a larger work, and each tale affects the others and is affected by them. This section studies the additional meanings and resonances that result from their being part of the larger scheme.

Style. The style—or styles—of each tale can be as distinctive as its genre or its themes, and is indeed an integral part of such things. I analyse aspects such as the choice of words and images, the verse forms, rhetorical heightening, and characteristic syntax of each tale.

In addition, I provide separate discussions of the linking passages or prologues. One characteristic of the links is the quantity of critical or theoretical comment they contain, and I have tried to bring out this emphasis.

Such a division into separate areas of discussion is a matter of convenience, and the most frustrated or sceptical reader will still not be as conscious as I am of the artificiality of some of these boundaries. How Chaucer treats a source is inseparable from what he wants to say; we seldom read the tales as isolated units, without being aware of the Reeve's breathing fire at the Miller, or the Merchant's glancing over his shoulder at the Wife of Bath. I have tried to arrange the material so that it is possible to find the discussion of a specific point where it would most reasonably be expected, but the sections, like the tales, are not watertight units, and there are plenty of spills and leaks.

I have not attempted to give a complete survey of critical viewpoints on the tales, though the annotated bibliographies at the end of each section record some of the lines of battle. My own approach shares in the recent critical stress on Chaucer's literary and stylistic awareness, his sheer multifariousness, rather than in readings that see the tales as dramatic speeches by their tellers, or as allegories of orthodox Christian teaching, though I have learnt much from such interpretations. But there are as many interpretations of Chaucer as there are readers; he is supremely skilled at providing material for an almost infinite variety of readings (though he would be startled at some of the interpretations he has produced). It is impossible, therefore, to write a definitive study of the *Tales*, and I am very much aware of how far this book falls short. The scholarship on the work is vast; I have had to make a large number of omissions in the course of selecting material, and there will inevitably be other accidental ones. But

more importantly, Chaucer is not the kind of author on whom it is possible to be definitive. The *Tales* itself is unfinished; its possibilities are endless. I have tried to keep the sense of the work's open-endedness, even where it has led me down some unexpected paths. I do not expect that every reader will follow me along all of them, though some (such as the claim of proto-feminism in the Clerk's Tale) have in the event become well trodden since the first edition of this book.

Bibliographical Note

The Riverside Chaucer, edited by Larry D. Benson, came out when I was half-way through the writing of this book. I have adjusted all quotations by reference to its text, and profited greatly from its scholarship. I have also kept alongside me its predecessor, the second edition of F. N. Robinson's *Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*; the eight volumes of Manly and Rickert; Skeat's magnificent edition; and those volumes of the Variorum Chaucer that have so far appeared. As no edition of a work such as the *Canterbury Tales* can replace the manuscripts, I have also relied heavily on manuscript facsimiles, especially that of Hengwrt; and I have frequently consulted the Chaucer Society prints of other manuscripts and occasionally the manuscripts themselves. Full details of the printed editions I have used are given below.

Each section of the discussion of the tales is followed, wherever appropriate, by its own brief annotated bibliography, which records works I have used in compiling the section and areas of further reading. I am most deeply indebted for factual material; the interpretations I give are usually my own.

I have profited from reading many excellent critical works on the *Tales* as a whole, and these are listed in the General Bibliography. I give abbreviated references to them in the section bibliographies only when I owe them a specific debt, or where their discussion is of particular importance.

Editions

All quotations from Chaucer in this book are taken, unless otherwise specified, from *The Riverside Chaucer*, general editor Larry D. Benson (Boston, 1987; Oxford, 1988); I have profited greatly from the scholarship of its many contributors.

Donaldson, E. T. (ed.), *Chaucer's Poetry: An Anthology for the Modern Reader* (2nd edn., New York, 1975). This edition omits the prose tales and slightly modernizes the spelling, but contains excellent critical material.

Fisher, John H. (ed.), *The Complete Poetry and Prose of Geoffrey Chaucer* (2nd edn., New York, 1989). A useful comprehensive edition.

Manly, John M. (ed.), *The Canterbury Tales* (New York, 1928). Although in many respects superseded, some of the critical material is still of value.

Manly, John M., and Rickert, Edith (eds.), *The Text of the Canterbury Tales* (8 vols., Chicago, 1940). This describes the manuscripts and records all textual variants.

Robinson, F. N. (ed.), *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (2nd edn., Boston and Oxford, 1957).

Skeat, W. W. (ed.), *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (7 vols., Oxford, 1894–1900). Although his scholarship is often outdated, Skeat is still a lucid and valuable source of essential information.

A Variorum Edition of the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer (Norman, Okla.) is a multi-volume edition, currently in progress, under the general editorship of Paul G. Ruggiers. Volumes on individual tales that appeared before this book was completed are listed in the appropriate bibliographies.

Manuscript facsimiles and transcripts

Ellesmere: *The Ellesmere Manuscript Reproduced in Facsimile* (2 vols., Manchester, 1911), reprinted as *The Ellesmere Manuscript of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales: A Working Facsimile*, with introduction by Ralph Hanna III (Cambridge, 1989); and *The New Ellesmere Chaucer Facsimile*, ed. Martin Stevens and Daniel Woodward (San Marino and Tokyo, 1995), with its accompanying volume of essays on all aspects of the manuscript (*The Ellesmere Chaucer: Essays in Interpretation*).

Gg.4.27: *The Poetical Works of Geoffrey Chaucer: A Facsimile of Cambridge University Library MS Gg.4.27*, with introductions by M. B. Parkes and Richard Beadle (3 vols., Cambridge, 1979–80).

Hengwrt: *The Canterbury Tales: A Facsimile and Transcription of the Hengwrt Manuscript*, ed. Paul G. Ruggiers (Variorum I, Norman, Okla. 1979).

Chaucer Society transcripts edited by Frederick J. Furnivall:

Cambridge MS Dd.4.24 (1901–2).
Corpus MS (1868–77).
Harleian MS 7334 (1885).
Lansdowne MS (1868–77).
Petworth MS (1868–77).

Note to the Second Edition

I was able to add a handful of new citations to the 1991 paperback edition of this book; this second edition incorporates some further work of my own, and also a broader representation of the most significant recent scholarship and criticism. I have made a number of updatings (or, on a few occasions, repaired omissions) in the main text, and added a large number of bibliographical references. The most extensive alterations elaborate on Chaucer's historical and social context, in a much compressed attempt to reflect the liveliness of current research in this area; provide new material on the sources and analogues for the whole *Tales*, to give the background for poetry contests and to strengthen the claims of Boccaccio's *Decameron*; sharpen up the information on some of the pilgrims; note developments in the interpretation of Chaucer's presentation of women; and discuss recent work on the Wife of Bath's use of the language of Lollardy. Recent criticism of the *Tales* has not, however, been such as to require a breaking of the framework of the book, and I have been gratified to see in how many areas my own work foreshadowed later developments.

The Canterbury Tales

Date

The writing of the *Canterbury Tales* occupied the last dozen or so years of Chaucer's life. He probably started work on it in the late 1380s; he died in 1400, and it is not known whether he continued working on it until his death. Within this period, all dates are conjectural, and are discussed separately for each tale in the course of the book. Two of the tales, the Knight's and Second Nun's, were written at some earlier date, and from time to time early composition has been suggested for a number of the others. Many were probably written before a specific place in the sequence was assigned to them, or a specific teller; the General Prologue need not have been written first, nor need the articulating device of the pilgrimage have given Chaucer the idea of writing a story-collection.

The year 1387 was for long taken as the date of the pilgrimage. This particular pilgrimage, however, is fictional, and Chaucer himself does not date it; the opening of the work could locate it in any sweet April of the later fourteenth century, or of the Middle Ages. The work's placing between contemporaneity and timelessness is peculiarly ambivalent. It contains a handful of references to such specific matters as the nefarious financial activities of the pardoners who claimed association with the hospital of St Mary Rouncesval, and the 'Peasants' Revolt', the English Rising of 1381; other more coded references to political events are sometimes claimed for the work as well. Lollardy, England's first home-grown heresy, in which Wyclif and his followers mounted a challenge to both ecclesiastical institutions and beliefs, gets one passing reference, though it may leave its traces in the text in more covert ways. Yet one would never guess from a reading of the *Tales* alone just how troubled were the years in which it was composed: years of social and political unrest that led to the execution of several of Chaucer's close associates and culminated in the deposition of Richard II. Chaucer himself moved out of range of the worst troubles, to Kent; and that too may be reflected in the shift of focus of the *Tales*, from the courtly narratives and concerns of the dream visions and *Troilus* to the pilgrimage route to Canterbury and its motley travellers.

Yet the *Tales* does belong to the late fourteenth century, and detail after detail registers the particularity of its historical moment. Some seem trivial, though their later cultural effects were enormous: the work contains almost the first English references to the recent inventions of paper, the prerequisite for both bureaucracy and mass literacy; and of the mechanical clock, which was to alter the conception of time from being a subset of

eternity or an element of Creation, such as were signified by the canonical hours or the movement of the sun, to being a mechanized commodity under human ownership. The work marks the moment when it was still possible to believe in the principle of a stable and unified Church, however imperfect in practice—this was the era of the Great Schism with its two rival popes—even while it documents the gap between personal piety and institutional corruption. It is poised on the divide between a world conceived in terms of a stable and God-given feudal hierarchy, and a society disrupted and energized by the pressures of social mobility at every level from the peasantry to the crown, by the demographic collapse following on the Black Death, and by the continuing rise in the importance of money and professional function rather than land or rank in the social machinery. The divide is represented in the reluctance of both the 'cherles' and the moneyed bourgeoisie of the *Tales* to accept any humble place assigned to them, in the satire on the corruption rife within the Church, in the ability to ask questions of a kind disallowed by the official faith as to the nature of the providential ordering of the world, in the stress on the qualities of the good ruler. The work is more concerned with ethics, both personal and political, than with political events; but the ethical questions it considers are both the timeless ones of fallible human beings living in an unstable world, and those raised by the frightening breakdown of hierarchy and stability in late fourteenth-century England.

W. W. Skeat (*Works of Chaucer* (p. 4 above), iii. 373) calculated the 1387 date out of the need to find a year when a pilgrimage that started on 17 April (see II(B^1)5) would not include a Sunday; but the whole argument rests on an anachronistic notion of realism.

Anthony Tuck, *Richard II and the English Nobility* (London, 1973), gives a detailed account of the political events of the period.

Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), analyses Chaucer's social and political affiliations, and the *Tales* as a model of contemporary social diversity.

Derek Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer: A Critical Biography* (Oxford, 1992), gives an account of the events of Chaucer's own life and stresses his avoidance of political involvement.

Other kinds of contextualization are provided by Barbara Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous Fourteenth Century* (New York, 1978), on connections with Western Europe; by Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400–1580* (New Haven and London, 1992), on the popular piety of the later Middle Ages; and in *Chaucer's England: Literature in Historical Context*, ed. Barbara Hanawalt, Medieval Studies at Minnesota, 4 (Minneapolis, 1992).

Text

There are fifty-five surviving manuscripts that appear once to have contained the complete *Tales*, though some of them are now damaged. A further twenty-eight contain one or more individual tales, or survive in such

fragmentary form that it is impossible to tell whether the remaining leaves once belonged to a manuscript of the whole work or to a copy of a single tale.

The texts vary in multitudinous small details and some major ones, and attempts to reconstruct Chaucer's original, or the copy of his work that served as archetype for the earliest manuscripts, have met with only partial success. Some variants are due to miscopying, but the nature of others suggests that Chaucer himself was still in the process of making alterations, additions, and excisions to his work. Furthermore, it is not known whether he had a final arrangement in mind for the order of the tales, and so whether any of the extant manuscripts preserve an order that has any authorial justification. There is however more consistency among the manuscripts than this might suggest. They all start with the General Prologue and end with the Parson, and most of the tales move around in constant groups, or 'Fragments'. There are two widespread orders for them, differentiated only by the different places assigned to Fragment VIII(G). The one most widely adopted in modern editions, and which I use in this book, is as follows:

Fragment I(A)	General Prologue, Knight, Miller, Reeve, Cook
Fragment II(B^1)	Man of Law
Fragment III(D)	Wife, Friar, Summoner
Fragment IV(E)	Clerk, Merchant
Fragment V(F)	Squire, Franklin
Fragment VI(C)	Physician, Pardoner
Fragment VII(B^2)	Shipman, Prioress, *Sir Thopas*, *Melibee*, Monk, Nun's Priest
Fragment VIII(G)	Second Nun, Canon's Yeoman
Fragment IX(H)	Manciple
Fragment X(I)	Parson

In the alternative manuscript ordering, Fragment VIII(G) appears before VI(C), to give an order Second Nun–Canon's Yeoman–Physician–Pardoner. Fragments I and II (A and B^1) appear together in almost all manuscripts; Fragments VI and VII (C and B^2) and IX and X (H and I) also consistently follow each other. By contrast, Fragments IV and V (E and F), of Clerk–Merchant–Squire–Franklin, are frequently broken up, and the four tales are often separated. The positions of these four tales and of the wandering fragments are discussed in more detail in the course of this book. There is no manuscript justification for the Victorian partiality, preserved in some more recent editions, for moving Fragment VII (B^2) forward to follow the Man of Law's Tale.

The earliest extant manuscript is preserved in the National Library of Wales, MS Peniarth 392 D, known as 'Hengwrt'. This was copied at about the time of Chaucer's death, and it contains the best text—the nearest, that is, to what Chaucer apparently wrote. The scribe, however, appears to have

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