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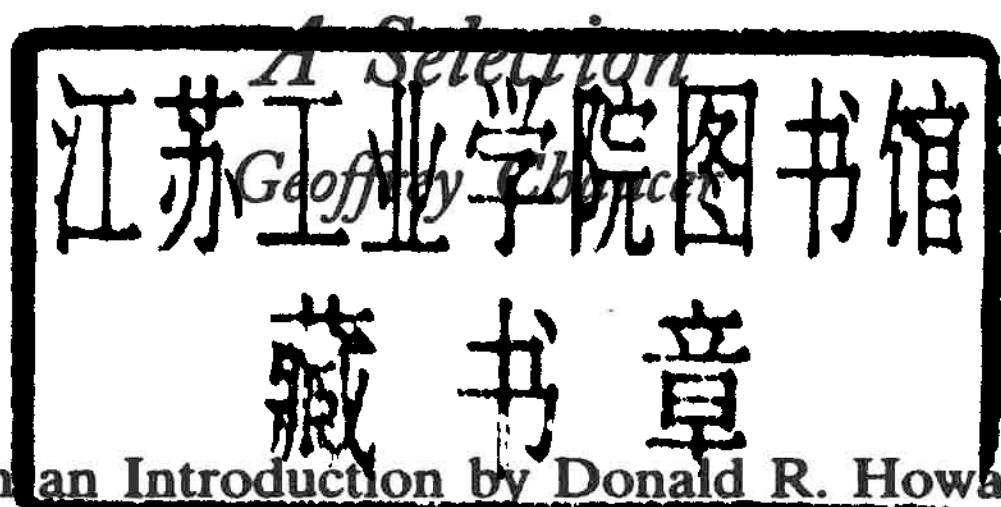


GEOFFREY
CHAUCER

With a New Foreword by Frank Grady



*THE
CANTERBURY TALES*



With an Introduction by Donald R. Howard
and a new Preface by Frank Grady

Edited by Donald R. Howard
with the assistance of James Dean



SIGNET CLASSICS

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The son of a wealthy and high-connected vintner, **Geoffrey Chaucer** (c. 1342–1400) received a classical education prior to becoming a page at the court of King Edward III. As soldier, statesman, public official, and court poet, he remained in contact with the most important people of his time. Chaucer was sent on several diplomatic missions to Italy, where he read and was deeply influenced by the works of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio. The Italian influence is evident in his masterpiece, *Canterbury Tales*, on which he worked intermittently for at least twenty years.

Donald R. Howard was the Olive H. Palmer Professor in the Humanities at Stanford University and the author of a number of noted books on medieval literature, including *The Three Temptations: Medieval Man in Search of the World* (1966), *The Idea of The Canterbury Tales* (1976), and *Writers and Pilgrims: Medieval Pilgrimage Narratives and Their Posterity* (1980).

Frank Grady is associate professor of English at the University of Missouri–St. Louis, where he teaches medieval literature, literary theory, and film. He has published essays on both late medieval English literature and contemporary American popular culture, and he is currently editor of the annual of the New Chaucer Society, *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*.

Contents

Preface	7
Introduction	16
A Note on This Edition	43
On Pronouncing Chaucer	45
Chronology	52
Selected Bibliography	56
SELECTED CANTERBURY TALES	
The General Prologue	61
The Knight's Tale	95
The Miller's Prologue and Tale	162
The Reeve's Prologue and Tale	185
The Shipman's Tale	201
The Shipman-Prioress Link	215
The Prioress' Prologue and Tale	216
The Prologue and Tale of Sir Thopas	225
The Monk's Prologue	236
The Nun's Priest's Prologue and Tale	240
The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale	261
The Clerk's Prologue and Epilogue	299
The Merchant's Prologue and Tale	305
The Franklin Addresses the Squire	340
The Franklin's Prologue and Tale	341
The Host Addresses the Pardoner	370
The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale	370
The Parson's Prologue	391
"Retraction"	394
Glossary of Basic Words	396

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PREFACE

A few years after I began teaching *The Canterbury Tales* at the college level, an article appeared in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* describing how officials at the high school in Eureka, Illinois—about 175 miles away—had suspended discussion of the *Tales* in a senior English class, in the face of complaints that the work was inappropriately racy and might not conform to community standards. I'd like to say that, outraged by this egregious mischaracterization, I rushed right out and set people straight in the bold, heroic manner long associated with Chaucer scholars. Actually, I left the task to the *Post's* editors, who dryly remarked that, given the work had only been around for about six hundred years, it was easy to understand why the school board might need a little more time to study the issue, and then duly observed that daytime television regularly supplies us with more examples of human depravity than Chaucer ever dreamed of.

The episode did inspire me to do a little research—perhaps a more natural professorial reaction—and I confirmed that a similar episode had occurred less than a decade earlier, in Columbia County, Florida, and that over the last hundred years Chaucer has often kept company with other well-known subversives—Maya Angelou, Mark Twain, John Steinbeck, J. K. Rowling—on the list of authors most frequently challenged by high school curriculum hawks. In fact, for many years after the passage of the Comstock Law of 1873 (or to be more precise, the Act for the Suppression of Trade in, and Circulation of, Obscene

Literature and Articles of Immoral Use), it was illegal to send a copy of the *Canterbury Tales* through the U.S. mail. And just recently, in a used bookstore in Michigan, I picked up an 1891 edition of the General Prologue to the *Tales* that simply omitted line 691 (you'll have to look that one up; I think it's on page 88). So right away there's a good reason to read the *Canterbury Tales*—it's a banned book, or has been, and there's nothing better for one's mental and intellectual health than a steady diet of such dangerous reading.

For people who object to the alleged immorality of the *Canterbury Tales*—from the nineteenth-century crusader Anthony Comstock and his New York Society for the Suppression of Vice to present-day parents and school administrators—the notoriously difficult Chaucer is easy to understand because they find his meaning easy to fix. In fact, for them his work means only *one* thing, whether you call it lewdness or indecency or obscenity (if you're defending him, incidentally, you use the word “bawdy”—much quainter and tamer, and hardly threatening to community standards). There is, though, another, less preemptive way to look at Chaucer, a point of view nicely captured by one of my students in her end-of-semester course evaluation. In response to the question “Were there any features of the course not beneficial to your mastery of the literature?”—a sentence only an English teacher could love—she wrote, “It would be beneficial if Chaucer made any sense at all! I guess he makes sense, but I wish he would have an idea and stick to it and make it a lot easier on us.”

In fact Chaucer goes out of his way to avoid making things easy for us, and this student was reacting to what, in the Introduction to this volume, Donald Howard calls with typical acuity (and rare inelegance) Chaucer's strategy of “accumulative discrediting”: “No sooner do we get one point of view clearly in mind than we are given some reasons to doubt it.” The General Prologue to the *Tales* provides many examples of this process in its portraits of the Canterbury pilgrims, typically four parts naïve admiration (even infatuation) and one part outrage, shaken into a cocktail so potent that it leads you to draw firm conclusions

about the characters that, when you look back, turn out to be based on the flimsiest evidence, or no evidence at all. For example, the narrator says of the Merchant: "There wiste no wight that he was in dette," that is, literally, that "no one knew that he was in debt." Does that mean that he *wasn't* in debt—i.e., "certainly no one could say that *he* was in debt"—or that he really was in debt but successfully hid the fact by working diligently to give the impression of solvency ("So estatly was he of his governaunce"), uttering conventional business bromides ("His resouns he spak ful solempnely,/Souning alwey the encrees of his winning"), and dressing the part of a wealthy trader ("His bootes clasped fair and fetisly"), all the while living in fear of discovery and the evaporation of his credit rating? Is he Bill Gates, or Donald Trump, or Willy Loman?

Shakespeare scholars like to pretend that Shakespeare more or less invented this phenomenon (*Henry V*: stirring tribute to patriotic ideals or penetrating study of the degrading effects of war on even the noblest of heroes?), but really it's as old as poetry itself, and Chaucer is a practitioner without peer. And this approach to the *Canterbury Tales* provides among other things an indispensable context for the issue of Chaucerian lewdness (I mean, bawdiness). The farts and fornication of the Miller's Tale are not just juvenile indulgences or the irresistible outgrowths of some coarse and prurient (read: medieval) sensibility; rather, they are part of a carefully elaborated, brilliantly plotted plan—or rather, two plans. One is the plan of the tale, which is to distract jealous old John the Carpenter so that his coltish young wife, Alison, and their amorous boarder, Nicholas, can spend the night together "In business of mirth and in solas," and the other is the plan of the *Tales*, according to which the love triangle of the Miller's Tale and the several comeuppances that make up its magnificently disastrous conclusion specifically recall the story that precedes it, the elevated and courtly Knight's Tale, in a way that retrospectively renders that tale's commanding Duke Theseus either faintly ridiculous, or faintly menacing, in his fussy efforts to co-opt that tale's every event to the service of his own reputation for aristocratic magnanimity, "as he were a god in trone."

Hence another reason to read the *Canterbury Tales*: not only the tales themselves but the relationships between the tales are dynamic and thought-provoking, and having one's thoughts provoked is generally a good thing, too.

But who are these Knights and Millers and Merchants, and why are they telling tales of any sort? What exactly is *The Canterbury Tales* about?

The Canterbury Tales is a collection of stories told by a group of medieval English pilgrims traveling from greater London to Canterbury Cathedral, about sixty miles south-east. In the General Prologue, the narrator of the collection—a stand-in for the poet Chaucer—introduces us to the twenty-nine other pilgrims, varied in occupation and status, and to the Host of the Tabard Inn, where they coincidentally meet one April evening in the late fourteenth century. After an evening of convivial eating and drinking, the Host proposes a tale-telling contest that will help pass the time on the long ride, and volunteers to come along as organizer and judge. (Note to those of you who will have to write essays about the *Tales*: do *not* confuse the narrator of the poem with the Host; they are two very different characters.) His offer is quickly and unanimously accepted—pretty much the last time this merry company will agree on anything—and the next morning they set out, with the Knight telling the first tale. There are twenty-four tales in all (eleven in this edition)—only a fraction of the contest, according to the Host's original plan—and they come down to us in somewhat fragmentary form, arranged in what we in fact call *fragments*, tales or groups of tales that are linked together by prologues and epilogues and other pilgrim banter. In the medieval manuscript copies that survive—fifty-five more or less complete ones, eighty-two or eighty-three in all—the First Fragment, unsurprisingly, always comes first, comprising the General Prologue, the Knight's Tale, the Miller's Prologue and Tale, the Reeve's Prologue and Tale, and the Cook's Prologue and Tale (the last being unfinished). After that, the order of the tales can vary considerably from manuscript to manuscript, Chaucer never having provided a definitive final sequence before his death.

A couple of important observations follow from this

brief description. First, it's worth bearing in mind that while the Prologue suggests that the tales exist for the sake of the pilgrimage—they're allegedly meant to relieve the tedium of the long ride to Canterbury—in fact the pilgrimage exists for the sake of the tales, as a structuring frame that helps Chaucer to organize his poem and to experiment with different literary styles and modes. Thus, when the Miller obstreperously insists on telling a tale to "quite" the Knight's opening number (the word literally means "match" or "repay," but quickly acquires an explicitly aggressive edge), what is on one level a clash of genres—courtly romance versus comic fabliau—gets refigured as a clash of personalities, and as Professor Howard writes, "The order of the tales thus comes to be directed by inner forces of social conflict and interplay of character, by disagreement and aggression." At least, that *seems* to be the case, and the more we subscribe to this dramatic view, the more fully we collaborate with Chaucer's effort to disguise an aesthetic contrivance as a roadside drama. Indeed, this may be the most effective aspect of his fiction making, since it has spawned a virtual industry of "dramatic criticism" of the *Canterbury Tales* devoted to understanding the interplay of themes and topics as reflective of the relationships among the pilgrims, whose fully rounded, psychologically complete personalities are seen as determining—rather than deriving from—the content of their tales. (On the other hand, it may be the case that the rest of us don't really have personalities either—just a raft of stories that we tell about ourselves, to ourselves and others, in which case we would have to give Chaucer an entirely different kind of credit.)

Another factor that contributes to the dramatic illusion of the *Tales* is the way in which they are doubly, sometimes triply, *voiced*—not so much narrated as narrativized, as the process of telling a story typically becomes part of the story itself. "Chaucer the pilgrim"—as we traditionally refer to the narrator—makes this point repeatedly, when he apologizes for possibly getting things out of order or for repeating some of the more disreputable (remember: bawdy!) tales, which might fail to conform to the principles of "moralitee and holinesse," but the pilgrims adopt this

style too, to sometimes dizzying effect. The Wife of Bath, for example, can be found at one point in her Prologue (which is of course being recounted to us by the narrator) quoting herself quoting her husband quoting St. Paul—immediately after which she brings us up short by claiming that “all was false.” One well-known effect of this voicing is the enormous difficulty of pinning down exactly where Chaucer himself stands on a given issue, since every utterance in the *Canterbury Tales* is always already someone else’s—a narrator’s, a pilgrim’s, a character’s. The ironic distance caused by such slipperiness makes it hard to know exactly where to rest. Professor Howard, for example, wants to take the very end of the Pardoner’s Tale, when the Knight effects a reconciliation between the mocking Host and the furious Pardoner, as an affirmative moment and an example of Chaucer’s “profoundly comic and forgiving spirit,” but when we apply the principle of “accumulative discrediting” to this scene, we realize that the kiss of reconciliation that the Knight elicits (or coerces?) sits only twenty lines away from the Host’s original insulting remark about kissing the Pardoner’s dirty breeches, and within hailing distance of a similarly misdirected kiss at the end of the Miller’s Tale. Such echoes might just as well lead us to conclude that Chaucer’s own view, at least at this moment, is more skeptical than forgiving.

One could argue that such skepticism ought to have a particular appeal to twenty-first-century readers, who hate to be fooled, though they don’t mind being surprised. And there are some surprising things about Chaucer, from our postmodern perspective. It’s customary (almost required, in fact—Professor Howard does it on page 28) when introducing the *Canterbury Tales* to quote the seventeenth-century English poet John Dryden, who in the course of declaring Chaucer the “Father of English Poetry,” said of the *Tales* that “here is God’s Plenty”—a remark generally taken to indicate that, in the engaging variety of the pilgrims and their stories, Chaucer provides us with the broadest possible picture of fourteenth-century English life and lore. But of course that’s part of the effect of the tales too, rather than some kind of objective truth about them; though his diverse cast gives the impression of being fully