

from Intro to Riverside Chaucer

The Canterbury Tales contains a wide variety of subjects and literary genres, from fancy fabliaux to sober tales of Christian suffering, in accents that range from the elegant opening sentence of the general prologue to the thumping doggerel of Sir Topas and the solemn prose of the Parson.

The whole is lent coherence and verisimilitude by a framing narrative: a pilgrimage provides the occasion for gathering a broadly diverse group of characters to tell a series of tales intercalated with narrative links, in which the pilgrims argue, interrupt one another, or comment on the tales that have been told as they move through the 14th century countryside to their common goal.

The use of a narrative framework for a collection of tales goes as ancient as the Thousand and One Nights, [but] the most suggestive analogy is Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, [in which] ten elegant young ladies and gentlemen, accompanied by their servants, journey from villa to villa through the countryside around Florence to avoid the plague. The tales are told in the villas at which they stay, rather than on the road.

[Chaucer's] pilgrims gather not by prior arrangement
but by mere chance ... they squabble, interrupt
one another and tell tales the author would
prefer not to relate [except] to give a true report

A pilgrimage was one of the few occasions in
medieval life when so diverse a group [might
gather] on a basis of temporary equality and
might have told tales to pass the time.

We are never told that the pilgrims attend mass,
nor take notice of shrines and relics along
the way.

In many cases the tales are... invited by their
tellers... [but are] sometimes unexpected and
never completely predictable... Some function
as parts of arguments between the pilgrims,
others express a view on a common theme,
[some] are related in a more subtle way.

[Chaucer's individuals combine stereotypes with
highly individualised portraits]

Chaucer transformed every genre. The Knight's
Tale is a romance, but uniquely philosophical,
sharply contemporary in the Miller's Tale has two
lines of action, leisurely description, elaborate

dialogue and development of character. It's also a deft parody of the Knight's.

The Reeve sets out to "quit" the miller, in a story less jolly, and the book continues the downward momentum, shifting from the idealised romance of the Knight's Tale to the steepest side of contemporary reality.

The Clerk retells Petrarch, avoiding highstyle as requested. He's followed by the Merchant, in the same Lombardy setting.

The Squire's Tale promises to be elaborate and long, but he's cut off (mercifully).

The Franklin's Tale, like several others, is about the problem of keeping pledged troth — and the only solution is to forgo the rightful payment (to forgive).

The Physician and the Pardoner address the public and private punishment of sin... The Pardoner only expresses his own corruption but says he can still tell a moral tale — and he is moved by his own story. He's been described as the one lost soul on the Pilgrimage.

DATUM/DATE

Sir Topas has no source but almost everyone has
placed it in one of the popular minstrel romances.
It's a merciless (but affectionate) parody.

The Nun's Priest tells a beast fable, popular through
the Middle Ages; talking animals create a satire
or comment on the world of humans. Chaucer does
this learned as well as courtly; but he mistranslates
Latin.

The Second Nun's Tale is a saint's life, and sets up
a model of a philosopher vainly devoted to worldly
learnings; the following Canon's Yeoman's Tale
picks up on that — as a kind of occupational
satire of alchemy, a relatively new business in
Chaucer's time.

The Purson's Tale is a tract on penance, covering the
seven deadly sins and (thus) a comment on all
that precedes it. There's no story, as such. He ends
with a call for penance, and one who repents is
Chaucer himself — whose retraction is not only
for the Canterbury Tales but his whole lifetime of
writing.