

Extended Review: The Canterbury Tales *and their place in history*

Introduction

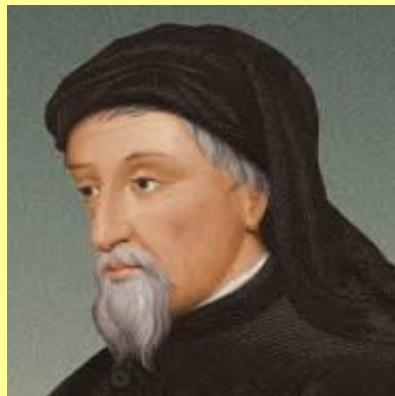
Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (began c.1387) is undoubtedly one of the oldest, most famous and also most important books ever to be written in the English language. In a way that has entertained readers for over 600 years, it tells the story of a group of pilgrims on their way to Canterbury from Southwark, just over the River Thames from the old City of London. The story revolves around the Innkeeper Harry Bailly, who suggests that each of a group of travellers who are about to leave his pub on their way to Canterbury Cathedral take turns in telling stories so as to pass time. To spice things up, Harry introduces an element of competition, stating that the teller of the best story will win a free meal as a prize.

Not a bad idea, really. After all, radios hadn't been invented yet, and I imagine that staring at the bum of the horse in front of you would get very boring, very quickly. Unsurprisingly, then, the group do all agree to his plan, and there follows a collection of short stories (or 'embedded narratives' as the educated types call them), that keep the travellers (and us) entertained until they reach the outskirts of their destination.

Cleverly, each tale varies in style, and as every story is supposedly being told by a new narrator, they can also be of different lengths. The more educated pilgrims tend to tell the longer stories, flaunting their education by alluding back to the days of antiquity in their narratives, whereas those told by people further down the social hierarchy are often relayed in an attempt to snipe at others in the group, with very funny consequences.

Whatever else it is, then, *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole is certainly not boring, even if just because of the variety it contains. Ultimately, while some of the stories are indeed fairly serious and ‘grown-up’, many more are told with comedy in mind and are rib-ticklingly humorous, particularly if you like farting jokes... and who doesn’t? The best thing of all, though, is that if you don’t like a particular tale, just keep on plodding like the pilgrims in the story and it will soon change into something else... a bit like the weather really.

The author



Geoffrey Chaucer (c.1343-1400) was uniquely placed to document the time in which he lived. Coming from a relatively humble background, he rose through society to eventually become a government minister, at various times also being a soldier, diplomat, civil servant, knight, and MP... an impressive chap, then! He lived in the reigns of not one but two kings,

Edward III and his grandson and successor Richard II, and served them whilst they ran the country. (Of course, in those days the monarch really did rule his kingdom; none of this democracy stuff.) Chaucer began writing the *Tales* towards the end of his life after his wife passed away, and sadly died himself just a few months after King Richard was deposed by his own cousin, the new Henry IV, in 1399.

Whilst Chaucer's unique experiences meant that he had actually met and knew Millers and 'Plowmen' just as well as he knew the Nobility (represented in the story by the knight), he also had much first-hand experience of visiting Europe due to the many adventures he had undertaken! He also is sure to have visited and sometimes possibly lived in the places he mentions in the story. However, as Chaucer didn't want his *Tales* to be about himself, but instead to be about the people, he takes a 'back seat' in the story. When he *does* include himself as a character, he makes it clear that he is *not* in charge... asked to tell a story by Harry Bailly, he is interrupted because the Host thinks he is a bad poet!

How it's put together

According to the text, Chaucer's original plan was to have each of the travellers tell two stories on the way to Canterbury, and another two on the way back. With well over 20 people in the group, however, this proved to be a monumental task, and as he neared the end of his life, poor old Geoffrey had to cut the project a little short. Sadly, only the outward journey was covered by the time he died, and even this has some gaps in it; whilst some of the characters tell two stories, others tell none at all. All is not lost however! The various sections he left behind (known by the boffins as 'Fragments'), have since been stuck together to make a (still very) readable collection of stories. Indeed, his cast list reads like a snapshot

of English society at the time, with people of all genders, classes and backgrounds coming together for a common purpose: their trip to Canterbury!

The stories in the *Tales*

In the Middle Ages, as with today, three of the most important issues facing society were religion, class, and gender, and all three of these are addressed by Chaucer in the *Tales*. Sadly, there is just not enough space to look at them all here, so I've chosen three of my favourites, one about each of the things I've listed above. In Chaucer's time, these three groups fell roughly into an system called 'The Three Estates' which described the social groups that people in England (and other countries) were split into. Firstly, we have the nobility who fought and ran the country. They would include the teller of 'The Knight's Tale' (and Chaucer himself). After the knight finishes, Harry asks the Monk, representing the Church, who are the Second Estate, to tell a story next. However, Robin the Miller, just a normal worker and so a member of the third (and lowest group), interrupts and insists on taking having his go next! Secondly, then, we'll look at his tale. Lastly, we have the Church who have been dumped to down to third place. They had a far more dominant role in life back then than now, and included people like the teller of 'The Pardoner's Tale', whose story I'll look at last. Before I do, though, it's worth mentioning 'The General Prologue', the very beginning of the wider story that introduces these characters to us.

The General Prologue sets the scene for the whole collection. It introduces the characters (some getting a longer and more detailed description than others), describes the time of year, why the pilgrims are all in Harry Bailly's tavern, 'The Tabbard', and lets him set up the idea for a story telling competition. Some of the characters are portrayed as

virtuous and good, like the knight, and others as rude and unpleasant like the Miller. Anyway, on with the stories...

The Knight goes first in telling his tale, and is mentioned first by Chaucer in his General Prologue. Having fought all over the known world, the knight is well respected by the other members of the group, and his long story, originally written in poetry and split into several parts, tells the story of Theseus, a Duke who was Lord of Athens in ancient times. This reflects his education and well-travelled experience. His story includes many of the kings of antiquity and also the gods of old make an appearance.

In the end, and after much fighting by hero and villain alike, the Duke allows a love match to take place, one that had previously been forbidden by ancient custom, or so he thought. With a happy ending and a moral in there somewhere (something like: don't be a spoil-sport all your life), his tale draws to a close, allowing for a change of gear to take place. (Interestingly, when it comes to his own turn to tell a story, Chaucer decides to talk about Sir Topaz, another knight. 'His' way of speaking, though, is different, and at the beginning of the second part of his story, Harry the Host tells Chaucer the pilgrim to shut up. Probably just as well.)

The Miller's story is very different to that which came before. Whereas the knight was talking about 'posh' stuff, Robin talks about people closer to his own background, telling of a very bad romantic situation between John, a miserable old pub land-lord, his young and pretty new wife Alison, their lodger Nicholas the scholar (who tells his own tale later), and a heap of other people who all get drunk and make each other rather angry. This is probably because all the boys fancy the clever Alison, and she plays them off against one another, even tricking the boys into kissing each other on the bum at one point (they think it's her bum)! Poor Nicholas even manages to get branded on his and get a blister; mind you, he probably shouldn't have stuck it out of the window in the first place...

Alison is one of the few ‘baddies’ in the collection who doesn’t really get a comeuppance at the end, quite possibly because she is female. This could be one of several morals a reader can take away from the story. One of the most famous characters in the *Tales* is the Wife of Bath, who has a list of former husbands and is very rich.... Infer from all this what you will!

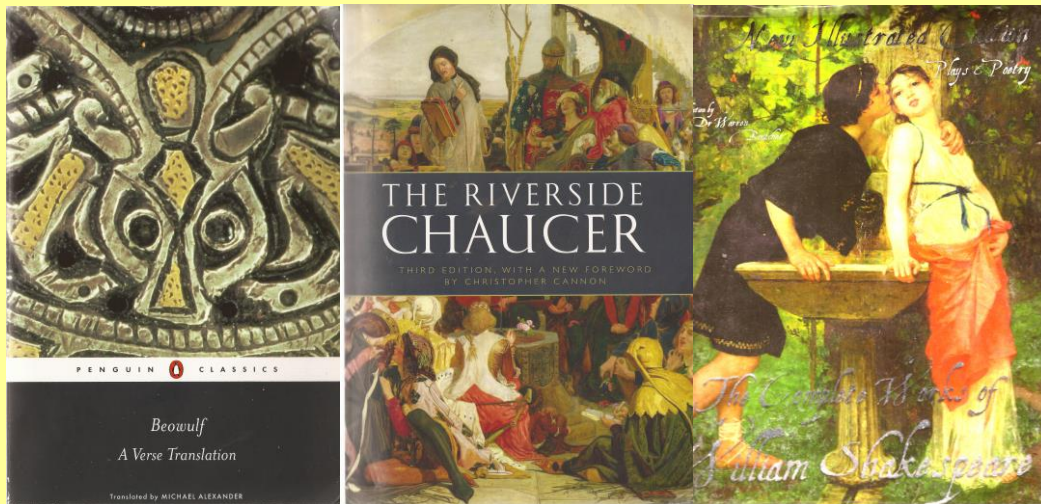
The last story from *Tales* we’ll look at is ‘The Pardoner’s Tale’. He (sort of) represents the Church, the last of the Three Estates, and his is a job that no longer exists in the modern day. People would pay Pardoners to be blessed by their ‘sacred relics’. The theory was that the more blessings you had under your belt, the more likely it was that God would be happy with you and let you into heaven when you died. Sadly though, most if not all of the Pardoners were con-artists and obsessed with making money, which makes his story about greed very appropriate. It’s actually my favourite of them all.

It involves three friends who have seen many of the people they know die because of the plague. They decide that the grim reaper needs to be taught a lesson, as he keeps separating loved ones from each other. Full of booze, they wander off to confront ‘death’ only to find a little old man who tells them that death is actually under a nearby tree; but when they get there, they find instead a big bag of gold. They decide to send one of the three off to get some food and beer to celebrate while the other two guard their new find, but money can corrupt almost anybody... the two men decide to stab their friend when he gets back so as to increase the share of the treasure, he meanwhile poisons the wine they will drink with the same thing in mind! They stab him, drink the wine to celebrate, and so in the end they all end up dead together under the tree. Death was there after all...

After he finishes his story the Pardoner asks if anyone would like to pay to be blessed by his relics, to which Harry replies (roughly) that the only relics he would like to see, would

be the Pardoner's 'plums' cut off and set in a pile of pig poo! Not all religious people were held in high esteem then...

The *Tales* and the three ages of English



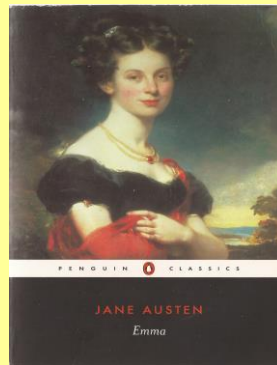
The *Tales* as a book has gone through many writes and re-writes over the centuries, and for the readers of today, whatever their age, this is most certainly a good thing! As it was written so long ago and the English language constantly changes, most people now would struggle to understand Chaucer's original manuscript, yet practically everything that came after *The Canterbury Tales* has been influenced by it. It really has. To prove it to you, I'm afraid we're going to have to take a little trip in a time machine...

Just think of how words and the way we speak have changed over the last, say, two decades. If we took a ride in a time machine back to 1994 – not that long ago - people would have had no idea whatsoever of the meanings of words *we* use, like 'bling' 'Google', 'Facebook' or 'LOL' or even 'i-pod'! So, if going back just 20 years has changed things that much, imagine what 200 years has done to the way people speak and write. If we popped

back in our time machine back to the early 1800s, we'd find ourselves in a time where ideas like the novel, and female writers like Jane Austen, were only just taking off:

'Harriet, she found, had never in her life been within side of the Vicarage, and her curiosity was so extreme, that, considering exteriors and probabilities, Emma could only class it, as a proof of love, with Mr. Elton's seeing ready wit in her.' (Chapter X).

This extract from *Emma*,



one of Jane's most famous books and also one of the first 'proper' novels, may look a little odd to some eyes, but it's still readable... What happens, though, when we go back another 200 years or so, back to the days of the great William Shakespeare?

'His Majesty,
Tend'ring my person's safety, hath appointed
This conduct to convey me to the Tower.' (Richard III, 1.1)

Here, you can see a bigger difference. If this extract sounds a bit like *The Bible*, it's because the 'King James' version, still used in many English speaking churches today, was written at roughly the same time as William (or Bill to his friends) was producing his plays. For instance, think of a famous Bible line like: 'Thou shalt not kill'... the ancient Hebrews certainly did *not* write like that, or even in our language! This era, then, is important, because it is said to be the starting point of what boffins refer to as 'Modern English', one of the three ages of the language.

Impressive, eh? Yep, he was no slouch was Bill. But he didn't 'invent' poetry. Though he remains the best known writer in English ever, he merely improved many of the ideas that had already been around for... yep 200 years (do you see a pattern emerging?) We'd need to go back to the peak of the 'Middle English' period, to our friend Geoffrey and the poetry in his *Canterbury Tales* to find the origins of much of the styles of verse Shakespeare wrote, and indeed that which came after. For instance have a look at the quote below:

This Somonour in his styopes hye stood;
Upon this Frere his herte was so wood
That lyk an aspen leef he quook for ire.

This is the first part of the Prologue of the 'Summoner's Tale'. In our English, it reads:

High in his stirrups stood the summoner,
He was so wild with anger at the friar
That like an aspen leaf he shook with ire.

These are the same sentences, just 600 years apart; but most importantly, the rhythm is the same, and is called 'Iambic Pentameter'. It remains one of the main 'tools' used by poets right up to the present day, and this little section in *The Canterbury Tales* was one of the first times it had ever been used anywhere in English.

However, though Geoffrey and his friends made a great contribution to English, they in turn were improving what was already there! If we went back about another 500 years still, to the time when England was being founded, we'd barely be able to understand English at all. This very first version of the language is now known by most people as 'Old English', and looks like this:

'Ðeos Boc Sceal to Wiogorceastre'

which means:

'This book is meant to go to Worcester'

Difficult, eh? Still, there was some good stuff written back then. JRR Tolkien, who was a very clever chap, thought Old English was so interesting that he decided to take some of the ideas in *Beowulf*, the oldest story of all in English, and turn them into a new story which he called *The Hobbit*!

It's funny 'cos it's true...

The quality of the stories aside, Chaucer's *Tales* as a whole are useful because they offer history fans a glimpse of what life was like back in those days, and not just for the rich as with many other records of the time. Our mate Geoffrey makes a point of including everyone, the fight-ers, the pray-ers and the work-ers, and isn't afraid to portray badly those people he thinks deserve it.

The places he mentions, such as Southwark, Deptford, Greenwich, Sittingbourne and Canterbury are all still there, and in them echoes of Chaucer's time can still be seen today. For instance you could start at Canterbury Cathedral (<http://www.canterbury-cathedral.org/>), which looks much the same as it would have done in his time, or walk through the ancient medieval streets (which have also not changed *that* much since Chaucer's day).



If you've had a big breakfast, from there you could stroll across Kent and try to complete the return trip the pilgrims were never to make. Unless you've had a very big breakfast indeed, you may want to do it in stages, but don't worry, that can be arranged! 'The North Downs Way' (check out their website: <http://www.northdownsway.co.uk/>), are a collection of walks that stretch across southern England to the coast, and provide some lovely views for your walk back to London. A bit nearer home, you could stop off to look at the sites of the old Royal Dockyards at Chatham, Greenwich or Deptford, all of which are steeped in history, before turning up the Old Kent Rd. to visit the tomb of John Gower, Chaucer's friend and fellow writer, at Southwark Cathedral (<http://cathedral.southwark.anglican.org/>)



As a finish to your trip, throw a stone from there and it might land in Tabbard St, a road that carries the same name as Harry Bailly's pub, and probably marks the spot where 'The Tabbard', the place where *The Canterbury Tales* began, might have once stood.

The Canterbury Tales... relevant today?

Well, yes. There aren't enough sausages in the whole world to grade this book to the level it deserves, so I'll have to settle with giving it the perfect score on my sausage-o-meter. As well as being a really interesting collection of stories with good endings and lots of (very entertaining) humour, love, war, politics and philosophy, *The Canterbury Tales* is at least partly responsible for the written English that Shakespeare and others developed, and which

has ultimately been inherited by us. What's more, almost all of the places Chaucer mentions did and still do exist in one form or another, so once you've finished reading the book, you can go and look at them for yourself, or even go and visit the grave(s) of Chaucer (and Shakespeare) in Westminster Abbey!

In ending, then, *The Canterbury Tales* is one of, if not *the* most important book(s) ever written in English, yet it's stayed popular not because it's sacred, or special in some way, but because it really is *that* good; and readers like it not because the people in it are different from them, but because they are the *same*. The characters, stories and the morals they carry hold universal appeal, as do the beauty of the words used to describe them...

10 sausages out of 10

RW Jan 2014