

Geoffrey Chaucer (1343? – 1400)

Chaucer was the son of a wine merchant and was brought up as a page in the household of the Duke of Clarence and later of the King. After fighting in France, where he was taken prisoner, he was sent on diplomatic missions to France and Italy.

In Italy he discovered the works of Boccaccio, including Il Filostrato, which was the main source for Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde.

The Canterbury Tales

The Canterbury Tales was to be a collection of about 120 stories linked together, like Boccaccio's Decameron, by a narrative framework or 'cornice' which is described in the Prologue: the stories are told by a group of pilgrims to amuse each other as they ride to the shrine of St Thomas Becket in Canterbury.

The Canterbury Tales is important both as a literary work and as a historical document. It is the first great poem written in Middle English using the iambic pentameter, which was to become the typical line of English drama and poetry. Moreover, the stories and the portraits of the pilgrims are a lively gallery of medieval society.

The Prologue

The Prologue introduces the setting and the characters. A group of 30 pilgrims, including Chaucer himself, meet at the Tabard Inn in Southwark before setting off on the pilgrimage. The host suggests that each of them should tell two stories on the way to Canterbury and two on the way back. In fact, the poem is unfinished, it includes only about 30 tales.

After an opening section, Chaucer – the pilgrim narrator – introduces the 29 pilgrims who represent several social types, but the upper class and the labourers are missing. For example, there are a Knight, a Prioress, a Monk, an Oxford student, a Cook, a Parson, a Doctor and a Lawyer.

The opening section of the Prologue (extract p. _____)

These are the opening lines of the Prologue. Lines 1-18 describe the general setting: in spring, when people start travelling after the hardships of winter, pilgrims from all over the country go to Canterbury to visit the shrine of Thomas Becket. These lines are characterised by subtle irony and understatement, which are the result of the juxtaposition of images of fertility and the mating season with the pilgrimage situation. This juxtaposition seems to imply that the pilgrims go to Canterbury not only for religious reasons, but also to have fun together and meet other people, especially of the opposite sex.

In lines 19-42, the pilgrim narrator says that he has met 29 people at the Tabard Inn and that he is going to join them on their journey to Canterbury. Before they set off, he is going to describe the pilgrims, their social class and status as well as their garments.