

Saints and Sinners

CHAUCER AND THE CANTERBURY PILGRIMS

The group of travellers which Chaucer describes in his 'Prologue to the Canterbury Tales' are varied characters who have been established in the popular imagination over several centuries since the author completed his work on them towards the end of the fourteenth century. Chaucer actually spent about 13 years writing the 'Prologue' and Tales in the "Canterbury" series but there were several times when the author may have diverted his interests elsewhere during that period.

No one can forget the inspiration with which Chaucer started the 'Prologue' revealing his deep insight into nature and the passing of the seasons:

'Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote,
Hath pierc'd the droughte of March to the route; And palmers go to seek the holy reliques...'

Nor can we forget the liveliness of the Wife of Bath, the serious diligence of the Clerk of Oxford or the perfect, gentle Knight. In this regard Chaucer was basing his 'types' of human character on the real people he encountered on his journeys in the Middle Ages. This period of the fourteenth century was notable for the apparent reverence for things 'holy' with which characters were keen to be identified. The most dedicated wished to be blessed by God for their efforts in visiting the holy relics of saints like Saint Thomas A' Becket who died for his defence of the Church's values in an age of baronial feuding and coercive kingship. Indeed, Thomas, himself formerly a friend of King Henry II, was probably the victim of a piece of kingly caprice; the king reportedly saying on a whim: "Who will rid me of this turbulent priest?" When we couple these perceptions with an outline in which the pilgrims are anticipated to tell of their experiences through the medium of narratives based upon human nature; then we know we're going to be in for a thrill.

Geoffrey Chaucer had himself been variously employed as a page, a diplomat and, possibly, as a spy working abroad. This experience had allowed Chaucer to travel widely in Europe, and particularly in France and Italy. There he would have undoubtedly been introduced to the works of contemporary writers such as Boccaccio, who wrote a piece called 'The Decameron', as well as Dante Alighieri who wrote 'The Purgatorio'; 'The Inferno' and 'The Paradiso'; works collectively referred to as 'The Divine Comedy'. Naturally, the works of the Troubadour poets and the courtly literature in France would have been of interest to an eager mind such as that which Chaucer undoubtedly possessed. He also translated the "Roman de la Rose" from the French in the productive years 1369-87.

Here was the basis for creating a new English Literature, one which would be based on the new fusion of literary types and the languages most prevalent at court: namely, Medieval or 'Church' Latin; Norman French; the new English which superseded AngloSaxon (although many words and roots of AngloSaxon words remained the same). Chaucer could quite realistically be named as the Father of English Literature.

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The pilgrimages to Canterbury, to the shrine of Thomas A Becket were held every three years.

The congregated pilgrims were known to frequent and meet for the journey at the Tabard Inn in Southwick, London, where Chaucer's father, John, had once been an innkeeper.

'What that Aprille with his shores sote
The droghte of Marche hath perced to the rote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licour,
Of which vertu engendred is the flour...
And smale fowles maken melodye. ..
Than longen folk to goon on pilgrimages. ..'

(Chaucer's Canterbury Tales).

SOURCES of further information on the topics of Chaucer and Pilgrimages can be revealed by reference to books like 'Chaucer's World' and websites such as York University's www.york.ac.uk/projects/pilgrimage.

For diligent students there are, in addition, numerous commentaries, modern 'translations' such as that published by Penguin and critical works.