



GEOFFREY CHAUCER'S THE PROLOGUE TO THE CANTERBURY TALES AS A GALLERY OF PORTRAITS

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ABSTRACT

Geoffrey Chaucer, the son of John Chaucer, a wine merchant of London, was born about 1340. His father was connected with the royal family perhaps as purveyor of wine and Chaucer himself became at seventeen a page to the page to the wife of the Duke of Clarence, third son of Edward III. Two years later he went to the French wars where he was taken prisoner and was ransomed by the King himself. After his return he was appointed Valet of the King's chamber. He was certainly married and had a son named Lewis to whom he dedicated his Treatise on the Astrolabe. Not much is known of his wife, Philippa, who is believed to have been sister to the wife of John of Lancaster, his great patron. She is said to have died in 1387. From about 1370 when he was thirty to 1378 he was employed on diplomatic missions to France and Italy. About this time he was a member of Parliament for Kent and also held the office of comptroller of Customs in the port of London. In addition he was granted a pension and was generally prosperous throughout life except for a brief spell during the disgrace of John of Gaunt under Richard II. He died in 1400 and was buried in Westminster Abbey.

INTRODUCTION

The Canterbury Tales begin with a Prologue which constitutes the framework for the tales. Thirty pilgrims including Chaucer have put up at the Tabard inn in Southwark. They are bound on a pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Thomas a Becket at Canterbury. After supper the host of Tabard offers to join the party and be a guide and master of ceremonies. He proposes that to beguile the tedium of the journey each pilgrim should tell two tales on the forward journey and two on the return journey. The teller of the best story to be judged by the host is to be entertained to a supper at the Tabard at the general expense.

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Thethirtyone pilgrims are drawn from all classes except royalty. The military or fighting class is represented by the Knight, his son and their Yeoman; a Doctor, a Lawyer, a Clerk or Student of Oxford and the poet himself represent the liberal professions. Those connected with the land are a Franklin, a Reeve and a Ploughman; the trade is represented by a Merchant, a Shipman, a Haberdasher, and the Host of the Tabard. The crafts are represented by the Wife of Bath, a Carpenter, a Weaver, a Dyer and a Tapicer or Tapestry-maker. A munciple and a Cook complete the secular group. The Religious Order, the most numerous of all, includes the poor Parson, a Monk, a Friar, a Prioress with her chaplain nun and three priests, a Summoner and a Pardoner.

The Prologue is a masterpiece of characterization. Nothing like it existed in medieval literature, nor has it been equaled, much less surpassed, to this day. It is a picture gallery depicting the contemporary society of England (14th Century) in all its variety and colour. Each pilgrim is at once an individual and a type of the class or calling to which he belongs. The technique which Chaucer has employed to achieve this is simply admirable. He first sketches the outline of a character by broadly describing the characteristic or typical features of his profession. Then he fills it up with minute details, physical or moral, that make it palpitate with life. And all this is done with the careless air of a master artist. He piles up the details in a casual, haphazard, table-talk fashion and yet with such touches of ironic humour as to make the resultant portrait not only strongly individual but highly amusing. His carelessness is studied and deliberate and is designed to give the impression of naturalness and spontaneity. This naivete indeed is the most charming quality of Chaucer's. In the midst of a most finely wrought description of the Prioress so simple, shy, prim Chaucer innocently and casually observes how elaborately careful she was in her table manners. We have thus an amusing picture of a nun aping a society girl.

Chaucer is one of the greatest painters of character in the field of English literature. His *The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* is an excellent picture gallery and his pilgrims are like thirtyone portraits. All these portraits are hung on the wall in the wide scale of his narrative art. The wonderful picture gallery has extended to about 855 lines in which complete sketches of the various pilgrims have been given with even minute details. Common aspects of human life like the habits, manners, speech, dress, physical feature, peculiarities of various habits etc. have been narrated quite well. When we look at each of Chaucer's character, we really feel that it is a pen-picture of human beings.

Chaucer's art of characterization is excellent. He paints his characters from direct observation as a painter paints certain natural scenes from direct observation. Chaucer is gifted with a supreme power of observation. He has drawn many characters from real life and from his own acquaintances. Such characters are the wife of Bath and the clerk of Oxford. Actually

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speaking, Chaucer's characters are neither saints nor devils but they are living and breathing like human beings.

Chaucer does not follow any systematic method of narrating his character. For example, sometimes he begins with the description of the dress and manner and sometimes he makes the super use of contrast to heighten effect. He also heightens the effect by apt similes and metaphors. For instance, he has described the happy nature of the squire in a fantastic manner, 'He is as bright as the month of May.'

Chaucer's characters are also true to the whole classes of men and women. No doubt, all characters represent some particular age group, profession etc. But these characters definitely differ from one another. For instance, the character of the Prioress is contrasted with that of the wife of Bath. In short, Chaucer's characters are types as well as individuals.

Almost all the characters represent the cross section of the 14th century English society. So many traits of the human beings of Chaucer's time can be easily perceived by going through the prologue. Moreover his characters not only give typical traits or characteristics of different characters but also show theory of knighthood, medical profession, scholarship and religion of his time. For instance, the Miller reveals the corn profession, the doctor reveals the medical profession, the knight reveals the spirit of the chivalry etc.

Certain features of the plan strike the reader at once and hence need only be mentioned. The sketches were devised to provide representative of the chief classes of English society. No one ever supposed that there was one knight, one lawyer, one monk etc. Some critics have praised Chaucer's portraits especially for their realism, sharp individuality, deep psychology and vividness of felt life. The noblest and lowest class of labourers are not included in the Prologue as it was not convenient for them to travel in the fashion of the group. Chaucer gives a very clear picture of the monastic order of his time by describing the character of the monk, the Prioress the nun and the Friar. Almost all the characters of Chaucer are the complete pictures of real human beings. All these characters represent typical persons of different classes belonging to the 14th century. Whatever details Chaucer has given on each of the characters-whatever details Chaucer has given about his characters are complete ones. Thus Chaucer's prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* is really a picture gallery.



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