

Critical comments on "The Canterbury Tales"

✓ 1. The great work of the English period is *The Canterbury Tales* with its realistic setting in contemporary England. Here we immediately notice a difference from the other periods; the English influence is not a literary one, like the French and the Italian, but is simply the influence of the breadth, scope, and zest of Chaucer's own land and age. The specific literary influences are still French, Italian and Latin, but the setting is no longer in dream-worlds or in ancient Troy: it is on the road between London and Canterbury. Into this setting, Chaucer could pour the whole wealth of his reading, his knowledge, his wide experience of men, and his humorous tolerance.

2. Since the pilgrims come from all walks of life and all occupations, from knight to cook and miller, the company represents the whole range of medieval English society. And as each tale told—with one or two exceptions—suits the character and taste of the teller, the stories cover all possible medieval literary types from stately romance to salty *fabliau*¹. Not the least entertaining parts of *The Canterbury Tales* are the links between the stories, in which the narrators themselves speak or have their squables settled by the jolly host of the Tabard, who makes the pilgrimage to act as master of ceremonies and to see to it that such a goodly company stops at no other inn on the return voyage.

3. As we leave *The Prologue* and proceed with *The Tales* and links, these personalities reveal themselves still further. Lowes says: "*The Prologue* gives us the tellers statically in their potentialities. But as the cavalcade² moves on the static³ becomes dynamic⁴. Antagonisms flame up, a drunken pilgrim insists on telling his tale out of turn; the shipman flatly refuses to hear a sermon from the Parson and promises a tale that will wake the company up; a cleric

¹ A short story in verse with comic and realistic incidents

² procession

³ stationary; inactive

⁴ active and showing change