THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO *THE CANTERBURY TALES*

Chaucer's best-known poem, *The Canterbury Tales*, is justly celebrated for its richness and variety, both literary – the *Tales* include fabliaux, romances, sermons, hagiographies, fantasies, satires, treatises, fables, and *exempla* – and thematic, with its explorations of courtly love and scatology, piety and impiety, chivalry and pacifism, fidelity and adultery. Students new to Chaucer will find in this *Companion* a lively introduction to the poem's diversity, depth, and wonder. Readers returning to the *Tales* will appreciate the chapters' fresh engagement with the individual tales and their often complicated critical histories, inflected in recent decades by critical approaches attentive to issues of gender, sexuality, class, and language.

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PREFACE

In 2002 I was slated to teach the Chaucer course, and I had the great idea that on the first day of class I would show a clip from Brian Helgeland's *A Knight's Tale*, which famously adds a young Geoffrey Chaucer to the entourage of a peasant-squire-turned-knight working his way through the fourteenth-century "tournament circuit." The movie had been released in the previous year and grossed a decent $56 million domestically,[1] so it seemed like the perfect source for one of those hep pop-culture tie-ins that medievalists are justly famous for, all the more because of Chaucer's memorable first appearance. Roughly fifteen minutes into the film, the main characters are ambling down a suspiciously well-graded medieval French country road when they are overtaken by a completely naked stranger, who trudges doggedly if affably past them. This turns out to be Geoffrey Chaucer – "Chaucer? The writer?" he helpfully suggests, to a collection of utterly blank looks – whose gambling losses have reduced him to this bare, unaccommodated state. My plan was to show this scene not just to correct the mistaken impressions it might give – he was not really a skinny naked guy with a gambling problem, so far as we know – but also to acknowledge the way in which the scene does convey certain familiar ideas, two of the things that "everybody knows" about Geoffrey Chaucer's work: that its language makes it difficult (he casually drops a Latin phrase, which he then kindly translates for both his auditors in the film and the audience in the theater), and that it is frequently bawdy (hence Chaucer's own buttocks are recruited in the film to do the work typically displaced on to someone else's – Nicholas or Alisoun or grumpy Thomas in *The Merchant's Tale*). Interesting discussions would ensue – at least, that was the plan. But a different sequence of events unfolded when I showed up to class with my cued-up VHS tape (2002, remember). "We're going to start with a clip," I announced – possibly even before I introduced myself – and I hit "play." The scene began, but alas, there was no sound. I stopped, fiddled with the equipment, rewound, and tried again: silence. Two or three more tries brought me to the limit of my abilities,

so I stepped out of the classroom and used the Bat-phone in the hallway to call the technology support office, which dispatched an agent at once. He arrived quite soon and went directly to work, trying again all of the things that I had already tried that hadn't worked, and a few more tricks that also didn't work: fiddle, rewind, play, sigh, repeat. At some point – a point rather farther along than was really optimal – it dawned on me that I had now spent about fifteen minutes showing my class the same few seconds of Paul Bettany's backside silently twerking its way down a country road, over and over and over, without a word of explanation. I turned away from the uncooperative technology and looked out over the stunned faces of my new students. Some were obviously amused, some looked scandalized, and at least a couple of them wore faces that seemed to say "Yes, I've seen English professors struggle with the AV equipment before, but you've really given me something new for my money here." I cut my losses, dismissed my unhelpful helper, and got to work convincing the class that every day wasn't going to begin like this.[2]

I offer this anecdote to suggest that, if Chaucer himself needs an introduction, I may not be the best person to provide it. But I'm happy to offer a few words about this book, *The Cambridge Companion to The Canterbury Tales*.

Since just 2010, *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* has supplied in its annual bibliography more than 2,100 annotated entries describing books and essays on Chaucer, more than a third of them primarily or exclusively concerned with the *Canterbury Tales*. Numbers like that obviously point to a robust scholarly enterprise; the study of Chaucer and his *Tales* is being pursued with as much energy and industry as ever, as a parallel survey of academic conferences or of scholarly organizations also shows. But such numbers also suggest the difficulty of simply keeping up with the state of the discipline, much less establishing a first foothold in it: the prospect of successfully catching the tenor of some Burkean conversation about, say, *The Wife of Bath's Tale* grows more daunting by the day. And since the *Canterbury Tales* is Chaucer's most frequently taught poem, it's not only the text students most often encounter, but also the one that instructors, whose training may or may not have prepared them to teach it, most often have to confront.

The Cambridge Companion series is designed to respond to exactly such needs, and this volume hews to the series standard by offering "a lively, accessible introduction" to the work of a major writer. The chapters in this volume, like the *Canterbury Tales*, represent a collection of distinct voices and styles; the contributors are united in a common enterprise but hardly unanimous in their conclusions or methods. Some chapters use the critical history of a tale to structure an exploration of its salient points of interest; some use the tale's narrative to provide entrée to that critical history and to

the issues that have occupied it; some start with the salient topics and move through the narrative according to those rubrics. All of the contributors can claim long acquaintance with Chaucer, both scholarly and pedagogical.

"Companionship" turns out to be an especially appropriate metaphor to draw on when it comes to helping new readers approach the *Tales*. After all, it is framed as a story of companionship, though Chaucer calls his collection of pilgrims-turned-storytellers a "felaweshipe," using the word in both its descriptive and evaluative senses. "In felaweshipe wel koude she laughe and carp" (1.474), he writes of the Wife of Bath, capturing both her circumstances and her attitude, both her literal comradeship and her amiable camaraderie. Traveling with a companion, of course, is different from hiring a guide. Guides supply everything that's known about the destination – the full history, the curious myths, the common misconceptions and the appropriate correctives, the way there and the way back. They are exhaustive (and sometimes exhausting) in their coverage, they've heard all the questions before, and they have a full stock of answers. There is no carping allowed, in its modern sense of querulous complaint. Travel with a guide and you will not be distracted by detours, or at least not for very long. When the tour is over, it's over.

A companion, on the other hand, is someone who has been there before, and wants to take you back to visit her favorite spots. The attention that is paid is more selective: there are some places where you might want to linger, while other stops are dropped from the agenda – too touristy, too conventional, not what they're cracked up to be. The undertaking is less transactional, and more of an invitation to share your companion's investment and excitement. The risks are perhaps greater: you may not find everything on offer equally wonderful, which may lead to arguments and episodes of falling-out. That's what happens in the *Canterbury Tales*, in fact; not every tale leaves every pilgrim listener happy, and although the irritation is sometimes papered over for a time, for the sake of the fellowship, just as often the antagonism is ongoing and becomes a generative force, thanks to the acts of narrative one-upmanship that Chaucer calls "quiting."

Another way to put this is to say that a companion solicits your engagement, and not just your admiration, and that's the goal of this book. It brings together a group of scholars charged with both explaining and inviting, with making the *Canterbury Tales* accessible to new and returning readers and with preparing those readers for their own further, independent investigations. It's a *Companion* designed to widen the circle of potential companions, to make entry into the fellowship attractive and rewarding. Its unique advantage is that its subject is the perennially appealing Chaucer, who was the focus of the very first *Cambridge Companion* more than thirty years ago.

Preface

The *Canterbury Tales* obviously organizes itself by tale, and nowadays what is typically excerpted or anthologized is an individual tale or group of tales, not (or not anymore) exemplary extracts. This volume is organized for the most part in the same way, by tale rather than theme. This may be a conventional *forma tractatus*, but given the kind of utility the volume seeks, it has a certain undeniable efficiency. One consequence, though, given production constraints, is that certain tales are not represented; in fact, only about half of the tales can claim a stand-alone chapter. Decisions about what to include and what to sacrifice can, some would argue, have a certain auto-canonizing effect; the rich tales get richer, and the Squire and the Second Nun *hoppe alwey byhynde*. I have to reject this notion, though, since behind such reasoning lies the disreputable assumption that students and other new companions will only read what gets put in front of them, and nothing more – that the only alternative to whetting an appetite is to surfeit it. I prefer to think of these instances of editorial ascesis as a gift both to readers, who have the pleasure of more Chaucer to look forward to, and to reviewers, who will have something to be scandalized about. In addition, this volume does not include separate chapters on contextual material, on the justifiable assumption that readers who turn to this book are likely to be in possession of an anthology or omnibus or selection of Chaucer's poetry, which will inevitably contain a section on his language, a brief (or longer) biography, and a sketch of the social and intellectual context of the era. For those looking for additional background information, I'm happy to recommend *The Cambridge Companion to Chaucer*, 2nd edn, edited by Piero Boitani and Jill Mann (Cambridge, 2004).

One thing that the present volume does include is a Postscript. "How to Talk about Chaucer with Your Friends and Colleagues" is a section of shorter essays designed to address the fact that our encounters with the *Canterbury Tales* take place not in isolation or in purely critical and intellectual terms but in larger administrative, pedagogical, and technological contexts, in which the question "Why Chaucer?" does not generate a single, permanent answer. If the longer essays offer access to the Chaucerian fellowship, this last group supplies some of the vocabulary necessary for missionary work.

I close with expressions of gratitude to Linda Bree of Cambridge University Press, the First Mover whose *wise purveiaunce* led to the production of this volume, and to the book's contributors, who responded inventively and with great forbearance to my editorial interventions, which were not always models of *gentilesse*.

1. Internet Movie Database, www.imdb.com/title/tt0183790/. 2. It turned out, by the way, to be a bad sound cable – the kind of problem that was never going to be turned up by on-the-fly classroom diagnostics.

NOTE ON THE TEXT

The *Riverside Chaucer* remains the scholarly standard when it comes to editions of Chaucer, and of the *Canterbury Tales*. But in the present academic publishing environment, it is by no means the most available volume, especially for beginning students. Accordingly the reference text for this *Companion* is Jill Mann's classroom edition (Penguin, 2005), a widely accessible paperback. The *Tales* are cited by fragment and line number. Quotations from Chaucer's other works are drawn from the *Riverside*.

CHRONOLOGY

1327	Edward III crowned
1337	Edward lays claim to French crown, beginning the Hundred Years War (1337–1453)
c. 1340	Birth of Chaucer
1348–49	Black Death; plague returns in 1361 and intermittently thereafter
1357	Chaucer in service of Countess of Ulster as a page
1359–60	Chaucer taken prisoner in Normandy; Edward III contributes to his £16 ransom
1365/66	Chaucer marries Philippa de Roet, lady-in-waiting to Edward's queen Phillipa; travels to Spain
1367	Chaucer granted life annuity of twenty marks per year by Edward III; birth of Chaucer's son Thomas
1368	Possible first visit of Chaucer to Italy
c. 1369–72	*Book of the Duchess*; "Fragment A" of the *Romance of the Rose*
1369	Chaucer an esquire in the royal household
1372–73	Chaucer visits Genoa and Florence as part of a diplomatic mission
1374	Death of Petrarch
1374	Chaucer appointed Controller of Customs in London (renewed 1382); granted a pitcher of wine daily by Edward III; leases a house over Aldgate in the London city wall
1375	Death of Boccaccio
1376	"Good Parliament" condemns corruption in Edward's government
1377	Death of Edward III; accession of his grandson Richard II, aged ten; Chaucer travels in France for negotiations concerning Richard's marriage

Chronology

1378	Chaucer visits Lombardy; John Gower serves as one of his attorneys in his absence
1378	Great Schism: rival popes in Rome and in Avignon (until 1409)
c. 1378–80	*House of Fame* and *Anelida and Arcite*
c. 1380–82	*Parliament of Fowls*
1380	Cecily Champain unconditionally releases Geoffrey Chaucer from all actions concerning her rape or anything else, "omnimodas acciones tam de raptu meo tam de aliqua alia re vel causa"
1381	Rising of 1381 ("Peasants' Revolt"): portions of London burned; Archbishop of Canterbury and Treasurer executed by rebels
c. 1382–86	*Boece* and *Troilus and Criseyde*
1385	Eustace Deschamps sends a ballade to the "Grant translateur, noble Geoffrey Chaucier"
c. 1385–87	*Legend of Good Women*
1385–87	Thomas Usk's *Testament of Love* refers to Chaucer as "the noble philosophical poete in Englissh"
1385–89	Chaucer a Justice of the Peace in Kent
1386	Chaucer a Member of Parliament for Kent; resigns controllership and gives up Aldgate house
1387	Death of Philippa Chaucer?
c. 1387	Chaucer begins *Canterbury Tales*
1388	"Merciless Parliament": Lords Appellant impeach and execute officials close to Richard
1389–91	Chaucer appointed Clerk of the King's Works, Commissioner of Walls and Ditches
c. 1390	Gower's *Confessio Amantis* has Venus refer to Chaucer as "mi disciple and mi poete" and "myn owne clerk"
1391–92	*Treatise of the Astrolabe*
1391	Chaucer appointed deputy forester of the Royal Forest of North Petherton
1394	Richard II renews and increases Chaucer's annuity
1397	"Revenge Parliament" undoes work of Merciless Parliament
1398	Richard II grants Chaucer a tun of wine (≈250 gallons) per year
1399	Richard II deposed by his cousin Henry Bolingbroke, who takes the throne as Henry IV

Chronology

1399	Henry IV renews and supplements Chaucer's annuity; Chaucer takes a fifty-three-year lease on a residence in the precincts of Westminster Abbey
1400	Death of Chaucer (traditionally October 25)
1407	Chaucer's son Thomas elected Speaker of the House of Commons (again in 1410, 1411, 1414, and 1421)
1476	William Caxton produces first printed edition of *The Canterbury Tales*

ABBREVIATIONS

ChR	*Chaucer Review*
MED	*Middle English Dictionary*, ed. H. Kurath, S. Kuhn, and R. E. Lewis, 22 vols., Anne Arbor, MI, 1952–2001; online edition http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med
PMLA	*Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*
Riverside	*The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson, Boston, 1987/Oxford, 1988
SAC	*Studies in the Age of Chaucer*
Sources and Analogues	*Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*, ed. Robert Correale and Mary Hamel, 2 vols., Cambridge, 2002–05.

References in notes with * are given in full in the Further Reading.