## The Arrangement of *The Canterbury Tales*

As the Introduction points out, *The Canterbury Tales* is an unfinished work. Excluding the Host, who as arbiter would not be expected to contribute a tale, there are thirty-two pilgrims in the company. Of this number, only twenty-three are called forward to tell stories, and only Chaucer himself relates more than one tale. As several of the linking passages are missing, these twenty-four stories do not form a continuous narrative chain but ten separate fragments, varying in length from a single prologue and tale to a linked series of six tales. The order of these fragments in the Chaucer manuscripts does not coincide with stages in the progress of the pilgrimage: in fact, some of the tales told near Canterbury are given places in the earlier groups of stories. An alternative sequence has been suggested but, as Chaucer evidently did not leave the fragments in any finally determined order, their arrangement in the manuscripts is as logical as any other. It runs as shown below. Asterisks denote the tales which have no separate introduction or prologue.

*Fragment I:*       *The General Prologue*
                    *The Knight's Tale*
                    *The Miller's Tale*
                    *The Reeve's Tale*
                    *The Cook's Tale (unfinished)*

*Fragment II:*      *The Sergeant of the Law's Tale*

*Fragment III:*     *The Wife of Bath's Tale*
                    *The Friar's Tale*
                    *The Summoner's Tale*

*Fragment IV:*      *The Clerk's Tale*
                    *The Merchant's Tale*

# Chaucer's English

Chaucer wrote in Middle English, a form of the language current between about 1150 and 1500. Its grammar and vocabulary reflect the influence of other languages, predominantly Anglo-Saxon, French and German. For this reason Middle English is not immediately familiar to the modern reader. The notes to this edition of *The General Prologue* translate difficult phrases, and the glossary gives modern equivalents for single words which have either changed their form or dropped out of use. The following notes, intended as hints to the beginner, list only words and grammatical forms found in *The General Prologue*.

## Verbs

Infinitives end in -*n*; as in *to goon*, to go or to walk; *to seken*, to seek; *to ben*, to be; and *to stonden*, to stand. *Stonden* shows the very frequent substitution of *o* for the modern *a* (see below).

Past participles often begin with *y-*: as in *yronne*, run; *yfalle*, fallen; *yknowe*, disclosed; and *ytaught*, informed. *Yclepen*, called, from the infinitive *clepen*, is an example of participle form closer to modern English.

Plural forms sometimes appear in -*n*: as in *they weren*, they were; and *that slepen*, that sleep.

The negative is usually formed by prefixing *ne* to the verb; as in *ne was*, was not; *he ne knew*, he did not know; and *n'arette*, do not impute. In the case of common verbs the prefix is often absorbed into the word, as in *nas = ne was*, was not, and *noot = ne woot*, did not know. Double negatives are plentifully used: *nas nat*, was not; *ne lefte nat*, did not leave; *nowher noon*, nowhere any; *nas noon swich*, was no such.

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### 'Kan' and 'Knowen'

In modern English the same verb is used to denote two distinct kinds of knowing; those represented in French by *savoir* and *connaître*, and in German by *können* and *wissen*. Middle English allowed the same distinction to be made between practical ability, or know-how, and intellectual grasp. *Kan* and *koude* convey the sense of knowing how to do something, or of possessing special talent or expertise. The modern forms 'can' and 'could' are not a satisfactory equivalent for these strong Middle English verbs. Thus:

> *wel koude he sitte on hors*
> he was an expert horseman.

> *noon that kan so muchel of daliaunce*
> no one who knows so well how to be charming and amusing.

> *she koude of that art the olde daunce*
> she knew all the ins and outs of that game.

*Knowen* is used to describe various kinds of intellectual activity – distinguishing, recognising, detecting, understanding and so on. This verb cannot usually be translated simply as 'to know'. Thus,

> *he knew the tavernes wel*
> he was well acquainted with the taverns.

> *that he ne knew his sleighte*
> but he detected his cheating.

> *and knew hir conseil*
> and made himself familiar with their secrets.

The distinction of sense between *kan* and *knowen* is illustrated by Chaucer's comment on the Cook,

> *wel koude he knowe a draughte of Londoun ale*
> he was an expert taster of London ale

## Spelling

Among old spellings the commonest forms are:

In pronouns, *h* for the modern *th*; as in *hem* for them, and *hir* or *hire* for their. But note that *hir* is also used for her.

Initial *y* in place of the modern *g*; as in *yeve*, *yaf*, for give, gave, and *yeldehalle* for guildhall. Used internally, the substituted *y* produces *foryete*, forget, and *foryeven*, forgiven.

Terminal -*we* in nouns now ending -*ow*; as in *arwe* for arrow, *halwes* for hallows, *morwe* for morrow and *pilwe* for pillow; and in adjectives, *holwe* for hollow. Similarly, terminal -*ne* where the modem form is -*en*, as in *festne* for fasten, *chiknes* for chickens.

As noted above, internal *o* frequently occurs where *a* now appears; as in *lond* for land, *stonde* for stand, *strondes* for strands = shores. Compare *dronken* for drunken, *song* for sung, and *dong* for dung.

Double vowels give an unfamiliar appearance to words which have now either dropped one or adopted a terminal *e* in place of the doubled letter: thus *caas* for case, *estaat* for estate, *maad* for made and *smoot* for smote; and *reed* for red, *leet* for let, *boold* for bold.

## Some deceptive phrases

*hem thoughte* = it seemed to them (*hem* is dative; compare *as it thoughte me*).

*him was levere* = he would rather (literally: it was preferable to him).

*which they weren* = who, or what kind of people, they were.

In several adverbial phrases, 'that' is intrusive – for example, *whan that* = when, *er that* = before, *al be that* = although, *how that* = how, *sin that* = since.

Some of the terms derived immediately from French are deceptive in meaning – for example, *aventure* does not mean adventure but chance. *Verray* = true, truly; *pleyn* = *full*, fully, and *port* = demeanour. Note too that *fredom* does not mean freedom but generosity.

## Note on the text

The text which follows is based upon that of F. N. Robinson (*The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 2nd ed., 1957).[1] The punctuation has been revised, with special reference to the exclamation marks. Spelling has been partly rationalised, by substituting i for y wherever the change aids the modern reader and does not affect the semantic value of the word. Thus *smylyng* becomes 'smiling', and *nyghtyngale* 'nightingale', but *wyn* (wine), *lyk* (like), and *fyr* (fire) are allowed to stand.

### Note on pronunciation

These equivalences are intended to offer only a rough guide.

### Short vowels

$\breve{a}$ represents the sound now written *u*, as in 'cut'

$\breve{e}$ as in modern 'set'

$\breve{i}$ as in modern 'is'

$\breve{o}$ as in modern 'top'

$\breve{u}$ as in modern 'put' (not as in 'cut')

final -*e* represents the neutral vowel sound in '*a*bout' or atten*tio*n'. It is silent when the next word in the line begins with a vowel or an *h*.

### Long vowels

$\bar{a}$ as in modern 'car' (not as in 'name')

$\bar{e}$ (open – i.e. where the equivalent modern word is spelt with *ea*) as in modern 'there'

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[1] Two lines acknowledged as authentic by Robinson have incorporated into the text following line 253. For this reason, line-references after this point of the present edition do not correspond with those of some other editions of the General Prologue.

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ē (close – i.e. where the equivalent modern word is spelt with *ee* or *e*) represents the sound now written *a* as in 'take'

ī as in modern 'machine' (not as in 'like')

ō (open – i.e. where the equivalent modern vowel is pronounced as in 'br*o*ther', 'm*oo*d' or 'g*oo*d') represents the sound now written *aw* as in 'fawn'

ō (close – i.e. where the equivalent modern vowel is pronounced as in 'road') as in modem 'note'

ū as in French *tu* or German *Tür*

## Diphthongs

*ai* and *ei* both roughly represent the sound now written *i* or *y* as in 'die' or 'dye'

*au* and *aw* both represent the sound now written *ow* or *ou* as in 'now' or 'pounce'

*ou* and *ow* have two pronunciations: as in *through* where the equivalent modern vowel is pronounced as in 'through' or 'mouse'; and as in *pounce* where the equivalent modern vowel is pronounced as in 'know' or 'thought'

## Writing of vowels and diphthongs

A long vowel is often indicated by doubling, as in *roote* or *eek*. The ŭ sound is sometimes represented by an *o* as in *yong*. The *au* sound is sometimes represented by an *a*, especially before *m* or *n*, as in *cha(u)mbre* or *cha(u)nce*.

## Consonants

Largely as in modern English, except that many consonants now silent were still pronounced. *Gh* was pronounced as in Scottish 'lo*ch*', and both consonants should be pronounced in such groups as the following: '*gn*acchen', '*kn*ave', 'wo*rd*', '*fo*lk', '*wr*ong'.

# The General Prologue

Here biginneth the Book of the Tales of Caunterbury

Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veine in swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his halve cours yronne,
And smale foweles maken melodie,
That slepen al the night with open ye            10
(So priketh hem nature in hir corages);
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,
And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,
To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;
And specially from every shires ende
Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende,
The hooly blisful martir for to seke,
That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke.
    Bifil that in that seson on a day,
In Southwerk at the Tabard as I lay            20
Redy to wenden on my pilgrimage
To Caunterbury with ful devout corage,
At night was come into that hostelrie
Wel nine and twenty in a compaignie,
Of sondry folk, by aventure yfalle
In felaweshipe, and pilgrimes were they alle,
That toward Caunterbury wolden ride.
The chambres and the stables weren wide,
And wel we weren esed atte beste.
And shortly, whan the sonne was to reste,            30

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So hadde I spoken with hem everichon
That I was of hir felaweshipe anon,
And made forward erly for to rise,
To take oure wey ther as I yow devise.
    But nathelees, whil I have time and space,
Er that I ferther in this tale pace,
Me thinketh it acordaunt to resoun
To telle yow al the condicioun
Of ech of hem, so as it semed me,
And whiche they weren, and of what degree,                    40
And eek in what array that they were inne;
And at a knight than wol I first biginne.
    A KNIGHT ther was, and that a worthy man,
That fro the time that he first bigan
To riden out, he loved chivalrie,
Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie.
Ful worthy was he in his lordes werre,
And therto hadde he riden, no man ferre,
As wel in cristendom as in hethenesse,
And evere honoured for his worthiness.                        50
At Alisaundre he was whan it was wonne.
Ful ofte time he hadde the bord bigonne
Aboven alle nacions in Pruce;
In Lettow hadde he reysed and in Ruce,
No Cristen man so ofte of his degree.
In Gernade at the seege eek hadde he be
Of Algezir, and riden in Belmarie.
At Lyeys was he and at Satalie,
Whan they were wonne; and in the Grete See
At many a noble armee hadde he be.                            60
At mortal batailles hadde he been fiftene,
And foughten for oure feith at Tramissene
In listes thries, and ay slain his foo.
This ilke worthy knight hadde been also

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