

The General Prologue of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales MIC, ENGLISH, SEM- IV

Themes in The Canterbury Tales

The Pervasiveness of Courtly Love

The phrase “courtly love” refers to a set of ideas about love that was enormously influential on the literature and culture of the Middle Ages. Beginning with the Troubadour poets of southern France in the eleventh century, poets throughout Europe promoted the notions that true love only exists outside of marriage; that true love may be idealized and spiritual, and may exist without ever being physically consummated; and that a man becomes the servant of the lady he loves. Together with these basic premises, courtly love encompassed a number of minor motifs.

One of these is the idea that love is a torment or a disease, and that when a man is in love he cannot sleep or eat, and therefore he undergoes physical changes, sometimes to the point of becoming unrecognizable. Although very few people's lives resembled the courtly love ideal in any way, these themes and motifs were extremely popular and widespread in medieval and Renaissance literature and culture. They were particularly popular in the literature and culture that were part of royal and noble courts.

Courtly love motifs first appear in *The Canterbury Tales* with the description of the Squire in the General Prologue. The Squire's role in society is exactly that of his father the Knight, except for his lower status, but the Squire is very different from his father in that he incorporates the ideals of courtly love into his interpretation of his own role. Indeed, the Squire is practically a parody of the traditional courtly lover. The description of the Squire establishes a pattern that runs throughout the General Prologue, and *The Canterbury Tales*: characters whose roles are defined by their religious or economic functions integrate the cultural ideals of courtly love into their dress, their behavior, and the tales they tell, in order to give a slightly different twist to their roles. Another such character is the Prioress, a nun who sports a “Love Conquers All” brooch.

The Importance of Company

Many of Chaucer's characters end their stories by wishing the rest of the “compaignye,” or company, well. The Knight ends with “God save al this faire compaignye” (3108), and the

Reeve with “God, that sitteth heighe in magestee, / Save al this compaignye, grete and smale!” (4322–4323). Company literally signifies the entire group of people, but Chaucer’s deliberate choice of this word over other words for describing masses of people, like the Middle English words for party, mixture, or group, points us to another major theme that runs throughout *The Canterbury Tales*.

Company derives from two Latin words, *com*, or “with,” and *pane*, or “bread.” Quite literally, a company is a group of people with whom one eats, or breaks bread. The word for good friend, or “companion,” also comes from these words. But, in a more abstract sense, company had an economic connotation. It was the term designated to connote a group of people engaged in a particular business, as it is used today. The functioning and well-being of medieval communities, not to mention their overall happiness, depended upon groups of socially bonded workers in towns and guilds, known informally as companies.

If workers in a guild or on a feudal manor were not getting along well, they would not produce good work, and the economy would suffer. They would be unable to bargain, as a modern union does, for better working conditions and life benefits. Eating together was a way for guild members to cement friendships, creating a support structure for their working community. Guilds had their own special dining halls, where social groups got together to bond, be merry, and form supportive alliances. When the peasants revolted against their feudal lords in 1381, they were able to organize themselves well precisely because they had formed these strong social ties through their companies. Company was a leveling concept—an idea created by the working classes that gave them more power and took away some of the nobility’s power and tyranny.

The company of pilgrims on the way to Canterbury is not a typical example of a tightly networked company, although the five Guildsmen do represent this kind of fraternal union. The pilgrims come from different parts of society—the court, the Church, villages, the feudal manor system. To prevent discord, the pilgrims create an informal company, united by their jobs as storytellers, and by the food and drink the host provides. As far as class distinctions are concerned, they do form a company in the sense that none of them belongs to the nobility, and most have working professions, whether that work be sewing and marriage (the Wife of Bath), entertaining visitors with gourmet food (the Franklin), or tilling the earth (the Plowman).

The Corruption of the Church

By the late fourteenth century, the Catholic Church, which governed England, Ireland, and the entire continent of Europe, had become extremely wealthy. The cathedrals that grew up around shrines to saints' relics were incredibly expensive to build, and the amount of gold that went into decorating them and equipping them with candlesticks and reliquaries (boxes to hold relics that were more jewel-encrusted than kings' crowns) surpassed the riches in the nobles' coffers. In a century of disease, plague, famine, and scarce labor, the sight of a church ornamented with unused gold seemed unfair to some people, and the Church's preaching against greed suddenly seemed hypocritical, considering its great displays of material wealth.

Distaste for the excesses of the Church triggered stories and anecdotes about greedy, irreligious churchmen who accepted bribes, bribed others, and indulged themselves sensually and gastronomically, while ignoring the poor famished peasants begging at their doors. The religious figures Chaucer represents in *The Canterbury Tales* all deviate in one way or another from what was traditionally expected of them. Generally, their conduct corresponds to common medieval stereotypes, but it is difficult to make any overall statement about Chaucer's position because his narrator is so clearly biased toward some characters—the Monk, for example—and so clearly biased against others, such as the Pardoner.

Additionally, the characters are not simply satirical versions of their roles; they are individuals and cannot simply be taken as typical of their professions. The Monk, Prioress, and Friar were all members of the clerical estate. The Monk and the Prioress live in a monastery and a convent, respectively. Both are characterized as figures who seem to prefer the aristocratic to the devotional life. The Prioress's bejeweled rosary seems more like a love token than something expressing her devotion to Christ, and her dainty mannerisms echo the advice given by Guillaume de Lorris in the French romance *Roman de la Rose*, about how women could make themselves attractive to men. The Monk enjoys hunting, a pastime of the nobility, while he disdains study and confinement. The Friar was a member of an order of mendicants, who made their living by traveling around and begging, and accepting money to hear confession.

Friars were often seen as threatening and had the reputation of being lecherous, as the Wife of Bath describes in the opening of her tale. The Summoner and the Friar are at each other's throats so frequently in *The Canterbury Tales* because they were in fierce competition in Chaucer's time—summoners, too, extorted money from people. Overall, the narrator seems to harbor much more hostility for the ecclesiastical officials (the Summoner and the Pardoner) than he does for the clerics. For example, the Monk and the Pardoner possess

several traits in common, but the narrator presents them in very different ways. The narrator remembers the shiny baldness of the Monk's head, which suggests that the Monk may have ridden without a hood, but the narrator uses the fact that the Pardoner rides without a hood as proof of his shallow character. The Monk and the Pardoner both give their own opinions of themselves to the narrator—the narrator affirms the Monk's words by repeating them, and his own response, but the narrator mocks the Pardoner for his opinion of himself.

Deceit

Somewhat paradoxically, Chaucer uses deceit and lies throughout *The Canterbury Tales* to reveal the true natures of his characters. In "The Miller's Tale," Alisoun and Nicholas's adultery scheme may expose John's foolishness, but it also shows their own childish cruelty when they encourage the town to laugh at John's stupidity, downplaying the seriousness of his broken arm. The Pardoner revels in his deceptive tendencies, speaking at length in his prologue about the false relics he sells his poor parishioners. However, he bizarrely ends his tale with a sales pitch to the other pilgrims.

We cannot know whether the Pardoner has forgotten his earlier speech or if he believes his storytelling prowess will have led the other pilgrims to forget he sells counterfeit relics.

Either way, his attempt at deception exposes his hypocrisy and shamelessness. In "The Wife of Bath's Tale," the enchantress's initial old age and ugliness are a trick, meant to test the knight's willingness to grant her autonomy and bringing the knight's character growth to light. Chaucer's pilgrims and their characters may lie to each other frequently, but their lies reflect the truth of who the deceiver and the deceived really are.