

# General Prologue

## ***The General Prologue: Cultural Crossings, Collaborations, and Conflicts***

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The *General Prologue* is, arguably, the most familiar part of the *Canterbury Tales*. It frames the longer story collection by setting the season, describing the pilgrims who will narrate the tales, and laying the ground rules of the storytelling contest. Beside and within these portraits of professional figures from Chaucer's late medieval English society, the *Prologue* witnesses traffic among places, languages, and cultures as well as between the religious and the secular. Introducing the *Canterbury Tales*, the General Prologue produces a collaboration of strangers, a "compaignye" of pilgrims whose tales cooperate, conflict, and compete for attention.

### **Tools**

Situated at the beginning of Chaucer's work, the *Prologue's* position as "first" would seem obvious, but we should reconsider the simple introduction it offers. Philosopher Jacques Derrida problematizes the borders at which texts begin and end in a way that can help us think about the paradoxical status introductions and prologues hold (Derrida). Meant to be read first, they are usually written last, and as such are marked by both their firstness and lastness. These positions of knowing and unknowing render such beginnings ambivalent and complex. Few literary texts capture this ambivalence as well as the *General Prologue*. A first glance at a group of figures gathered by happenstance at a suburban London inn called The Tabard, this opening somehow knows each of them better than it should. As such, the *General Prologue* is both the first and final Canterbury tale, a story that sets up what is to follow but one that can only be fully accounted for after the tales that it precedes.

### **Text**

The pilgrim portraits often overwhelm us with the density of historical and cultural information they offer. But that information can also feel like a necessary pre-requisite for understanding the *Prologue* and the culture it represents. For instance, the Knight's many military campaigns fighting in "his lordes werre"(GP 47) and important to measuring his "worthynesse" (GP 50) occur in Eastern locales (Alexandria, Lithuania, Prussia, and Russia) or the Arab Mediterranean (Grenada, places that are now in Morocco, Turkey, and Algeria), far from the sites of battle with the familiar French enemy. How are these details to be understood and what might they say about the "chivalrie, / Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie" the Knight "loved" (GP 45-

46)? These locations mark the sites of less-than-prestigious campaigns against “heathen” enemies of Christianity and participate in the Crusading propaganda circulating in western Europe. Do they call into question the Knight’s honor by clashing with the heroic zeal they appear to exemplify? How familiar would Chaucer’s native, insular audience be with them? For these details may be more literary effect than historical fact. For instance, as Jill Mann notes, the victory at Alexandria was short-lived. After plundering the city for a week, troops left because of the difficulty garrisoning there. Yet that fact might not fully shape the matter’s significance. Instead the French poem of Chaucer’s contemporary, Guillaume de Machaut, *La Prise d’Alexandrie*, celebrated the event as heroic (Mann 799n). What, then, do these “historical” details mean? Do they indicate serious or ironic praise for the Knight’s military prowess? Are they merely distant locales meant to stir a sense of exoticism and, working by occlusion, offer information that Chaucer’s audience could only partially understand?

Partial knowledge characterizes Chaucer’s *Prologue* more generally, and in domestic scenes as well. One need not be dealing with anything as historically remote as the Knight’s foreign campaigns or the Pardoner’s role in the Latin curial culture of Rome, Papal indulgences (GP 687), or the market for religious relics, to see their ambiguous cultural contexts, crossing territory that is more than merely geographic. The Merchant attends to the sea-lanes between Middleburgh (in Flanders) and Orwell (GP 277), on the coast of Suffolk. The Shipman himself crosses the channel, bringing wine from Bordeaux back to England (GP 396-97). With her local woolens, the Wife surpasses the fabled cloth makers of Ypres and Ghent, two Flemish cities. What does such customary, local traffic suggest? Beyond the terms of commerce, the Physician trades in the astrological and philosophical learning of various figures of Greek, Roman, and Arab descent (GP 429-34). And in homely terms, the Cook’s “blankmanger” (GP 387, a fricassee of meat and rice) and “mortreux” (GP 384, a thick soup) are as mundane as his efforts to “rooste, and sethe and broille, and frye” (GP 383), attesting to the tri-lingual nature of Chaucer’s England. Similarly, the Prioress speaks “After the scole of Stratford atte Bowe, / For Frenssh of Parys was to hire unknowe” (GP 125-26). Developing its own dialect, Anglo-Norman, the French of the English had been the language of the aristocracy and of law since the Norman invasion of 1066. Along with the clerical Latin that appears on the Prioress’ brooch (*Amor vincit omnia*), the “*In principio*” the Friar lisps, and the “*Questio quid juris*” spoken by the Summoner, the *General Prologue* also echoes with a number of dense professional vernaculars—like the language of laws, statutes, and property used by the Sergeant of Law. Such details certainly make us feel as if we know—and sometimes as if we have actually heard—the pilgrims, for how can Chaucer rehearse these details about them (and in their idioms) unless they had spoken that way themselves? Yet even that “fact” does not tell us how to take them. A long history of reading the pilgrims has debated the level of irony embedded in these descriptions.

Religious and secular cultures within medieval society also provide interpretive friction and may not be fully separable. For instance, a number of the pilgrims work in professions difficult for us to categorize: Pardoners, Summoners, the Canon’s Yeoman, even the Clerk, because we think of those in “religious” professions as men and women who took vows (monks, nuns, and priests). But the Church formed a hierarchical institution that governed the lives of its members and was central to any kind of formal education. The Pope employed many to work for and in the institution of the Church — for instance, in ecclesiastical courts dealing with sexual misconduct (the Summoner) or to carry out the business of salvation and repentance (the Pardoner). Neither

of these figures was necessarily in clerical orders. Moreover, the Physician is a good example of a professional whose job conflates religious and secular in ways we might not expect. The Doctor of Physik, as he is called in the *General Prologue*, deals with matters of bodily sickness, but he is more likely to be steeped in Biblical knowledge and astrological lore than anything we would call medicine. Seeing man as the microcosm of the created universe, the Physician looks to the influence of planetary forces on human life, specifically on the bodily humors that illness imbalances, and seeks the perfect alignment of the stars to influence his herbal remedies.

That conflation of secular and spiritual lies at the heart of the story collection, not merely “in” the pilgrims’ professions. It arises in the first sentence of the *Prologue*, in which sexual and spiritual urges are aligned with the emergence of spring. Just as the poem’s occasion conflates the religious and the worldly, so too do the stories, which cross various cultures inside and outside England in theme, setting, and textual origin. In the *Prologue*’s transition from placid pilgrimage journey to tale-telling contest, Chaucer yokes two differently vectored organizing principles as the poem’s efficient cause. But, sacred and secular, serious and playful, are also remixed into the terms of the contest itself, which demands “Tales of best sentence and moost solaaas” (GP 798).

The shrine of St. Thomas à Becket in Canterbury Cathedral was the most important pilgrimage site in all of England, providing an attractive, perhaps even compelling, destination appropriate to any traveler from prince to pauper. While the *Prologue* mentions other illustrious shrines in distant lands (Rome, Jerusalem, Santiago de Compostella), Canterbury carries a certain pride of place as a native and nationally-revered site, attracting visitors “from every shires ende” (GP 15). It thus begins as a universalizing cultural event that resists hierarchy, leveling all spiritual wayfarers. As such, pilgrimage opposes the competitive instincts the Host’s contest intentionally excites. But even that opposition is a false one. What pilgrimage ought to inspire (or be inspired by) in no way accounts for what does. Such a journey might provide a vacation or be commanded by penitential injunction, as much as it might suggest personal devotion and sincere humility. The difference between pilgrimage and story competition, as purely spiritual and worldly pursuits, may be built on a false opposition, once again conflating modern-day assumptions about the separation of religious and secular.

The contest imagined into existence by the Host concludes the activities recorded by the *General Prologue* and offers a loose scaffolding for what follows. A chance meeting is turned into a collaboration and then a contest by the Host, an innkeeper later named Harry Bailly (CkT 4358), who draws the pilgrims together by promising a cost-free entertainment. Calling them a “compaignye,” Harry proposes that they tell tales to pass the time and proffers himself their companion and judge (GP 761-809, 764). The winner of the competition will be rewarded with a free supper “at oure aller coste” (GP 799) when the group returns to London (presumably passing by the Tabard once more on their homeward journey). In forming this company, as David Wallace has shown, Chaucer’s *General Prologue* draws on Italian ideas of “associative form” and, particularly, Boccaccio’s formation of a *brigata* of tale-tellers in the *Decameron*. But distinctly unlike Boccaccio’s group of aristocrats fleeing plague-ridden Florence for the safety of the countryside, Chaucer’s motley pilgrims engage in competition, a structure making the Host’s judgment a necessary and centralizing force.

Already we can see that a number of different things are going on, even as matters seem not to have had much time to develop. Chaucer is adept at creating a scene of immediacy, both as he sidles up to the pilgrims to describe them “so as it semed me” (GP 39), as though in some completely random sequence, and when Harry Bailly suddenly hits upon the idea of a storytelling game:

Fain wolde I doon yow myrthe, wiste I how.  
And of a myrthe I am right now bythoght,  
To doon yow ese, and it shal coste noght.  
(GP 766-68)

Momentarily admitting he does not know how to entertain them reminds him of an entertainment only too perfect for the occasion. The idea breaks over his thoughts between two lines, as he goes from lament, “wiste I how,” to inspiration, “right now bithoght,” across the space of a simple conjunction, “And.” Even further, in his excitement to describe how much fun it will be, he manages to sidestep any description of the actual plan. The fiction of spontaneity is produced by the Host’s cascade of ideas that interrupt each other and prevent full disclosure:

And wel I woot, as ye goon by the weye  
Ye shapen yow to talen and to pleye;  
For trewely, confort ne myrthe is noon  
To ride by the weye doumb as a stoon.  
And therefore wol I maken yow disport,  
As I seyde erst, and doon yow som confort.  
And if yow liketh alle by oon assent  
For to stonden at my juggement,  
And for to werken as I shal yow seye,  
Tomorwe, whan ye riden by the weye,  
Now, by my fader soule that is deed,  
But ye be myrie, I wol yeve yow min heed!  
Hoold up youre hondes, withouten moore speche.  
(GP 771-83)

Of course there will be conversation (“to talen and to pleye” 772) as they travel; it makes no sense to ride silently “doumb as a stoon” (774), and this logic triggers his plan almost naturally. But his certainty of “disport” (775), his “juggement” (778), and his rules for how they are to “werken . . . whan ye riden by the weye”—even his near-violent oath: “Now, by my fader soule that is deed, / But ye be myrie, I wol yeve yow min heed!” (781-82), precede any of its details. The Host’s self-centered language dramatizes his stroke of genius and is wholly consumed by having the idea instead of the idea itself. Caught up in the Host’s enthusiasm, the pilgrims agree before they even know what it is: “Us thoughte it was noght worth to make it wys, / And graunted him withouten moore avys” (GP 785-86). The effects of this gesture have not been fully appreciated. Its humor has been registered, as the Host’s enthusiasm turns slightly coercive in his efforts to bring the pilgrims together, “under [his] yerde” (CIT 44), as the Clerk will later say. But this gesture is formative. The Host’s sense of control, as well as the inner conflicts of the group, will drive the rest of the work. Indeed, it is entirely constructed out of it.

The *General Prologue* has not only been read as an introduction to the fiction of the contest and the pilgrimage underwriting it but often provides a background to the pilgrim tale-tellers. The fiction is, of course, that Chaucer learned these tidbits before hearing their stories. They are merely random impressions. And yet, many will seem more significant later. For instance, the Wife of Bath “was somdel deaf, and that was scathe” (GP 446), but we don’t find out the range of meanings this disability might carry until much later. Critics have long read the pilgrim descriptions against their individual tales to ground a particular approach to them. For instance, the Prioress’s “conscience and tendre herte” (GP 150), her fawning care for mice caught in traps and for her lapdogs, have been read against the emotionalism of her Marian miracle story of a Christian child murdered in a Jewish ghetto. The *General Prologue*’s details have been seen as an indictment of the Church’s practice of taking its nuns (whose devotion may not be appropriately placed) from wealthy aristocratic families, as well as this nun’s moral limitations. Her attention to innocent creatures (as well her obliviousness to human suffering) appears as a displaced maternal instinct and aligns her *General Prologue* description with her story as evidence of naïve sentimentalism (highly inappropriate to one second in command of a convent). But rather than merely “proving” the alignment of *General Prologue* descriptions with stories, the Prioress also calls into question the assumptions of the *Prologue* and incites friction between the two parts of Chaucer’s poem. The blood libel story she tells makes perfect sense after we hear it, but it is not what we expected of this stately French-speaking nun, with her fashionable cloak and jewelry. Her aristocratic background and head-to-toe description, reminiscent of romance heroines, instead intimated that Madame Eglantyne, whose name refers to a kind of cultivated rose, would be more likely to offer a courtly narrative. This kind of disruption of the expectations excited by the partial knowledge in the *General Prologue* has been less investigated. Reading the *Prologue* descriptions in too deterministic a fashion can *limit* rather than illuminate what a tale can mean. And while the fiction of “roadside drama”—the dramatic interaction of pilgrims and Host—begun in the *General Prologue* and carried on in the links gives the poem its liveliness, it has also threatened to overshadow the stories. The conflict between the pilgrims and their tales, which has been waged in critical accounts of the poem, has proven a longstanding issue.

In these ways the *General Prologue* holds the status of an ambiguous tale like any other in the larger poem and ought to be read as such. In fact, a better understanding of the *Prologue*’s genre could assist in that direction. In a duly influential study, Jill Mann compared the *General Prologue* to the genre of estates satire, which its form clearly imitates. Her work showed Chaucer’s debt to that form of literary social critique as well as its sharp deviation from the terms of its moral judgments. Chaucer was much more interested in cultivating conflict and friction both in and with the *General Prologue* than settling our sense of the pilgrims who become his storytellers.

## **Transformation**

The *General Prologue* is more than a download of historical information that refers to matters outside its literary borders. It is yet another tale, though it masquerades as merely documentation of the day the group gathered and its various projects began.

1. What other pilgrims disrupt the expectations cultivated by the *General Prologue*? What do we do with pilgrims that have not been described adequately enough to incite expectations, like the Nun's Priest, but who are assigned tales? Or those that never tell one?
2. Some pilgrim descriptions are quite lengthy and some full of free indirect discourse, while others are cryptically brief. How do we account for the variation of the *General Prologue*? At what levels does Chaucer cultivate variation?
3. Chaucer claims that there is no order to the pilgrims, but are there different kinds of orders: social rank, economic success, a moral hierarchy? In how many different ways could we arrange the pilgrims and what effect does that have on the display we are given? What about the groups inside the group (the Knight and his servants; the Prioress and her retinue; the Guildsmen and their Cook; the fraternal Parson and Plowman)?

### Further Reading:

Bowden, Muriel. *A Commentary on the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. NY: Macmillan, 1967.

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Mann, Jill. *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1973.

Rigby, Stephen, editor. *Historians on Chaucer*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Wallace, David. *Chaucerian Polity: Absolutist Lineages and Associational Forms in England and Italy*. Stanford UP, 1997.



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