

he arson's

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Geoffrey Chaucer

Translated by

Mary Farrell Pomerleau

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## FOREWORD

The modern English Language owes much of its present form to three documents: the King James *Bible*, the *Book of Common Prayer*, and the works of William Shakespeare. Of these, the first two are translations (albeit with a Protestant orientation) of the scriptures and liturgy which dominated Medieval Europe. In that sense, they do not reflect the work of one man, or one era. Shakespeare's plays and poetry, on the other hand, do reflect the work of a single genius; a genius whose understanding not only of his own times (or the audiences of those times), but of the immutable human condition in general, has never been excelled since. Indeed, in his insight into human nature and psychology, he had perhaps only one rival. In this rival we see the same ability to delineate types of character, to bring his creations alive on the page precisely because they are the sort of people who actually walk and breathe on this planet. Moreover, this rival accomplished in one major work what Shakespeare did in the whole of his endeavor. The rival is Geoffrey Chaucer, and the work is *Canterbury Tales*.

Chaucer depicted for us in his *Tales* late Medieval England with a clarity the best historians do not possess. On the one hand, the ethos of that age, so different from our own due to the prevailing philosophy (well described by Mrs. Pomerleau in her

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Introduction) comes alive. Within that context, however, we may recognize portrayed all the unchanging human types who populate our modern world - even ourselves.

When the *Tales* are well taught, there are few High School or College students who will not fall in love with one or more of Chaucer's pilgrims. Indeed, the Wife of Bath and the Knight were my own favorites in school. But whatever edition of the *Tales* is used, and whichever character's stories are read, one is almost always left out - the Parson. His tale is summarized, usually, with a curt dismissal. After all, we are generally told, his "tale" is really just a sermon reflecting an outdated theological or moral system. There are four problems with this view.

The first is that, as Mrs. Pomerleau tells us, without *The Parson's Tale* our view of Chaucer is unbalanced and inaccurate. The Parson's piety is as much a part of the pilgrim's world as the Wife of Bath's bawdiness or the Pardoner's hypocrisy. To eliminate this aspect is to vitiate the study of the entire work.

Secondly, the objection to the Parson's belief system as irrelevant because outmoded is incorrect. What is *Hamlet*, but an exposition of the doctrine of Purgatory? What could we do with the whole of Medieval literature? *Beowulf*, *Chanson de Roland*, *Parzival*, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, to say nothing of Dante - indeed, the whole of Medieval Romance is animated by precisely the code which the Parson explains comprehensively yet concisely. It is not too

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much to say that a study of the Parson is essential to a good understanding of these other works.

Moreover, the moral problems he deals with, such topics as social justice, abortion, substance abuse, as well as basic things like personal honesty, are still very much with us. The Parson expresses what was almost completely the majority view of his time on these and other topics. While many today might disagree with the answers he and his peers gave to these problems, surely the modern dialogue concerning such issues can only be enriched by a knowledge of these earlier opinions. In any case, based as they are upon Classical, Scriptural, and early Christian sources, these views have at least continuity in their favor.

Lastly, just as the Wife of Bath's exuberance and the Pardoner's hypocrisy are not unknown today (together with the virtues and vices exemplified by the other pilgrims) so too, there are such folk as the Parson about even in our time. Certainly, in Chaucer's description of the Parson, we might see someone like Mother Teresa, just as others might see Mahatma Gandhi or the Dalai Lama. That is to say, the Parson is exhibited as a genuinely good person, as someone who truly lives for others - a type we moderns respect just as much as our ancestors did. In the course of his tale, the Parson enunciates the values which have made him what he is. It is rare indeed that we receive such insight into this kind of person, a kind which people of all opinions will admit the world needs more of.

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We live in an ever more complex and difficult-to-understand society, as Alvin Toffler in *Future Shock* and numerous other authors assure us. Philosophy, ethics, literature, and politics - all seem to be in a never-ending state of flux. For the Medievals, however, things were very different. Norman F. Cantor gives a good summary:

In assessing their own world, medieval intellectuals were heavily conditioned by a persistent idealism that saw in society around them signs of the earthly incarnation of the Heavenly City...

The sacred dogma of the Incarnation likewise governed the social perceptions of medieval people. They were pre-conditioned by the dogma of the Incarnation and the philosophy of "realism" that underlies it to find the ideal within the material, the beautiful within the ugly, the moral and peaceful in the midst of violence and disorder. "The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us... full of grace and truth." Since everything was of divine creation, medieval intellectuals had no doubt that all the pieces would ultimately fit together in an idealistic, morally committed structure. Whatever they saw or experienced was part of a divine manifestation. (*Inventing the Middle Ages*, page 414)

Chaucer's Parson epitomizes this world-view. Taken together with the personalities and opinions of the rest of the pilgrims, his *Tale* transforms *The Canterbury Tales* from just a literary masterpiece to a statement of values and ethos for at least thirty generations of Europeans. While we may not share

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these values, this statement can at least shed light on the world-views currently competing for our acceptance.

In making this key work generally available to the modern English speaking public, and by her illuminating Introduction, Mrs. Pomerleau has done a great service to lovers and students of Chaucer and Medieval Literature.

Charles A. Coulombe  
Los Angeles, California  
May 8, 1995