

## Thoughts on *The Canterbury Tales*

### What makes a good tale?

Primarily, it must be uplifting and entertaining.

- some sort of specific point—a moral, wisdom about life, etc.
- a spiritually uplifting quality—see *pilgrims' reaction to Knight's Tale at beginning of Miller's Tale*
- relative simplicity: not too complicated; easy enough for everyone in audience to follow
- shocks/surprises/twists
- humor
- engaging characters whom the audience cares about
- accessibility: should be able to be appreciated by all listeners in order to win a contest
- appeal to emotions
- vivid descriptions, so audience can visualize characters and scenes
- should contain “truth” in that the motivations and actions of the characters seem real
- appropriate length: not too much redundancy
- good narrator: likable, serves as an appropriate vehicle for the story—character of narrator should not detract from the story
- should leave the reader affected in some way for the tale to be memorable

### \*Types of Stories:

- **Romance:** human emotions and relationships (Franklin's Tale, Wife of Bath's Tale, Knight's Tale)
- **Fabliau:** basic human needs of food, sex, or money (Miller's Tale, Merchant's Tale)
- **Saint's Life:** the operations of God in a holy person's life (Second Nun's Tale, Prioress's Tale)
- **Moral Tales:** orthodox morality (Pardoner's Tale, Melibee)
- **Sermons and Ethical Treatises:** spiritual matters (Parson's Tale)

### Miller's Tale: fabliau

#### Strengths:

- humorous
- engaging characters
- seems very real in terms of human nature
- plot twists

#### Weaknesses:

- not weighty/substantial enough
- probably offensive to some of the pilgrims

### Wife of Bath's Tale: (folktale) romance

#### Strengths:

- interesting characters
- rings true in terms of characters' actions and motivations
- interesting insight
- surprising plot twist
- happy ending

#### Weaknesses:

- potentially offensive to male segment of audience
- teller is long-winded—but most of audience apparently doesn't mind too much
- crime of knight is rewarded in the end (opposite of poetic justice)—but this is balanced by the fact that he is not an unlikable character and learns a lesson in the story

### Merchant's Tale: fabliau

#### Strengths:

- very thorough and reflective?

#### Weaknesses:

- story doesn't carry much philosophical or emotional weight—no real point or uplifting quality
- story feels essentially amoral
- characters aren't particularly engaging
- narrator's comments and slant of tale are probably offensive to women in audience
- long-winded and redundant in places

### Franklin's Tale: romance

#### Strengths:

- happy ending is somehow believable and very uplifting
- conveys a strong moral, even though it's technically not a moral tale
- characters are both emotionally engaging and believable
- interesting plot

#### Weaknesses:

- some might find the ending too pat (contrived, simplistic, trite)
- one section is quite redundant

**Pardoner's Tale:** moral tale

**Strengths:**

- beautifully told, seemingly with great feeling and conviction
- strong moral that affects the reader emotionally
- plot is an interesting example of poetic justice

**Weaknesses:**

- the Pardoner is reviled by the audience, so his story doesn't carry as much weight; also, has conflict with Host

**Prioress's Tale:** saint's life; "Miracle of the Virgin"

**Strengths:**

- appeals to religious feelings and ideals; probably moving to her audience
- child is a very sympathetic character (if not very believable to us)
- vivid descriptions
- pious

**Weaknesses:**

- too serious, melodramatic; lacks any subtlety
- doesn't ring true
- tainted by the prejudice and hatred of the teller