The Prologue from the-canterbury-tales : Summary and Analysis

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Abstract : In The Canterbury Tales, the narrator sets out on a pilgrimage to Canterbury along with twenty-nine other people. They agree to a storytelling contest in order to pass the time.

The Canterbury Tales summary key points:

- The characters represent various social levels, including a knight, some clergymen, members of the middle class, and a few peasants.
- The stories cover many genres from medieval literature and reflect the lively characters who tell the tales.
- The pilgrims respond to one another's stories and create links between seemingly disparate topics.

Summary :

" Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote . . . "

The narrator opens the General Prologue with a description of the return of spring. He describes the April rains, the burgeoning flowers and leaves, and the chirping birds. Around this time of year, the narrator says, people begin to feel the desire to go on a pilgrimage. Many devout English pilgrims set off to visit shrines in distant holy lands, but even more choose to travel to Canterbury to visit the relics of Saint Thomas Becket in Canterbury Cathedral, where they thank the martyr for having helped them when they were in need. The narrator tells us that as he prepared to go on such a pilgrimage, staying at a tavern in Southwark called the Tabard Inn, a great company of twenty-nine travelers entered. The travelers were a diverse group who, like the narrator, were on their way to Canterbury. They happily agreed to let him join them. That night, the group slept at the Tabard, and woke up early the next morning to set off on their journey.

Before continuing the tale, the narrator declares his intent to list and describe each of the members of the group.

Analysis :   The invocation of spring with which the General Prologue begins is lengthy and formal compared to the language of the rest of the Prologue. The first lines situate the story in a particular time and place, but the speaker does this in cosmic and cyclical terms, celebrating the vitality and richness of spring. This approach gives the opening lines a dreamy, timeless, unfocused quality, and it is therefore surprising when the narrator reveals that he's going to describe a pilgrimage that he himself took rather than telling a love story. A pilgrimage is a religious journey undertaken for penance and grace. As pilgrimages went, Canterbury was not a very difficult destination for an English person to reach. It was, therefore, very popular in fourteenth-century England, as the narrator mentions. Pilgrims traveled to visit the remains of Saint Thomas Becket, archbishop of Canterbury, who was murdered in 1170 by knights of King Henry II. Soon after his death, he became the most popular saint in England. The pilgrimage in The Canterbury Tales should not be thought of as an entirely solemn occasion, because it also offered the pilgrims an opportunity to abandon work and take a vacation.

In line 20, the narrator abandons his unfocused, all-knowing point of view, identifying himself as an actual person for the first time by inserting the first person—"I"—as he relates how he met the group of pilgrims while staying at the Tabard Inn. He emphasizes that this group, which he encountered by accident, was itself formed quite by chance (25–26). He then shifts into the first-person plural, referring to the pilgrims as "we" beginning in line 29, asserting his status as a member of the group.

The narrator ends the introductory portion of his prologue by noting that he has "tyme and space" to tell his narrative. His comments underscore the fact that he is writing some time after the events of his story, and that he is describing the characters from memory. He has spoken and met with these people, but he has waited a certain length of time before sitting down and describing them. His intention to describe each pilgrim as he or she seemed to him is also important, for it emphasizes that his descriptions are not only subject to his memory but are also

shaped by his individual perceptions and opinions regarding each of the characters. He positions himself as a mediator between two groups: the group of pilgrims, of which he was a member, and us, the audience, whom the narrator explicitly addresses as "you" in lines 34 and 38.

On the other hand, the narrator's declaration that he will tell us about the "condicioun," "degree," and "array" (dress) of each of the pilgrims suggests that his portraits will be based on objective facts as well as his own opinions. He spends considerable time characterizing the group members according to their social positions. The pilgrims represent a diverse cross section of fourteenth-century English society. Medieval social theory divided society into three broad classes, called "estates": the military, the clergy, and the laity. (The nobility, not represented in the General Prologue, traditionally derives its title and privileges from military duties and service, so it is considered part of the military estate.) In the portraits that we will see in the rest of the General Prologue, the Knight and Squire represent the military estate. The clergy is represented by the Prioress (and her nun and three priests), the Monk, the Friar, and the Parson. The other characters, from the wealthy Franklin to the poor Plowman, are the members of the laity. These lay characters can be further subdivided into landowners (the Franklin), professionals (the Clerk, the Man of Law, the Guildsmen, the Physician, and the Shipman), laborers (the Cook and the Plowman), stewards (the Miller, the Manciple, and the Reeve), and church officers (the Summoner and the Pardoner). As we will see, Chaucer's descriptions of the various characters and their social roles reveal the influence of the medieval genre of estates satire.

References :

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