

The Canterbury Tales

Medieval Life

When Chaucer was writing *The Canterbury Tales* in the 14th century, the Roman Catholic Church was a powerful institution in Western Europe. The church was the center of daily life in every village and town. Church bells announced the time for work, meals, rest, and for mass, the worship service. Churches were also centers of community activity, gathering places for town meetings, and places of refuge.

Throughout the Middle Ages, moreover, the church inspired and sponsored artistic achievements. One of them was *The Divine Comedy* (1321), the Italian poet Dante Alighieri's literary masterpiece. The church's universities and monasteries became centers of learning, where scholars and monks wrote, translated, and copied manuscripts. Gothic cathedrals were the architectural marvel of the age. These cathedrals were enormous buildings with an interior of immense open spaces, religious images, and colored light. For believers, praying in a cathedral was like experiencing heaven on earth.

Church Scandal

By Chaucer's time, corrupt practices among the clergy had damaged the church's reputation in England. One of these practices was the selling of indulgences. These certificates, issued by the pope, were said to reduce or cancel the punishment in the next life for sins forgiven here on earth. Like Chaucer's Pardoner, many preachers in real life sold indulgences. People bought them in the hope of easing the torment of a dead person's soul. Another abuse was the selling of religious offices to the highest bidder. This practice resulted in some clergy who were immoral, uneducated, or even illiterate.

As such practices continued, reformers clamored for change. One of them was John Wycliffe, a scholar at Oxford University in England. Writing in the late 1300s, he declared that monarchs should rule over the church in their own kingdoms. He also translated the Bible from Latin into English, thereby making it available to a larger audience. His ideas were the seedbed for the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century.

Astrology

Astrology was one of the pseudo-sciences of the Middle Ages. Astrologers maintained that the position of the heavenly bodies at the time of one's birth determined one's personality and future.

The four elements thought to be the basic components of all matter in the universe: fire, earth, air, and water.

"Astrology is the study of the influence that distant cosmic objects, usually stars and planets, have on human lives. The position of the sun, stars, moon and planets at the time of people's birth (not their conception) is said to shape their personality, affect their romantic relationships and predict their economic fortunes, among other divinations" (What is Astrology, 2005).

Referencing the "sign" refers to one of 12 constellations, known as the zodiac. This is the basis of newspaper horoscopes, which predict a person's future based upon the sign that was in the sky at the time of their birth.

Humors

According to medieval thought, the human body contained four fluids called humors (or humours): yellow bile, black bile, blood, and phlegm. Each humor, or fluid, corresponded to one of the four elements – fire, earth, air, and water. An excess of one of the four humors in the body supposedly produced certain physical and mental characteristics. For example, someone with a ruddy complexion and a confident attitude was said to have an excess of blood. The adjective sanguine, meaning “of the color of blood,” is still used today to describe a cheerfully optimistic person.

Why Canterbury?

The characters in “The Prologue” are embarking on a pilgrimage to the shrine of Saint Thomas a Becket at Canterbury Cathedral. Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury, was murdered in 1170 by followers of King Henry II after a dispute concerning the rights of church and state. After the assassination, Becket was revered as a martyr, and in Chaucer’s time pilgrimages to Becket’s shrine were common. (From the speed of the horses carrying pilgrims to Canterbury comes the word canter, still used to describe a slow gallop – 12 to 15 mph.) For the 55-mile journey to the city of Canterbury, Chaucer’s pilgrims assemble at the Tabard Inn, an actual inn in Southwark, a neighborhood just south of London proper.

Frame Story

A frame story exists when a story is told within a narrative setting or frame – hence creating a story within a story. The Canterbury Tales is one of the best-known examples of a frame story in English literature. “The Prologue” is the frame, describing the narrative setting and explaining who the characters are and why they have come together to tell their stories.

The Seven Deadly Sins

In addition to condemning behavior forbidden by the Ten Commandments listed in the Bible, the medieval Church identified seven sins as especially dangerous. The Seven Deadly Sins, as they were known, were considered not only grave evils in themselves but additionally harmful in that they led to other sins as well. The sins were pride, wrath, envy, lust, gluttony (including drunkenness), avarice, and sloth.

What is Astrology?. (2005). HowStuffWorks. Retrieved 13 September 2016, from <http://entertainment.howstuffworks.com/horoscopes-astrology/question749.htm>