

## Lesson 9: Middle English Poetry

Source: Donaldson, E. Talbot. *Speaking of Chaucer*. Durham, NC: Labyrinth Press, 1983 [1970, 1977].

### Introduction

The “great poets” of English medieval poetry are (p. 134):

William Langland, *Piers Plowman* – a poem by priest “Long Will” giving the common, country-folk outlook

Allegory – like fables, but instead of animals, virtues and vices are personified

Geoffery Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales* – upper-class Renaissance poet, serving the king’s court in London

“Father of English Poetry” – first to be buried in the Poet’s Corner at Westminster Abbey

### Middle English – Sample from the Pardoner’s Prologue

Norman French – the official language of England for 300 years (until the late 1300s)

Result: English dialects diversified (landlocked serfs) and London dialect trumped Alfred’s West Saxon

Middle English – regained the homes and then the official status due to two factors:

1. The Black Death – one-third of England dies between 1348-1351 (first epidemic in Europe since 500s)  
Labor shortage – people on the move
2. Hundred Years War (1337-1453) – England lost all continental lands except the port of Calais  
No practical reason to learn French, nor were the French well-liked.

Changes in English:

Rhythm – from trochaic (BOOM-boom) to iambic (boom-BOOM)

Sounds – lacking only “ng” and “zh” but still having “gn”, “kn”, “night”, and “through” (*thurx*)

Loss of long consonants (mann vs. man) and some sounds (*half*, *lamb*), but some added (*thunder*).

Spelling – worsened with French scribes, and the *thorn* letter written as “y” (ye olde) or “th” as today

Forms – loss of inflection (word order important) and grammatical gender, easier to gain loanwords

Results in Modern English:

Vocabulary – “its current unparalleled size among the languages of the world” (Millword, *Biography*, 167)

Spelling – “English is the most irregular of all the modern languages” (Cheryl Lowe of Memoria Press)

No direct alphabet for 45 English sounds—so phonics is necessary in English (8 ways per long vowel)

### Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*

Three Personas – Chaucer the civil servant, Chaucer the Poet, and Chaucer the Pilgrim

Thirty Pilgrims – less than nobility: franklin (landowner), reeve (carpenter), prioress (nun), manciple (steward)

Frame Story – the host asks each to tell a tale as they travel on horse—less for the moral, more for the humor

**Claim:** *Medieval poetry has “courtly love” of humility, courtesy, adultery, and the religion of love* (C. S. Lewis).

Ans. Until Malory, Middle English literature rarely has adultery—it is “mostly in Chaucer” (Donaldson 156).

The host is dirty and the humor often centers on women, as the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* shows:

“Woman is man’s delight and all his bliss” (223).

“O woman’s counsel is so often cold! A woman’s counsel brought us first to woe,...

If I suggest that women are to blame, Pass over that; I only speak in game” (226).

If Langland is confused about salvation, he is still “a more explicit seeker after the good” (Donaldson 8).

*Why should students read selections of Chaucer’s tales, even if carefully selected?*

Illus. Fifth-grade football coach – not a best friend

Who are those “holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power” (2 Tim. 3:5)?

Command: “Avoid such men as these.” Hate it when morals and faith are treated so casually.

English Literature:

Storytelling Abilities – the Chanticleer ending, the tragedy of Virginius’ 14-year-old daughter

Chaucerian Irony – the manly Monk, the greedy Pardoner, the startling word (Donaldson 14, 25)

### Character Development

John Matthews Manly noted two ways of developing characters in his introduction (pp. 71-72):

**Abstract** – list the traits of certain *type* of character, and then create this likeness

Movie: *The Wizard of Oz* – the timid lion, etc.

**Concrete** – start with a person you know who embodies the trait to exhibit

Movie: *Citizen Kane* – based on William Randolph Hearst

Besides some of the lower class, most characters in the *Canterbury Tales* are concrete personalities Chaucer knew.

**Challenge** – *In your story with Piers, insert a person you know and then read the story to them. Did they detect it?*