

# **THE EVOLUTION OF THE CANTERBURY TALES**

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The Evolution of the Canterbury Tales by Walter W. Skeat

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**WALTER W. SKEAT**

**THE EVOLUTION OF  
THE CANTERBURY  
TALES**



*Eng Lit 2061*

Chaucer Society.

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The Evolution of  
The Canterbury Tales.

BY THE

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## The Chaucer Society.

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### NOTICE.

DURING the years 1903-6, the Society's Editors did not enable it to issue any Text except the short No. 36, the *Four-Days' Journey from London to Canterbury and back of the Aragonese Ambassadors in 1415*. But several Subscribers generously continued to pay their Subscriptions, so that the Society has now rather more than £800 in hand to pay for its issues of 1903, 1904, 1905, 1906 and 1907, five years. These issues will be dated 1907 or 1908, &c., the year in which they are sent out, but about £200 worth of work will be assigned to each of the back years in which no Text was issued. The present volume, Prof. Tatlock's *Development and Chronology of Chaucer's Works*, will be taken as the second Text for 1903. It is hoped that Prof. M<sup>c</sup>Cormick will soon issue two vols. for 1904, and Miss Spurgeon and Miss Fox one—the *Chaucer Allusions, 1360-1900*, Pt. I—for 1905, with Prof. Syphard's work on *The Hous of Fame*, which has been for some months in the printers' hands. So far as is possible, the money paid in for every year will be spent on Texts for that year; and these Texts will be sent to the payers of the money.

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The Announcements as to the issues for 1907 on the cover of Prof. Tatlock's volume will be altered, in future Texts, so as to correspond with the Notice above.

F. J. FURNIVALL.

June 14, 1907.

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the Tale of Melibeus, which nearly every other MS. and all the printed editions put in its proper place, between Sir Thopas and the Monk's Tale. But this MS. divides Group 7 into two parts, giving the two last tales (the Monk and Nun's Priest) precedence, and relegating all the rest to a position just before the Parson. And this is done in spite of the reference in the line—"When ended was my tale of Melibee"—with which the Monk's Prologue rightly begins.

A more important fact is that in this MS. (as in MS. Rawl. Misc. 1133), the Manciple's Tale appears quite early, instead of just before the Parson's Tale, as usual. Accordingly we find, in the Prologue of the Parson's Tale, that the first line is:—"By that the *Manciple* hadde his tale al ended," with a note to say that *Manciple* is written over an erasure; *i. e.* it is not the original reading, though nearly all other MSS. have it.

The Hengwrt MS. also preserves the old original seven-line stanza at the end of the Clerk's Tale, printed in the note to my edition, vol. iv. p. 424, and in the Student's Chaucer, p. 611. I call this stanza the Host-stanza, and denote it in the Tables above by "h." The conjecture that it was meant to follow Group E, l. 1162, or l. 1169, is a conjecture, and nothing else. If we are to go by evidence, its right place is after l. 1212. See the Six-text edition, p. 477.

The conjecture was of course due to the inadvisability of separating the words "wringe and wayle" in l. 1212 from "Weping and wayling" in l. 1213; but this does not apply to the Hengwrt MS. at all, because ll. 1213-1244 *do not occur in it*.

The Hengwrt MS. (followed here by the Corpus MS.) omits the stanza on Adam in the Monk's Tale; but this may have been accidental. It does not greatly matter.

Another interesting point about this MS. is that, in the Monk's Tale, the "modern" stories of the two Pedros, Visconti, and Ugolino of Pisa are simply added at the *end* of the Tale, though in the later schemes (except the Ellesmere, which is unauthorised) they occur much earlier, as the case requires. This is just what we should expect. We have, in the Hengwrt, a nearer approach to the *actual* or original order, as regards date of composition; in the other schemes, we have a revised order, written with a new intention. The placing of the modern stories at the end does not contradict what is said in the Nun's Priest's

Prologue, because lines 3961-80 of Group B *do not appear* in the Hengwrt MS.

Another point is that there is in this MS. no Tale of Gamelin. It is possible that this Tale had not, as yet, attracted Chaucer's attention.

Once more. The Hengwrt MS. contains two additional lines in the Prologue, in the description of the Frere; ll. 252 *b, c*. But in the very first recension they were cut out or omitted, and therefore cannot be found in any other MS.

When once the antiquity of type of the Hengwrt MS. is understood, it presents no difficulty. It contains, in fact, ten groups instead of eight, owing to its insufficient arrangement.

The statement, just made, that the Hengwrt MS. contains ten groups requires explanation, because it seems, at first sight, to contain twelve. But the fact is that it joins together three tales which were afterwards re-arranged, viz. the Squire, the Merchant, and the Franklin. At the end of the Squire's Tale, we find the Merchant's Prologue (F 673-708), which is joined on to the preceding Squire's Tale by the first line, viz. "In faith, Squyer, thou hast thee wel y-quit;" and the same arrangement continues in the Petworth scheme. (The ultimate fate of what is here called the Merchant's Prologue will be fully explained hereafter, when we come to speak of the Petworth MS.) Once more, the Merchant's Tale is followed by The Words of the Host to the Franklin (E 2419-2440) and by a Franklin's Prologue (F 1-8) and the Franklin's Tale. This reduces the number of groups to eleven; but it is really only ten, as group 7 has been casually divided into two parts.

I shall proceed to show that the chronological order of the types of the seven chief MSS., with reference, that is to say, to their contents and arrangement, but without regard to the actual dates when these individual MSS. were written, is as follows:—Hengwrt, an archetype; Petworth, showing the first scheme of arrangement; Corpus and Lansdowne, the second; Harleian, the third; Ellesmere and Cambridge, the fourth and last. In the first three schemes, we find Chaucer himself at work, making various experiments. In the last scheme, we find the work of a careful editor. It follows that the authoritative type, the only one which arranges the Tales as Chaucer at last left them, is the Harleian. It is anything but final, and even some obvious

mistakes remain. But we have *no authority* for proceeding further.

I wish to state expressly that, in speaking of any MS. such as the Hengwrt, I do not refer so much to the MS. *itself* as to its *type* or scheme of arrangement. Neither do I in any way interfere with or contradict the arrangement into *seven groups*, as deduced by Dr. Koch from the readings of the MSS. in the extremely valuable Introduction to his edition of the Pardoner's Tale (Berlin, 1902). A group, as formed by MSS. which have similar readings, is quite a different thing from a type as deduced from the order in which the Tales are arranged. It is obvious that a type may include two or more groups.

For example, Dr. Koch places the Ellesmere MS. in Group I, and the Cambridge MS. in Group II; no doubt, correctly. But the arrangement of the Tales is the same in both.

#### THE SCHEME OF THE ORDER OF THE CANTERBURY TALES, ACCORDING TO THE PETWORTH MS.

IN order to exhibit the arrangement of the Canterbury Tales as concisely as possible, it is best to adopt the notation employed by Dr. Furnivall in the Tables of MSS. prefixed to his Six-text edition of the Tales. I merely use arabic numerals in place of his roman ones.

The chief sets are as follows:—1. Prologue; Knight; Miller; Reeve; Cook.—2. Man of Law.—3. Wife; Friar; Sompnour.—4*a*. Clerk; 4*b*. Merchant.—5*a*. Squire; 5*b*. Franklin.—6. Doctor; Pardoner.—7*a*. Shipman; Prioress; Sir Thopas; Melibee; 7*b*. Monk; Nun's Priest.—8*a*. Second Nun; 8*b*. Canon's Yeoman.—9*a*. Manciple; 9*b*. Parson.

Let us first of all ascertain the order of the Tales in the Hengwrt MS. According to the above list, it is as follows, viz. 1. 3. 7*b*. 9*a*. 2. 5*a*. 4*b*. 5*b*. 8*a*. 4*a*. 6. 7*a*. 9*b*. See pp. 2, 3.

Moreover, the MS. makes it quite clear that 7*b* was destined to succeed 7*a*, though for some temporary reason it was placed earlier in this particular copy. It is best to make this alteration at once, which gives, as the true scheme for this MS., the arrangement:—1. 3. 9*a*. 2. 5*a*. 4*b*. 5*b*. 8*a*. 4*a*. 6. 7. 9*b*.

We see that, despite the apparent disorder, much has already