

*The Clerkenwell Tales* by Peter Ackroyd (Chatto and Windus, R225)

12 July 2003

The title of Peter Ackroyd's latest novel suggests that it is modelled on Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and individual chapters, too, seem to be following Chaucer's lead, in being named, like his Tales, for the tellers: *The Prioress' Tale*, *The Clerk's Tale*, *The Knight's Tale*, and so on, through a series familiar to generations of students (though probably not to the present generation).

But *The Clerkenwell Tales* is much more than an updating of Chaucer's masterly collection of tales: it is a whole new novel. Indeed, the reader looking forward to a Chaucerian feast of knightly romances and bawdy fabliaux will at first be disappointed: Ackroyd's characters bear little resemblance to Chaucer's, and their 'tales' are hardly tales at all but segments of a larger narrative which the reader gradually has to piece together from the various perspectives on offer. (There is, though, an incidental pleasure for Chaucer scholars in picking up the deadpan quotations from the *Canterbury Tales* that Ackroyd has scattered through his text.)

Where Chaucer's collection of tale purports to be told by pilgrims on their way to Canterbury, Ackroyd situates his novel very much in the London of the day – the day being 1399 (the year before Chaucer's death). Ackroyd, having written a best-selling *Biography of London*, knows the history of the city intimately, and his knowledge is evident on every page, in descriptions of places and practices, the smell and sound of the streets, the earthy vernacular of an unsentimental people.

The story at first seems rather static, owing to Ackroyd's device of splintering the main narrative up into different perspectives. But gradually the story takes shape and very skilfully establishes a continuity of its own, held together by the figure of the Mad Nun of Clerkenwell, Sister Clarice, who seems to be mysteriously at the centre of an intrigue to depose Richard II and put Henry Bolingbroke, later Henry IV, on the throne. The intrigue, as indeed the novel, is complicated by the fact that there are two groups conspiring towards the same end, but with very different agendas: on the one hand, a fanatical sect of "predestined men" believe that as the chosen of God they are justified in killing anybody who gets in the way of their divinely inspired mission; behind this is a more shadowy congregation of powerful men called Dominus, who are using the predestined men to undermine Richard's authority by acts of sabotage and heresy.

There is, as should be clear from even this inadequate synopsis, little of Chaucer's good-humoured indulgence of human weakness in this book. There is one quasi-Chaucerian situation, in the figure of a rich merchant whose young wife cheats on him with his apprentice Janekin (which, readers of Chaucer will remember, was the name of one of the Wife of Bath's young husbands). Ackroyd underlines the connection by making the apprentice quote one of the most famous lines from the *Canterbury Tales* at the young wife: "They say, mistress, that pity runs swiftest in a gentle heart."

In this case, there is no pity and no gentleness: as the wife points out "I have no heart at all," and the story runs its heartless course in the poisoning of the husband by the wife – who, we find out in a later story, tiring of Janekin, has him arrested for the murder. Nor is there much here of the Merry England of the popular imagination. There are pageants and festivities, but violence is never far from the surface, and the mood of a

crowd can turn murderous at the drop of a blasphemy. An unpopular summoner chanced upon a group of revelling women on Midsummer's Eve, and has his ear bitten off: "He howled and the women, sensing his pain, yelled in triumph. It was the savage yell, hard, prolonged, exultant, which often sounded through London. It was the cry of the city itself."

If the common people are merciless, the rich and powerful are utterly ruthless, the church corrupt, the state in turmoil. Religion is fanatical, omnipresent and murderous. The only two gentle characters in the novel, the physician and a simple-minded illuminator of manuscripts, both fall prey to the machinations of Dominus. A brothel (run here by the Wife of Bath) sells eleven-year-old virgins for two shillings and the church sells a remission of 700 years of punishment in purgatory for seven shillings.

The handsome cover of the book, featuring medieval illuminations from various sources, presents, in its orderly and stately beauty, an ironical commentary on all this moral and religious chaos – a contrast that we also find inside the book, as Garret Barton, the franklin, listens to plainchant in St Paul's: "These voices encircled each other like the heavenly spheres; they passed smoothly over each other as if they were already part of the empyrean, their marvellous moving and wonderful turning combined to create harmony." In the actual cathedral however, there is little ethereal: "A man was fumbling with his leather hose in a corner of the transept. And this was Garret's thought: What is praying but piss against a wall? He walked back down the aisle amongst the dogs and the pedlars. Three candles for a penny. Two Spanish onions for a penny. Five biscuits for two pennies."

Plainchant or piss against a wall? Ackroyd notes both, and leaves us to choose.

The historian Barbara Tuchman wrote, some time ago, a fascinating study of this period called *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous Fourteenth Century*. Ackroyd's compelling book forms a kind of fictionalised footnote to hers; and in both works we are made to feel on the one hand grateful to be living in a more enlightened age, and on the other hand disconcerted to recognise many aspects of our own society in this "distant mirror".

Mercenary preachers, charismatics, religious fanatics, suicide bombers, ruthless and hypocritical politicians, mindless crowds, public violence? Welcome to the fourteenth century.