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Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*: A Fragmentary Pilgrimage

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Oral Presentation O4.1

CHAUCER'S *CANTERBURY TALES*: A FRAGMENTARY PILGRIMAGE

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The ordering of *The Canterbury Tales* has been contested since the work was first put into publication after Chaucer's death. Looking at the discrepancies between the eighty-three surviving manuscripts and the six incunabulae exposes the many ways in which the working canon for the *Tales* is simply a mess, and it will never be known for certain what Chaucer intended. However, this paper analyzes existing arguments while also proposing new ideas about the ordering of the ten tale fragments, which compose *The Canterbury Tales*, in an attempt to come closer to an accurate structure. Through consideration of various criteria, the Ellesmere manuscript order is shown as the most likely tale order. Alternative popular structures are also examined, including the Chaucer Society order, as set forth by Henry Bradshaw and Frederick J. Furnivall. This issue continues to come up in modern debate, such as with Norman Blake who is working on a new edition of the *Tales*, and this paper seeks to demystify many of the aspects surrounding this complex phenomena.