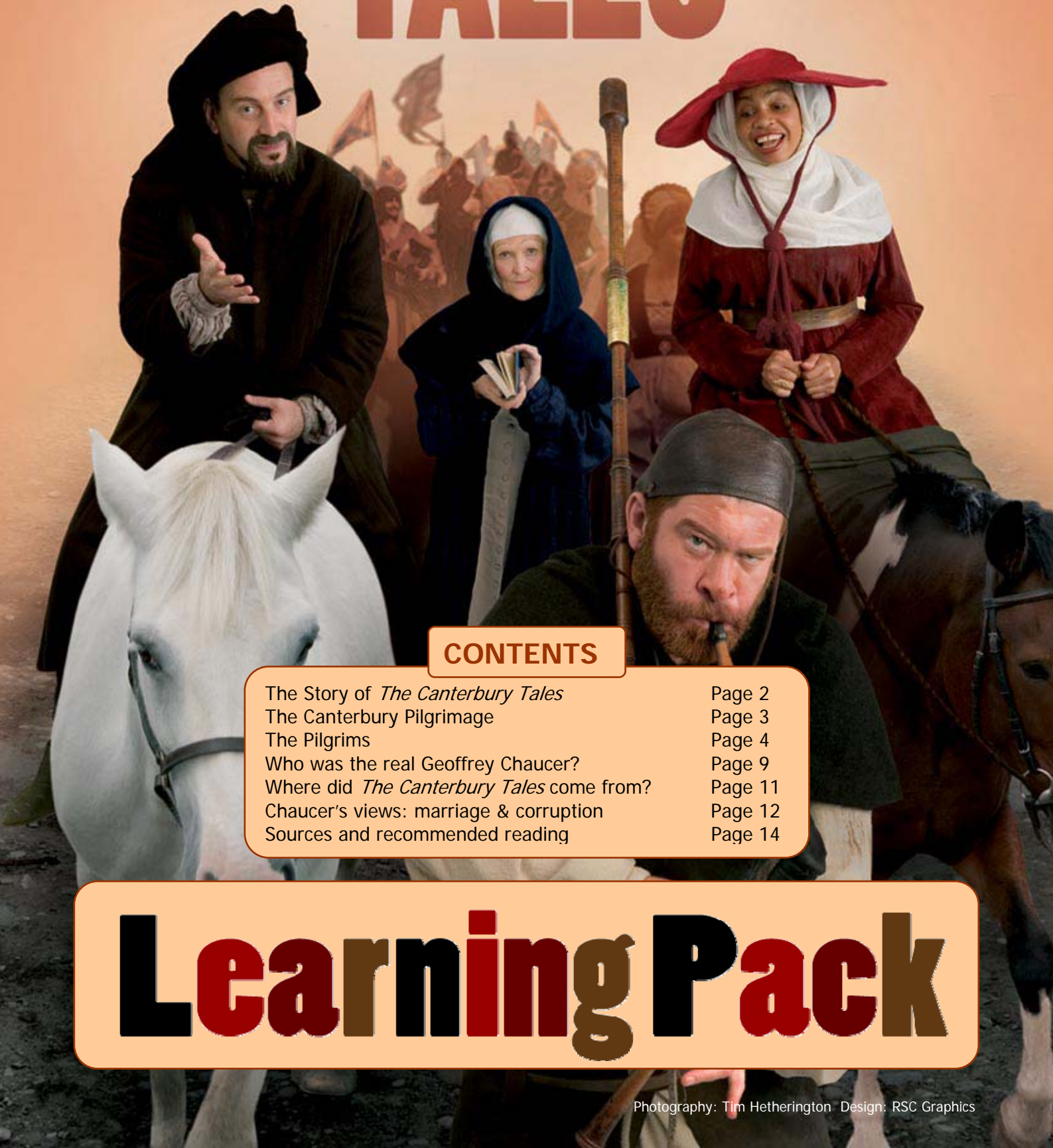


THE CANTERBURY TALES



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Learning Pack

The Story of *The Canterbury Tales*

The story opens on a spring evening. Chaucer is staying at the Tabard Inn in Southwark just across the River Thames from the City of London. He plans to set out the following morning on a pilgrimage, to the shrine of St Thomas à Becket at Canterbury.

In the course of the evening, other pilgrims arrive at the tavern and spend the evening eating, drinking and getting to know each other.

By the end of the evening, when the bills have been paid, and everyone is in a cheerful mood, the landlord (or 'Host') of the Tabard proposes a challenge. He suggests that the whole group of about thirty pilgrims travel on together; to pass the time along the way each pilgrim will tell a story. The landlord offers to join the pilgrimage and judge the storytelling. The pilgrim who tells the story he thinks is best will be treated to another meal at the Tabard by all the other pilgrims when they return home.



Chaucer tells his own tale



The Host asks the Prioress to draw a straw

Everyone agrees, and the following morning the Host has them all out of bed bright and early, ready to start their journey.

He asks everyone to draw straws to decide who will go first. The short straw falls to the Knight.

The rest of *The Canterbury Tales* intersperses the pilgrims' stories with banter between the Host and the pilgrims. So there are two layers to the story of *The Canterbury Tales*: the familiar world of inns, muddy lanes and ordinary people, and the more fantastical world from which the pilgrim's tales are drawn.

The Canterbury Pilgrimage

The pilgrimage to Canterbury was just one amongst many hundreds a medieval pilgrim could have chosen from. The Wife of Bath has already been to Rome, Boulogne, Cologne and Saint James of Compostella in northern Spain. Going on pilgrimages was a popular activity all over Europe.

Canterbury was the most famous English pilgrimage site. Pilgrims travelled there to pay their respects to St. Thomas à Becket. Thomas à Becket was Archbishop of Canterbury in the reign of Henry II. The two men had been firm friends at first, but when Thomas became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1162 he felt obliged to defend the Church against Henry's attempts at reform and the two men quarrelled. By 1170 their quarrel seemed to be resolved, but in December of that year, Thomas was attacked by a group of knights, perhaps on Henry's orders, and killed in the cathedral itself.



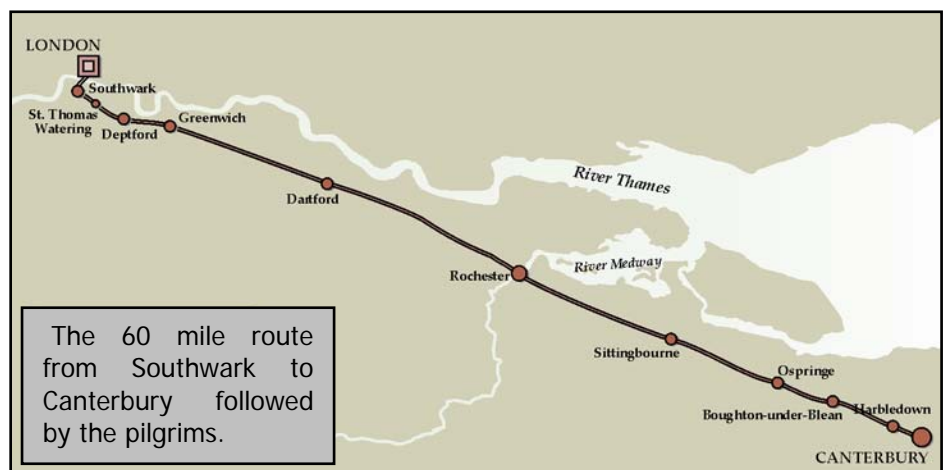
The pilgrims on their horses

In the 200-odd years between his death and canonisation, and the writing of *The Canterbury Tales*, St. Thomas à Becket acquired a great reputation for healing the sick. By Chaucer's day it was common for people who were unwell to vow to make a pilgrimage to Canterbury if and when they had recovered:

*And specially from every shires ende
Of Engelond, to Caunterbury they wende,
The hooly blisful martir for to seke
That hem hath holpen, whan that they were seeke.*
(General Prologue, ll.15-18)

In the opening lines of the General Prologue, Chaucer gives an idyllic depiction of English spring, all soft westerly breezes, bird song and blossom and says: "Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages" (line 12). Clearly the attractions of a journey at this time of year were not entirely religious. The companionship of other pilgrims, the overnight stops at friendly inns and the chance to see new places would all have played their part.

The excuse for travel would have been all the more welcome in a pre-industrial age, when the journey time from London to Canterbury was about five days (for comparison, a modern train, running on time, takes about one and a half hours).



The Pilgrims

THE CANTERBURY TALES

The Pilgrims are a mixed bunch, from all walks of life. Between them they create a cross-section of society in Chaucer's day, which may not be 100% accurate, but is definitely varied, lively and convincing. Chaucer describes them all, in terms of character and appearance, in the 'General Prologue' to *The Canterbury Tales*. Here's a quick run through in the same order Chaucer describes them – roughly with the people of highest social status first, and lowest last:

The Knight

Chaucer says he is a "verray, parfit gentil knyght", who loved "chivalrie, Trouthe and honour, freedom and curteisie". He's fought all around the Mediterranean, mostly against Islamic forces, and is making the pilgrimage to give thanks for his safe return. Despite being a great fighter he looks ordinary: he has a good but sensible horse, and his clothes are stained where the armour has rubbed on them.



The Squire

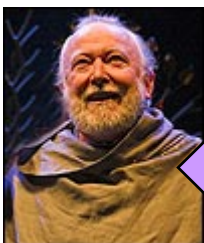
The squire is much showier than his father, the knight. He's about 20 years old, handsome, strong and fit, an excellent rider, writer and dancer; he wears beautiful embroidered clothes. He's also a bit of a lady's man and often out till dawn.

The Yeoman

The Knight and Squire are also travelling with a Yeoman, a servant to the knight. The prologue describes him as looking just like film versions of Robin Hood – all in green, with a bow and arrow, a great tan and a massive hunting horn. He doesn't tell a story of his own.

The Prioress

The Prioress is a gentle, slightly pretentious lady. She has excellent table manners, speaks Franglais, thinking it's real French, and has several little dogs that she feeds at the table. Chaucer mentions various odds and ends of jewellery that she wears, which isn't exactly appropriate for a nun, but he doesn't describe her as a bad person, just a bit feeble.



The Nun's Priest

The Prioress travels with two nuns and three priests. One of these priests, Sir John, gets to tell a story, and we learn that he is a "sweete preest, this goodly man sir John" but the others are fairly anonymous.

The Pilgrims

The Monk

Just like the Prioress, the Monk seems to have a more luxurious time than you might expect from someone in holy orders. He is well-dressed and well-fed in a fur-trimmed cloak with a golden clasp. He rides a fine horse, which we are told is just one of many.



The Friar



The Friar is even more worldly than the Monk, which is ironic given that he is supposed to live on other people's charity. He does so well because he works with wealthy people (taking their confessions) and avoids dealings with the poor and the sick. He seems to have a rollicking good time in life, spending his money in taverns and on women – despite the fact friars had to swear a vow of chastity.



The Merchant

The merchant is another well-dressed character, but Chaucer tells us although he appears wealthy he is deeply in debt. He is a bit of a bore, going on and on about business matters "ful solempny".

The Clerk of Oxenford

The Clerk took his degree at Oxford University some time ago, but hasn't managed to find a job in the church, and is too academically-minded to find a job in the non-religious world. He lives off loans from his friends, but even when he has money he spends it on books. He is quiet, polite and respectful to others, though Chaucer does hint that he could be tediously virtuous.



The Man of Law

A 'man of law' or 'sergeant of law' was something like a barrister. Chaucer doesn't tell us much directly about his personality, only that he is a successful and popular lawyer in the City of London, and that he likes to appear busier than he actually is.



The Franklin

A Franklin was a man who owned land, but had no title to go with it – posh, but perhaps not as posh as he'd like to be. He's generous, opening his house to a stream of guests, and giving them the finest food and drink, but there's a hint that this generosity is partly to show off his wealth and social status.

The next five people who Chaucer mentions are all craftsmen: a **Haberdasher**, a **Dyer**, a **Carpenter**, a **Weaver** and a **Carpet-maker**. As successful businessmen and members of their guilds they have a high social status, but like the Franklin might have liked it to be higher – Chaucer pictures their wives egging them on to get elected as Aldermen.



The Cook

The Cook is travelling with the craftsmen. All we really learn about him in the General Prologue is that he is a skilful chef and has a nasty ulcer on his knee. There's a bit more about his personality in the introduction to his story – he laughs uproariously at the Reeve's tale, which is a blatant insult to the Miller. The story he starts to tell (but doesn't finish) is about a partying apprentice who moves in with a friend and his prostitute wife.

The Shipman

The Shipman comes from the West Country where he imports French wine. He's a skilful navigator, but on dry land he rides a farmer's horse and looks very uncomfortable on it. Although Chaucer calls him a "good felawe" he's also a tough individual – apparently he has made prisoners walk the plank after a battle.



The Physician

The doctor is wealthy and successful, though a little miserly.

The Wife of Bath

The Wife of Bath is a real firecracker. She is self-important and vain, but also sociable and cheery. She has been married five times already and has had numerous affairs. All those dead husbands have left her plenty of money, and she can afford good clothes and pilgrimages all over Europe.



The Parson

The Parson is the only religious character who Chaucer describes without a hint of criticism: kind, gentle, setting his parishioners an outstanding moral example, and putting their welfare before his financial gain. He is travelling with his brother, a Ploughman.

The Pilgrims

THE CANTERBURY TALES



The Miller

Physically the Miller is pretty impressive chap (16 stone, Chaucer tells us, and often walks off with the prize at wrestling competitions) but not handsome – he has a hairy wart on his nose, flaring nostrils and a big gaping mouth. He also has a fairly unattractive character, stealing grain from his customers, when they bring it to him for milling. He also plays the bagpipes.

The Manciple

The Manciple works supplying food and drink to the lawyers at Inner Temple in London. He's a thrifty chap, craftier than the crafty lawyers he serves.



The Reeve

The Reeve comes from Norfolk, where he's an official on a noble's estate. His pinched face and skinny legs reflect his penny-pinching ways as he assesses how much the serfs on the estate owe their master.

The Summoner

The Summoner is physically and morally repellent. His face is a mass of bright red pimples – so terrible that children are afraid to look at him. He drinks until completely out of his mind. His job is to summon people to appear at the church courts, but he will turn a blind eye in return for a bribe.



The Pardoner

The Pardoner comes a close second to the Summoner for the title of Most Unpleasant Pilgrim. He makes his living by selling indulgences (documents saying the purchaser would be let off some time in purgatory) and holy relics. The relics are all fakes. Chaucer describes him as effeminate and weedy-looking, yet vain at the same time.

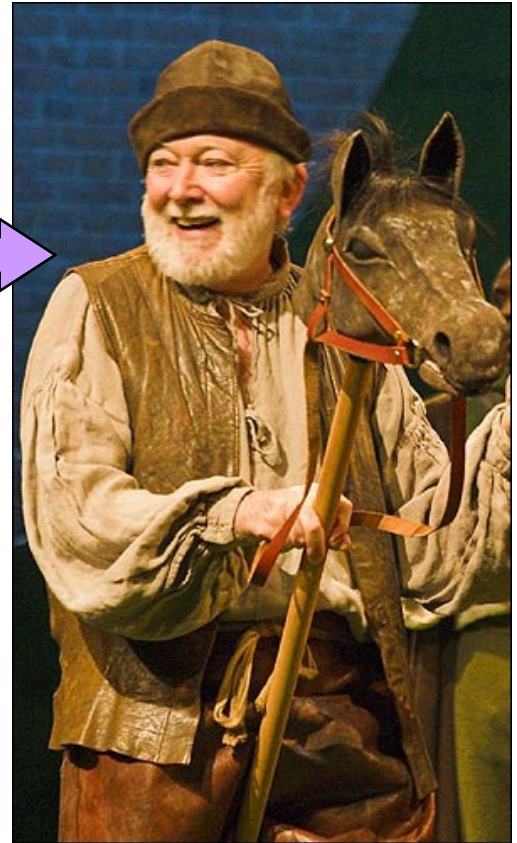


The Canon's Yeoman

The Canon's Yeoman doesn't appear in the Prologue – the Pilgrims meet him towards the end of their journey. He's a blabbermouth, telling the other pilgrims all about the Canon's work as an alchemist.

The Host

The host, or landlord, of the Tabard Inn, where *The Canterbury Tales* begins is a big, hearty chap, a confident and sensible speaker and "right a myrie man". His idea for a story-telling contest turns a serious pilgrimage into a game, and his tact and good humour smooth over squabbles between the pilgrims on the journey.



Chaucer

Chaucer doesn't describe himself in the General Prologue but we get a good picture in the prologue to his story of Sir Thopas. He portrays himself as quiet and withdrawn: the host scolds him for riding along gazing at the ground, ("*Thow lookest as thou woldest fynde an hare, For ever upon the ground I se thee stare*") and tells the other men in the company to make room for him, as though he had been lagging behind.

Chaucer doesn't mind laughing at himself – the Host describes him as thick around the middle, and interrupts his story about Sir Thopas, saying, "*Thy drasty rymyng is nat worth a toord.*" It's worth bearing in mind that Chaucer wasn't writing autobiography – his self-portrait could be just as fictional as his depiction of the other characters.

Who was the real Geoffrey Chaucer?

Chaucer's professional life

There are very few poets today who can make enough money from their poetry to give up the day job, and Chaucer was no exception. He's remembered as a poet, but poetry was only part of what he did.

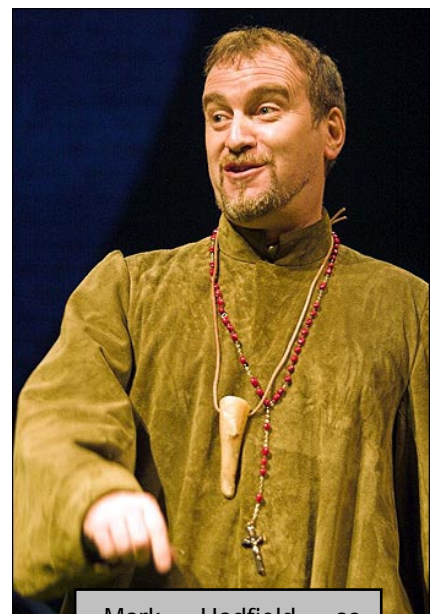


Chaucer was born at some point between 1340 and 1345 – nobody's sure exactly when. He grew up in his merchant father's home in the City of London and possibly went to St. Paul's Almonry School nearby.

By 1357, he had joined the household of the Countess of Ulster and Prince Lionel, the second son of King Edward III, as a page. Chaucer would not have been paid for this work – in fact his family would have had to pay his expenses – but he would have got an excellent education in courtly behaviour and sportsmanship, as well as ordinary lessons with a tutor. It also gave him the chance to make excellent contacts, and in one way or another he worked for the royal family for the rest of his life.

As an adult he was sent on several royal diplomatic missions to France, Italy and Spain. Some of his missions were to encourage trading links, others were to negotiate royal marriages – highly responsible and important jobs. He also served on various military expeditions against France. From 1374 he was Controller of the Customs in the Port of London, overseeing the collection of taxes on imports and exports. Eventually he gave up his work in the City and became responsible for the upkeep and maintenance of the Royal palaces. In his later years, he became an MP and a Justice of the Peace in Kent.

So Chaucer had experience of aristocratic households, business, politics and the law – he was a man of the world. He describes himself as bookish in some of his poems, but that doesn't mean he buried himself in a library. He was somebody who combined writing great poetry with a long and varied career.



Mark Hadfield as Chaucer in the RSC's *The Canterbury Tales*

Who was the real Geoffrey Chaucer?

Chaucer's personal life

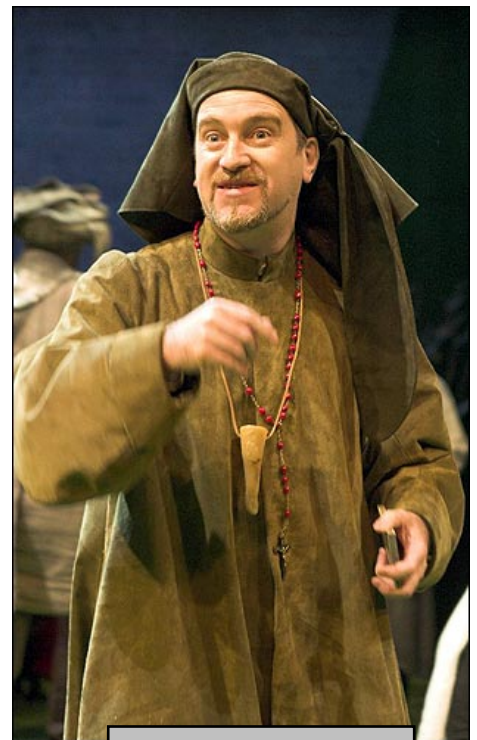
If his career and literary achievements are impressive, Chaucer's personal life was a little less successful. He married Phillipa de Roet in 1366. They had a daughter, Elizabeth, a son called Thomas, and another boy called Lewis in 1380. But Chaucer did not see a great deal of Phillipa. She was a lady-in-waiting to John of Gaunt's wife (John of Gaunt was Prince Lionel's younger brother) and had to follow the royal court around from palace to palace. It may even be that Elizabeth and Thomas were fathered by John of Gaunt, but there is no hard evidence one way or the other. Some biographers of Chaucer have also speculated that he may have had an affair with a woman called Cecily Chaumpaigne, who later accused him of rape. The charges were dropped but even so, it was a pretty unpleasant end to a relationship.

So Chaucer's relationships with women were pretty unsatisfactory and this may be reflected in his attitude to some of the female characters in *The Canterbury Tales*. The Wife of Bath sees marriage as an opportunity to enrich yourself at your husband's expense, and the Miller and Reeve describe adultery as an inevitable part of marriage. But he is not completely one-sided on the topic of women: other characters, Emily in the Knight's tale and the sensible wife in Chaucer's *Tale of Melibee* are portrayed in a much more positive light.

Chaucer gives himself a part in *The Canterbury Tales* as the narrator, but that doesn't mean that the events he describes really happened, or even that he ever went on a pilgrimage. But the basic setting of the Tales – a mixed group of pilgrims travelling together on horseback, from inn to inn across the English countryside – is definitely based in reality.

When Chaucer began writing *The Canterbury Tales* (in about 1387) he was living in Greenwich, on the pilgrim route from London to Kent. He was also a Justice of the Peace in Kent, and may have owned land there. He had plenty of opportunity to see and speak to pilgrims travelling down to Canterbury and get a feel for the atmosphere of their journeys. Chaucer worked on the Tales for the rest of his life, until his death in 1400. Not every story that he began was completed – and this probably shows how busy he was with other work rather than a lack of interest or commitment to the poems.

The most dramatic events of Chaucer's lifetime were the Hundred Years' War with France (well, some of it anyway), dreadful outbreaks of plague in 1348-50 and 1361-62, and the violence of the Peasants' Revolt in 1381 (in opposition to a poll tax). None of these gets much more than a casual mention in *The Canterbury Tales*, and this is a guide as to how to watch (or read) the *Tales*. We can use them to pick up clues as to what life was like in Chaucer's day, and how Chaucer viewed that life and the people in it, but they weren't meant as a historical record or as a political rant – they were written as an escape and an entertainment.

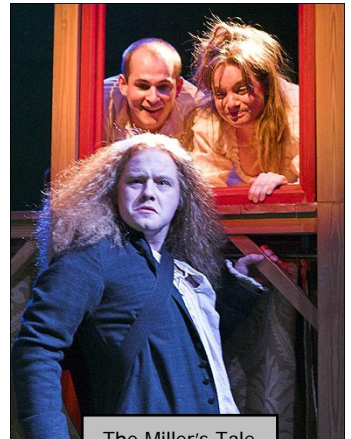


Mark Hadfield as Chaucer in the RSC's *The Canterbury Tales*

Where did *The Canterbury Tales* come from?

The idea that writers should always do something original or new is a relatively recent one. In Chaucer's day people were more impressed by writing that was clearly inspired by other well-respected work.

The tales the pilgrims tell in *The Canterbury Tales* come from a variety of sources. There are Greek myths and legends (the Knight's tale), legends from the early days of the Christian church (the Man at Law's tale), and comic anecdotes which we might nowadays call urban myths, or else were made up by Chaucer himself (the Miller's tale and the Canon's Yeoman's tale). But the most important influences on *The Canterbury Tales* (and most European poetry at this time) were two Italian poets, Dante and Boccaccio.



The Miller's Tale

Boccaccio

The first tale, the Knight's, is based on the *Theseida*, a long poem by Italian poet Boccaccio. Boccaccio also wrote a collection of tales called the *Decameron*. In the *Decameron*, a group of wealthy young people from Florence are holed up in a country house, for fear of catching the plague. They agree to tell stories to pass the time and take their minds off the plague.

There's clear inspiration in this for Chaucer's structure for *The Canterbury Tales* and for the sheer variety of the stories that are told. But by deciding to set his own poem in the context of a pilgrimage, Chaucer gives himself the freedom to bring in characters from all walks of life and so paint a portrait of the English society of his day.

Dante

Another poet who is likely to have influenced Chaucer is another Italian, Alighieri Dante, who wrote the *Divine Comedy*, a verse narrative describing an imaginary journey through the most grisly quarters of hell to paradise to find his lover Beatrice. Dante, who had died in 1321, was widely respected as the greatest poet of the age, in Italy and beyond. The great contribution Dante made to European literature was to write in Italian. Ever since the days of the Roman Empire, people had generally felt that Latin was the only 'proper' language for literature. Dante made a deliberate decision to write in Italian, not Latin, and by doing it so well, opened up the choice for all the writers who followed him – including Chaucer – to write in their own language too.

So Chaucer had some highly respectable and distinguished sources and influences for his work. How does this fit in with the downright lewd, crude and disgusting behaviour described in the Miller's and the Reeve's Tales? And what were pilgrims, supposedly making a holy journey, doing telling stories that lower the tone this much?

One answer is that the *Decameron* included saucy stories alongside the more elevated ones, but this isn't the whole story. Mixing the holy and the tasteless in this way was actually quite common in medieval society. 'Mystery plays' were performed as part of the procession on saints' days and feast plays, with the actors performing on a moving cart. The mystery plays retold events from the Bible interspersed with crude pantomime-style jokes. In a more religious age, it probably seemed less odd to mix up holiness and everyday behaviour. Introducing an element of slapstick bawdiness also adds to the warts-and-all picture of life painted by *The Canterbury Tales*.



The Knight's Tale

Themes in *The Canterbury Tales*

There are two themes that Chaucer returns to over and over again in *The Canterbury Tales*: marriage and corruption.

Marriage

There are several stories about husbands and wives in *The Canterbury Tales*. Married life comes up in the tales told by the Knight, Reeve, Miller, the Wife of Bath, the Clerk, the Merchant and the Franklin.

Some of the tales are harshly negative about marriage. In the Reeve's and Miller's tales, adultery is described as almost inevitable (and laughable). The Merchant's tale describes adultery too, in more bitter tones. Other tales give more positive views of marriage and relationships.

The Knight's Tale

The love affairs of the Knight's tale are set in a fantastical past. It's a world of heady romance, with the main characters ready to die for love.



The Clerk's Tale

The Clerk tells the story of the super-faithful Griselda, though it's made clear that her level of patience and forbearance is unrealistic in the real world.



The Wife of Bath's Tale

The Wife of Bath, with her five previous marriages, sets herself up as an authority on marriage. Within her tale and prologue there's a broad range of thoughts on the subject. In her opening lines, she speaks of the "wo that is in marriage" and yet she is already on the lookout for husband number six! Her attitude to marriage can seem cynical and selfish: she seems to see marriage as a way of personally enriching herself, but then her story suggests that it is possible for husbands and wives to live happily together if they can agree to be equals.



The Franklin's Tale

The Franklin's tale echoes the Wife of Bath's, describing another couple who have found a way to understand and respect each other.



There's a broad range of attitudes expressed in these tales, and they don't all add up to a neat viewpoint that we can pin down as being 'what Chaucer thought about marriage'. The breadth of the viewpoints on marriage in *The Canterbury Tales* adds to the work's convincing portrayal of the world. The variety of views reflects the complexity of real life.

Themes in *The Canterbury Tales*

Corruption

The Pardoner's Tale

The Pardoner's Tale is a fable about three brothers who find a stack of gold. They each come up with plots to get rid of the other two, so they can keep the gold for themselves but all end up dead. The moral of the story is that greed is the root of all evil – "radix malorum est cupiditas".



The story takes on a particularly ironic flavour when it's being told by the Pardoner because, according to the General Prologue, financial gain is his chief motivation. The Pardoner preaches sermons where he scares people with thoughts of hell and purgatory, then charges them a fortune for fake relics and indulgences, documents which he says will save them from years of suffering in the afterlife, but which have no real worth.

Chaucer's description of the Pardoner's unpleasant physical appearance, with lank hair, suspiciously smooth chin and his bulging eyes seems to reflect a moral disgust with the Pardoner's trade.



Chaucer's disgust with greed and hypocrisy come out in descriptions of other characters too. The Miller always keeps back a little more grain from his customers than he has really earned. The Manciple skims a profit from the goods he buys for the Inner Temple. The Reeve makes a tidy profit from running his lord's estate. The Summoner abuses his position by taking bribes from people who should be taken to court or by blackmailing those who are afraid they might be.

Chaucer's moral standpoint is pretty clear when it comes to greed and corruption, but he doesn't lay on the disapproval too thickly. The criticism is always mixed with humour and the most repulsive characters are also the most entertaining. The descriptions of the Parson and his brother the Ploughman positively glow with moral approval, but relative to some of the others they are just a little dull.

Sources & Recommended Reading

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Ackroyd, Peter – *Chaucer*, Vintage, London 2005

George, J-A (ed.) – *Geoffrey Chaucer, The General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales, a reader's guide to essential criticism*, Icon Books, Cambridge 2000

The original language text: <http://www.librarius.com/cantales.htm>

An overview: <http://www.courses.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/>

Links to lots of Chaucer resources: <http://www.unc.edu/depts/chaucer/>

St. Thomas à Becket, Catholic Encyclopedia: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14676a.htm>

Credits

The RSC's *The Canterbury Tales*

By

Geoffrey Chaucer

A new adaptation by

Mike Poulton

Directed by

Gregory Doran, Rebecca Gatward,

Jonathan Munby

Designed by

Michael Vale

Cast

Nick Barber, Claire Benedict, Daon Broni, Dylan Charles, Paola Dionisotti, Lisa Ellis, Christopher Godwin, Mark Hadfield, Michael Hadley, Anna Hewson, Edward Hughes, Michael Jibson, Michael Matus, Barry McCarthy, Chu Omambala, Ian Pirie, Joshua Richards, Christopher Saul, Katherine Tozer, Darren Tunstall.

RSC Learning Pack

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Edited and designed by

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Photography by

Stewart Hemley and Suzanne Worthington



The pilgrims arrive at the shrine of St Thomas