

# *The Canterbury Tales*

The Atlanta Shakespeare Company



**C**anterbury  
**T**ales

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## **The Atlanta Shakespeare Company**

499 Peachtree St NE  
Atlanta GA 30308

404-874-5299

[www.shakespearetaVERN.com](http://www.shakespearetaVERN.com)

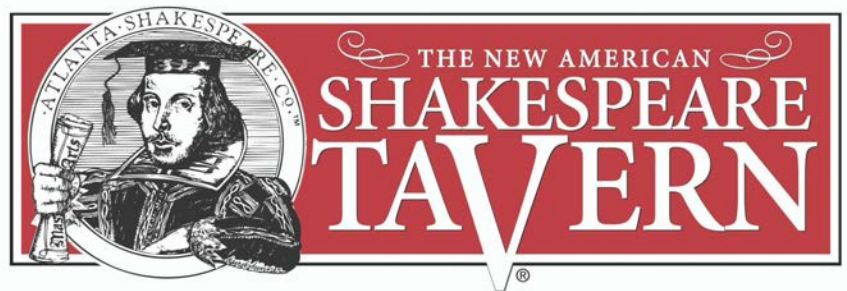
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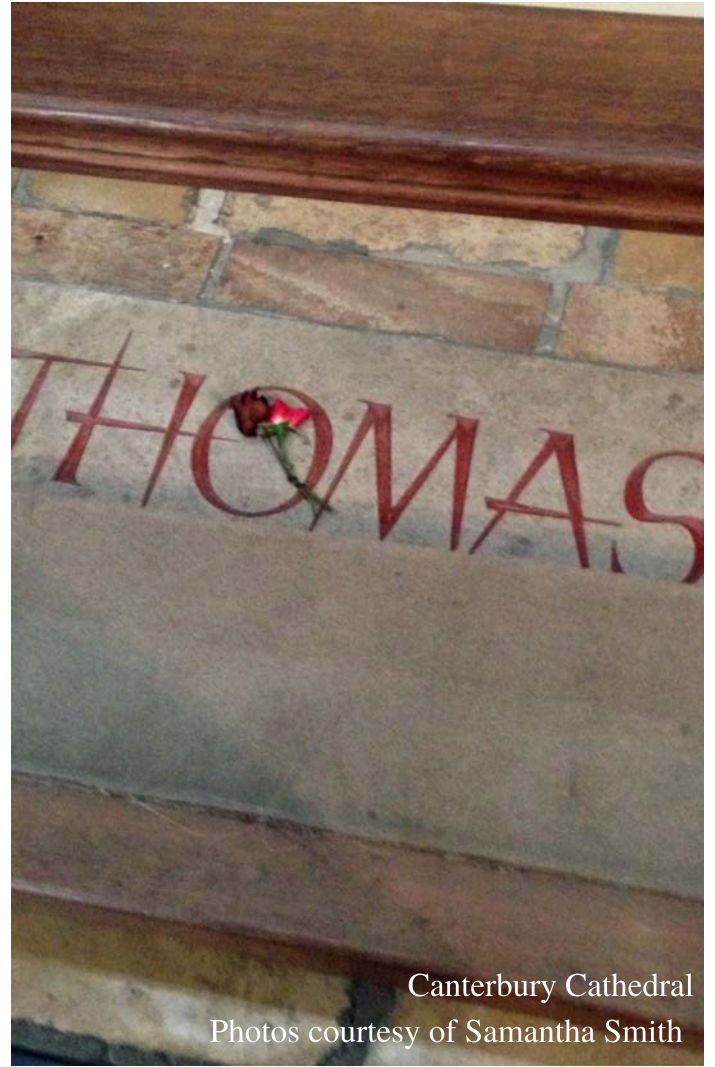
# *The Canterbury Tales*

**Director:** Kati Grace Brown

**Cast:** Kirstin Calvert  
Laura Cole  
Nicholas Faircloth  
Adam King  
Enoch King  
Rivka Levin  
Amanda Lindsey  
Drew Reeves

**Playwright:** John Stephens





Canterbury Cathedral  
Photos courtesy of Samantha Smith

## Introduction to *The Canterbury Tales*

Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1345-1400) was a well-to-do Englishman connected to the court, where he served in various posts and benefited from connections to Edward III, Richard II, and Henry IV. Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, which was written in Middle English, features twenty-four stories told by pilgrims on their way from the Tabard Inn in Southwark to the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket in Canterbury Cathedral (pictured above). The *Canterbury Tales* was an incredibly popular piece of literature in the early sixteenth century.

The Atlanta Shakespeare Company's production is a comedic adaptation of Chaucer's famous work. This study guide will encourage you to make connections between ASC's adaptation and the text you are studying in school.

# Characters

Note: The character descriptions and summary describe ASC's adaptation of *The Canterbury Tales*, which features deviations from Chaucer's text.

*Chaucer*: The author of *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer repeatedly gets run over by the tour bus for comedic effect in this adaptation of his famous work.

*The Hostess*: The hostess works as a tour guide leading pilgrims from Southwark to Canterbury. She explains that the pilgrims tell stories on their journey.

*A Nun*: A nun who is horrified by Chaucer's inclusion of so many bawdy stories in *The Canterbury Tales*, she tells the story of Chanticleer, the rooster.

*The Miller*: A strong, boisterous, and often intoxicated man, the Miller tells the tale of Allison, the wife of an old carpenter, and her lover, Nicholas.

*The Wife of Bath*: A woman who has had five husbands, the Wife of Bath tells the tale of what transpires in King Arthur's court when a knight assaults a maiden.

*The Merchant*: The Merchant tells the tale of January, his wife, May, and her lover, Damian.

*The Merchant's Wife*: In this adaptation, the Merchant's wife is an American tourist who acts as comic relief throughout much of the play.

*The Pardoner*: The Pardoner sells indulgences, which were pieces of paper that sinners could purchase that would reduce the amount of time spent in purgatory after death. The Pardoner tells the tale of the three fellows who murder each other over a hoard of gold.

*The Reeve*: The Reeve tells the story of the dishonest Miller and the students, John and Alain, who sleep with the Miller's wife and daughter.



# Plot of *The Canterbury Tales*



**The Miller's Tale:** An old carpenter marries a beautiful young woman named Allison, who quickly becomes involved with their boarder, a smart young astronomy student named Nicholas. Allison and Nicholas flirt and devise plans about how to consummate their love affair. Allison's beauty attracts the attention of another young man, Absolon, who is preparing for the priesthood but who is so overwhelmed by his attraction for Allison that he abandons the Church. When Allison and Nicholas' attempts to spend the night together are foiled by Allison's husband and by Absolon, Nicholas devises a plan. He tells Allison's husband that a great flood is coming and that he should construct three arks so that they can all float to safety. Worried about the impending deluge, the carpenter sleeps on the roof, which allows Allison and Nicholas to enjoy the night together. When Absolon croons a love song outside Allison's window and begs a kiss from her, she plays a trick on him by sticking her bottom out the window for him to kiss. Angry at being made to look like a fool, Absalom fetches a hot poker and returns to ask Allison for another kiss. Attempting to humiliate Absolon yet again, Nicholas sticks his bottom out the window, and Absolon scalds him with the hot poker. Nicholas cries for water, causing the carpenter to believe the flood has begun, so he cuts the tether on his ark and comes crashing to the ground.



**The Wife of Bath's Tale:** A knight in King Arthur's court assaults a young woman, and the court demands justice. Queen Guinevere oversees the knight's punishment, declaring that he will face death unless he can return to court in one year with the answer to her question: *What is the one thing women most desire?* The knight unsuccessfully searches for the answer for a year until he finds an old crone, who promises to give him the answer if he pledges to marry her. The knight returns to court with the correct answer to the Queen's question; women most desire sovereignty over their own lives. Despite the fact that he finds the crone abhorrent, the knight is forced to marry her to keep his promise. After their marriage, the crone tells the knight that she can either remain old and wrinkled, but faithful to him, or she can become so beautiful that he might doubt her faithfulness. The knight permits his wife to make her own decision, thereby granting her sovereignty over her own life. The crone turns into a beautiful woman and the couple live happily together.

# Plot of *The Canterbury Tales*



**The Pardoner's Tale:** In Flanders, three fellows sit drinking in a Tavern. They see a funeral procession and vow to defeat Death. On their search for Death, they encounter an old woman, who tells them that Death is underneath an oak tree. The fellows discover a hoard of gold underneath the tree and immediately begin to secretly plot how they could get more gold for themselves by murdering each other. Their avarice causes them to lose the gold and their lives. The two older fellows murder the youngest fellow and then promptly die from drinking poisoned wine given to them earlier by their dead companion.



**The Nun's Tale:** Chanticleer, a rooster, and Pertelote, a hen, belong to a poor widow. Chanticleer and Pertelote are always discovered in amorous situations, much to the straight-laced Nun's dismay. Chanticleer is troubled by a bad dream, a dream that Pertelote tries to dispel by giving Chanticleer a laxative.

**The Merchant's Tale:** In Italy, a sixty-year-old knight named January marries a beautiful young woman named May. January's valet, Damian, is captivated by May's beauty and writes her a love letter, and May arranges to meet him in the garden. January is struck with blindness. While January sits in the garden, May attempts a liaison with Damian in a pear tree. January's sight returns in time for him to see May and Damian's exploits, but May is able to fix the situation by saying that she and Damian were just pretending to create an outrageous scene so that January's sight would miraculously return. Surprisingly, January accepts May's explanation.



**The Reeve's Tale:** In England, a miller is known for cheating people out of their grain. A school teacher tasks two students, John and Alain, to go to the miller and keep a close eye on him while he grinds their grain. Despite John and Alain's careful observation, the miller steals some of the students' grain and secretly steals their horse as well. Tired and without a way to return to their school, John and Alain stay at the miller's house for the night. Eager to get revenge on the miller, Alain sleeps with the miller's daughter and John sleeps with the miller's wife. When the miller discovers what transpired over the night, he attacks John and Alain and soon the whole household is fighting.





## Adapting *The Canterbury Tales*

Do you remember Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* including a careening tour bus, a belligerent American tourist, an homage to 1950's Italian cinema, and a fight inspired by the old Wild West? If you said no, you are quite correct. This production is an adaptation in which the playwright, John Stephens, made adjustments and alterations to Chaucer's work. Scholars who study literature and performance studies spend a great deal of time discussing adaptation, especially when adaptations involve a change in medium. Keep the following questions in mind while you watch the play:

ASC's adaptation features a change in medium, from a piece of written literature meant to be read to a play meant to be performed for an audience. What challenges do you think the playwright faced in adapting Chaucer's work for the stage?

When scholars discuss adaptations, they often discuss fidelity to the source. In what ways did the playwright stay true to Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* and in what ways did he deviate from the original source?

ASC's adaptation features substantial changes in language from the Middle English of the source text. The adaptation features some excerpts from Chaucer, a great deal of rhyming poetry, and some modern language. Does the modernization of the language make the plot of each tale clearer? What in Chaucer's language might have inspired the playwright's reliance on rhyming?

ASC's adaptation puts the tales in new settings. What is the effect of these changes? Do the changes in setting have any influence on the tales besides comedic effect?

One of the benefits of adaptation is that the adapters can deviate from the source text as much as they like in order to achieve their artistic goals. What would your adaptation of *The Canterbury Tales* look like?

# Canterbury Tales: A Closer Look

**The Miller's Tale** : The source of this tale is likely a Middle Dutch story from the fourteenth century called *Heile van Berseele*, which included the key features of a flood, a kiss on a bottom, and a branding (Correale 249-251). Scholars are quick to compare this tale with the Knight's Tale, which features the competition of Arcite and Palamon over Emelye. Like the Knight's Tale, the Miller's Tale deals with male competition over a desirable woman, but the Miller's Tale is much bawdier than its counterpart. Despite the lewd nature of the tale, scholars note that the language of the tale is surprisingly refined, especially with its parody of the language of courtly love.

Note the similarities in word choice between the Chaucer's Absolon and the playwright's. When wooing Allison, Chaucer's Absolon says:

“What do ye, hony-comb, sweete Alisoun,  
My faire brid [bird or bride], my sweete cinamome?  
Awaketh, lemman [sweetheart] myn, and speketh to me” (Damrosch 371).

The playwright's Absolon says:

“Where are you, sweet Allison, my honeycomb  
My cinnamon, my own little bird  
Sooth me, my love with one gentle word...” (Stephens 27).

When you watch the play, listen for language in the Miller's Tale that seems very similar to Chaucer's. Does the playwright ever use language that sounds very modern? What does the inclusion of the twentieth-century song “That's amore!” do for the tale?

**The Wife of Bath's Tale**: The Wife of Bath is one of the most famous characters in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, in part because of the details he gives regarding her biography. Even without Chaucer's full prologue to her tale, we learn in the play that she has had five husbands and that she relies firmly on her own experiences to understand the world around her, instead of depending on a man to explain everything to her. Her tale features women who are given legal power—Guinevere, who has the ability to sentence the guilty knight to death—and magical power—the old crone, on whom the knight must rely to escape death and who transforms herself into a beautiful woman. Chaucer drew on well-known motifs from folklore in crafting this tale; Chaucer's readers would have been familiar with the idea of a withered old woman transforming into a beautiful maiden. Although the fact that the knight is not imprisoned for his crime does not meet modern expectations of justice, the tale, when placed in its historical context of the late fourteenth century, has a uniquely feminist undercurrent in its foregrounding of the need for female sovereignty.







# Canterbury Tales: A Closer Look

**The Pardoner's Tale:** The ending of the Pardoner's Tale in the play highlights the many choices that an adapter can make. The playwright chose to end the scene with the Pardoner seemingly interjecting himself into his story and defeating Death. Chaucer ended the Pardoner's Tale with the Pardoner insulting the Host, suggesting that he might want to kiss the religious relics because he is full of sin. The Knight is forced to step in before the argument between the Pardoner and the Host devolves into a fistfight. Chaucer's ending focuses more on the Pardoner's lack of credibility and his own displays of extreme avarice- the very sin that he constantly admonishes the pilgrims to avoid. How is the Pardoner portrayed in the playwright's version? Is the playwright's decision to forgo Chaucer's ending in keeping with the play's trend to encourage the audience to focus more on the plot of the tales and less on the teller of the tales?



**The Nun's Tale:** This tale features significant deviations from Chaucer's text. Compare and contrast the two versions of the tales; what is the effect of the playwright's decision to excise so many plot points from Chaucer's tale? Much of the comedic effect in this tale comes from the humor created by human actors pretending to be a rooster and a chicken. What, if any, elements of humor can be found in Chaucer's original tale about Chanticleer and Pertelote?

**The Merchant's Tale:** What comparisons can you make between this tale and the Miller's tale, which both feature young wives falling for men who are more enticing than their older husbands?

**The Reeve's Tale:** This tale ends in an outrageously comedic scene that exemplifies the many liberties a playwright can take when adapting a piece of literature. How did the Wild West setting affect your interpretation of the tale? What was your reaction to the amusingly absurd features of the staged version of the tale, including a baby played by an adult actor, a *Star Wars*-inspired fight, and a drone? If you were staging this tale, what elements would you add to the fight at the end of the tale to make it even more comic?

## Bibliography

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