The Canterbury Tales

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF GEOFFREY CHAUCER

Chaucer was born between 1343-5 to a well-to-do family of wine merchants in London. He served as a lower-level court official in a variety of roles throughout his life. Chaucer was captured by the French during the Hundred Years' War but quickly released on ransom. Shortly afterwards, he married Philippa de Roet, an attendant to the Queen, and became an esquire at the King's court. As an esquire, he served as a spy and traveled to Italy and France, where he likely encountered much of the continental European poetry that influenced his writing. Chaucer held several official positions, including the clerk in charge of overseeing new construction for the crown as well as one of the king's foresters. In addition to *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer wrote a number of other important poems and prose texts, including *Troilus and Criseyde*, a romantic, mythological tragedy; *The Book of the Duchess*, a courtly elegy; and a scientific treatise on the astrolabe.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The late 14th century was a chaotic time in England. The Catholic Church was undergoing huge shifts and changes. After the horrors of the Black Death, many people were questioning the Church's authority, and groups such as the Lollards rebelled against the power that priests wielded. Medieval society traditionally consisted of three estates: the church, the nobility, and the peasantry. The church represented people who prayed but did not work for a living; this holy sector of society was supported by the other two and was not supposed to be concerned with material goods. The nobility was strictly bound to many rules of chivalry and courtliness. The rest of the population consisted of the peasant working class. However, in the late 14th century, this structure was breaking down. Peasant revolts such as the Jack Straw rebellion of 1381 raged through the countryside. A new middle class consisting of educated workers such as merchants, lawyers, and clerks was beginning to gain power, particularly in urban areas. Chaucer himself was a member of this new middle class. *The Canterbury Tales* both depict and satirize the conventions of these turbulent times.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Although Chaucer never refers to it directly, he likely got much of his source material from Boccaccio's *Decameron*, a series of linked stories that have a similar structure to *The Canterbury Tales*: just as the *Tales* are told by pilgrims on their way to Canterbury, the stories of the *Decameron* are told by lords and ladies traveling around Florence as they try to avoid the Black Plague. Nearly every great poet writing in English is influenced by Chaucer.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Canterbury Tales*
- **When Written:** End of the 14th century
- **Where Written:** London, England
- **When Published:** England
- **Literary Period:** Medieval
- **Genre:** Estate satire
- **Setting:** The road to Canterbury, England
- **Climax:** No climax: each Tale has its own climax, but the *Tales* as a whole are unfinished, and though they are interconnected in terms of characters and themes, there is not a single plot thread that develops throughout.
- **Point of View:** Many different characters tell their tales, but the whole frame narrative is told through the eyes of Chaucer the pilgrim. It's also important to keep in mind that the *Tales* are unfinished. Each pilgrim is supposed to get two tales––one for the road to Canterbury, and one for the way back––but several of the pilgrims don't even get one story, and they never actually make it to Canterbury.

EXTRA CREDIT

Geoffrey Chaucer Tweeteth. Though Chaucer likely did not foresee a digital future for the *Tales*, he has a very active social networking presence, particular under the Twitter handle "LeVostreGC"(https://twitter.com/LeVostreGC). The blogosphere has adopted Chaucer in sites such as "Geoffrey Chaucer Hath a Blog" (http://houseoffame.blogspot.com), which is written in a fake Middle English and features entries "written" not only by Chaucer but by his son and his contemporaries.

Chaucer Through the Ages. Since its first publication, *The Canterbury Tales* has never been out of print, and they have inspired countless adaptations and re-workings. In his *Autobiography*, Ben Franklin claimed, perhaps as a joke, that his last name came from Chaucer's Franklin. The whole genre of the buddy road-trip movie can be traced to the structure of the *Tales*. Some recent adaptations have included the 2001 film *A Knight's Tale*, featuring Paul Bettany playing Chaucer himself.

PLOT SUMMARY

General Prologue

After a description of the **spring**, Chaucer the narrator introduces each of the pilgrims one by one. The form of the General Prologue is an estates satire: Chaucer is describing characters from each of the three medieval estates (church, nobility, and peasantry) with various levels of mockery.

The frame story of the General Prologue is a religious pilgrimage: all of these characters have come together to go to the cathedral at Canterbury. Chaucer describes each of the pilgrims' **physical appearance** very carefully, and this description often gives much insight into each of their characters.

After Chaucer describes the pilgrims, he apologizes for any harshness or rudeness that might appear: he is simply trying to be as honest a narrator and use as clear, simple, unadorned language as possible. He then describes how the tale-telling contest begins. The Host at the Tabard Inn, Harry Bailly, proposes that instead of marching toward Canterbury in boring silence, the pilgrims tell each other amusing tales on the way there and back. The Host says that he will judge the tales and that everyone else will have to pay for the winner's dinner upon their return. The pilgrims readily agree to this jolly plan. They draw straws to see who will tell the first tale, and the Knight––the most noble of the company––happens to draw the straw to go first.

The Knight's Tale

The Knight is a skillful storyteller: he knows all the tricks of classical rhetoric and uses lots of flourishes in his style. Theseus brings his wife, Hippolyta, and her sister, Emelye, back to Athens. On the way, they meet weeping noblewomen, and Theseus avenges them by conquering the evil tyrant Creon. After the battle, scavengers find Arcite and Palamon, two knights who are badly wounded but still alive. Theseus takes them back to Athens and imprisons them for life. Palamon and Arcite are cousins who are sworn by the bonds of chivalry to be brother knights to the death.

One morning, Palamon looks out the window, spies the fair Emelye, and falls immediately head over heels in love. Arcite is also smitten. The two knights have sworn never to let the love a lady come between them, but this is exactly what happens. Arcite gets released on the condition that he never return to Athens, and both men pine for Emelye. Arcite sneaks back to Athens in disguise and under a changed name takes a position in Theseus's court. Palamon drugs his jailer and makes his escape from prison. The two knights end up in the same grove, and they begin to duel for Emelye, but Theseus finds them and makes them wait for a year so they can each amass armies and stage a proper fight. The winner of the battle will win the hand of Emily.

Theseus builds a huge arena for the battle. Palamon prays to Venus that he win the hand of Emelye, and Arcite prays to Mars for victory. Emelye prays to Diana for either chastity or the love of the man who truly desires her. Each knight interprets the sign from the gods as saying that he has won, and neither is wrong. During the battle, Palamon is captured and Arcite is victorious, but just as Arcite is doing a victory lap, a fury from hell pops up and scares his horse so much that Arcite is thrown off. Gravely injured, Arcite whispers forgiveness to Palamon on his deathbed and says that if he cannot have Emelye, Palamon should have her.

Arcite dies, the kingdom mourns, and the Knight elaborately describes how he is *not* elaborately describing the funeral rituals. Several years later, Theseus gives a speech about how all mortals should submit to the wisdom and will of the gods, Palamon and Emelye wed, and all live happily ever after.

The Miller's Prologue and Tale

The drunken Miller interrupts the Host's order so that he can "quite" the Knight's Tale, that is, respond to it directly. The Miller tells a fabliau, which is a bawdy fable that involves a lot of complicated tricks and dirty jokes. Chaucer interrupts briefly to tell the reader that if he doesn't want to read a risqué tale, he should turn over the page.

The foolish old carpenter is devoted to his frisky young wife, Alison. Nicholas, a dashing young scholar from Oxford, woos Alison, and they devise a plan to sleep together. The vain parish clerk Absolon also wants to sleep with Alison, but she rejects his advances. Nicholas pretends that a flood twice the size of Noah's flood is going to come and drown them all, and he convinces the carpenter that the carpenter, Alison, and Nicholas can save themselves by sleeping in tubs. Of course, this all turns into an elaborate ruse so that Alison and Nicholas can make love under the carpenter's nose. Meanwhile, Absolon comes to the window to kiss Alison, but she sticks her rear end in his face. Enraged, Absolon gets a red-hot poker from the blacksmith. When he returns, Nicholas farts in his face, but Absolon takes revenge by branding Nicholas in the buttocks. Nicholas cries out for water, the carpenter wakes up and crashes in his tub to the ground. The tale ends with everyone laughing at the cuckolded carpenter.

The Reeve's Prologue and Tale

The Reeve, a carpenter by craft, is furious at the Miller's treatment of carpenters and declares that he will "quite" the Miller's tale with another fabliau, this one not about carpenters but about silly millers.

Symkyn the miller is a fat, pug-nosed scoundrel. Two young scholars, Aleyn and John, try to stop the miller from stealing. However, Symkyn catches onto their plan and releases their horse into a field of wild mares. The scholars spend all day chasing their horse, which gives the miller plenty of time to steal grain. Aleyn and John end up spending the night at the

miller's house. The miller, his wife, his grown daughter, his infant, and the two scholars all share a bedroom. To take his revenge on the miller, Aleyn has sex with the miller's daughter. Not to be outdone, John switches the cradle from the foot of the miller's bed to the foot of the scholars' bed. Mistaking the beds, the miller's wife hops into bed with John, who has sex with her. Aleyn leaves the daughter's bed and crawls back into what he thinks is his own bed to brag to John about his exploits, but it turns out that he brags to the miller. Chaos ensues and everybody ends up beating up the miller.

The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale

The Wife of Bath's long prologue is in the form of a literary confession, or a monologue in which a character freely talks about his or her faults and virtues. The Wife of Bath says that her authority to tell her tale comes from experience: since she has had five husbands, she is an expert in the realm of marriage and the relationships between men and women. The Wife of Bath also enjoys providing her own interpretations of Biblical and classical **literary allusions**. She gives detailed descriptions of how wives wield power and control over their husbands, which makes the Pardoner, who is about to be married, get nervous. The Wife of Bath describes her first three husbands as good but boring: they were rich old men who were putty in the palms of her hands. The fourth husband had affairs, but the Wife of Bath, a lusty young thing herself, retaliated by making his life a living hell. Jankyn, her fifth husband, is good-looking but poor, and he outrages her by reading a book about wicked wives. The Wife of Bath tears pages out of the book and punches Jankyn in the face, but he hits her back, causing her to go deaf in one ear. The Wife of Bath pretends to be dead for a little while on account of the blow, which makes Jankyn pliable to her every whim. The Friar and the Summoner interrupt the Wife of Bath, but the Host shushes them and lets her tell her tale.

The Wife of Bath sets her Tale during the days of King Arthur, when fairies, not friars, roamed England. A young, lusty knight rapes a maid, but instead of having his head chopped off, the queen gives him the chance to save his life if he can find out what women want. The knight receives different answers from every woman he asks. Finally, he meets an old woman who says that she can help him if he promises to pledge his life to her. He agrees and they return to court, where the queen is assembled with her maids. The knight tells them that women want sovereignty over their husbands, which the women agree is the correct answer. The old woman makes the knight marry her, which he does, but very reluctantly. She offers him a choice: either she can remain ugly and be faithful, or she can become beautiful but possibly unfaithful. The knight lets the old woman choose, which, again, is the right answer, as she responds by letting him have his cake and eat it too: she transforms into a beautiful *and* faithful woman.

The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale

Like the Wife of Bath's Prologue, the Pardoner's Prologue is also a literary confession. Every sermon that the Pardoner gives has the same theme: "Greed is the root of all evils." However, the Pardoner himself lives a very greedy life. He brings pardons and fake relics back from Rome and gets the gullible parishioners to make offerings to these trinkets. The Pardoner doesn't care about saving souls: all he wants to do is get rich.

The Pardoner tells the story of three young rioters who spend their days carousing and drinking. They hear a coffin passing outside the tavern and learn that one of their friends has been stabbed by a thief named Death. The revelers pledge a bond of brotherhood among them and declare that they will slay Death.

They meet an old man wandering the earth begging Death to let him die. He points them to an old oak, where he says Death is sitting. However, when the knights arrive, there are eight enormous bushels of gold in the spot. One of the rioters says that they should wait until nightfall to transport the gold, but that one of them should go to town to get provisions so that they can wait all day. They draw straws, and the youngest goes into town. While he is gone, the two others plot to kill him upon his return so that they will each have a bigger share of the money. But the youngest reveler also plots to kill the other two so that he can have the treasure to himself. He gets a strong poison from the apothecary and spikes two bottles of wine. The youngest reveler returns and the others kill him, but then they drink the poisoned wine and die on the same spot.

Greed, the Pardoner reminds the pilgrims, is the root of all evils. The Pardoner tries to sell a fake relic to the Host, but the Host gets mad, and the Knight must step in to break up the fight.

Prologue to the Tale of Sir Thopas, The Tale of Sir Thopas, the Host's Interruption of Chaucer

The Host asks Chaucer for a merry tale, and Chaucer replies that he can give a piece of rhyming doggerel from his childhood. The Tale of Sir Thopas is a parody of alliterative, rhyming romances popular during medieval times, and it is told in a thumping, heavily repetitive meter and rhyme scheme. Sir Thopas is a young knight who lives in the silly-sounding "Poperyng." He is a fresh and lusty, though chaste, youth. Driven nearly mad with desire by birdsong, Sir Thopas dreams of an elf-queen whom he resolves to make his lady-love. However, Sir Olifaunt guards the elf-queen, and he and Sir Thopas must duel. Chaucer describes Sir Thopas's **clothes** in great detail.

The Host interrupts Chaucer, saying that his horrible rhymes are not worth a turd. The Host begs Chaucer to say something in prose with a sensible moral, and he replies with the long and long-winded prose Tale of Melibee.

The Nun's Priest's Prologue, Tale, and Epilogue

The Nun's Priest Tale is a beast fable, meaning that the tale

occurs among animals and usually contains a clear moral. However, the Nun's Priest fable is more complex and layered than a typical beast fable, as it contains elements of courtly romance, mock epic, and contemporary political satire.

A widow and her two daughters live on a small farm, and their prized possession is Chaunticleer, a fine rooster. Chaunticleer has seven wives, of which his favorite is the lovely hen Pertelote. One night, Chaunticleer has a nightmare about a murderer. Pertelote retorts that he is a coward, cites Cato on the dismissal of dreams, and prescribes a laxative. Chaunticleer gives many **literary examples** of the importance of interpreting dreams correctly, but despite his instinct and all of his arguments, he ultimately follows Pertelote's advice and ignores the dream. Chaunticleer's rationale for following Pertelote's advice comes from his total mistranslation of a Latin quotation.

One day in **May**, the fox comes into the chicken yard. At first, Chaunticleer is wary, but when the fox flatters his singing abilities, Chaunticleer forgets to be cautious, closes his eyes, and opens his mouth to sing. At that very moment, the fox grabs the cock by the throat. The hens begin to wail like Trojan woman. The widow and her daughters wake up, see the fox run off with the rooster, and everyone in the barnyard chases after the fox as though they are part of Jack Straw's rebellion. Chaunticleer tells the fox he should turn around and taunt his tormenters. The fox agrees, and when he opens his mouth to speak, Chaunticleer makes his escape and flies to the top of a high tree. The fox attempts to sweet-talk the rooster down, but Chaunticleer has learned his lesson and will not go. The moral, says the Nun's Priest, is to never trust flatterers. The Host immediately proceeds to flatter the Nun's Priest.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Chaucer – Chaucer does not name himself in the General Prologue, but he is one of the characters who gather at the Tabard Inn. All of the descriptions of the pilgrims in the Prologue are narrated through the perspective of the character of Chaucer (which may or may not be the same as that of the author Chaucer). Although the Chaucer-narrator is not initially preparing to go on pilgrimage, after describing all the pilgrims, he decides to join the merry company on their journey.

The Knight – The Knight is a noble man who fights for truth and for Christ rather than for his own glory or wealth. He has traveled throughout many heathen lands victoriously. The Knight is one of the few characters whom Chaucer praises wholeheartedly: he is a genuine example of the highest order of chivalry.

The Squire – The Squire is a young knight in training, a member of the noble class. While he is chivalrous and genteel, he is not quite as perfect as his father, the Knight, as he wears fine **clothes** and is vain about his appearance. The Squire is being trained in both the arts of battle and the arts of courtly love.

The Prioress – The Prioress attempts to be dainty and well-bred, and Chaucer makes fun of her by describing how she speaks French with a terrible accent and sings the liturgy straight through her nose. Although the Prioress should be devoted to Christ, she is more concerned with worldly matters: her **clothes** are richly bedecked, and her coral rosary that says "Love conquers all" serves as a decorative piece rather than a religious article.

The Monk – The Monk is another religious character who is corrupt. Instead of reading in his cell, the Monk prefers to go hunting, even though this is against the rules of the order of St. Benedict. The Monk also wears richly decorated **clothing** rather than the simple robes that one might expect a monk to wear.

The Friar – In medieval society, friars were mendicants, or beggars who could not work but had to live off the charity of others. Although they were supposed to be humble and modest, this Friar is jolly and wants to lead a comfortable life. Instead of ministering to lepers and beggars, as friars are supposed to do, the Friar cultivates relationships with rich men so that he can make a profit. Rather than the simple cloaks of a beggar, the friar wears expensive **clothing**.

The Merchant – The Merchant outfits himself in fashionable **attire**, with his multicolored cloak and his forked beard. He is a member of the new, rising middle class that Chaucer the author belongs to. Chaucer says that the Merchant hides being in debt by wearing fancy clothes, but the fact that even Chaucer, a stranger among the company, knows the Merchant's financial troubles indicates that the Merchant does not hide his secrets as well as he thinks he does.

The Man of Laws – Like the Merchant, the Man of Laws is also a member of the new middle class. He works hard and attempts to pull himself up through merit rather than simply by birth. The Man of Laws wants to join the ranks of the nobility, unlike the Merchant, who wants to rise to prominence in the new bourgeois class.

The Franklin – The Franklin is a free, wealthy landowner, an excellent host who always keeps his table set for a feast. He provides frequent meals and entertainment for the peasants who live on his land. The Franklin leads a pleasant life, following the tenets of the Greek philosopher Epicurus, and his tale speaks of the merits of a marriage based on trust and faith.

The Wife of Bath – The Wife of Bath comes from the town of Bath, which is on the Avon River. She is a seamstress by trade but a professional wife by occupation: she has been married five times and presents herself as the world's expert in matters of marriage and the relations between men and women. Chaucer describes her as large, gap-toothed, and dressed in red **clothing**, which is traditionally the color of lust. The Wife of

Bath is a force of nature, a larger-than-life character who is not afraid to push her way to the front and state her opinions.

The Reeve – In medieval society, a Reeve is a manager of an estate. This Reeve is slender, old, and crabby. Everyone is afraid of him because he knows all the tricks of the trade. The Reeve squirrels away the money that he earns from his landowner; indeed, at this point, he's wealthier than his boss. The Reeve is also a talented carpenter and is extremely offended when the Miller tells his story about a foolish carpenter.

The Summoner – The Summoner is another supposedly devout religious figure who is actually a hypocrite. In medieval society, summoners brought people to the ecclesiastical court to confess their sins. He has a disgusting skin disease that makes his face pimpled and scaly. His outside appearance matches his inner corruption: he is very willing to be bribed in exchanged for a full pardon.

The Host – The Host at the Tabard Inn, Harry Bailly, is a jolly, lively tavern-keeper. He establishes the main frame narrative of the Tales, since he is the one who proposes the tale-telling game and sets the rules that it will follow. The Host joins the pilgrimage not as a figure seeking religious guidance but as guide and judge to the game. The Host's presence demonstrate that the main purpose of this pilgrimage lies not so much in the devout religious act but in the fun that these tourists will have along the way.

The carpenter – The foolish, gullible old carpenter is very possessive of his beautiful young wife, Alison. The carpenter criticizes Nicholas, the scholar, for looking into "Goddes pryvetee" with all of his astrological studies, but as soon as Nicholas tells the carpenter about the "vision" that he has had, the carpenter believes him, doing anything he can to save his wife and himself.

Nicholas – Nicholas is a poor young scholar from Oxford who studies astrology and is much cleverer than the foolish carpenter. Nicholas is lively and lusty and likes to play tricks. He sleeps with Alison directly under the carpenter's nose, cuckolding him in his own house, and he farts in Absolon's face.

Alison – Alison is the beautiful, flirtatious young wife of the carpenter. When Nicholas woos her, she thinks nothing of her marital obligations and has no guilt at having an affair with the dashing young scholar. She is also somewhat temperamental: even though she sings sweetly to Nicholas, she harshly rebuffs Absolon's advances.

Absolon – Absolon is a vain parish clerk who also tries to woo Alison. Unlike the poor Nicholas, Absolon is able to shower gifts and money on Alison, yet Alison scorns his advances, and she and Nicholas trick the foolish young clerk. Absolon literally kisses Allison's ass, and Nicholas farts in his face. However, Absolon does get his revenge on Nicholas when he brands him with a hot poker.

The miller's wife – Unlike Alison, the wife in "The Miller's Tale", who is much younger than her husband, the miller's wife is probably at least as old as the miller, considering they have a twenty-year-old daughter. The miller's wife enjoys "swyving" (that is, having sex) and doesn't seem to have any guilt upon sleeping with John.

Jankyn – The fifth and final of the Wife of Bath's husbands, and the only one whom she names in her Prologue. Unlike the other husbands, Jankyn is not rich and old, but young and poor: the Wife of Bath marries him for looks, not for money. Jankyn infuriates the Wife of Bath by reading books about wicked women.

The knight – The unnamed knight in the Wife of Bath's tale is a foolish, overly lusty bachelor who breaks the code of chivalry when he rapes a maiden in the woods. He is sent by the queen on a quest to learn his lesson. Once he proves himself by discovering the answer to the question of what women want and then by answering the old woman's question correctly (that is, by letting her decide), he is rewarded by getting to have his cake and eat it too: the old woman turns into a beautiful and faithful wife.

The old woman – The ugly but wise old woman in the Tale is a common character in legends: the loathly lady, or the woman who seems to be an unimportant old woman but actually contains magical powers. The old woman helps the knight on the condition that he promises to do whatever she wants.

The queen – The unnamed queen, who is probably Guinevere out of Arthurian legend, wields most of the power in the kingdom: she orders the king to have mercy on the knight, and she dictates the terms of the punishment. The assembly of women gathered to hear the knight's answer is reminiscent of the major arena that Theseus builds in "The Knight's Tale".

Sir Thopas – Young, brave Sir Thopas is a knight in both the literal **springtime** and the figurative spring of his life, as he is just starting forth on all his adventures. Although he is chaste, he is full of lust and zest for conquest in both love and battle. With his sweet tooth and his fashionable **attire**, Sir Thopas resembles the Squire.

Chaunticleer – Chaunticleer the cock, the widow's prized possession, is the lord of the barnyard: he has seven hen wives, and his plumage is described as though it were made of jewels. Although Chaunticleer is a rooster, he is well-educated and makes lots of **literary allusions**, even if he doesn't know what all of them mean.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Yeoman – Chaucer does not describe the Yeoman in much detail in the Prologue, primarily observing that since he is dressed in green **clothing** and keeps his arrows in good condition, he is an excellent forester who takes care of the Knight's land.

The Second Nun and the Nun's Priests – Even though the second nun and the nun's priests are only mentioned in passing and are not described in the General Prologue, this second nun and one of the priests do get to tell tales.

The Clerk – The Clerk is a poor scholar who can only afford threadbare **clothes** because he spends all his spare money on books. There are many scholars through *The Canterbury Tales*, and though nearly all of them are poor, this does not dampen their spirits.

The Guildsmen (Haberdasher, Carpenter, Weaver, Dyer, Tapestry-Maker) – Chaucer mentions five specific guildsmen by trade in the Prologue, but none of them gets to tell a Tale. In medieval society, tradesmen organized into guilds to obtain more power and money, and these workers were rapidly gaining recognition and influence.

The Cook – The Cook, Roger de Ware, is one of the pilgrims explicitly based on a real-life figure. The Cook makes tasty food, but his disgusting appearance and severe lack of hygiene might not make that food the most appetizing of options.

The Shipman – The Shipman is a scoundrel who skims off the top of the wares he transports. However, even though he is a crook, the Shipman has a great deal of experience and is good at his job: he may be a thief, but he's not a hypocrite.

The Physician – The Physician, like the Clerk, is well-educated, but he practices his trade for love of gold rather than love of knowledge. He may not know his Bible, but he certainly knows all that there is to know about science and medicine.

The Parson – Unlike most of the other religious characters in the Tales, the Parson is a sincere and devout priest, devoted to his parishioners. He genuinely practices what he preaches, traveling through rain and shine to the farthest corners of his parish.

The Plowman – The Plowman, the Parson's brother, is also a devout Christian, dedicated to his labors. He wears a modest **tunic**, demonstrating his humble ways, and always pays his tithes in full, showing his devotion to Christ.

The Miller – The Miller is a pug-nosed, brawny worker with a red beard and a warty nose. He's a champion wrestler, a thief––Chaucer says that he steals corn from his bosses––and something of a drunkard.

The Manciple – The Manciple supplies a school of law with provisions, but he is cleverer than the lawyers he works for. He, like the Shipman and the Miller, likely steals from his masters, since his accounts always come out ahead and in his favor.

The Pardoner – The Pardoner, with his mincing, feminine ways and long hair, has been interpreted as potentially homosexual. He carries a full bag of pardons and fake relics from Rome, which he uses to dupe gullible parishioners into giving him money.

Theseus – Theseus is the noble king of Athens. A powerful conqueror and a fair ruler, Theseus often must make the final judgment throughout "The Knight's Tale", but he accepts the counsel of others throughout.

Hippolyta – Hippolyta is Queen of the Amazons, a tribe of powerful women. Nevertheless, before the story begins, she has fallen in love with Theseus, and he brings her back to Athens as his bride.

Arcite – One of the two main knights of the Tale. Bound in chivalric brotherhood to Palamon, Arcite nevertheless falls in love with the same woman, Emelye, while the two are imprisoned in the tower.

Palamon – Brave, strong Palamon, sworn to eternal brotherhood with Arcite, his cousin, falls in love with the maiden Emelye while he and Arcite are imprisoned for life in the tower.

Emelye – The object of both Palamon's and Arcite's desire, Emelye, Hippolyta's maiden sister, is the lady whom the knights love from afar. She is pious, virginal, and the epitome of an object of courtly love.

Perotheus – A duke who is a friend of both Theseus and Arcite, he petitions for Arcite's release from prison.

Venus – Palamon prays to Venus, goddess of love, before battle, asking to win the hand of Emelye. The temple of Venus is decorated not only with heroic love but also with stories showing the sinful and disastrous effects that love can have.

Mars – Arcite prays to Mars, the god of war, asking for victory in battle. Mars's temple is decorated with images of the destruction and havoc that war creates.

Diana – Emelye prays to Diana before the climactic battle. Diana is the goddess of chastity as well as of change. Her temple is decorated with symbols of virginity and maidenhead, but Diana's emblem is the moon, and the temple also depicts various mythological characters whom she has changed.

Saturn – The father of the gods and the ultimate judge, pale, cold Saturn makes sure that everything turns out as Fortune and the gods have decreed.

Egeus – Theseus's father and the voice of reason in the Tale who instructs Theseus to move forward despite his grief.

Symkyn – Symkyn the miller, a fat, pug-nosed man, resembles the portrait of the Miller in the General Prologue. Symkyn is a scoundrel who steals grain from his masters.

Aleyn – Aleyn, who comes from the north of England, is one of the two scholars studying at Cambridge. When the miller sets the clerks' horse loose into the field of wild mares, Aleyn takes his revenge by setting himself loose upon the miller's daughter and having sex with her.

John – John, who comes from the north of England, is one of the two scholars studying at Cambridge. By swapping the cradle from the foot of one bed to the foot of the other, John

tricks the miller's wife into sleeping with him.

The miller's daughter – The twenty-year-old daughter resembles her father, Symkyn, since she also has a pug nose. She is a lusty young creature who steals grain from her thieving father to give back to the scholars. She sleeps with Aleyn.

The three rioters – The three rioters spend their days carousing, drinking, and making mischief. Although they swear brotherhood during their quest to slay Death, as soon as they find the bushels of gold all bets are off and they start plotting against each other, to their eventual demise.

The old man – The old man who cannot die is a typical character from a moral fable: he gives the rioters the information that they seek, but it turns out that he leads them directly into danger.

Sir Olifaunt – Sir Olifaunt, that is, "Sir Elephant," is a huge giant who guards the elf-queen whom Sir Thopas falls in love with in a dream.

The widow and her daughters – The widow and her two daughters are the only humans who appear in this Tale: all of the other characters in this beast fable are animals. The widow and her daughters act like animals in the climactic scene of the Tale, when the entire barnyard chases the fox.

Pertelote – Chaunticleer's favorite hen-wife, Pertelote, is also well-educated, quoting Latin **authors** and physician's remedies. She is quite bossy and is an example of the kind of authoritative wife that the Wife of Bath champions in her Prologue.

Russell the Fox – The fox is the wily villain of the story, the murderous threat that Chaunticleer sees in a dream. The fox also is an allusion to the threat of royal power disrupting peasants' lives, as Chaucer hints when he describes the barnyard chase as being like the Jack Straw rebellion.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

SOCIAL SATIRE

Medieval society was divided into three estates: the Church (those who prayed), the Nobility (those who fought), and the Peasantry (those who worked). The General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* is an estates satire. In the Host's portraits of the pilgrims, he sets out the functions of each estate and satirizes how members of the estates – particularly those of the Church – fail to meet their duties. By the late fourteenth century, the rigid organization of these three estates had begun to break down. A merchant class had begun to rise and was quickly gaining money and power throughout secular society. An intellectual class was also rising – people trained in literature but, unlike monks, not destined for church life. As the son of wine merchants and clerk to the king, Chaucer belonged to both of these new suborders of society. Chaucer puts all of society on parade, and no one escapes his skewering.

The social satire that the Host sets up in the General Prologue continues throughout the tales that the pilgrims tell. The Nun's Priest's tale satirizes courtly love by putting chivalry in the setting of a barnyard. Supposedly pious religious figures are shown to be corrupt and greedy just underneath the surface. In her Prologue, the Wife of Bath presents a parody of religious logic, giving her own readings of Scripture to back up her view that experience is the only authority.

Even though the *Tales* are fictitious, Chaucer draws directly on real people and real events in his satire of human life. Chaucer presents his characters as stock types – the greedy Pardoner, the hypocritical Friar, etc. – but he also presents them as individual people who exist in the world around him. The most famous example of this is Chaucer himself. The author of the *Tales* does not remove himself from his own satire. On the contrary, Chaucer depicts himself as a bumbling, clumsy fool. Chaucer also draws on real-life settings and events to emphasize the social commentary. In the Nun's Priest's Tale, Chaucer compares the climactic battle among all the farm creatures to the Jack Straw rebellion, a peasants' revolt that took place in England in 1381. The clash between the nobility and the peasants gets played out in miniature version between the fox and the rooster.

The rigid hierarchy of the medieval estates is frequently inverted and subverted throughout the Tales. Even though the Host sets forth each of the characters in order and in a procession in the General Prologue, the whole company of pilgrims is mixed. Pilgrims of all levels of society respond directly to each other. The Miller jumps in right after the Knight to tell his tale instead of waiting his place in line. In a pilgrimage, members from all three estates share the same primary function: all of them, great and small, are going to Canterbury.

COMPETITION

The premise of *The Canterbury Tales* is a tale-telling competition between pilgrims on their way to Canterbury. In the General Prologue, the Host introduces the structure: each pilgrim will tell two tales on the way to Canterbury and two on the way home. Many of the tales that the pilgrims tell are about competition. In the Knight's Tale, for example, the climactic battle scene expands an individual competition into a contest between Mars, god of war, and Venus, goddess of love.

Competition occurs both in the tales the pilgrims tell and

among the pilgrims themselves. After the Knight tells his tale, the Miller jumps in: "By armes and by blood and bones, / I kan a noble tale for the nones, / With which I wol now quite the Knyghtes tale" (I.3125-27). "Quiting" means paying back or requiting, and the quiting game becomes an important part of the ordering principle of the Tales. After the Miller tells his tale featuring a foolish carpenter, the angry Reeve––a carpenter––blurts out, "'So theek,' quod he, 'ful wel koude I thee quite / With blerying of a proud milleres ye.'"

Though competition is the driving force of the frame narrative and spurs on the *Tales*, competition can also halt the action. Between the Wife of Bath's Prologue and her Tale, the Friar and the Summoner interrupt and begin arguing with each other. The Friar complains about the Wife of Bath's rambling, and the Summoner complains about the Friar's complaining. The Host has to step in and moderate the fight so that the Wife of Bath can get on with her story.

COURTLY LOVE AND SEXUAL DESIRE

Courtly love is the medieval concept of expressing admiration and love in a noble, chivalrous fashion. This type of love exists outside marriage: true courtly love exists on a spiritual, idealized plane, and does not need to be physically consummated. The Knight's Tale centers on courtly love: the two knights compete for the hand of a fair maiden. In the General Prologue, the Host's description of the Squire, a young knight, has all the trappings of a traditional courtly lover: he wears fancy clothes, takes care of his appearance, writes music, jousts, dances, and is so passionate in his love that he can barely sleep.

Courtly love is satirized in many of the tales that do not take place among the nobility. The Miller's Tale turns ideals of courtly love into a rude fart joke. The Nun's Priest's Tale, a beast fable about a rooster and a fox, puts courtly love in the henhouse: Chaunticleer the cock is devoted to Pertelote, his favorite hen. Just like a noble knight, Chaunticleer uses classical references and is inspired by dream visions, and Chaunticleer's crazy misreading of the message that he gets in the dream is what lets him get tricked by the fox.

In contrast to idealized courtly love, sexual desire also plays a large role in *The Canterbury Tales*. Many of the tales are bawdy and focus on physical lust. The Miller's Tale, among several others, centers on sexual rivalry. The Wife of Bath is very frank about her relations with her five husbands.

The opening to the General Prologue introduces both noble love and carnal lust: men long to go on pilgrimages, Chaucer says, both when they feel religious zeal and physical desire. The birds singing and flowers blossoming are emblematic of both poetic and sexual awakening. Misplaced or disproportionate sexual desire drives many of the tales. Cuckolding is a major theme in many of the more vulgar tales. Chaucer uses lots of double entendres and thinly veiled dirty jokes to portray lust.

Sexual desire and courtly love both feature prominently in the debate over what makes a good marriage, which is a question that many of the pilgrims ask themselves throughout their tales. Both male and female roles are considered in the question of what makes successful and sustained relationships. The knight in the Wife of Bath's Tale must answer the question, "What do women want?"

FRIENDSHIP AND COMPANY

Friendship can be seen on two scales throughout the *Tales*: the brotherly connection between two men, and the ties that exist among members of a company. Friendships between knights were an extremely important part of chivalry, or the code of conduct that knights were supposed to follow. In The Knight's Tale, Palamon and Arcite must choose between their chivalric bond to each other or their rival love for Emelye. For a knight, choosing a beloved over a brother jeopardizes the chivalric code.

Friendship between two individuals that turns into rivalry plays a key role in many of the tales. The Miller, responding directly to the Knight's Tale, also gives a story involving a love triangle of two friends competing for the same woman. The Pardoner tells the tale of three friends who find buried treasure, but whose greed corrupts their friendship: they all plot against each other to gain more wealth for themselves.

The concept of the company is also a form of friendship that has its own social and economic rules. Several of the pilgrims that the Host introduces in the General Prologue are guildsmen. Medieval guilds were organizations of members of a specific trade (for example, carpenters) and formed the backbone of the economy. If there was fighting among members of a guild, or between rival guilds, the whole town would suffer. Even though each of the pilgrims comes from a different group, they all come together as one joint company on the pilgrimage. Many of the pilgrims end their tales by addressing the company at large, and the host often addresses all of them as a single group.

CHURCH CORRUPTION

The frame narrative of the *Tales* itself is religious: everybody is on pilgrimage to Canterbury. But these are not necessarily the most pious pilgrims in the world: for many of the travelers, that the pilgrimage is a tourist expedition rather than a devout religious quest.

The Catholic Church was an enormously powerful force in medieval society, and extremely wealthy. The elaborate, ornate, gilded cathedrals built to enshrine saints' relics were very costly, and the Church also collected regular tithes from its members. By the late fourteenth century, people had begun to become deeply suspicious of the Church's ostentatious wealth.

After the Black Death, which wiped out at least a third of the population, many people no longer trusted the Church's authority. Church official were often seen as corrupt, bribing and coercing people to obtain money for the church under false pretences. Since members of the church were not allowed to work for a living, they had to gain money by other means. Friars took a vow of poverty and roamed the countryside, relying on charitable donations for their livelihood. Summoners brought sinners to the church court for punishment. People bought indulgences from pardoners to purchase forgiveness for their sins.

The religious figures in *The Canterbury Tales* highlight many of the problems corrupting the medieval Church. The Monk, who is supposed to worship in confinement, likes to hunt. Chaucer's Friar is portrayed as a greedy hypocrite. He tells a tale about a summoner who bribes an old innocent widow. The Summoner, in retaliation, skewers friars in his tale, satirizing their long-windedness and their hypocrisy. The Pardoner openly admits to selling false relics to parishioners. Though the Prioress supposedly wears a rosary in devotion to Christ, her ornate token seems much more like a flashy piece of jewelry than a sacred religious object.

WRITING AND AUTHORSHIP

Chaucer is considered to be the father of English poetry. Even though the premise of the *Tales* is that they unfold organically throughout the course of the pilgrimage to Canterbury, Chaucer is highly conscious of the fact that he is conducting a literary project with readers as well as listeners. When the Miller introduces his tale, for example, he says that if the reader doesn't like it, he should simply "turn over the leef and chese another tale" – in other words, turn the page and read another story. Chaucer himself appears as one of the pilgrims. He depicts himself as a bumbling, clumsy, foolish sort, and the two tales he tells are ironically awful, given that we know he is the mastermind behind this whole enterprise.

The concept of a framing narrative that surrounds a group of tales is itself is a common literary convention, seen, for example, in *The Thousand and One Arabian Nights*. Chaucer most likely based his frame narrative on Boccaccio's *Decameron*, in which ten ladies and gentlemen, traveling around the Italian countryside to avoid the plague, tell each other stories.

In this tale-telling competition, the pilgrims are very interested in what makes for good and bad literature. Are the best tales the ones that give the best moral lessons, or the ones that provide the most entertainment for the company? *The Canterbury Tales* contain a vast array of subjects and literary genres, from noble depictions of courtly love to bawdy jokes to beast fables to stories of saints' lives. Almost all the pilgrims introduce themselves and their tales through a prologue, in which they typically explain who they are and why they are going to tell their tale.

The pilgrims have several different theories about what makes a good story and what it means to have the authority to tell it. The Wife of Bath claims that authority comes through experience, saying she is qualified to tell a tale of love and marriage because she has been married five times and using her own interpretations of Scripture as evidence. The Pardoner unapologetically describes how he cons foolish men out of money by selling them false religious relics. He rejects a monastic life, declaring that he lives for greed rather than celestial love. But even though he himself is vicious, he says, he knows how to tell a moral tell with the lesson that greed is the root of all evils.

Chaucer uses a huge variety of styles and forms in the tales. Each pilgrim has a distinct voice. The Knight uses genteel, formal language, while the Miller and Reeve speak in coarse, rude double entendres. Although the majority of *The Canterbury Tales* are in rhymed couplets of iambic pentameter, some of them use different verse forms. The Prioress tells her story of a pure-hearted Christian boy in rime royal, which is a rhyming form in seven-line stanzas. Chaucer's Tale of Sir Thopas is told in comic doggerel with a thumping, irregular rhythm.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

SPRINGTIME

The pilgrimage begins in April, when all of nature is starting to flower and people are experiencing reawakening of both religious and sexual zeal. **Springtime** appears as a symbol of both courtly and erotic love throughout many of the Tales. Both the Knight's Tale and the Nun's Priest's Tale are set in May, the time of courtly love and wooing.

CLOTHING AND APPEARANCE

What the pilgrims wear is often a very important sign of their characters. Outward appearance indicates who one is in medieval society. The Knight's armor is stained from battle, indicating that he not only talks the talk, he walks the walk. The Prioress wears fussy, heavily ornamented **clothes**, showing that she is more preoccupied with her earthly appearance than her devotion to God. Similarly, the Friar is supposed to be a poor beggar, yet he wears rich clothes. The red clothing that the Wife of Bath wears signifies her lusty nature. An overemphasis on clothes and physical appearance usually indicates the hypocritical nature of that vain pilgrim.

LITERARY ALLUSIONS

Many characters use **literary allusions** from the Bible and classical mythology. The pilgrims use literary allusions to make themselves seem more authoritative as tale-tellers. Chaucer also uses this effect to enhance the literariness of his *Tales* and to emphasize his role as the father of English poetry. Sometimes, the effect is serious, as in the Knight's Tale, when Olympian gods arrive. Often, the effect is comic, as when the rooster Chaunticleer and the hen Pertelote begin quoting classical authors in the Nun's Priest's Tale.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Oxford University Press edition of *The Riverside Chaucer* published in 1988.

The General Prologue Quotes

Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licour
Of which vertu engendered is the flour;
...
Thanne longen folk to goon pilgrimages
...
And specially from every shires ende
OF Engelond to Caunterbury they wende,
The hooly blissful martir for to seke,
That hem hath holpen whan that they they were seeke.

Related Characters: Chaucer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

Ful weel she soong the service dyvyne
Entuned in hir nose ful seemly,
And Frenssh she spak ful faire and fetisly,
After the scole of Stratford atte Bowe,
For Frenssh of Parys was to hir unknowe.

Related Characters: Chaucer (speaker), The Prioress

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

He yaf nat of that text a pulled hen,
That seith that hunters ben nat hooly men,
Ne that a monk, whan he is recchelees,
Is likned to a fissh that is waterlees––
This is to seyn, a monk out of his cloystre.
But thilke text heeld he nat worth an oyster.

Related Characters: Chaucer (speaker), The Monk

Related Themes:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

The Knight's Tale Quotes

Whilom, as olde stories tellen us,
Ther was a duc that highte Theseus;
Of Atthenes he was lord and governour,
And in his tyme swich a conquerour
That gretter was there noon under the sonne.
Ful many a rich contree hadde he wonne;
What with his wysdom and his chilvalrie.

Related Characters: The Knight (speaker), Theseus

Related Themes:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

He cast his eye upon Emelya,
And therwithal he bleynte and cride, "A!"

Related Characters: The Knight (speaker), Palamon, Emelye

Related Themes:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

The Firste Moevere of the cause above,
Whan he first made the fair cheyne of love,
Greet was th'effect, and heigh was his entente.
Wel wiste he why, and what thereof he mente,
For with that faire cheyne of love he bond
The fyr, the eyr, the water, and the lond
In certeyn boundes, that they may nat flee.

Related Characters: Theseus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

And therefore, whoso list it nat yheere,
Turne over the leef and chese another tale;
For he shal fynde ynow, gret and smale,
Of storial thing that toucheth gentilesse,
And eek moralitee and hoolynesse.
Blameth nat me if that ye chese amys.
The Miller is a cherl, ye know wel this.

Related Characters: Chaucer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

The Miller's Tale Quotes

This Nicholas anon leet fle a fart
As greet as it had been a thonder-dent.

Related Characters: The Miller (speaker), Nicholas

Related Themes:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

Thus swyved was this carpenteris wyf,
For al his kepyng and his jalousye,
And Absolon hath kist hir nether ye,
And Nicholas is scalded in the towte.
This tale is doon, and God save al the rowte!

Related Characters: The Miller (speaker), The carpenter, Alison, Absolon, Nicholas

Related Themes:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

The Reeve's Prologue Quotes

This dronke Miller hath ytoold us heer
How that bigyled was a carpenteer,
Peraventure in scorn, for I am oon.
And, by youre leve, I shal him quite anoon.

Related Characters: The Reeve (speaker), The Miller

Related Themes:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

The Reeve's Tale Quotes

Thus is the proude miller wel ybete,
And hath ylost the gryndynge of the whete,
And payed for the soper everideel
Of Aleyn and of John, that bette hym weel.
His wyf is swyved, and his doghter als.
Low, swich it is a millere to be fals!
And therefore this proverbe is seyd ful sooth,
"Hym thar nat wene wel that yvil dooth."

Related Characters: The Reeve (speaker), Symkyn, Aleyn, John, The miller's wife, The miller's daughter

Related Themes:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

The Wife of Bath's Prologue Quotes

Experience, though noon auctoritee
Were in this world, is right ynough for me.

Related Characters: The Wife of Bath (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

Men may devyne and glosen, up and doun,
But wel I woot, expres, without lye,
God bad us for to wexe and multiplye,
That gentil text kan I wel understonde.

Related Characters: The Wife of Bath (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

By God! if women hadde written stories,
As clerkes han withinne hire oratories,
They wolde han writen of men moore wikkednesse
Than all the mark of Adam may redresse.

Related Characters: The Wife of Bath (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

And whan I saugh he wolde never fyne
To reden on this cursed book al nyght,
Al sodenly thre leves have I plyght
Out of his book, right as he radde, and eke
I with my fest so took hym on the cheke
That in our fyr he fil bakward adoun.

Related Characters: The Wife of Bath (speaker), Jankyn

Related Themes:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

The Wife of Bath's Tale Quotes

Wommen desiren to have sovereynetee
As wel as over hir housbond as hir love
And for to been in maistrie hym above.

Related Characters: The Knight (speaker), The knight

Related Themes:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

For gentilesse nys but renomee
Of thyne auncestres, for hire heigh bountee,
Which is a strange thing to thy persone.
Thy gentilesse cometh fro God alone.
Thanne comth our verray gentilesse of grace;
It was no thing biquethe us with our place.

Related Characters: The old woman (speaker), The knight

Related Themes:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

The Pardoner's Prologue Quotes

But shortly myn entente I wol devyse:
I preche of no thing but for coveityse.
Therfore my theme is yet, and evere was,
Radix malorum est Cupiditas.

Related Characters: The Pardoner (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

The Pardoner's Tale Quotes

"Now," quod oure Hoost, "I wol no lenger pleye
With thee, ne with noon oother angry man."
But right anon the worthy Knyght bigan,
Whan that he saugh that al the peple lough,
"Namoore of this, for it is right ynough!"

Related Characters: The Host, The Knight (speaker), The Pardoner

Related Themes:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

Prologue to Sir Thopas Quotes

He in the waast is shape as wel as I;
This were a popet in an arm t'embrace
For any woman, smal and fair of face.

Related Characters: The Host (speaker), Chaucer

Related Themes:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

The Tale of Sir Thopas Quotes

Listeth, lordes, in good entent,
And I wol telle verrayment
Of myrthe and of solas,
Al of a knight was fair and gent
In bataille and in tourneyment;
His name was sire Thopas.

Related Characters: Chaucer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

The Host's Interruption of Chaucer Quotes

Thy drasty rhyming is nat worth a toord!

Related Characters: The Host (speaker), Chaucer

Related Themes:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

The Nun's Priest's Tale Quotes

For al so siker as in principio
Mulier est hominis confusio,––
Madame, the sentence of this Latyn is,
"Womman is mannes joye and al his blis."

Related Characters: Chaunticleer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

Certes, he Jakke Straw and his meynee
Ne made never shoutes half so shrille
Whan that they wolden any Flemyng kille,
As thilke day was maad upon the fox.

Related Characters: The Second Nun and the Nun's Priests (speaker), Russell the Fox

Related Themes:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

For seint Paul seith that al that writen is,
To our doctrine it is ywrite, ywis;
Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stile.

Related Characters: The Second Nun and the Nun's Priests (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE GENERAL PROLOGUE

The General Prologue opens with a description of April showers and the return of spring. "Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote / The droghte of March hath perced to the roote," he begins, and writes about the burgeoning flowers and singing birds. The sun has gone through the second half of the zodiacal sign Aires, the "Ram." Budding, lust-filled **springtime** is also the time when people desire to go on pilgrimage, and travelers from all corners of England make the journey to Canterbury Cathedral to seek the help of the blessed martyr.

The first sentence of the General Prologue, is one of the most important 18 lines of poetry in English. Writers ever since Chaucer's day have used and responded to this expression of springtime. The combination of the awakening physical landscape with the desire to go on pilgrimage mixes bodily lust with religious zeal. The pilgrims seek help from the martyr St. Thomas à Becket.

Chaucer, the narrator, who is preparing to go on pilgrimage, is staying at the Tabard Inn, a tavern in Southwark. A diverse company of twenty-nine other pilgrims enter the inn, and the narrator joins their group.

The diversity of the company traveling to Canterbury emphasizes that people from all levels of medieval society take the same journey.

The narrator and the other pilgrims drink, and they decide they will start their journey together the next morning. But before they begin, the narrator pauses the story to introduce the reader to the array of travelers in the company, saying that he will describe how each one of them seemed to him.

Not only does the narrator of the story become one of the characters in it, he also makes the reader aware of his presence as an author: these are his individual perceptions and judgments of appearance.

The narrator begins by describing the Knight, a noble man who loves chivalry and fights for truth and honor. The knight has travelled through Christian and heathen territories––Alexandria, Prussia, Russia, Lithuania, Granada, Morocco, Turkey––and has been victorious everywhere and universally praised for his valor. But his exploits are always conducted for love of Christ, not love of glory.

The narrator is sincere in his description of the Knight as a noble, chivalrous man, determined to fight for the glory of God and always victorious. Unlike many of Chaucer's portraits, which satirize the figure being shown, Chaucer is genuine in his praise for the Knight.

In addition to being worthy and brave, says the narrator, the Knight is modest and meek as a maid. He never speaks ill of anyone. He wears modest **clothes**, and his mail is stained with rust.

The Knight's stained, modest clothes show that he truly fights well and is not showy or vain.

The narrator next describes the Knight's son, a Squire, who is a lively and lusty young knight in training. The Squire has curled hair and, though only of moderate height, is marvelously agile. He has taken part in chivalric expeditions in Flanders and northern France.

The Squire is not yet as noble and experienced as his father: though he is learning all the proper ways to be a good knight, he is still youthful and somewhat vain.

The Squire, says the narrator, wants to find favor with his lady. His **tunic** is embroidered with flowers, as if he had gathered a meadow and sewn it to his clothes, and his gown is short with wide sleeves. The Squire is constantly singing and playing the flute. He can also joust, dance, draw, and write well. The Squire is so passionately in love that he sleeps no more than a nightingale. He is always courteous, humble, and modest.

Unlike the Knight, who dresses modestly so as not to show off, the young Squire wears elaborately decorated clothing that reveals him as a lusty youth as well as a fighter. He displays all the skills of a courtly lover. But although the Squire is a bit vain, he does always act in accordance with his social position.

The only servant the Knight has with him is the Yeoman, who wears a **green hood and coat**. The Yeoman takes great care of his bow and sharp, keen peacock arrows. He has closely cropped hair and tanned skin. On his arm he wears a bright arm guard and carried a sword as well as a dagger. The Yeoman also wears a badge of St. Christopher. The narrator guesses that, according to the Yeoman's dress, he is a forester.

Even though the Knight is noble, he is shown as humble, as befits a good knight, because he only travels with one servant. The fact that he has a Yeoman also shows that the Knight owns land because he needs a forester to maintain it.

The narrator next describes the Prioress, a nun named Madame Eglentyne. She sings the liturgy through her nose. She speaks French elegantly, though in an English accent. She has excellent table manners: she never lets a morsel of meat fall from her mouth onto her breast, nor does she dip her fingers into the sauce. She wipes her lips so clean that not a speck of grease remains after a meal. The Prioress takes pains to imitate courtly manners and to remain dignified at all times.

The narrator's fawning description of the Prioress is mocking, emphasizing her fastidious airs and her affected mannerisms. She believes she sings well, but she intones in straight through her nose. The fact that the Prioress speaks French shows her desire to adopt the behaviors of a noble lady, since French was the language of the court.

The Prioress is so charitable and compassionate, the narrator says, that whenever she sees a mouse caught and bleeding in a trap, she weeps. She keeps small dogs, feeding them roast meat, milk, and fine white bread, and she weeps if any of them are trampled or if men beat them with a switch.

The narrator sarcastically portrays the Prioress as a wimp, squealing every time she sees a dead mouse. In the name of her compassion, she also spoils her little pet dogs.

The Prioress wears a **wimple** draped to show off her well-formed nose, gray eyes, and small red mouth. The narrator observes that she has a wide forehead and that she is hardly underfed. Her cloak is very elegant. She wears a **coral rosary with green beads**, on which there is a gilded A, for *Amor vincit omnia*: "Love conquers all."

The Prioress pretends to be dainty, but the narrator sardonically observes that she is a rather large woman, which explains why he knows her table manners so well. Her fancy rosary suggests that the Prioress is more devoted to earthly possessions than to Christ.

The narrator notes that a second nun rides with the Prioress as well as a chaplain and three priests; however, these characters are only mentioned in passing in the General Prologue.

Although only mentioned in passing here, the Second Nun and one of the Nun's Priests later tell their own tales.

Next there comes a handsome Monk who conducts business outside the monastery. When he rides through the country, men can hear his bridle jingling as loud as the chapel bell. This monk is of the old, somewhat strict Benedictine order, but he lets the old ideas pass away to follow new customs. The Monk scoffs at the notion that monks cannot be holy if they go hunting and scorns the text that claims that a monk out of his cloister is not worth an oyster. The narrator claims to agree: why waste away indoors, and do as Augustine ordained? Let Augustine do his own work!

The narrator satirizes the contemporary non-devout life of monks through his portrait of the jolly huntsman. By pretending to agree that monks should abandon the commands of their orders and go hunting instead of studying in cloisters, the narrator mocks the corruption he sees in medieval monasteries.

The Monk is a good horseman and rides along with a pack of swift greyhounds. His **sleeves** are trimmed with expensive squirrel fur, and his **hood** is fastened with a gold pin into an elaborate knot. His head is bald, and his face glows as if he had been rubbed with oil. He is a plump, lively man whose eyes gleam like fire under a cauldron.

The plump, robust Monk resembles a prosperous lord rather than a scholar who spends his days pouring over his books. Instead of dressing in modest, pious attire, the Monk wears fine furs and shows off his material wealth.

The merry, wanton Friar is licensed to beg in a certain district. Of all the orders of Friars, his is the most inclined to gossip. The Friar has arranged and paid for many marriages of young ladies. He is well known to all the rich landowners and wealthy women in town, as he has full powers of confession and could absolve any sins sweetly and pleasantly. Many a man is so hard of heart, says the narrator, that he cannot weep for his sins: instead of tears and prayers, these men give silver to poor friars.

Medieval friars were mendicants: they took a vow of poverty, were not allowed to work, and had to rely on the charity of others for their livelihood. Arranging young ladies' marriages suggests that the Friar did so because he first made the women pregnant. The wily Friar hears the confessions of the wealthy landowners and gives them easy penance to make more money, twisting the spiritual intention of his office to his own material well-being.

The Friar is an excellent singer and knew every innkeeper and barmaid in every town. He disdains lepers and beggars as unworthy: instead, he deals with rich men with whom he can make a profit. Whenever he can make money, there is no man so virtuous. On days when conflicts are resolved, the Friar behaves not like a cloistered cleric but like a master or pope, donning an expensive **cloak** and frolicking. This friar, whose name is Hubert, also has a lisp.

Saint Francis, the founder of the Order of Friars, famously spent his life treating lepers and beggars. This hypocritical Friar abuses his office to make money instead of concentrating his efforts on helping those who need aid. Instead of remaining pious and true to his vows, the lusty Friar cavorts in expensive clothes. The detail of his lisp turns him into an even more ridiculous figure.

A Merchant with a forked beard is also among the company. He is dressed in a multicolor **cloak**, fur hat, and boots. He speaks slowly, weighing the profit of expressing his opinions. He is good at borrowing money and was so dignified in business that no one can tell he was in debt, the narrator claims.

The narrator says that the Merchant hides being in debt with his flashy boots and nice hat, but the fact that even the narrator knows about his debt shows that everyone else must know about it too.

The Clerk is an Oxford University student, thin and dressed in threadbare **clothes**. He would rather have books than fine clothes or money. Though he is a philosopher, he has not found the philosopher's stone: what little money he has, he spends on books. He takes his studies very seriously, and whenever he speaks, his speech is full of moral virtue.

The narrator is satirizing the stereotype of the poor, emaciated scholar who spends all his money on books rather than on practicalities like food and clothing; however, the narrator does admit—and seem to admire—that the student truly loves knowledge.

The wise and prudent Man of Laws is very well respected and highly sought after for his legal assistance. He is an excellent buyer of land. The Man of Laws is extremely busy and pretends to be even busier than he is. No one could ever find a flaw in his legal documents.

The Man of Laws is a social climber, a hard worker attempting to climb up the ranks through skill and networking.

Next in the company comes the Franklin, a white-bearded, cheerful landowner whose main goal in life is pleasure and delight. He gives such elaborate meals that it seems to snow meat and drink in his house. He offers any dainty treat that men could think of. The food changes with the seasons, but it is always abundant.

A franklin, or gentleman landowner, was expected to provide generous meals and entertainment in medieval society. His actions are in line with the Greek philosopher Epicurus, who said that happiness comes through pleasure.

Five guildsmen are among the company: a Haberdasher, a Carpenter, a Weaver, a Dyer, and a Tapestry-Maker. They are dressed well, with brightly polished belts and knives. Any one of them, says the narrator, could have been an alderman, as their wives would agree.

The guildsmen only appear in the General Prologue. Even though they fancy themselves to be important town personages, the narrator does not give them individual personalities, and they don't tell their own tales.

The guildsmen hired a Cook for the journey. The Cook, Roger de Ware, is very skillful, but the narrator is repulsed by the pus-filled ulcer on his shin.

Roger de Ware is one of several pilgrims in the Tales who is based on a real person.

A Shipman rides as well as he could on a carthorse. He wears a dagger around his neck. When he was on his ship, he stole wine from the merchant, whose goods he was transporting, while the merchant slept. The Shipman knows all about navigation and the tides: his beard has been shaken with many a tempest.

The Shipman is not a good horseman because he is not used to traveling on land. Although it is his job to transport goods safely, he shows no scruples at skimming a little off the top for himself.

The Physician bases his medical practice on principles of astronomy and diagnoses the cause of every malady based on the four humors: hot, cold, moist, and dry. He can quote all the ancient medical texts but knows very little about the Bible. The Physician practices moderation in his diet. Though he wears taffeta **robes**, he saved much of what he earned: gold is the best medicine, the narrator says, and the Physician therefore loves gold best.

The narrator's portrait of the Physician is neither uniformly complimentary nor entirely satirical. The Physician is genuinely a man of learning and practices a moderate lifestyle, yet he pursues his career not for love of knowledge but for love of gold.

The slightly deaf Wife of Bath, an excellent seamstress, is always first in line at parish offerings. If anyone brings alms before her, she becomes extremely angry. On her way to Sunday mass, she wraps her head in scarves that the narrator says must weigh ten pounds. Her **stockings** are as bright red as her face.

The Wife of Bath, one of the few female pilgrims, is one of Chaucer's most entertaining and lively characters. She is proud and quick-tempered. Her red face and stockings come from medieval stereotypes that red is the color of lust.

The Wife of Bath has been married five times (not to mention her other "company") and has gone on three pilgrimages to Jerusalem; she has also visited Rome, Cologne, and other foreign pilgrimage sites. She is gap-toothed; sits easily on her horse; and wears a **wimple**, an overskirt over her broad hips, and sharp spurs. The Wife of Bath gives excellent advice in matters of love, having a great deal of expertise.

The Wife of Bath speaks from the voice of authority, and although she is no longer young and beautiful, she has a wealth of worldly knowledge. She is probably a widow, because only women who have been widowed would have the money and power to travel as widely and freely as she does.

A Parson from a small town is also among the company. He is poor in wealth but rich in holy thoughts and deeds. The Parson devotedly teaches the members of his parish, but he is loathe to tithe them. Neither rain nor thunder nor sickness prevents him from visiting his parishioners: he picks up his staff and walk to all corners of his parish. In words and deeds, he gives his flock a noble example. He is even kind to sinners. He is a shepherd, not a mercenary. The Parson wants to draw people closer to God through graciousness and kindness. He never adopts a fussy manner and always stays true to Christ's teachings.

In contrast with the satirical portraits of the mincing Prioress, the hunting Monk, and the hypocritical Friar, the Parson is described in sincere terms as a devoted servant of the Lord. Unlike the Friar, who takes money from rich landowners, the Parson is reluctant to make poor people pay, instead covering the tithes himself if necessary.

The Parson's brother, the Plowman, is a faithful worker who worships God and loves his neighbor as he loves himself. He threshes hay for Christ's sake and always pays his tithes fully; he wears a loose workman's **tunic** and rides on a mare.

Chaucer's Plowman falls in a long line of literary Christian plowman, including William Langland's book Piers Plowman, which was written slightly before the Canterbury Tales.

The rest of the company is a Reeve, a Miller, a Summoner, a Pardoner, a Manciple, and the narrator himself: besides these, "ther were namo."

By assuring the reader that he is almost done describing the company the narrator asserts his authorial control.

The Miller is a burly workman who always wins prizes at wrestling. He has a head and beard of thick red hair and a hairy wart on his nose. His nostrils and mouth are enormous. The Miller is a buffoon who told dirty stories and played the bagpipes; he steals corn, yet has a "thombe of gold."

The Miller is a rough, bawdy peasant with none of the fine airs of daintier pilgrims in higher stations. The "thumb of gold" is an ironic reference to a proverb: the narrator is implying that there are no honest millers.

The Manciple, a businessman who supplies a school of law with provisions, is always ahead in his dealings: even though he is uneducated, he is more clever than the lawyers he serves and is able to deceive them all.

The lawyers serve the people, and the Manciple is supposed to serve the lawyers, but he is so shrewd and conniving that the lawyers unknowingly end up serving the Manciple.

The Reeve is a slender, choleric man with a closely cropped beard and stick-thin legs. No auditor can ever catch him: he knows the accounts of his lord's estate extremely well, and all the farm-managers, herdsmen, and servants fear him. The miserly Reeve has hoarded so much money that he is wealthier than his lord. He is a talented carpenter, and he always rides last among the company.

The miserly, wily Reeve knows all the tricks of servants and managers because he uses them himself. Instead of working for his master's gain, he steals from the master and jealously hoards all the money that he skims off the top of his dealings. That he rides last indicates the way he surveys others and sits in the shadows, gathering money and power.

The Summoner has a disease that makes his face bright red and pimpled, gives him scaly skin, and makes his beard fall out. No medicine or ointment can treat the pustules. He loves onions and garlic, and when he drinks, he speaks only in Latin––at least, the few Latin phrases he knows. He is a buffoon, a good fellow: for a quart of wine, he will allow a man to keep his mistress for a year and excuse him in full.

The Summoner is another one of the religious figures in the Tales who is not as devout as one would expect someone in his office to be. Summoners were supposed to call people before the church court to confess their crimes, but this Summoner can be bought off easily because he cares primarily about his own pleasures.

The Summoner also knows how to swindle people. If a man's soul is in his purse, he says, in his purse he should be punished. But the narrator knows that wicked men need to fear execution as well. The Summoner also is the sole counselor for all the young women of his diocese. His staff is the sign of an ale-house, and his shield is a cake of bread.

The Summoner is just as unappealing on the inside as on the outside: he swindles people by taking their money instead of sending them before the church court, and he is also lecherous, making himself the "counselor" of all the local young ladies.

The Pardoner, coming straight from the court of Rome, rides with the Summoner. He has thin yellow hair that he loops over his shoulders in long, elaborate strands, and to show it off, he rides bareheaded. His voice is as high as a goat's. The Pardoner has a wallet stuffed full of pardons from Rome as well as many religious trinkets, such as veils, goblets, and decorated crucifixes. He also has pigs' bones in a glass reliquary, which he tells poor people are relics from holy saints. He uses false flattery to make fools of both priests and laypeople. However, the Pardoner is a good singer and storyteller.

The Pardoner's mincing, vain, feminine appearance have led many commentators to speculate that Chaucer is painting a picture of him as a homosexual. The Pardoner gleefully exploits the poor, gullible people in his parish, showing them cheap trinkets and bones from Rome and pretending that they are valuable relics.

After providing descriptions of all the pilgrims who have assembled at the tavern in Southwark, the narrator begs the reader's forgiveness for anything unseemly in the tales, as the narrator is simply trying to report the pilgrims' words and characters as plainly and truthfully as he can. Whoever tells a tale about a man, he says, must repeat it word for word so that he does not tell falsehoods or make up words. As Plato says––for those who can read Plato––the word must be cousin to the deed. The narrator says that he has described the people to their full degree in plain language so that the reader will understand.

The narrator poses as simply an innocent bystander, a reporter dedicated to presenting as fair and honest a portrait of each of the pilgrims as possible. Chaucer presents his narrative style as being as clear as possible so that all readers will be able to understand what he is saying. This pose of humility also allows Chaucer as the narrator to present each of the pilgrim's stories in a very different narrative style according to the type of character he or she portrays.

The narrator returns to the story of the first night he spent with the pilgrims. The merry Host, an excellent master of ceremonies and a fine citizen of Cheapside, puts everyone in a cheerful mood by serving a merry supper. After supper, when everyone has paid their bills, the host tells the pilgrims that they are the merriest company he has had under his roof all year and that he will add to their mirth free of charge.

The Host is a somewhat separate figure from the rest of the pilgrims: though he is an important character, he is not one of the tale-tellers and does not get his own portrait in the General Prologue.

The Host proposes that instead of riding dumb as a stone to Canterbury, the pilgrims should tell each other tales along the way to keep each other amused. The Host says that he would judge the tales, and that if they play the game he has invented, he sears by his dead father's soul that they will be entertained. By a unanimous show of hands, the company agrees to take his advice.

The Host serves as yet another layer of narrator: we have Chaucer the author of all the Tales; Chaucer the narrator, one of the pilgrims on the journey who both observes all the other pilgrims and gets to tell tales himself; and the Host, the guide to the tale-telling game.

Delighted, the Host explains the game: Each pilgrim will tell two tales on the way to Canterbury and two more on the way home. Whoever tells the best stories––that is to say, the ones that give the most significance and most pleasure––will have a free meal at the tavern upon his return, paid for by all the rest of the pilgrims. The Host decides that he will ride with the pilgrims, at his own cost, to serve as their guide in this merriment. Any pilgrim that disagrees with his judgment will have to pay all the expenses of the journey.

The narrator presents the Canterbury Tales through the frame narrative of the Host's game. The Canterbury Tales as they stand today appear, by the Host's explanation of the game, to be incomplete: each pilgrim is supposed to tell two tales on the way there and on the way back, yet not every pilgrim gets even one tale, and they don't make it to Canterbury, let alone back.

The pilgrims agree to the plan and beg the Host to serve not only as their guide but as governor, tale judger, and record-keeper.

The pilgrims are uniformly delighted to treat the expedition to Canterbury as a form of entertainment rather than a pious religious journey.

The next morning, the Host, like a rooster, wakes up all the pilgrims and gathers them together. After they ride a mile or two, the Host reminds them of the agreements of the night before. The Host says that they must draw straws to see who will tell the first tale. He gives the privilege of drawing the first straw to the Knight, in deference to his rank. The Knight draws the short straw and nobly accepts the challenge.

Even though the system of choosing straws is supposedly democratic, it is perhaps not entirely by chance that the Knight begins the tale-telling game. While the pilgrims are from all different socioeconomic backgrounds, medieval society is still very hierarchical, with the knight at the top. It seems likely that the Host rigged the game.

THE KNIGHT'S TALE

Once upon a time, the legendary Theseus, duke of Athens, had conquered the country of the Amazons. He brings home their queen, Hippolyta, as his wife, and he also brings her younger sister, Emelye.

The Knight sets his tale among ancient royalty, immediately situating himself as a member of the noble class.

If the story were not so long, says the Knight, I would tell you all about how Theseus defeated the Amazons, and what a great battle it was, and what a glorious wedding––but I have a long road ahead to plow, and so I will begin.

The Knight first introduces his characteristic tale-telling style of occupatio, or pretending he will not talk about the very thing he immediately proceeds to describe.

As Theseus is riding into Athens, he sees a group of women in black **clothing** weeping and wailing by the side of the road. He asks them why they are grieving, and they tell him that they are noblewomen from Thebes who have come to Athens to seek Theseus's help against the tyrant Creon. After his victory in a recent war, Creon has barred the women from burying the bodies of their vanquished husbands.

The Knight provides an elaborate frame narrative for his story: before he reaches the heart of the tale (that is, the story of the two knights), the Knight spends a lot of time setting the stage and describing the backstory of Theseus's world.

Theseus is deeply moved by their sad story and vows, as a true knight, to avenge the noblewomen. He sends Hippolyta and Emelye ahead to Athens and leads his army to Thebes. Theseus quickly slays Creon, conquers the city, and returns the bones of the slain husbands to the grieving women.

Theseus is shown to be the noble conqueror: he is both a powerful warrior and a just ruler, invested in maintaining power over his lands and avenging evil tyrants' wrongdoings.

After the battle, as scavengers are taking armor and treasures from the slain armies, they find two young knights lying side by side named Arcite and Palamon. Though both are badly wounded, they are not quite dead yet. By their **coat of arms**, the scavengers can tell that they are of royal Theban blood. Theseus proclaims that the knights should be brought to Athens to be held prisoner perpetually and with no possibility of ransom.

The purpose of the Knight's description of Theseus's accomplishments becomes clear when Palamon and Arcite, the two main protagonists of the story, arrive on the scene. Again, Theseus's justice is demonstrated by the fact that he lets the knights live (albeit as permanent prisoners).

One morning in **May**, Palamon is looking out the window of the tower where the knights have been imprisoned when he spies Emelye, who has risen early to pay her respects to nature. She is even lovelier than all the fresh flowers. "Ah!" cries Palamon, as if he had been struck through the heart.

The theme of knights falling in love through a single glance at the object of their desire is common in chivalric tales. The ritual of the gaze forms the basis of courtly love, which does not need to involve physical consummation.

The cry awakens Arcite, who asks Palamon what ails him. Arcite thinks that Palamon is bemoaning their imprisonment, but Palamon replies that he has received a wound through his eye straight to the heard: he has seen woman below who is so beautiful that he does not know whether she is a woman or a goddess. He guesses that she is Venus and prays to her to release himself and Arcite from captivity.

Palamon's cry that awakens Arcite is both a demonstration of how strong his feelings are for Emelye as well as a foreshadowing of the rift that their rivalry over the lady will drive between them. Arcite takes Palamon's description of Emelye as a goddess literally, which will later come to haunt Palamon.

Meanwhile, Arcite looks at Emelye and is just as love-struck as Palamon. They quarrel over who has the right to love her. Palamon reminds Arcite that they have sworn to be faithful first to each other and never to let the love of a lady come between them. Because he loved her first, claims Palamon, he has the right to her hand. Arcite replies that Palamon thought she was a goddess, not a woman. Arcite also points out that neither one of them will ever be able to claim Emelye, since they are sentenced to a lifetime of imprisonment. Strife builds between the knights.

According to the chivalric code, the bond between brother knights should be stronger than courtly love: no love for a woman should come between these men. However, because they have let Emelye come between them, the social balance has been disrupted. Arcite takes Palamon's figurative description of Emelye as Venus and interprets them literally for his own advantage.

One day, Duke Perotheus, a close friend of Theseus, visits Athens. Perotheus, as it turns out, had known and loved Arcite at Thebes, and he petitions Theseus to free Arcite. Theseus agrees on the condition that if Arcite is ever found on Theseus's lands, he will be killed.

Perotheus's defense of Arcite demonstrates the strength and importance of chivalric bonds in medieval society: even though Arcite is Theseus's sworn enemy, Perotheus's defense makes Theseus alter the terms of punishment.

As Arcite leaves Athens, he bursts into a complaint, lamenting that he must leave his prison––which now seems a paradise––because he will no longer be able to see Emelye. When Arcite departs, Palamon is thrown into a fit of despair and complains that he will never have the chance to go to Thebes and gather his army so that he might win Emelye's hand. The Knight poses the rhetorical question of whether Palamon or Arcite is worse off.

Arcite's and Palamon's complaints follow the traditional medieval form: both knights bemoan their current state and explain in great detail why the other's position is more desirable. The dueling complaints emphasize the contest between the knights for love of Emelye, and the reader must decide which knight is in the worse situation.

When Arcite returns to Thebes, he suffers from "loveris maladye." He cries "Alas!" constantly, stops eating, grows so gaunt and sickly that he is unrecognizable, and moans to the stars. After spending a year or two in this lovesick condition, Mercury visits him in a dream and tells him to return to Athens, where he will find the end to his woe.

Arcite's release to Thebes puts him in a sort of catch-22 situation: even though he has his freedom, the one thing that he wants to do––marry Emelye––is denied to him because the one condition of his freedom is that he not return to Athens.

Arcite determines to go to Athens despite the danger of death. He looks in the mirror and realizes he has become so thin that he can **disguise** himself as a poor laborer and therefore have the chance to see Emelye every day.

Arcite has pined away so much for Emelye that he no longer looks like himself, with suggests the danger of a knight having an excess amount of love. He can wear different clothing to appear to be a different person.

In Athens, Arcite takes the name Philostrate and finds a job as a page working for Emelye. He is so courtly and well-mannered that within a few years' time, he becomes one of Theseus's favorite squires. Theseus gives him gold, and Arcite has money secretly brought to him from Thebes.

Even disguised as a commoner, Arcite's noble, knightly upbringing shines through, which both emphasizes the hierarchies of medieval society and also suggests the possibility of some meritocracy.

Meanwhile, Palamon has pined away in prison for seven years, living as a martyr in an unimaginable hell. Finally, one night in **May**, he drugs his jailer and flees the city. Palamon finds a grove to hide in during the day so that at night he can return to Thebes and amass an army to wage war against Theseus and win Emelye's hand.

While Arcite has at least had his freedom, even if he has been separated from Emelye, Palamon has been forced to stay within sight of his love but never able to speak to her. His escape may not be entirely noble, but his brave intentions toward his lady love are certainly chivalric, if somewhat foolish.

By chance, Arcite comes to the very same grove to pay respects to **May**. Arcite weaves himself a garland, sings praises to the spring, lapses into a melancholy stupor, then laments his tragic fortunes. At first, Palamon, hearing but not seeing Arcite, thinks that the fields have eyes and the woods have ears, but then he realizes that it is his old companion.

Since the Knight's Tale is a romance set in a mythological time, the coincidence of Arcite and Palamon arriving in the very same grove on the same day after seven years apart is accepted within the terms of the tale.

Palamon leaps out from his hiding place, calls Arcite a traitor, declares himself to be Arcite's mortal foe, and challenges him to a duel. Arcite renounces the bond of brotherhood that they had previously pledged to each other and says that he is ready to fight for the hand of the lady. They agree to meet the next morning.

The rivalry between Palamon and Arcite has only grown stronger since they have been apart, especially since they are now each forming elaborate, separate plans to woo the hand of the same lady.

The next morning, Palamon and Arcite return to the woods, Arcite having gone back to Athens to get weapons for both of them. The two knights fight each other so fiercely that they are up to their ankles in blood.

Even though the knights are sworn rivals, they still abide by the codes of chivalry, and since Palamon cannot obtain his own weapons, Arcite outfits them both.

That morning, Theseus, Hippolyta, and Emelye are riding through the woods to go hunting. They happen to ride into the grove where Arcite and Palamon are fighting. Astonished, Theseus cries for the fight to come to a halt and demands to know who these two knights are. Palamon answers, revealing that Arcite has been living in Theseus's court as Philostrate and admitting that he broke out of prison, but that everything they both did was for love of Emelye. The knights admit that they deserve death.

When Theseus and his hunting party find Palamon and Arcite, the two knights demonstrate their noble, chivalrous nature by immediately confessing the truth (though Palamon does emphasize the fact that Arcite has been deceiving Theseus as a page under a false name). Both knights at once subject themselves to Theseus as a higher power.

Hippolyta and Emelye, moved to tears by the knights' misfortune, beg Theseus to spare their lives. Theseus decides that mercy is the best policy and forgives Palamon and Arcite, declaring that they have been led into their folly by their allegiance to the god of love. Theseus makes Palamon and Arcite swear never to wage war against him.

Just as the noblewomen's tears had moved Theseus to pity earlier in the Knight's Tale, so Hippolyta and Emelye's pleading make him merciful in his judgment of the two foolhardy knights.

Theseus orders Palamon and Arcite to return in exactly fifty weeks' time with a hundred knights each, ready to do battle for the hand of Emelye.

As knights, the only acceptable way to vie for Emelye's hand is not just to duel, but to show knightly valor in battle.

Theseus builds an elaborate, ornate, mile-wide amphitheater for the tournament. The lavish stadium contains three temples to three different gods: a temple to Venus, goddess of love, above the eastern gate; a temple to Mars, god of war, above the western gate; and a temple to Diana, goddess of chastity, to the north.

The Knight gives an extremely long, detailed account of every aspect of this fantastic theater to show off his very best rhetorical flourishes and powers of description.

The walls of the Temple of Venus portray allegorical figures from various love myths. There are also portraits of historical figures who have been victims of seduction. In the Temple of Mars, a terrifying forest is painted on the wall, in front of which stands a statue of omnipotent Mars. The Temple of Diana features pictures from myths about the goddess as well as the image of the goddess as a moon.

Venus's temple shows both the heroic and the sinful sides of love. The temple of Mars is more focused on the terrifying destruction that comes of war rather than the glory. Diana's temple shows both symbols of chastity and symbols of change.

Finally, the day of the battle arrives. Palamon and Arcite come to Athens with their armies of a hundred knights. Palamon and Arcite have also each brought a king to lead their armies: Palamon has brought Lygurge, king of Thrace, while Arcite has Emetreus, king of India. All the knights are received by Theseus with great hospitality.

The Knight's description of Palamon's and Arcite's armies shows the structure of a properly staged, full-blown duel between two knights: rather than solving the battle impromptu in the forest, the contest becomes a form of entertainment for the kingdom.

On the Sunday night before the battle, Palamon rises at two o'clock in the morning with the lark and goes to the temple of Venus to pray. He asks the goddess for the possession of Emelye, praying specifically that he might win the lady rather than asking for victory in battle. The statue of Venus shakes, which Palamon interprets as a sign that his prayer has been granted.

Palamon rises at two in the morning because this is supposed to be the most auspicious hour to pray to Venus. Palamon does not pray to win the battle but only to win Emelye. The shaking of Venus is ambiguous, but Palamon sees what he wants to see in it.

The third hour after Palamon rises, Emelye goes to the temple of Diana. Emelye cleanses herself, performs sacred rites, and prays to Diana to keep her maidenhood and to live forever as a virgin. She asks Diana to cure Palamon and Arcite of their love for her and to restore the bonds of friendship between them. If she must marry one of them, however, Emelye asks that she marry the one who desires her the most. One of the sacrificial fires suddenly goes out, and Diana appears in an image to Emelye. Diana tells her that the gods have decreed she must marry one of the knights, but that she cannot say which one.

Unlike Palamon and Arcite, who see and hear signs from the gods but do not interact with them, Emelye sees the goddess directly. Diana informs Emelye that she cannot remain a virgin forever but does not tell her which knight will win her hand, suggesting either that mortals cannot know everything about their fates or that the gods themselves do not yet know the outcome.

During the next hour, Arcite goes to the temple of Mars to pray. He reminds Mars of the pain he suffered for the love of Venus and begs for victory in battle. Arcite offers to cut his previously uncut hair and beard as a sacrifice and swears to serve Mars for the rest of his life if the god grants him victory. The statue of Mars shakes and murmurs, "Victorie!"

Arcite goes to the temple of Mars at the hour meant to be most auspicious to that god. He prays only to win the battle, not to win the love of Emelye, because he assumes that the two are one and the same.

The scene shifts to the heavens, where Venus and Mars are having a disagreement over the outcome of the battle. Saturn, father of the gods, must step in to settle the dispute. He tells Venus that Palamon will win the hand of the lady, but that Mars will help Arcite keep his honor.

Mars wants Arcite to win the battle, which would mean that he would win Emelye's hand, but Venus wants Palamon to win Emelye. Finally, Saturn steps in and explains that both of these outcomes will be true.

After a magnificent feast, with much jousting and lusting, the knights rise early the next morning and go to the theater for the battle, looking splendid in their finest armor. A herald announces the battle rules to minimize loss of noble life: no weapons other than long swords, maces, and a few spears; no secret short swords; captured knights should be taken to stakes rather than killed; and that when Palamon or Arcite has been captured or killed, the fight is over.

Even though two hundred knights will be fighting in the mile-wide arena, the main show is the duel between Palamon and Arcite. Because this battle is a spectacle, not an out-and-out war, knights are supposed to tag each other out instead of kill each other, and the end of all fighting should occur along with the defeat of either one of the two main knights.

With Theseus, Hippolyta, and Emelye in the stands, Palamon rides in under the gates of Venus, Arcite under the gates of Mars, and the battle begins.

Palamon has adopted Venus as his guardian deity, and Arcite, Mars. This has turned into a battle of love vs. war.

All the knights joust in the great battle. After much brave fighting, twenty opposing knights, led by Arcite's king Emetreus, wound and capture Palamon, thus ending the fight. Theseus declares Arcite the winner and says that he shall have the hand of Emelye.

According to the rules of the battle, the spectacle ends when Palamon has been overpowered. When Theseus ends the battle, the fight is over: they only need to duel symbolically, not literally, to the death.

Venus whines to Saturn that she has been disgraced, but Saturn tells her to watch and wait. As Arcite prances around the amphitheater in victory, the ground opens and a fury from hell scares his horse, causing Arcite to be thrown to the ground. Arcite is still alive, but terribly injured, and he is taken to a bed in the palace.

The fury from hell shows that Fortune's wheel is inescapable: just when Arcite is on top of the world, he tumbles and falls. Also, the fury from hell serves as a warning to be careful what you wish for: Arcite prayed only for victory in battle, not for Emelye.

None of the other knights have been killed in the tournament. Theseus makes sure that their wounds are tended to, and he declares that Palamon has not lost his honor by being captured at the stake in front of the crowd.

The spectacle that Theseus has arranged among the knights has served its purpose for entertainment and art and has not caused unnecessary death. Theseus makes it clear that honor is not just a matter of victory but rather of a willingness to face an adversary with courage.

Arcite's body is paralyzed and beginning to rot, and it is clear that he will shortly die. On his deathbed, Arcite sends for Emelye and Palamon. He tells Emelye that his ghost will continue to serve her after he dies and that he will always love her. He also tells Emelye that if she marries after he dies, she should marry Palamon, as there is no worthier man than he. The last words he breathes are "Mercy, Emelye!"

Even though Arcite and Palamon had become mortal foes, in his moment of death, Arcite allows the old chivalric bonds of brotherhood to triumph, declaring that if he cannot live, Palamon ought to marry Emilye.

Emelye, Palamon, and Theseus weep and wail inconsolably as all Athens mourns Arcite's death. Egeus, Theseus's father, consoles Theseus by reminding him of the inevitability of death.

Theseus's father serves as the voice of reason: even though men may mourn, life and the kingdom must go on.

Theseus conducts an extremely elaborate funeral ritual for Arcite. Arcite is buried in the same grove where he and Palamon battled, and there is a long funeral procession. While claiming that he not going to describe the whole scene, the Knight launches into a very detailed description of Arcite's funeral pyre, describing all the types of wood used to build it, depicting what Arcite's body looked like, and explaining the rites of the ceremony.

The elaborate description of the funeral ritual is a lot like the elaborate description of the arena that Theseus builds for the heroic duel between the knights. The Knight again shows off his occupation, claiming that he will not tell us all about the funeral pyre that he then describes in great detail.

Several years later, there is a parliament in Athens to discuss which lands must have obedience to Thebes, and Theseus calls Palamon and Emelye to attend. Theseus delivers his "First Moevere" speech, which describes how the course of life moves in the intent of the great chain of love that the universe's first mover has set into motion. We should trust in Jupiter's wisdom, says Theseus. We can honor Arcite, but we must move forward with our lives. Theseus urges Palamon and Emelye to wed, and they all live happily ever after.

Theseus's "First Moevere" ("First Mover") speech contains many of the main morals of the Knight's Tale: people should trust in the will of both their king and their gods, allowing themselves to be governed by wisdom greater than their own. The Knight ends his romance happily: even though Arcite has died, Palamon can continue the chivalric tradition and legacy, and even though Emelye does not get to remain a maiden as she wished, she does end with the knight who truly loved her.

THE MILLER'S PROLOGUE

All the pilgrims agree that the Knight has told an excellent, noble story. The Host turns to the Monk for the next tale, but the Miller, who is drunk, interrupts and declares that he will "quite" the Knight's tale.

The Miller's interruption of the Host's order establishes the "quiting" principle of the Tales: pilgrims respond directly to the previous tale told rather than waiting their turn.

The Miller says that he will tell a legend about a cuckolded carpenter and his wife. The Reeve, himself a carpenter, angrily protests, but the Miller says that the Reeve should not take the tale so personally––unless, of course, the Reeve has reason to do so. Indeed, says the Miller, he himself has a wife, but he doesn't ask her too many questions.

The Miller presents his tale as though he will be describing the life of a saint, but the story he tells is bawdy and full of raunchy jokes. The Reeve thinks that the Miller is directly insulting him because the tale is all about carpenters.

The narrator apologizes for the bawdy, raunchy nature of the Miller's tale and tells the reader that if he does not want to hear it, he can turn over the page and read the next story.

The description of the tales being on pages that the reader can flip through demonstrates that Chaucer was very aware of the literary, written nature of his stories.

THE MILLER'S TALE

In Oxford there lives a rich old carpenter. Boarding at his house is a poor young scholar, Nicholas, who is very learned in astrology and can also sing well. The carpenter is very jealous of his eighteen-year-old wife, Alison, who is pretty and flirtatious: the Miller describes her as a frisky young flower.

The rich old carpenter is a parody of the Knight's noble Theseus. Unlike Hippolyta, an extremely powerful woman who submits willingly to Theseus, Alison is a young flirt who deliberately slips from the carpenter's control.

One day, Nicholas begins to flirt with Alison. Nicholas grabs her, and though she cries out at first in protest, he coaxes her sweetly and she gives in. However, since the carpenter is such a jealous man, they agree to wait until they can make love in secrecy. Nicholas is confident that, as an educated clerk, he will be able to outwit a carpenter.

Unlike Palamon and Arcite, who only worship their lady love from afar, Nicholas immediately demonstrates his affection crudely and physically, grabbing at Alison and wooing her with caresses rather than only sighing from afar.

On the next holiday, Alison goes to the parish church, where another young clerk, Absolon, spies her. Absolon is vain and finely dressed, with curled hair and fashionable tunic. His one fault, the Miller says, is his squeamishness: Absolon doesn't like to fart in public. Absolon is smitten with "love longynge": if Alison had been a mouse and he a cat, he would have pounced.

With his curly hair and fashionable attire, Absolon is a parody of a vain young squire. The rich but silly Absolon also serves as a foil to the crafty but poor Nicholas. Unlike Arcite and Palamon, who are virtually interchangeable in many respects, Absolon is much more ridiculous than Nicholas.

Absolon serenades Alison underneath her window, brings her gifts, and showers her with money, but to no avail––Alison loves Nicholas, and Absolon might as well be her pet monkey.

Absolon's actions are parodies of the traditional methods of wooing that a courtly lover would use (singing, gift-giving, etc.), but Alison prefers the physical advances of Nicholas.

One Saturday, the carpenter travels to nearby Osney, and Alison and Nicholas form a plan to spend the night together. Nicholas tells Alison to have a day's worth of meat and drink brought to him in his room and to tell her husband, if he asks, that she does not know where he (Nicholas) is.

Alison and Nicholas openly plot their infidelity, playing off the fact that the carpenter is a foolish old cuckold. Alison feels no qualms about remaining loyal to her doddering husband when the dashing Nicholas is present.

When the carpenter returns on Sunday, he wonders about Nicholas and asks a servant to check on him. After knocking and receiving no reply, the servant peeks through a hole in the door that the cat uses to get in and out and sees Nicholas sitting upright, gaping at the moon.

While the Knight's Tale is set among ancient mythological characters who take their interactions with the gods and goddesses seriously, the Miller's Tale parodies Biblical stories—in this case, the tale of the Flood.

The carpenter is convinced that Nicholas has gone mad due to his study of astronomy and declares that this is what men get for inquiring too closely into "Goddes pryvetee."

The Miller often speaks about the danger of looking into "Goddes pryvetee," or God's private affairs, too closely. "Pryvetee" is also a pun on physical private parts.

The carpenter and the servant break down Nicholas's door and find the scholar sitting still as a stone, gazing into the air. The carpenter shakes Nicholas, saying prayers and calling on Christ to arouse him from his trance. Finally, Nicholas speaks, telling the carpenter that he has had a vision from God.

While the knights in the Knight's Tale pray sincerely to the gods and receive direct communication with deities, Nicholas only pretends that he is having a vision so that he can hoodwink the carpenter.

Nicholas says that he has discovered through his astrology that on the next Monday night, there will be a wild rainstorm twice as great as Noah's flood. All mankind, he says, shall die. The carpenter cries out, "Allas, my wyf! / And shal she drenche?" Nicholas replies that he knows a remedy, and that if the carpenter follows his orders, they will all––including Alison––survive the flood.

Nicholas's false use of astrology to fool the carpenter is a direct parody of the Knight's obsession with astrological timing throughout the Knight's Tale: every visit to the deities' temples in that story, for example, was charted to occur precisely at the appropriate time.

After swearing the carpenter to secrecy, Nicholas tells him to get three tubs, instructing him to fill them with enough food to survive for a day (the water, he explains, will subside the next day) and to hang them high from the roof. The carpenter must also bring an axe so that when the waters subside, they can cut the tubs loose and float away.

After making the carpenter believe that he is receiving communication from God, Nicholas engineers the whole plan very specifically so that the carpenter will not be close enough to Alison to hear when she leaps out of her tub to join Nicholas in bed.

They will climb into the tubs before nightfall, says Nicholas, and they will not speak a word to each other the entire time. The carpenter and Alison, Nicholas says, must not hang next to each other so that they will not be tempted to sin. Weeping and wailing, the gullible carpenter leaves to make his preparations, telling Alison everything in strictest confidence (although she, of course, knows the whole plan already).

Although Nicholas's scheme is ridiculous, the carpenter is so blinded by his jealous love for his wife that he falls for the trick. Nicholas's overly complex scheme is traditional for a fabliau, the type of bawdy fable that the Miller is telling.

On Monday night, the carpenter, Nicholas, and Alison climb into their tubs and say their prayers. The carpenter falls asleep, and Nicholas and Alison promptly hop out of their tubs and tumble into bed with each other.

Nicholas has arranged his whole complicated plan so that he and Alison can sleep together and cuckold her husband right under his nose.

That same Monday, Absolon happens to be in Osney, and, inquiring after the carpenter is told that he is either out of town gathering timber or at home. Absolon, who has been by the carpenter's house and has not seen him there, decides that he will go there at dawn and confess his love to Alison.

Absolon is a parody of the traditional courtly lover who comes to woo his lady love by singing songs underneath her window.

Absolon chews cardamom and licorice to sweeten his breath, and at the first cock's crow, he knocks on Alison's window and begs for a kiss. She rebuffs him, saying that she loves another. Absolon begs her, and she opens the window, telling him to come quickly. He carefully wipes his mouth dry, but in the pitch-dark, he kisses her "naked ers" that she has stuck out the window. Alison and Nicholas laugh as the furious Absolon rubs his lips with dust and woodchips.

Unlike Arcite, who is so lovesick that he grows gaunt and unrecognizable, Absolon is vain and takes care of his appearance while he woos Alison. The trick that Nicholas and Alison have plotted against the carpenter turns into a trick against Absolon.

Screaming and cursing, Absolon goes to his friend the blacksmith and borrows a hot iron. He returns to the window, knocks, and tells Alison that he has brought her a gold ring and that he will give it to her in exchange for a real kiss.

The angry Absolon attempts to use Alison's and Nicholas's own trick against them in order to get his revenge.

Nicholas, who has gotten out of bed to urinate, sticks his rear end out the window. Absolon tells Alison to speak so that she can let him know where she is, and Nicholas lets fly a fart as loud as thunder.

Chaucer makes lots of fart jokes in the Canterbury Tales, and this is probably the best one: Nicholas describes Absolon's empty speeches, quite literally, as hot air.

Though nearly blinded, Absolon strikes Nicholas's rear with the hot poker and brands the skin. Nicholas cries for help and for water. The carpenter wakens at the cry of "water!" and, thinking that the flood is coming, cuts the cord, and his tub crashes to the floor.

Nicholas's two tricks converge: his rear end is on fire, so he wants water, but he has told the carpenter that there is going to be a massive flood, so the carpenter takes the cry for water as a warning.

The carpenter lies in a swoon, his arm broken. The neighbors rush in to see the spectacle. Nicholas and Alison tell everyone that the carpenter is crazy, and no one will listen to the carpenter's story about Noah's flood. The townspeople all laugh.

Although the carpenter is telling the truth, he has been proven to be such a fool that Nicholas wins the day and no one is punished for infidelity.

The Miller sums up the tale: the carpenter's wife has been "swyved" by Nicholas, despite the carpenter's jealousy; Absolon has kissed her lower regions; and Nicholas has been scalded in the buttocks. "God save al the rowte!" says the Miller.

The Miller merrily concludes his jolly fabliau without any sort of moral or ethical takeaway: this is a tale of pure pleasure.

THE REEVE'S PROLOGUE

Everyone laughs at the Miller's Tale except Oswald the Reeve, a carpenter by craft, who takes the story personally. The Reeve retorts that if he wanted to, he could tell a dirty story about millers, but that since he is an old man, there isn't much point.

The Reeve, a carpenter, takes the Miller's Tale not as a parody of the Knight's Tale but as a personal insult against all carpenters.

The Host makes fun of the Reeve for giving the company a sermon of self-pity. The Reeve changes his mind and decides to tell a dirty story about millers in retaliation.

The Reeve's Tale follows the "quiting" structure that the Miller started, where a teller responds directly to the tale last told.

THE REEVE'S TALE

Symkyn is a bald, pug-nosed miller who lives near Cambridge and swindles all his customers. The miller's wife was raised in nunnery, and stinks with pride at her expensive upbringing. They have a fat, pug-nosed twenty-year-old daughter and a six-month-old infant. The miller intends to marry the daughter into a family of worthy ancestry.

Fat, pug-nosed Symkyn's resemblance to the portrait of the Miller in the General Prologue is––although the Reeve does not point it out––most likely not accidental at all, considering that the Reeve is directly and angrily responding to the Miller's Tale.

One day, the manciple of a school in Cambridge, who regularly grinds Symkyn's grain, gets sick. Symkyn takes this opportunity to steal all kinds of corn and wheat: where he had once stolen "but curteisly", he now is a "theef outrageously."

Angry at the Miller's depiction of the carpenter as a rich, old, foolish cuckold, the Reeve paints the Miller as a conniving, outrageous thief.

Two young scholars, John and Aleyn, who come from a town in northern England, get permission from the headmaster to try and stop Symkyn from stealing more grain. The scholars ask the miller to explain every step of the grain-grinding process. The wily miller realizes that they're policing his activities, and he unties their horse and looses it into a field of wild mares. When the clerks realize that their horse is missing, they spend all day chasing it in the field to get it back, which gives Symkyn plenty of time to steal flour from them.

The Reeve's Tale is one of the first examples of English writing to use dialect as a way of creating characters. John and Aleyn use vocabulary and speech patterns that mark them as being from Northern England. The horse who goes crazy in the field of wild mares is a symbol for all of the rampant sexual play that will happen later in the Tale.

Since they have spent the whole day trying to catch their horse, Aleyn and John pay Symkyn to lodge for the night at his house. Everyone goes to his or her respective beds in the same room. The miller, who is drunk, and the miller's wife go to bed with the infant's cradle at their feet. The miller's daughter, Aleyn, and John also go to bed.

The Miller thinks that he has tricked Aleyn and John and now is getting them to pay for their lodging. But, in fact, the Reeve puts everyone in the same room to ensure that sexual mishaps can occur. Though everyone starts out in their respective places, readers familiar with the genre of a raunchy fabliau know what is to come.

To take revenge against Symkyn, Aleyn decides to have sex with the miller's daughter. John, not to be outdone, takes the cradle and puts it at the foot of his own bed. The miller's wife wakes up to urinate, and when she comes back, she climbs into the bed with the cradle at the foot of it. Of course, this is John's bed, and John and the miller's wife have sex.

Chaucer did not invent the plot device of switching the infant's cradle to fool the wife into getting into the wrong bed: the cradle-swap is a trick seen in many similar raunchy fables.

Early in the morning, Aleyn creeps out of the miller's daughter's bed, but first the miller's daughter tells him about half a bushel of meal that she has helped to steal from her father for the clerks to have. Aleyn then gets into how own bed, or thinks he does—he, too, is tricked by the cradle and ends up getting in bed with Symkyn instead of John.

Not only do the scholars trick the miller by sleeping with his wife and daughter, the miller's own daughter conspires against him by stealing his grain. The miller only learns about his cuckolding not by figuring it out himself, but because the scholars accidentally trick each other.

Thinking he is talking to John, Aleyn brags that he has slept with the miller's daughter. However, he is actually talking to Symkyn himself. The miller, outraged, punches Aleyn in the nose. As the men fight, the miller tumbles onto the bed that his wife and John are in.

All the sexual shuffling escalates into a dramatic fight, where everyone is punching everyone else. This is the opposite of the well-orchestrated duel in the Knight's Tale.

The miller's wife wakes up and tries to help her husband by hitting the clerks with a staff, but she mistakes Symkyn's bald head with their white caps and end up hitting her husband by accident. Aleyn and John beat up Symkyn, grab the grain that the miller's daughter had told them about, and make their escape.

The sexy comedy turns somewhat brutal at the end, when all the characters start bludgeoning each other. It has gone from finding laughs in sex to a darker humor that finds laughs in violence.

Thus, says the Reeve, the proud miller is bested: Aleyn and John have slept with the miller's wife and with his daughter and have swindled the swindler, and the Reeve has gotten his revenge against the Miller.

Like the Miller's Tale, the Reeve's Tale ends without a moral. It is for enjoyment and revenge—the Reeve's revenge against the Miller.

THE WIFE OF BATH'S PROLOGUE

The Wife of Bath announces that she is an authority on marriage because of her experience, having had five husbands. She does not follow Jesus's example of only marrying once, nor does she heed his reproach to the woman at the well with five husbands. Instead, the Wife of Bath interprets **Scripture** in her own way. She prefers to go forth and multiply, defending her position by pointing to King Solomon, who had many wives, among other Biblical figures who married often.

The Wife of Bath claims authority for her tale from her own experience. She interprets Scripture her own way, reading against the grain to find different meanings in the text than the generally accepted ones. Some literary scholars argue that Chaucer has her misread the Bible, but others argue that Chaucer is actually empowering her, that she deliberately finds new ways to read it.

The Wife of Bath challenges anyone to prove that God commanded virginity: though it is great for some people, she says, it's not for her. God made sexual organs, she claims, for both function and for pleasure, and she does not envy any maiden her virginity. The Wife of Bath uses her sexual power to control her husbands.

The Wife of Bath is unabashedly lustful and physical. Her Prologue takes the form of a literary confession, in which she openly admits and defends her sins.

The Pardoner interrupts, worried because he is about to be married. The Wife of Bath tells him to shut up and have another drink: when she, the expert in marriage, has told him her tale, he will be able to make his own decision about whether or not he should marry.

In the General Prologue, Chaucer describes the Pardoner as feminine and anxious, which makes sense with his nervousness about being wed to a woman much stronger than himself.

Of her five husbands, the Wife of Bath says, three were good and two were bad. The first three were good because they were rich, old, and obedient to her every whim. Once they had given her their money and land, she no longer had any use for them. She would make her husbands bring her presents and put them through torments.

Women in medieval society could only gain power and money through their husbands. The Wife of Bath both goes against and conforms to stereotypes: though she takes power over her husbands, she also admits to marrying solely for money.

The Wife of Bath tells all the wives to listen to her carefully: Always, she says, be mistress in your own household, for women are twice as good as men at lying and cheating. The Wife of Bath recounts how she used to accuse her husbands of having affairs with the neighbors' wives. She would launch into a tirade, firing an array of all kinds of accusations.

Though men may have all the tangible power in society, women are better at lying and deceiving than men are: though a man may be the head of the household, the woman, according to the Wife of Bath, is the neck, turning him wherever she likes.

For example, says the Wife of Bath, in such a rant, she would ask why the neighbor's wife looks so pleased with herself. Some men, she claims, only want women for their looks, some for their money, some for their figure, some for their gentleness. An ugly woman lusts for any man she sees and will jump on him with animal lust. To the man who claims that he does not need to marry, the Wife of Bath cries, may thunder and lightning strike him down!

The Wife of Bath gives a typical rant that she might launch into against one of her husband. She gives a long list of what men want in a woman, which foreshadows the long list of answers to the question of what women want that the knight in her Tale seeks to answer.

The Wife of Bath rants against the old proverb that women only show their vices after they are married. She also argues against the complaint that the husband is expected to flatter and praise his wife in public. It's also ridiculous, she says, that the husband makes a jealous fuss about the handsome young apprentice boy. The husband should trust the wife to go wherever she likes.

It is useless, says the Wife of Bath, to try and keep jealous tabs on a wife's activities: either she will love her husband and be faithful, or she will find some way to cuckold him behind his back. Husbands, she argues, must trust their wives. And in so arguing, she argues against the norms society that gives men the right to believe they can and should control their wives.

The wise astrologer **Ptolemy**, says the Wife of Bath, knew best: Ptolemy advises men to mind their own business. What good is it to spy on her? If she will stay, she will stay; if she will stray, she will stray.

Not only does the Wife of Bath re-interpret the Bible, she also finds her own textual authorities who agree with her ideas about morality.

The Wife of Bath boasts that through her sexual and verbal powers, she kept control over her five husbands. If they ever accused her of anything, she would call them drunk, and she could make them admit to crimes they never committed in their lives.

The Wife of Bath uses both the power of her physical presence and her verbal skills to make her husbands submit to her will.

Women, says the Wife of Bath, are born with the tricks of deceiving, weeping, and spying. She also claims that everything in the world is for sale and that she has endured the lovemaking of old husbands to satisfy her purse, even though she doesn't like old meat.

Again, the Wife of Bath reiterates how women can take control within their households even though men have all the power in medieval society.

The Wife of Bath tells about her fourth husband, who took a mistress. Back in those days, the Wife of Bath was still a young, lusty maid, and she was so angry that she decided to give the husband a taste of his own medicine and made his life a living hell.

The Wife of Bath ascribes to Hammurabi's code of an eye for an eye: if her husband makes her jealous, she will make him jealous in return.

The Wife of Bath took her fifth husband, a clerk named Jankyn, not for his money but for his looks and charms. Jankyn boarded at the house of a friend whom the Wife of Bath gossiped with. The Wife of Bath wears her special red **robes** to the house. When she first meets Jankyn, she is still married to her fourth husband and tells Jankyn that she has had a dream in which the fourth husband has enchanted her; however, this is a pack of lies. A month after her fourth husband's funeral––during which the Wife of Bath lustily watches Jankyn carry her husband's casket––the two are married.

As the Wife of Bath tells the story of her fifth husband, she loses her place several times, growing lost in reverie as she reacts to her own story. Rather than just a silly, pompous character who brags about her sexual exploits, the Wife of Bath is revealed to have depths to her character. Red is typically the color of lust. The friendship and gossip that the Wife of Bath and the other woman have show glimpses of what the female sphere of medieval society might have looked like.

The Wife of Bath is upset to learn about Jankyn's book of wicked wives that he spends his time studying. She tears a leaf out of the **book**. The book, called "Valerie and Theofraste," contains tales of all the unfaithful women of history and legend: Eve, Delilah, Clytemnestra, etc. Jankyn reads the tales aloud to the Wife of Bath, who hates these stories passionately.

The Wife of Bath's hatred of Jankyn's terrible book is another reminder of the importance of the written word and text to Chaucer. The Canterbury Tales are explicitly written to be read, even though the pilgrims tell the stories to each other orally.

Out of frustration, the Wife of Bath tears three leaves out of the book and punches Jankyn in the face. Jankyn retaliates by smacking her on the head, which causes her to become deaf in one ear. She pretends to be dead so that he will feel guilty and then do anything she wishes.

The Wife of Bath's violence against the book itself is the equivalent of punching Jankyn in the face: books in medieval society were rare and precious, and even though Jankyn's book is objectionable, it is still a treasure.

The Friar interrupts the Wife of Bath's prologue to complain about its length. He and the Summoner begin to quarrel. The Friar starts to tell a nasty tale about summoners, but the Host steps in and lets the Wife of Bath tell her tale.

The interruption of the Friar and Summoner remind the reader that this is a frame narrative, and the other pilgrims are always present in every tale.

THE WIFE OF BATH'S TALE

In the days of King Arthur, Britain was filled with fairies and elves, unlike now, when lecherous friars roam around the land. Although the friars rape women, just as incubi used to do in the days of fairies, women only lose their dishonor: the friars don't make them pregnant.

Even though the Wife of Bath sets her fable in the romantic realm of Arthurian legend, she takes the opportunity to retaliate against the Friar, who has just rudely interrupted her.

A lusty young knight in Arthur's court is riding through the forest when he spies a beautiful maid. Overcome with desire, he rapes her. The court is outraged, and according to law, the knight should be beheaded. But the queen and her ladies intervene to spare him, and King Arthur bows to his wife's counsel. The queen tells the knight that if, in a year's time, he can answer the question of what women want, his life will be spared.

In the context of the tale, King Arthur is a wise king because he bows to his wife's counsel, practicing mercy at her decree rather than overruling her. The knight gets the opportunity to learn from his mistakes and to become more humble through an educational journey.

The knight sets forth sorrowfully through the countryside and asks the question of every woman he meets. Everyone answers differently. Some say riches; some say honor; some, jolliness; lust; clothes; etc. Some say that women want to be free. Some say that women's greatest desire is to be able to deceive and keep secrets. As proof of this last point, the Wife of Bath tells Ovid's story of King Midas, whose ears were turned into ass's ears. Midas begged his wife not to tell, but the secret burned inside her so much that she couldn't bear it and she whispered it to the marsh water.

Though the knight seeks his answer far and wide, women don't come to consensus. The only shortcoming that women have according to the Wife of Bath––that is, their inability to keep secrets––is the only thing that can save the young knight. Although the Wife of Bath primarily relies on her own experience to give her authority, she can also use literary examples like the story of King Midas to back up her claims.

The day comes when the knight must return to court. As he is riding past the forest, he sees a group of women dancing and decides to ask them his question. But before he can come close, the dancers vanish, and only an ugly old woman remains. She asks him what his question is, and he promises to reward her if she can tell him what women want. The old woman says that she can help him, but he must pledge his life to her. The knight agrees, and she whispers a message in his ear.

The disappearing dancers signify the presence of magic in the area. The ugly but wise old hag is a stock character in Arthurian legends: although she appears to be a doddering old fool, she is actually a powerful witch. The knight, who has thus far failed in his quest, has no choice but to submit to her demands if he has any hope of keeping his life.

The knight and the old woman go to court, where a large audience of the queen and her maids is assembled, waiting to hear the knight's answer. He tells them that women desire sovereignty over their husbands and lovers. The women in the audience agree that this is the right answer, and his life is spared.

The women gathered in assembly to hear the knight are reminiscent of the townspeople who gather in the Knight's Tale to watch Palamon and Arcite duel. Though no women agreed throughout the knight's yearlong journey, all the woman concede that he now has the right answer.

At that moment, the old woman comes forward and demands that the knight marry her. The knight recoils in horror, begging her to take his possessions instead of his body, but the old woman insists, and he is forced to wed and bed her, and the knight is miserable the whole time.

Even though the knight begs to get out of his contract to marry the ugly old woman, everybody involved or witnessing––the old hag, the queen, even the knight himself––know that the knight is bound by his promise.

While they are in bed, the old woman asks the knight why he is so despondent, and the knight replies that he is repulsed by her "loothly" and "oold" appearance. The old woman reminds him that true gentleness and character are on the inside, not the outside. Sons of noble blood may be villainous; true poverty, she says, is in greed and longing for what you do not have.

The old woman is not ashamed of her ugliness, nor is she angry at the knight's superficiality. She takes it for granted that he would be unhappy with an ugly woman, but reminds him that beauty is on the inside.

The old woman gives the knight a choice. She can remain ugly but faithful and virtuous; or she can be beautiful, but he must take his chances that she may stray and cuckold him. The knight thinks for a while, then says that the choice is hers, thus granting her sovereignty.

It is unclear whether or not the knight genuinely, deep in his heart, wants to give the old woman the choice or whether he recognizes her question as a riddle and gives her the answer she wants to hear. Perhaps it doesn't matter, as he does give her the choice, which is what she wants.

Since the knight gives her the authority to choose for herself, the old woman says that she will be both beautiful and true. She tells him to kiss her, and when he does so, she transforms into a young woman, and they live happily ever after. The Wife of Bath concludes with a plea that Christ send all women meek, young, and fresh husbands who will not outlive their wives.

The Wife of Bath's tale of the loathly lady who turns into a beautiful maid is a very common plot. However, the Wife of Bath's twist is that at the end of the day, women must have sovereignty over their husbands, and that a woman's faithfulness in fact depends *on being given freedom.*

THE PARDONER'S PROLOGUE

Deeply moved by the Physician's sad story, which the company has just heard, the Host turns to the Pardoner for a merry tale. The company, however, wants to hear a story with a good moral, and the Pardoner says he will give them what they want after he has a drink.

Even though the Host wants to hear a jolly story, he gets overruled by the company's demand for a story with a moral; the Pardoner, a man with no principles, will give them whatever they want—after he satisfies his personal desire for a drink.

The Pardoner says that every sermon he gives is always on the same theme: "Radix malorum est Cupiditas," or "Greed is the root of all evils." In these sermons, he shows his bag of fake relics to the congregation. He claims that sheep bones can cure ailments. The parishioners always believe him, and he tricks them into buying trinkets and hocus-pocus charms. It doesn't bother the pardoner that when his congregation has been buried, their souls are left to wander: he is in the business of making money, not absolving sins.

The Pardoner always gives the same sermon––Greed is the root of all evils––yet he himself is unashamedly greedy. He's all "do what I say, not what I do," with an added twist of trying to get paid for getting people to do what he says. His Prologue, like the Wife of Bath's, takes the form of a literary confession. The Pardoner admits that he dupes his gullible parishioners and that he doesn't care if he saves souls so long as he makes a profit.

In his sermons, the Pardoner always preaches about greed, the same sin that he himself freely admits possessing. Do as I say, not as I do, the Pardoner preaches: although he is guilty of avarice, he warns people about the dangers of covetousness through lots of examples. However, he himself would rather take a penny from a starving widow than give up his creature comforts. Having finished his ale, the Pardoner begins his tale.

Even though the Pardoner is guilty of greed and covetousness, he is not guilty of lying about it. He has the authority to tell tales warning against the dangers of greed because he himself lives a life dictated by avarice.

THE PARDONER'S TALE

In Flanders, there were three young men who loved to amuse themselves by singing, reveling, and drinking. The Pardoner launches into a long criticism about their sinful lives, citing many **Biblical examples** as support. First, he denounces their gluttony, which he says caused the fall of Man. He next decries their drunkenness, which makes men witless and lecherous. He then denounces their gambling: dice, he says, are the mothers of lies. The Pardoner criticizes the swearing of false oaths, saying that cursing and perjury are wretched.

Although the Pardoner himself hardly leads a spotless life, he bashes the protagonists of his tale for their sinful ways, spelling out all the various reasons why gluttony, drunkenness, gambling, and cursing are so terrible. He himself is a hypocrite, but he uses his Tale as a moral example.

Finally, after his long tirade, the Pardoner returns to the three young rioters, who are drinking at a tavern when they hear the bell signaling the sound of a passing coffin. A servant tells them that the dead man was a friend of the revelers who had been stabbed in the night by a thief called Death. The revelers declare that they will seek and slay this false traitor Death. They pledge to be true to each other as brothers in this quest.

The revelers' belief that they can slay Death himself demonstrates their extreme hubris. Rather than mourning their friend, they rashly seek their own glory. Although they here pledge that they will be brothers in their quest, as the story progresses it doesn't take much to dissolve their own bond. "Rioters" was a term for rambunctious young men.

The revelers meet an old man in rags who says that he must wander the earth restlessly because Death will not take his life. He makes a move to leave, but the rioters demand that he tell them where they can find Death. The old man says that he has just left Death a moment ago sitting under an oak tree. The youths run down the crooked path to the tree, where they find not Death but eight bushels of gold.

The old man in rags is a typical character in a parable, a prophet-like figure who gives the travelers information that turns out to be dangerous. Instead of the figure of Death that they expect to find, the three revelers find bushels of gold that ultimately lead them to their deaths through their greed.

The worst of the rioters speaks first, saying that this is their lucky day, but if they take the treasure down to the town by daylight, they will be accused as thieves, and therefore they must wait for nightfall to move the gold. He proposes that they draw straws, and whichever one gets the short straw must go to town to get food and drink so they can wait out the day.

The revelers immediately decide to keep the treasure for themselves rather than try to find out if it belongs to anyone, and this first greedy action sets off a chain reaction of escalating greed.

The youngest draws the short straw and leaves. While he is away, the other two rioters plot to kill the third when he returns so that the two of them will each get a bigger share of the treasure. Meanwhile, the youngest decides to poison the other two revelers so that he can keep all the money for himself. He goes to an apothecary, buys the strongest poison available, and pours it into two bottles, keeping a third clean for himself.

A third of the treasure is not enough for the rioters: even though the third will make each of them far richer than he was before, they each immediately see ways to become richer still. The bonds of brotherhood that they swore to each other disappear in the face of their greed.

When the youngest reveler returns, the two others slay him. Then, celebrating, they drink the poisoned wine. Thus, all three of the revelers die. Everyone must therefore beware sins, says the Pardoner, especially greed, which is the root of all evils.

All of the rioters meet their demise due to their gluttonous, avaricious ways, giving the Pardoner the chance to remind the listeners (and reader) yet again that greed is the root of all evils.

The Pardoner shows his relics and pardons to the pilgrims and asks for contributions, even though he has just admitted that they are all fakes. The Pardoner first offers his relics to the Host, as the man "moost envoluped in synne," and the Host reacts violently to the suggestion. The Knight must step in to resolve the conflict, telling the Host and the Pardoner to kiss and make up.

At the end of the Pardoner's Tale, the Pardoner practices the exact opposite of what he preaches: although he has just argued that greed is the root of all evils and that lying is terrible, he himself attempts to swindle the company, and the Knight must restore the social order. The pardoner is a complicated character—the morals spouting and yet gleefully immoral man of the church. And as such it speaks volumes about the church that such a man would be associated with it.

PROLOGUE TO SIR THOPAS

"What man artow?" says the Host to Chaucer the pilgrim. The Host makes fun of Chaucer for staring at the ground all the time and for being a fat little doll for ladies to toy with. The Host asks Chaucer to tell the company a merry tale, and Chaucer says he will give them a rhyme he learned long ago.

Chaucer gives a modest, ugly depiction of himself as a shy, bumbling, fat little man who doesn't have any sort of backbone around women. His tale is similarly lame: it's a foolish childhood tale.

THE TALE OF SIR THOPAS

Chaucer's Tale of Sir Thopas is told in a thumping rhyme scheme and song-like meter. Fair Sir Thopas, says Chaucer, lived in Flanders. He was a brave knight, with a white face and lips red as a rose. His beard was bright yellow and he wore expensive clothes. He is good at hunting, archery, and wrestling. All the young ladies swoon over Sir Thopas, but he remains chaste.

Chaucer tells the tale of Sir Thopas in a bob-and-wheel rhyme scheme, which makes it sound like childhood doggerel ("doggerel" is low-quality poetry). Young Sir Thopas is a fair, handsome knight, much like the Squire, and he is trained in the general arts of a knight, including chastity.

Sir Thopas goes out riding with his sword by his side one day in **springtime**, when all the flora and fauna are in heat, and he is filled with "love-longynge" when he hears birdsong. Thopas rides until he is weary and falls asleep on the grass.

Even though Sir Thopas is chaste, all the flowering and birdsong of springtime make him half-crazy with unfulfilled love and, presumably, lust.

Sir Thopas dreams of an elf-queen who will be his mistress, since no earthly woman is worthy of his affections. Upon awakening, he determines to find this queen and rides onward through the woods. Sir Thopas runs into the giant Sir Olifaunt, who says that he protects the elf-queen. They agree to fight the next day, and Sir Thopas returns home.

None of the mortal women who pursue Sir Thopas are worthy of his charms: the only lady he wants to pursue is the elf-queen. This childlike rhyme, like the Wife of Bath's Tale, is set in fairyland in the time of King Arthur.

Chaucer describes in great detail Sir Thopas's preparations for battle. First, he eats sweets, and then he puts on layer after layer of fine **clothes** and armor.

The description of how Sir Thopas prepares for battle is a parody of the battle preparations in the Knight's Tale, though this parody operates at the level of the author rather than Chaucer/narrator. In other words, it's just a part of the Chaucer/narrator's story, but in the larger context of the Tales it operates as a parody.

Lords and ladies, says Chaucer, listen to my story! Men speak of all the knights of Arthurian legend, but Sir Thopas is the most chivalrous of all. He has so many adventures that he barely ever sleeps in his house. One day––

Chaucer excitedly describes Sir Thopas as the most daring, noble knight of them all, but just as he beginning to launch back into his adventure, the Host interrupts him…

THE HOST'S INTERRUPTION OF CHAUCER

The Host tells Chaucer to stop his horrible doggerel, saying that his terrible rhymes are "nat worth a toord!" Instead, he advises Chaucer to tell a tale in prose that contains some sort of value. "Gladly," says Chaucer, and says that he can tell a tale in prose with deep meaning just as well as anybody can.

Chaucer the author makes Chaucer the pilgrim one of the worst tale-tellers on the pilgrimage. The Host's comparison of the tale of Sir Thopas to a "turd" is also Chaucer's way of making fun of doggerel romances written in heavily alliterative verse.

THE NUN'S PRIEST'S PROLOGUE

After the depressing Monk's Tale, the Knight begs that no more tragedies be told, saying that they need some pleasure to set the balance right. The Host agrees and turns to the Nun's Priest, who is travelling with the Prioress and the Second Nun, and asks for a merry tale. The Nun's Priest says that he is happy to oblige the company.

The Nun's Priest is barely mentioned in the General Prologue, yet he gets to tell one of the most memorable and lively of the Tales.

THE NUN'S PRIEST'S TALE

A poor widow lives a simple life in a little cottage with her two daughters. Her greatest possession is her noble rooster, Chaunticleer, who is the best singer in the land. Chaunticleer crows the time more accurately than the church clocks. His coxcomb is red as coral, his beak black as jet, and his feathers shine like burnished gold. Chaunticleer has seven hens, and his favorite is the lovely Pertelote.

The Nun's Priest's Tale is a beast fable. The most direct source text of the Tale is a fable by Marie de France. Although it appears to be a simple animal fable with a moral, the Tale ends up being much more complicated, with lots of allusions and plot twists.

One morning, Chaunticleer awakens from a terrible nightmare. He tells Pertelote that a savage, reddish, beast was about to swallow him. Pertelote chides him, saying that she cannot love such a coward. The Roman philosopher **Cato**, she says, tells men not to be scared of dreams. She says that the dream comes from some physical melancholy and urges him to take a laxative to get rid of this black bile.

Chaunticleer and Pertelote argue over the correct interpretation of dreams, each citing literary authorities to back up their claims. Pertelote says that bad dreams are simply a physical reaction and that Chaunticleer should just take some medicine to set his humors in order.

Chaunticleer argues that men of even greater authority than Cato argue that dreams are extremely important. He sites **authors** who describe premonitions of murders in dreams in order to prove to Pertelote that "Mordre wol out" through dreams that show the truth. Chaunticleer continues to cite many books and legends that tell about men who have portentous dreams, referring to Macrobius, Scipio, Joseph, and Croesus, among others.

Chaunticleer cites many different textual sources to prove to Pertelote that dreams are matters that should be taken seriously. He uses complex literary allusions to make his point. However, in the end, Chaunticleer doesn't follow his own advice, foolishly abandoning his own wisdom for the sake of his wife.

Chaunticleer praises Pertelote's beauty, saying that "In principio, mulier est hominis confusion," which he translates as "Womman is mannes joye and al his blis." Therefore, in spite of all his evidence that dreams are important, Chaunticleer decides to abide by his wife's advice and ignore his dreams. He then makes love to Pertelote.

Chaunticleer completely mis-translates the Latin that he quotes, which really means "In the beginning, woman is man's ruin." His misinterpretation of the Latin foreshadows his misinterpretation of his dream and the negative ramifications of listening to his wife. (The Wife of Bath, probably, isn't a fan of this tale.)

One day in **May**, just as Chaunticleer has declared his perfect happiness, an inexplicable wave of sorrow comes over him. That very night, Russell the fox comes into the yard and lies in wait till morning. The Nun's Priest laments the inevitable fate of the rooster to the murderous fox, but says it is his duty to tell the tale. Just like Adam, the cock has obeyed his wife's counsel at his own peril.

The Nun's Priests uses many of the conventions of both courtly romance and Homeric epic to describe his barnyard scene, lifting his story from a simple fable to the genre of mock epic and social satire. By taking noble concepts and ideas and putting them in mouths of chickens and foxes, the tale suggests that perhaps these high ideas, or those who talk about them, are not as noble or serious as they seem.

The next morning, Chaunticleer is watching a butterfly when he sees the fox watching him. Terrified, the cock is about to run away, but the sweet-talking fox flatters him. The fox says that Chaunticleer's father was the best singer he ever heard, and he coaxes Chaunticleer to sing for him. Chaunticleer puffs out his chest, beats his wings, closes his eyes, and stretches out his throat, and just as he begins to sing, Russell darts out and grabs him by the throat.

The fox uses Chaunticleer's own powers against him: Chaunticleer is the best singer in the barnyard, and the fox crafts his own sort of song to coax the rooster to lose his focus. The reference to Chaunticleer's father also places this story in the tradition of many cock-and-fox beast fables.

The hens in the barnyard wail louder than the woman of Troy did when their city was captured. When the widow and her daughters hear the crying, they rush in to the barnyard. Together with all the farm animals, they all run after the fox, just like Jack Straw leading the peasants in rebellion.

The Nun's Priest uses mock-Homeric similes in his comparison of the hens to the Trojans' wives. In one of the only direct allusions to current events, Chaucer compares the barnyard to the 1381 peasant's revolt in England, lead by Jack Straw.

Chaunticleer suggests to the fox that he stop and taunt his pursuers. The fox likes this idea. But as soon as the fox opens his mouth to do so, Chaunticleer flies away and perches in a high tree. The fox tries to flatter the rooster again, but Chaunticleer has learned his lesson. The moral of the story, says the Nun's Priest, is never to trust flatterers.

Usually, the clever fox defeats the rooster in this type of beast fable, but here, Chaunticleer tricks the fox at his own game and foils Russell. The moral of the story, says the Nun's Priest, is to never trust flatterers––perhaps a subtle jab at some of his fellow pilgrims. Though it is also worth noting that there is a moral of not trusting women or wives, either, that the Nun's Priest does not explicitly mention here.

THE NUN'S PRIEST'S TALE EPILOGUE

The Host praises the Nun's Priest for his merry tale. He says that the Priest would have made for an excellent rooster, with his strong muscles and great neck––all he would need would be hens, which, of course, he cannot have, being a member of the clergy.

In the Nun's Priest's Tale, the animals act like humans, and after the tale, the Host turns the tables and compares the Priest himself to the rooster hero of his story, while also getting in a nice dig about how the clergy are bound to lives of chastity.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Raphel, Adrienne. "*The Canterbury Tales*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 8 Nov 2013. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Raphel, Adrienne. "*The Canterbury Tales*." LitCharts LLC, November 8, 2013. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-canterbury-tales.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Canterbury Tales* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Chaucer, Geoffrey. The Canterbury Tales. Oxford University Press. 1988.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Chaucer, Geoffrey. The Canterbury Tales. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1988.