



THE CANTEBURY TALES

a selection of tales based on the original by Geoffrey Chaucer
adapted for the stage as a vaudevillian evening by Michael Bogdanov
with additional material by Kevin Kling

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STUDY GUIDE

THE GUTHRIE THEATER

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CHRONOLOGY

A Selected Chronology of the Life and Times of Geoffrey Chaucer

	Playwright	World History
c.1340-45	Geoffrey Chaucer is born north of London. His father is John Chaucer, a wine merchant, and his mother is Agnes de Copton who has ties to the Court of King Edward III.	Edward III is King of England. Europe is engaged in the Hundred Years War (1337-1453). Edward III claims to be the rightful king of France. Territories in France change hands many times for more than a century as invasions and battles flare up and recur.
1346		English are victorious over the French in the Battle of Crécy. England gains territories in the north of France.
1347-51	Chaucer's education would have included the study of French, Latin, classical literature.	The Black Death (Bubonic Plague) devastates Europe and the East, killing, according to some estimates, over 25 million people, one third of the population. Edward III founds the Order of the Garter (1348), an exclusive order of knights comprised primarily of members of the English royal family. Italian poet Petrarch completes his autobiography, "Epistle to Posterity."
1353		Italian poet Giovanni Boccaccio completes <i>Decameron</i> , a classical secular masterpiece of the Italian Renaissance. The structure and style of the work influences Chaucer's own writing.
1356		Edward, Prince of Wales (the Black Prince), leads the English to victory over the French in the Battle of Poitiers. French King John II and his son Philip are captured, taken to England and held in London at the Palace of the Savoy.
1357	Chaucer is engaged as a page in the household of Edward III's son Lionel.	
1359	Chaucer joins the British army in its	English forces led by Edward III invade

invasion of France. He serves as a squire and is captured by the French in the siege of Reims.

France to lay claim to the throne. The English conquer much territory, but fail to take control of France.

1360 Chaucer is ransomed and serves as a courier for Prince Lionel, travelling between Calais, France and England.

Treaty of Calais is signed between England and France.

The satirical and allegorical poem *The Vision of Piers Plowman* is credited to English poet William Langland.

The romantic poem, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, appears.

1361 Chaucer may have studied law during this period of his life (-1366).

Recurrence of the Black Death, less severe than the first, ravages Europe.

At about this time he writes the first of his poems to survive to this day, "An ABC." The poem is said to have been written for the Duchess Blanche, wife of John of Gaunt.

1363

The English Parliament conducts its business in English for the first time (Previously, official business had been conducted in French.).

c.1366 Chaucer's father dies.

English Parliament refuses to pay dues to the Pope.

Chaucer marries Philippa de Roet, daughter of Sir Paon de Roet. She serves as a lady in waiting to Queen Philippa. The queen grants the couple 10 pounds a year for life. They will have three children, Elizabeth, Thomas and Lewis.

Petrarch writes *Canzoniere, or Verses on the Life and Death of My Lady Laura*.

1367 Chaucer is appointed to a position in the court of Edward III and is granted 20 pounds per year for life.

French poet Jean Froissart serves as royal historiographer to the English court under the patronage of Queen Philippa. Chaucer is acquainted with him and is influenced by his work.

1368 Chaucer travels to Spain with the military forces of Edward, Prince of Wales.

Blanche of Lancaster, wife of John of Gaunt, dies during a recurrence of the Black Death.

He becomes a Squire of the King's Household, travelling widely throughout Europe as an emissary for the king.

He writes *The Book of the Duchess*, an elegy to the wife of John of Gaunt. The poem is innovative for its use of meter and for being written in English rather than French, the established language of literature.

Around this time he also writes a fragment of the romantic allegory, *The Romance of the Rose*.

- | | | |
|---------|---|--|
| 1369 | Chaucer fights in France under the command of John of Gaunt, youngest son of King Edward III. | War between England and France resumes.

Queen Philippa dies. |
| 1372 | Chaucer travels to Italy, negotiating trade relationships. He encounters Dante's <i>Divine Commedia</i> as well as the works of Petrarch and Boccaccio.

Phillipa serves in the household of John of Gaunt. She is granted 10 pounds per year for life. | French victories at Poitiers, Angouleme and La Rochelle. The English lose most of their territories in France.

Edward III suffers a stroke and Edward the Black Prince governs on his behalf. |
| 1373 | | John of Gaunt invades France conquering territories from Calais to Bordeaux. |
| 1374 | Chaucer is appointed Controller of the Customs of Wools, Skins, and Hides in London, overseeing the taxation of these essential commodities. He holds this post for 12 years. | Italian poet Petrarch dies. |
| 1375 | | Truce is signed between England and France.

A series of 50 or so Christian plays known as the York Plays are first performed in England.

The Black Death again ravages Europe. |
| 1376-77 | Chaucer travels to France participating in peace negotiations and in the arrangements for the marriage of Richard (the future Richard II). | Edward, the Black Prince, dies. John of Gaunt rules in the name of Edward III until the king's death in 1377.

Richard II, 10-year-old grandson of Edward III, becomes king of England (1377). |

		Pope Gregory XI condemns the anti-papist teachings of English religious reformer John Wyclif (1377). His followers, known as Lollards, suffer persecution.
		French King Charles V builds the Bastille tower in Paris to be used as a prison.
1378	Chaucer returns to Italy to secure alliances in the King's war against the Duke of Milan.	Disputes over papal succession result in the election of two different popes, one seated in Avignon, France (Clement VII) and the other in Rome (Urban VI). Neither pope will concede his appointment and the resulting "Great Schism" (1378-1417) shakes European religious practice as well as politics.
c.1379	Chaucer writes <i>The House of Fame</i> , <i>Anelida and Arcite</i> and <i>Saint Cecilia</i> .	
1380	Chaucer is accused and then acquitted on charges of rape. Chaucer writes <i>A Parliament of Fowls</i> .	The first translation of the Bible from Latin into English becomes available. The translation is known as Wyclif's Bible. Charles VI, 12 years old, is crowned king of France.
1381	Chaucer's mother dies.	The Peasant's Revolt. The common people of England, led by Jack Straw, John Ball and Wat Tyler, revolt against the inequalities of the feudal system and against over-taxation. Six thousand rebels attack London's suburbs, finally moving on London itself. Richard II meets with the rebels and diffuses the situation by agreeing to meet their demands. The king's popularity soars, although he later goes back on his word and allows the capture and execution of the rebel leaders.
1382	Chaucer is appointed Controller of Petty Customs on Wines.	John Wyclif is expelled from his post at Oxford. His teachings are condemned by the London synod. Richard II marries Anne of Bohemia. Black Death revisits Europe.
c.1385	Chaucer writes <i>Troilus and Cressida</i> , a verse narrative and <i>Boece</i> , a translation of	English forces, led by Richard II invade and attack Scotland, but do not subdue Scottish

- The Consolation of Philosophy*, a work by 5th-century Roman philosopher, Boethius. forces before returning home.
- French poet Eustache Deschamps praises Chaucer as a "great translator, noble Geoffrey Chaucer."
- 1386 Chaucer leaves his post as Controller of Customs.
- He serves as a justice of the peace and, as an appointed knight of the shire of Kent, he represents the shire in House of Commons.
- He begins writing *The Legend of Good Women*.
- 1387 Chaucer begins writing *Canterbury Tales*. The work remains unfinished at his death.
- Philippa Chaucer dies.
- 1388
- During the parliament of this year, known as the "Merciless Parliament," the Duke of Gloucester arrests many of young King Richard II's supporters, imprisoning some and beheading others.
- 1389 Chaucer is appointed Clerk of the King's Works. His duties include the maintenance of Westminster Palace, the Tower of London as well as other royal palaces and properties.
- Richard II, at the age of 23, takes full power over his kingdom.
- 1390 Chaucer is attacked by robbers and loses 6,000 pounds of the king's money and his horse.
- 1391 Chaucer leaves his post as Clerk of the Works and serves instead as Deputy Keeper of the Royal Forest of North Petherton.
- He begins writing *The Treatise of the Astrolabe* for his ten-year-old son, Lewis.
- 1394 Queen Anne dies.

- 1396 Richard II marries Isabella of France, securing peace with France for many years.
- John of Gaunt marries Elizabeth Swynford, Philippa Chaucer's sister.
- 1397 The King honors Chaucer, granting him a jug of wine a day for life. King Richard II orders his opponents, the Duke of Gloucester among them, imprisoned and/or executed.
- 1399 John of Gaunt dies.
- Richard II is deposed. Henry Lancaster, Bolingbroke, son of John of Gaunt, becomes king Henry IV.
- 1400 Chaucer writes "The Complaint of Chaucer to His Purse" as a request to the new king to renew his annuities. The king complies. Henry IV suppresses a rebellion of English barons. Richard II is murdered.
- Chaucer dies on October 25 and is buried in Westminster Abbey. He is the second commoner to be interred there. *The Canterbury Tales* are unfinished. Chaucer had intended to write 120 but completed just over 20. John Froissart's *Chronicles* tell the story of English French relations over the past century.
- 1478 The first mechanically printed edition of *The Canterbury Tales* is published. (England's first printing press was set up by William Caxton in 1476, expanding on the technology first created in 1436 by German inventor Johannes Gutenberg.)



This portrait from: *The Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer Rendered into Modern English Verse* by Frank Ernest Hill. London: Printed for the Limited Editions Club, 1934.

THE PLAY

Synopsis

Have you heard the one about the Miller...? Chaucer's Timeless Tale and the Guthrie Stage
by Jo Holcomb

Few works from early English literature are more revered than Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. His light-hearted treatise on human nature and the war between the sexes has fascinated scholars and entertained the masses for hundreds of years.

But there's probably more to them than Sister Ignatius let on in your high school English literature class. Chaucer's bawdy tales were removed from an advanced literature class at an Illinois high school in 1995 after parents deemed the sexual content in some of the tales lewd and inappropriate. In an age of *There's Something About Mary*, *American Pie*, and *South Park*, *The Canterbury Tales* serves as a timely reminder that in humor or literature little is genuinely original.

The Guthrie's production of *The Canterbury Tales* revisits the father of English poetry and shows how he is able to entertain 600 years after his death. Adapted for the stage as a vaudevillian evening by director Michael Bogdanov with additional material by Kevin Kling, the play captures the high art and the low comedy of Chaucer's late 14th century.

The original premise of *The Canterbury Tales* is that of a pilgrimage from Southwark to Canterbury in England. A pilgrimage was often an excuse to socialize rather than an act of religious devotion—in effect, a medieval package tour. It was also a time in which it was not uncommon for people of differing social classes to band together as pilgrims as they would not elsewhere in life. For his *Tales*, Chaucer introduced a device that had not been used before, the storytelling competition. To relieve the boredom of the trip, the pilgrims tell tales with the winner receiving a free meal when they return home. In the Guthrie's modern retelling of the tales, the storytelling competition celebrates the 600th anniversary of their writing. Although the framework for the tales is updated, the actual tales themselves come directly from the Chaucerian text.

Chaucer's original comic tales are hilarious. "The Miller's Tale" is an example of some of the best comic timing in English literature. Its set-up to the final showdown, so to speak, is very subtly done, and it is only when the events unfold that the reader realizes exactly where it has all been leading. The crudeness of the tale is balanced by its incredibly complex planning. So much so that the old "poker up the arse" gag has been the subject of academic debate.

The majority of Chaucer's comedies are fabliaux, a popular genre of the time, dealing mostly in cuckolding and trickery. The pure joy of the fabliau is not the outcome of the story, as everyone was aware that there would generally be adultery and trickery, but rather the innovative ways in which the story is told. In his *Tales* Chaucer manages to accomplish the chicanery in new and different ways.

Chaucer is a master of both character and comic timing, and it is his skilful writing that truly transcends the ages. From the heroic romance of "The Knight's Tale" to the low farce embodied in the stories of the Miller, the Reeve and others, *The Canterbury Tales* is a grand tour of 14th-century English mores and morals for the 21st-century audience. Universal subjects such as love, sex and death are framed in poetry that is simultaneously bawdy and insightful.

Synopsis of the Guthrie Production

On the 600th anniversary of Chaucer's writing of *The Canterbury Tales*, a crowd gathers in Minneapolis to hold a storytelling contest in honor of the medieval classic. The audience is asked to participate in some parts of the evening and to eventually choose the winner of the contest. Among the finalists are Mr. Knight, Mr. Reeve, Ms. Cook, Ms. Bath, Sister Sarah Jane Nunn, and the host is Rev. Merchant. Mr. Miller has been disqualified from the event because of his story's dubious content, but he does receive permission to entertain the crowd between the telling of the other tales. Miller's jokes become more bawdy, sophomoric and scatological as the evening progresses and he caps off his efforts by relating his own tale, previously disqualified, that proves to be a crowd-pleaser.

The contest includes adaptations of six of Chaucer's original 20 tales: "The Knight's Tale," "The Wife of Bath's Tale," "The Cook's Tale," "The Reeve's Tale," "The Nun's Priest's Tale," and "The Miller's Tale."

This article and synopsis were originally prepared for *Intermission*, the Guthrie Theater's newsletter, volume 2, issue 5, March/April, 2002.

From Canterbury to Minneapolis: Chaucer's Pilgrims Travel to the Guthrie Stage

*There came at night into that lodging-place
Twenty-nine in a group
Of sundry people, by chance fallen
Into fellowship, and they were all pilgrims
Wanting to ride toward Canterbury.
(Canterbury Tales, Prologue)*

Editor's Note. In his Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, before the Pilgrims begin their stories, Chaucer introduces each member of the party to the reader, illuminating the social circumstances and personality quirks of the storytellers, enhancing the reach of their collective tales. The paragraphs that follow here, taken from the Bogdanov/Kling adaptation of the *Tales*, closely parallel the original descriptions set out by Chaucer. In our version, Rev. Merchant, the host of the competition, introduces the performers to the theater audience. The Rev. Merchant's apology for the Miller's Tale, included below in his introductory comments, echoes Chaucer's own disclaimer in the Prologue. In the name of honesty and accuracy, Chaucer, and the production, make the claim merely to relate the sometimes bawdy episodes just as they were told. Also, in the Guthrie production, each of the fictional characters takes the first name of the actor playing the role. The Wife of Bath, for example, played by Sally Wingert, is known in this production as Sally Bath.

The Knight

A Knight there was, he was a worthy man,
That from the time that he first began
To ride a horse loved chivalry,
Truth and honour, freedom and courtesy.
Gallantly had he fought in many a war,
Having traveled the world, no man more.
His manner was as gentle as a maid.
Rude words or oaths he never said,



All his life he was most polite,
He was a very perfect gentle-knight.

The Nun

A Nun there was who resembled a boy,
His—her way of smiling was simple and coy,
She intoned through her nose in a manner most
seemly,
And spoke daintily in French in a fashion
extremely—[PAUSE] terrible!
She would wipe her upper lip so clean,
Not a morsel of food or grease could be seen.
And if perchance some dropped on her breast,
She would brush it off with uncommon zest!
Always to be pleasant and friendly straining—
She certainly was most entertaining.



The Reeve

[A reeve is a local official, similar to a sheriff]
The Reeve was choleric and fairly thin,
His beard was shaved close to his skin.
Short were his legs and very lean,
Like knitting needles, there were no calves to be
seen.
His ledgers were perfectly numbered and lettered,
For an accountant he couldn't be bettered.



The Wife of Bath

There was a business woman, a wife from Bath.
A little bit deaf but with a delicate laugh.
An excellent woman all her life.
As for husbands she'd gone through five,
Apart from other men in her early life—that is
But we won't talk about that—
This good wife knew all the remedies of love
perchance,
For in that art she knew every dance.



The Cook

A cook they had with them, for the nonce,
To boil the chickens with the marrow bones.
She could roast, seethe, boil and fry,
Make a good stew or bake a pie,
Unfortunately, it seemed a great pity
That she had gangrene on her knee;



An open sore, yellow with pus,
Her blancmange and custard was delicious.

The Miller

The miller was a stout churl, be it known,
Hardy and big of brawn and big of bone;
Which was well proved, for when he went on lam
At wrestling, never failed he of the ram.
He was a chunky fellow, broad of build;
He'd heave a door from hinges if he willed,
Or break it through, by running, with his head.



His beard, as any sow or fox, was red,
And broad it was as if it were a spade.
Upon the coping of his nose he had
A wart, and thereon stood a tuft of hairs,
Red as the bristles in an old sow's ears;
His nostrils they were black and very wide.
A sword and buckler bore he by his side.
His mouth was like a furnace door for size.
He was a jester and could poetize,
But mostly all of sin and ribaldries.
He could steal corn and full thrice charge his fees;

...

He told his tale in his own vulgar way,
I apologize for repeating it here today.
So to those with delicate taste, I pray,
For the love of God, don't think what I say
Is of evil intent. For I must rehearse,
Every single tale, for better or worse,
Exactly as told or else tell lies.
Those who might take offence, would be wise,
To turn the page and choose another sort,
They're all here, clean or dirty, long or short.



Images of the pilgrims are miniatures reproduced from the Ellesmere Manuscript of *The Canterbury Tales*, Henry E. Huntington Art Library, San Marino, California. Used with permission.

CULTURAL CONTEXT

On Chaucer

And gret wel Chaucer whan ye mete,
As mi disciple and mi poete,
For in the floures of his youthe,
In sondri wise, as he wel couthe,
Of Ditees and of songes glade,
The whiche he for mi sake made,
The lond fulfild is overal:
Whereof to him in special
Above all othre I am most holde.

John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, c. 1390

Truly, I know not whether to marvel more, either that [Chaucer] in that misty time could see so clearly, or that we in this clear age, go so stumblingly after him.

Sir Phillip Sidney, *Defence of Poesie*, 1580

His stature was not very tall,
Lean he was, his legs were small,
Hosed within a sock of red,
A buttoned bonnet on his head,
From under which did hang, I ween,
Silver hairs both bright and sheen.
His beard was white, timmed round,
His countenance blithe and merry found.
His sleeveless jacket large and wide,
With many plights and skirts side,
Of water camlet did he wear,
A whittle by his belt he wear,
His shoes were cornered, broad before,
His inkhorn at his side he wore,
And in his hand he bore a book.
Thus did this ancient poet look.

Robert Greene, "The Description of Sir Geoffrey Chaucer," c. 1590

Long had our dull forefathers slept supine,
Nor felt the raptures of the tuneful nine;
Till Chaucer first, a merry bard, arose,
And many story told in rhyme and prose.

Joseph Addison, *Account of the Greatest English Poets*, 1694

He is a perpetual Fountain of good Sense; learned in all Sciences; and therefore speaks properly on all Subjects: As he knew what to say, so he knows also when to leave off; a Continnence which is practiced by few Writers.

John Dryden, *Preface to the Fables*, 1700

I read Chaucer still with as much pleasure as almost any of our poets. He is a master of manners, of description, and the first tale-teller in the true enlivened natural way.

Alexander Pope, quoted in Joseph Spence, *Anecdotes, Observations and Characters, of Books and Men Collected from the Conversation of Mr. Pope and other Eminent Persons of His Time*, 1820

I take unceasing delight in Chaucer. ... How exquisitely tender he is, and yet how perfectly free from the least touch of sickly melancholy or morbid drooping! The sympathy of the poet with the subjects of his poetry is particularly remarkable in Shakespeare and Chaucer; but what the first effects by a strong act of imagination and mental metamorphosis, the last does without any effort, merely by the inborn kindly joyousness of his nature.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Table Talk*, March 15, 1834

And Chaucer, with his infantine
Familiar clasp of things divine;
That mark upon his lip is wine.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *A Vision of Poets*, 1844

There is delight in singing, though none hear
Beside the singer; and there is delight
In praising, though the praiser sits alone
And see the praised far off him, far above.
Shakespeare is not our poet, but the world's,
Therefore on him no speech! and brief for thee,
Browning! Since Chaucer was alive and hale
No man hath walked along our roads with step
So active, so inquiring eye, or tongue
So varied in discourse. ...

Walter Savage Landor, "To Robert Browning," 1846

He is the poet of the dawn, who wrote
The Canterbury Tales, and his old age
Made beautiful with song; and as I read
I hear the crowing cock, I hear the note
Of lark and linnet, and from every page
Rise odors of ploughed field of flowery mead.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "Chaucer," 1873

He was a staunch churchman, but he laughed at priests. He was an able public servant and courtier, but his views upon sexual morality were extremely lax. He sympathized with poverty, but did nothing to improve the lot of the poor... And yet, as we read him, we are absorbing morality at every pore.

Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader*, 1925

The medieval word for a Poet was a Maker, which indeed is the original meaning of a Poet. ... There was never a man who was more of a Maker than Chaucer. He made a national language; he came very near to making a nation. At least without him it would probably never have been either so fine a language or so great a nation. Shakespeare and Milton were the greatest sons of their country; but Chaucer was the Father of his Country, rather in the style of George Washington. And apart from that, he made something that has altered all Europe more than the Newspaper: the Novel. He was a novelist

when there were no novels. I mean by the novel the narrative that is not primarily an anecdote or an allegory, but is valued because of the almost accidental variety of actual human characters. The Prologue of *The Canterbury Tales* is the Prologue of Modern Fiction. ... It is not too much to say that Chaucer made not only a new nation but a new world; and was none the less its real maker because it is an unreal world. And he did it in a language that was hardly usable until he used it; and to the glory of a nation that had hardly existed till he made it glorious.

G.K. Chesterton, *Chaucer*, 1932

[Chaucer] was an original poet in any number of ways—among others his characteristic choice of themes, his taste in subject matter, his preference for particular earlier writers (poets, philosophers, religious thinkers), and his attitudes toward, say, women and money. But when we compare Chaucer's choices with those commonly made by his fellow English poets, certain features do, I think, stand out, and perhaps the most significant, though not the first we notice, is this: in nearly everything he wrote, Chaucer worried one basic philosophical question, *the nature and spiritual effect of love*. Chaucer wrote, of course, during one of the world's great moments for love poetry; but his handling of love is nevertheless one of the essential ingredients in his uniqueness.

Chaucer's basic subject has sometimes been identified... with what has been described as the central theme of all medieval literature, "What is the proper use of 'the World'?", a theme urgent in the Christian Middle Ages, when "the World" was both profoundly appealing and suspect, standing out—as it did not for Homer—in dramatic contrast to the promised ultimate haven of the soul. ...

John Gardner, *The Life and Times of Chaucer*, 1977

Chaucer's poetry was designed to be read aloud—printing was not invented for [many] years after his death. If an illustration in an early manuscript of *Troilus and Cressida* is to be believed, Chaucer himself read his poems to a court audience. That he did so seems attested by the mask or persona that he creates for himself in *The Canterbury Tales* and in poems like *The House of Fame*. There he poses as a portly, bookish, well-meaning, rather dim-witted sort of chap, not much good at making love or poetry, but doing the best he can; which may be "a simple and easy way of endearing the poet to his audience and, by implication, of winning delighted acclaim when he wrote better than he had promised. It may also have had something to do with Chaucer's bourgeois origins and his position as court poet seeking to please his social superiors." [S.S. Hussey, *Chaucer: An Introduction*] And also, perhaps, [this has something] to do with disassociating himself from any dangerous or upsetting opinions expressed in the poetry.

David Wright, "Introduction" to Oxford World's Classics *The Canterbury Tales*, 1985

[In] stressing the medieval aspects of Chaucer's world-view, we must reject the "fallacy of the homogenous past" in which the views of Chaucer can be syllogistically deduced from some uniform medieval mind: "Medieval man believed in social order; Chaucer was a medieval man; therefore Chaucer believed in social order." We should also beware of the false logic whereby the *differences* between the medieval and the modern periods are reduced to a series of simple *oppositions*: "modern literature involves psychologically complex characters; medieval literature is different from modern literature; therefore medieval literature cannot involve psychologically complex characters." Nevertheless, at the present moment, these fallacies seem to be far less of a danger than that of "blind modernism," i.e., the belief in a homogeneity of past and present (in human nature, textuality etc.) which is shared by otherwise opposing critical positions.

S.H. Rigby, *Chaucer in Context*, 1996

On the Middle Ages and Chaucer by Kevin Kling

This article also appears in the Guthrie Theater program for *Canterbury Tales*.

In the winter of 1987 I was standing on top of Ayers Rock in Australia. In the center of this vast, arid continent, on top of this great monolith, was a puddle of water. The puddle, on close examination, was teeming with activity. I asked the guide what was going on in there and he said there were thousands of tiny crustaceans, like shrimp, that live in these dry areas. For most of the year, about 364 days, they remain dormant in these dry hollows. Then, one day, it rains and they reanimate, eat like mad, procreate and party hard until the puddle dries up. The guide then explained this had been a particularly wet year and these puddles had been here for almost three weeks. I looked at the shrimp again and they were looking worse for wear but still going at it full bore and I could tell the party was not going to shut down until it was absolutely necessary.

This is much like Europe in the late 1300s.

During the Middle Ages, feudal lords had gained and held power on the backs of their overworked serfs. In return they provided protection and a team to cheer for at tournament time. By the mid-1300s the Black Death left Europe with over one-third of the population gone to the great beyond and a greatly reduced labor force. As those who provided goods and services fell to a few there came a shift in power. Now common people could charge more for work, delegate more time toward leisure, let the hair down, or, say, make a pilgrimage.

All of a sudden the world was in junior high.

They had survived childhood, their hormones were going crazy, outbursts of emotions were common, and they were all about finding the next party.

A favorite destination for the wanderlustful plague boomer was Canterbury Cathedral. This was the final resting place of Thomas Becket, who had been "accidentally" assassinated by four knights of Henry II in 1170 and canonized shortly thereafter. For those who braved the trip—and it could be quite dangerous—Canterbury offered a wonderful respite. One could visit the tomb of Thomas Becket, the lame would pray for health, relics were sold: for a price, one could own pieces of the cross, hair from a disciple, three ears of John the Baptist. There were rides; it was like Graceland times 10. There was also the chance that along the way a group might assemble at an inn and have a storytelling competition.

Back in the days of yore, when Olde English was more than just a good aftershave, there lived a man named Geoffrey Chaucer. Not much is known about Geoffrey the person, but we do know some of his occupations. A job can tell us much about a man. One day my neighbor, Ben, was helping me throw away an old storm door. Ben was 10 years old at the time and for fun I told him he could break the glass out. I held the door over a garbage can and Ben took a hammer and broke out the panes of glass into the can. All of a sudden he stopped and said, "Are there jobs like this?" I said, "Yes, I think there are." And I think Chaucer had such jobs. At times he was a soldier, a squire of the king's household, an envoy of diplomatic missions, a comptroller of customs, a justice of the peace, a member of Parliament, a clerk of the king in charge of building and repair at 10 royal residences and a forest official. These jobs, no doubt, led to a wide variety of friends and acquaintances ranging from knights and damsels, to farmers, clergy and tradespeople. It was probably from their stories that Chaucer found the heart of his wonderful *Canterbury Tales*.

Chaucer is called the father of English poetry. At his time the language of the court was French and literature was taught in either French or Latin. However, the plague was as indiscriminate as the oldest profession and killed teachers along with anyone else—French teachers. These teachers were soon replaced with English-speaking tutors and the vernacular became recognized and acceptable. Thus Chaucer wrote and created a language which centuries later Shakespeare made richer by a few thousand words and later still George W. Bush added his contributions.

During the Middle Ages the written word was not a popular form. Less than 5 percent of the population was literate and the printing press was a hundred years down the road. Copying was by hand, proving very costly. In order for these stories to reach the masses, Chaucer more than likely was asked to perform them time and again. The forms the stories take seem to suggest this as well. They are written with the oral tradition in mind, much the same way as the *Odyssey* or *Beowulf*. By this I mean, and would argue, they are better told than read.

My friend Oona Shaporin tells the *Odyssey*. It takes her 10 hours. I've tried to read the epic tale with no success but when Oona tells it I don't want her to stop. It's because in addition to her masterful telling there are forms of repetition and performance elements actually laced into the structure.

The same holds for the *Canterbury Tales*. These stories benefit from an audience, their laughter and a sense of community. The stories openly tackle love and chivalry, as in the Knight's Tale; sound advice, through a fable in the Nun's Priest's Tale; what was funny, the Reeve's Tale; morality, the Wife of Bath's Tale; and a bit of what was saucy, that Miller's Tale. Good stories are worthy of a live audience and by hearing them told we are reminded collectively of who we are and what we believe.

Something unique to Chaucer was that he didn't just tell the story, he created the teller as well. Archetypes, people recognizable by their jobs and physicalities, are given the task of delivering their favorite stories and each tale is as colored by the speaker as it is by its content. One of the best bits of advice I've heard for storytelling came from a wonderful sculptor, Paul Granlund. He said you could tell a good sculpture because you want to walk around it and see the other side. In his prologue Chaucer provides visceral descriptions of the contestants in the storytelling competition, clues to the worlds they create.

I remember my grandfather fondly by a joke he would tell. He was a tall, thin reed of a man and a politician from Missouri. Granddad was also known to have a private side, not too wild but enough that it often put him at odds with the clergy. He told me one time of a preacher who couldn't find his hat. The preacher looked everywhere to no avail. This was a Sunday and his sermon that week was on the Ten Commandments. He got up on the pulpit, started preaching and when he got to "adultery" he suddenly remembered where his hat was.

The stories Chaucer created continue to ask us who we are today. Are we the same people now in synthetic fibers? Back then they had tournaments; now we have Monday Night Football. They had a feudal system, where nobles lived off the backs of serfs; now we have Enron. They used leeches in medicine; we have insurance companies. They had holy wars...

In keeping with Chaucer's conceit we have set the Storytelling Festival on the lawn of the church grounds in a small town in Minnesota, featuring people many of us know and grew up with. We may be tempted to dismiss these folks. There is the fear we may have something in common with them. My dad used warn me "just because a guy talks like an idiot doesn't mean he isn't one." The spring before last I toured in the Guthrie production of *A Midsummer's Night Dream* as a rude mechanical. When we played

Iowa the reviews called us Minnesotans; in South Dakota, we were obviously North Dakotans; in North Dakota, Canadian; and in Minnesota one guy called us hillbillies. I don't really blame them. A mirror is only as kind as what you have on. But Chaucer's characters differ from the mechanicals. Shakespeare's wonderful troupe of misfits succeed *despite* themselves; this community succeeds, or not, because of themselves. Like most small towns there are subversion and personal motivations afoot but there is also the chance a wonderful talent will emerge, a gem on the prairie. So, tonight you are the pilgrim. You've pulled into town, noticed there is a festival, and decided, what the heck it's a beautiful spring night. You are served the local food, the pastor announces the proceedings, and via Minnesota you are in Canterbury 600 years ago.

Kevin Kling is a local playwright, actor and radio commentator. He has worked with Michael Bogdanov on this adaptation of *The Canterbury Tales*.

THE GUTHRIE PRODUCTION

Cider and Bars on the Parsonage Lawn Notes from the Director/Adapter Michael Bogdanov

Editor's Note. This piece has been edited from director/adapter Michael Bogdanov's comments to Guthrie actors and staff early in the rehearsal process for the current Guthrie production of *The Canterbury Tales*.

This production of *The Canterbury Tales* has had a long gestation period. The show was first conceived in 1974 for the Phoenix Theater, a small community and young people's theater in Leicester, England, and is based on Geoffrey Chaucer's fourteenth century masterpiece. His work contains the collected stories told by 29 fictional pilgrims as they journey together from London to the shrine of Thomas à Becket in Canterbury. Some of the pilgrims are from the English "quality," some are members of the clergy, some are artisans. The tales are clever, witty and written in the most marvelous English, in simple, rhyming couplets. They are romantic, fanciful, many are funny, some are remarkably bawdy.

The year I set out to adapt the *Tales* for the Phoenix Theater, I had also done a play called *Mind Your Head* by Adrian Mitchell. It was a rather risqué piece which ignited no small controversy among the good burghers of Leicester. There were letters in the paper and questions asked in the local town council. I knew I would be doing *Canterbury Tales* next, and I thought, "What am I going to do? If they didn't like the mild language in *Mind Your Head*, what are they going to say about some of these tales?" So I devised a "Get-Out-of-Jail-Card" whereby I couched the adaptation in a story-telling competition hosted by a perfectly respectable Vicar who expresses his righteous indignation at anything that gets in the way of the morality of the evening. Among the characters in the play, the most likely to offend is the Miller, who has the rudest tale of the lot (even Chaucer apologizes for it in his introduction to this tale). But he has been disqualified in an earlier round of the competition for the dubious content of his tale. The Miller is present at the competition, though, and gets to tell what he calls his medieval top ten jokes in between the tales of the other contestants. Throughout the evening, as the Miller gets bawdier and bawdier, the Vicar gets more and more indignant. Ultimately, of course, the Miller will manage to tell his tale after all. I thought that with this invented frame, I could circumvent any criticism of the production on moral grounds. If need be, I intended, quite logically, to point to the fact that we were trying to be upright citizens by protesting every time there was something untoward on stage.

I included in the production adaptations of five of Chaucer's original tales: the Knight's serious tale of courtly love; a musical version of the Cook's Tale about a young apprentice who gets the sack for dipping his fingers into the till; the slightly risqué Reeve's Tale, in which two students, when they are cheated by the Miller, repay him by sleeping with his wife and daughter; the Wife of Bath's Tale about a young man who is made to come to terms with female equality; and the bawdiest of all, the Miller's Tale. (For this production, I have added the Nun's Priest's Tale, told here by the nun, which is actually the old fable of the rooster Chanticleer who outwits the fox.)

Chaucer's text has been modernized for this adaptation. So many of the words in Chaucer's original *Tales* are not in common usage anymore, and the meanings of some are buried deep in medieval history. There are, however, sections of the original Chaucer in the play. For example, the introduction to each of the storytellers contains a certain amount of Chaucer's original language. The tales themselves have been rather freely adapted at some points and are remarkably close to the original in others. For example, The Knight's Tale is very long in Chaucer, and has been considerably condensed and contains

some prose. The rest of the tales are told in rhymed couplets.

The audience gets to participate in the evening's competition as well. The cast members mingle with the audience as they arrive, greeting them as citizens of this respectable community and welcoming them to the final round of the story telling competition. Throughout the production, the action often spills into the audience. Refreshments are offered on stage before the show and at the intermission. Also, audience members determine the order of the tales by drawing the names out of a hat, and they vote with their applause for the winner.

The production in Leicester turned out to be a great success. Now, more than twenty five years later, I have taken a look at the adaptation again. When Joe Dowling and I first talked about staging it here, I realized that I could reunite myself with Kevin Kling, an old friend from Minneapolis with whom I'd had a wonderful collaboration here at the Guthrie on *The Venetian Twins*. That is exactly what did happen. Kevin and I have "Minnesota-ized" the piece, moving it upstate and giving it local references. The Vicar has become Pastor Richard S. Merchant (played by Richard S. Iglewski), and the competition will be held on the lawn of the manse. Rather than such English fare as minced pies and mulled wine, here we find cider and bars. The names of the characters have all come down from the various tales contained in *The Canterbury Tales*, although these also have taken on a hometown flavor. In addition to Pastor Richard S. Merchant, we have among the cast Sally Bath (The Wife of Bath), played here by Sally Wingert, James Knight, played by Jim Lichtscheidl, and so on.

Notes on the Set and Costumes designed by Ulrike Engelbrecht for *The Canterbury Tales*

Ulrike Engelbrecht's Set Design

The production takes place on the lawn of a church manse somewhere in outstate Minnesota where a storytelling competition is being held in honor of the 600th anniversary of the year in which Geoffrey Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales*. The stage is covered with grass. At the back of the stage and up over the playing area is a sail of fabric indicating a canopy or tent under which the action will take place. In the center is a small stage for playing out the tales—in this model, the Reeve stands there. Around the small stage are changing areas with tables for props and costumes and screens behind which the actors prepare for their roles in each of the tales. Downstage is an area where, before the show and at the intermission, refreshments will be sold to the audience.



Model of the set designed by Ulrike Engelbrecht for the current Guthrie production of *The Canterbury Tales*.

Ulrike Engelbrecht's Costume Sketches

The costumes of the play reflect a simplified rendering of traditional medieval costumes. Represented here are broad caricatures of knights with tights and tunics, ladies in gowns and wimples (conical hats), artisans, and clergy men and women. The cast members also act out the various tales as the storytellers tell them, changing into costumes of kings, queens, knights, common folk and even animals as needed to play out each of the tales.



Costume sketch for Evan "Micky" Miller, an anarchic figure within the play. Here he is dressed as a holy warrior in chain mail and a tunic.



Queen Hippolyte from the Knight's Tale as told by James Knight.



Leenya Cook whose story is told as a musical number in this production.



Sally Bath who tells the Wife of Bath's Tale.



Two characters from the Wife of Bath's Tale in which a hag turns into a beautiful maiden.



Rooster, the hero from the Nun's Priest's Tale told by Sister Sarah Jane Nunn. The story is the ancient fable of Chanticleer the rooster who outwits the fox. For this tale the cast wear animal costumes including the sleek, slinky fox, the rooster and several chicks.

About the Playwright/Adapters: Michael Bogdanov and Kevin Kling

Editor's Note. The Guthrie production of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* was adapted for the stage by British director and playwright, Michael Bogdanov and Minnesota playwright and performer, Kevin Kling. Michael Bogdanov originally adapted the tales in 1974 for a theater in Leicester, England. Kevin Kling joins Bogdanov in reconceiving this production as together they bring Chaucer's classic tales home to Minnesota. Bogdanov and Kling collaborated in 1998 on an adaptation of Carlo Goldoni's *Venetian Twins* produced at the Guthrie in the fall of that year.

Michael Bogdanov

All art is political. It is protest. At its highest point, it is a powerful instrument of social change. The position of theater within society makes it ideally placed to aid that change, and we, the artists, the theater practitioners, have a duty to fulfill our elected role as purveyors of truth as we see it. However, theater has a problem. It is perceived as, and indeed is—old fashioned. That is both its strength and its weakness. While the communications industry powers along its technological path into a digitalized sunset, the theater continues to be a ceremonial circle, lassoing language—the last custodian and embodiment of an aural tradition now threatened by extinction. Not that there aren't attempts to evolve, adapt, even to rival its computerized confederates. Where once we whistled the set, now we sing the hydraulics. ... Young directors, rather than tackle the new, deconstruct the old, and there has been a general retreat from social and political engagement into the belief that the process is more important than the result, the journey more interesting than the destination.

Michael Bogdanov, *Times Literary Supplement*, London, April 28, 1995

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Michael Bogdanov biography

<http://www.britishtheatreguide.info/otherresources/directors/MichaelBogdanov.htm>

Michael Bogdanov biography

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/playlists/bogdanov.shtml>

Michael Bogdanov BBC speech on the relevance of Shakespeare's works today

Kevin Kling

Basically, I'm a storyteller. Most of my plays haven't been written down until weeks after they've been produced. ...

To read [a classic script] on the page is in one sense to look at a slice of history. What they laughed at then was the topical humor of the time. ... You can see something about their manners and their language and what they considered... funny in those days. To work on an adaptation of that is to bring the script to how it exists now in a contemporary setting. ...

Any successful collaboration is like two molecules that have to come together, and the problem is you don't want to bump anyone's nucleus. When collaborations fall apart, I feel it's because people have interloped on other people's nucleus.

Kevin Kling, "Waving from the Dock: Kevin Kling on *The Venetian Twins*," Guthrie Theater Study Guide, 1998

WEB RESOURCES

<http://www.kevinkling.com/>
Kevin Kling's web site

http://search1.npr.org/search97cgi/s97.cgi?QueryText=kevin+AND+kling&ResultTemplate=simple_date.hts&Action=Search&SortSpec=Date+Desc+Score+Desc&ViewTemplate=docview.hts&collection=C1&collection=WEB
National Public Radio archive of Kevin Kling's commentary

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Suggested Topics

Geoffrey Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales* in fourteenth-century England. What political and social circumstances define this period? What aspects of this historical context are reflected in the pilgrim's stories told in *The Canterbury Tales*? What shared cultural elements enable us to enjoy and appreciate these tales today?

Comment on medieval social structure as it is depicted in these tales. How have human relationships evolved and changed in England and the world over the past 600 years? What aspects have stayed the same? What contemporary themes come to mind when you consider the world of Chaucer's pilgrims?

Do you find the characters in Chaucer's tales to be similar to other fictional characters you have encountered in literature, film or theater? To whom might you compare the Miller, the Knight, The Wife of Bath, the Nun, the Cook and the Reeve? In what ways are these characters representative of their own time? What universal characteristics of human behavior are apparent in their actions?

What is the overall impression you received from the six tales adapted for the Guthrie production? How does each tale contribute to the entire stage work? Comment also on the significance of the selection and arrangement of the tales in this production.

Compare the various tales in terms of their plot, language, characters, tone, style, humor and overall literary impact. How do the rhyming couplets convey the forward motion of the narrative? Discuss such literary genres and conventions as romance, fabliau and fable, as you recognize their distinctive features in the various tales created by Geoffrey Chaucer.

Michael Bogdanov has adapted Chaucer's tales from their original Middle English. Explore the challenges involved in such an adaptation in relation to specific cultural features such as language, social conduct, customs, gender relations and humor. What are the means used to transfer the tales from their written, literary form to the stage? What do you think was Kevin Kling's additional writing contribution to the script? How do you perceive the collaboration between Bogdanov and Kling in the light of this production?

How aware are you of experiencing this work as a "translation" and adaptation of Chaucer's work? Compare your impressions of reading Chaucer's tales with your experience of encountering the tales performed on stage. What contemporary connotations emerge from the adaptations? Give examples from the script.

Discuss the creative work of the artists engaged in producing the Guthrie show: adapters, director, designers, composer, actors, etc. in the transformation undergone by *The Canterbury Tales* from the page to the stage.

Consider the transposition of the frame surrounding the tales—in Chaucer a fourteenth-century pilgrimage from London to Canterbury and in this production a competition on a church lawn in a Minnesota setting. Did you find that this transposition contributed to your enjoyment and appreciation of the tales? Explain your answer.

Discuss the moral points and/or lessons in each of the individual tales. How would you express them in your own words? Do some tales lend themselves to concise moral conclusions more than others? What explains the difference in this regard?

What aspects of the production did you find funny? Did you find that the humor in the performance illuminated any distinctive aspects of human behavior? Support your answer with examples from the play.

Consider the roles of the Rev. Richard S. Merchant and Evan "Micky" Miller. How are these two characters pitted against each other during the storytelling competition presented on stage? What is the contribution of their constant clash to the structure, enjoyment and significance of the evening?

Consider the Wife of Bath. What does the moral of her tale suggest in contrast with some different ideas articulated in the tale performed on stage? Comment on the clash between misogynist and derogatory views and our contemporary understanding of gender relations. Support your answer with specific references to the Guthrie production of *The Canterbury Tales*.

Who is your favorite character in this adaptation of *The Canterbury Tales*? Support your answer with examples from the show.

Compare and contrast the aspects of human love, lust and sexuality described in this collection of tales. Consider the courtly ideals of the Knight's Tale, the bawdy humor of the Miller and Reeve's Tale and the feminist bent of the Wife of Bath's Tale. What effect does the combination of these various perspectives have on your views regarding sexual politics as represented in the tales?

Comment on the adapter/director's viewpoint stated in the notes published in this Study Guide. Describe how they find a diverse theatrical expression in the production. What is your perception of the pace of the performance, the moments of direct engagement of the audience, the feeling of spontaneous improvisation, etc.?

Talk about the set and costumes for the Guthrie staging of the six tales selected from Chaucer's work. In what ways did the elements of the design add to your understanding, appreciation and enjoyment of the production?

What do the music and the songs performed live by the cast contribute to the overall atmosphere of fun and entertainment that the show aims to attain?

Discuss the challenges for the cast in this production. Consider the actors' multiple tasks of developing characters (each individual storyteller) while also playing various parts within each tale. How does this theatrical approach enhance the audience's appreciation of the range of acting resources displayed by the performers?

Consider the relationship of actor and audience in this production. What role does the audience play within the frame of the story-telling competition? Discuss the way in which this added dimension shaped your experience of the play.

ADDITIONAL SOURCES

For Further Information

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<http://www.uwm.edu/Dept/Library/special/exhibits/clastext/clspg073.htm>

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National Public Radio archive of Kevin Kling's commentary