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### Works Cited

Gould, Karen, and Jane L. Ball. "The Canterbury Tales." *Masterplots, Fourth Edition*, Nov. 2010, pp. 1–4. *EBSCOhost*, [search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lkh&AN=103331MP412909560000102&site=ehost-live](http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lkh&AN=103331MP412909560000102&site=ehost-live).

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### The Canterbury Tales

#### Geoffrey Chaucer

**Born:** c. 1343; London(?), England

**Died:** October 25(?), 1400; London, England

#### Quick Reference

**First transcribed:** 1387-1400

**Type of work:** Poetry

**Type of plot:** Romance, farce, and fable

**Time of plot:** Late fourteenth century

**Locale:** The pilgrimage road between London and Canterbury

#### Principal characters

Chaucer, the narrator

Harry Bailly, the Host

The Knight,

Robin, the Miller

Alison, a young woman

The Nun's Priest,

### **The Poem:**

One April, a group of pilgrims gathers at the Tabard Inn in Southwark, near London, to embark on a pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Thomas à Becket at Canterbury. After dinner, Harry Bailly, the host, proposes a storytelling competition on the journey. The host will judge, and the winner will receive a dinner at the Tabard Inn. The following morning, as the pilgrims depart, they draw lots to begin. The Knight draws the shortest lot and tells his tale.

In "The Knight's Tale," Duke Theseus returns to Athens victorious over the Amazons with their queen, Hippolyta, as his wife and with her sister Emily. They encounter women mourning because the Theban king, Creon, refuses burial for their husbands, who were killed besieging Thebes. Duke Theseus then conquers Thebes. He captures two knights, Palamon and Arcite, and imprisons them.

One May morning, both Palamon and Arcite fall in love with Emily when they see her walking in the garden. Duke Perotheus, a friend of Duke Theseus, negotiates Arcite's release on the condition that he never return to Athens. Arcite longs for Emily, however, so he disguises himself as a squire, calls himself Philostratus, and serves at the court of Duke Theseus. Meanwhile, Palamon escapes by sedating his jailer.

By chance, Palamon and Arcite meet in the woods outside Athens. Duke Theseus finds them as they battle over Emily. He decrees that Palamon and Arcite should return in a year to wage a tournament for Emily. Palamon and Arcite gather with their knights at the new stadium built by Duke Theseus. Palamon is defeated, but Arcite is mortally injured while riding in victory around the stadium. After mourning Arcite, Duke Theseus arrange for the marriage of Palamon and Emily.

After commending the Knight's story, Harry Bailly asks the Monk to continue, but Robin, the drunken Miller, insists on telling his bawdy tale next. In "The Miller's Tale," John, an older carpenter who is married to Alison, a pretty young woman, is afraid of her attractiveness to other men. Nicholas, a student who boards in their house, proposes a tryst with Alison. Absalom, a parish clerk, also tries to court her. Nicholas contrives a plan to deceive the carpenter. He convinces the carpenter of an impending flood and instructs John to provide tubs and provisions for them. At night, when they retire to their tubs in the attic to await the deluge, the carpenter falls asleep and Nicholas steals away with Alison to her bedroom.

Meanwhile, Absalom woos Alison outside her room. In the darkness, he asks for a kiss. She sticks her backside out the window. He kisses her backside. Realizing that he has been duped, Absalom obtains a red-hot iron. Absalom returns and asks for another kiss. Nicholas, amazed at Absalom's foolishness and wishing to participate in the jest, sticks his backside out the window while Alison says it is she, and Absalom brands Nicholas with the iron. Nicholas's screams of pain awaken the carpenter, who falls to the ground and breaks his arm. Nicholas and Alison convince the neighbors that the carpenter is delusional about the flood.

Next, the Reeve, the Cook, and the Man of Law tell their stories. In "The Reeve's Tale," a reaction to "The Miller's Tale," Oswald the Reeve tells about a dishonest miller who robs two clerks. They retaliate against him by getting him drunk and taking advantage of his wife and daughter. "The Cook's Tale," a fragment of about fifty lines, tells of a young man done out of his inheritance by a wicked older brother. In "The Man of Law's Tale," Constance, daughter of a Roman emperor, marries first a sultan of Syria who is killed and then a king. Both mothers-in-law cause her to be accused of treachery, but ultimately she is reunited with her second husband.

The wife of Bath next offers her tale. She prefaces the story with a discourse on marriage, based on her experiences with five husbands. In "The Wife of Bath's Tale," a knight in King Arthur's court rapes a young woman. When he is sentenced to death, the queen intercedes and agrees to save the knight's life if he searches for a year to ascertain what women most desire. As he is about to return after an unsuccessful search, he encounters an ugly old woman. She agrees to tell him the answer if he will grant her next request. The knight agrees, is told what women want, and returns to court. When the knight reveals to the queen that women desire power, his answer is accepted. The old woman appears and demands that the knight marry her. The knight is reluctant but changes his mind after the old woman lectures him on the true character of nobility. After the marriage, the old woman is transformed, becoming young and beautiful.

The Friar, the Summoner, the Clerk, the Merchant, the Squire, the Franklin, the Physician, the Pardoner, the Shipman, the Prioress, the Monk, and even the narrator himself all tell their tales as the pilgrims continue toward Canterbury. "The Friar's Tale," directed by the Friar at the Summoner, paints a humiliating picture of a wicked summoner in cahoots with the devil whose scheme against a widow backfires, landing him in hell. The Summoner retaliates by telling "The Summoner's Tale," in which a greedy, hypocritical friar visits the home of Thomas, a villager. In "The Clerk's Tale," patient Griselda, the daughter of the poorest man in a poor village, is married to a marquis who tests the limits of her patience by subjecting her to endless indignities. In "The Merchant's Tale," a young woman, married to an old man who goes blind, carries on an affair practically under his nose until the god Pluto restores the old man's sight. Proserpine in turn gives the wife a good excuse for what the old man "sees" as his wife's infidelity.

"The Squire's Tale," an incomplete tale, tells of a king's daughter, Canacee, who is given a brass

horse that can fly, a mirror with the power to foretell disaster, and a ring that enables its wearer to understand the language of birds. In “The Franklin’s Tale,” Dorigen, wed to Averagus, is loved by Aurelius, in whom she has no interest. She promises to be his lover if he can accomplish the near-impossible task of clearing away all the rocks on the seacoast. With a magician’s help, Aurelius completes the task, but when he realizes Dorigen does not really want him, he releases her from her promise. In “The Physician’s Tale,” the Roman knight Virginius has a beautiful daughter Virginia, who is lusted after by a wicked judge, Apius. Apius schemes to get her under his power, and, when his success seems inevitable, Virginia tells her father she would rather die than become Apius’s lover. When she swoons, her father cuts off her head.

In “The Pardoner’s Tale,” three blasphemous, lecherous revelers decide to seek out Death to destroy him. In their search, however, they find a cache of gold, which makes them turn on one another in their greed. They end up killing one another, thus meeting Death at last. In “The Shipman’s Tale,” a monk cuckolds a miserly merchant and then causes his wife to reveal her infidelity to her husband. In “The Prioress’s Tale,” a boy, delighted with the song “Alma Redemptoris,” sings it so much that a group of Jews become incensed enough to hire someone to kill him. The killer tosses the body into a pit to hide it, but, miraculously, the dead boy begins to sing, and those searching for him find his body and the killers, who are quickly put to death.

“The Monk’s Tale” actually combines several stories that tell of the fall from power or high station of Lucifer, Adam, Samson, Hercules, Nero, Julius Caesar, and several other men. Chaucer, the narrator, next begins “The Tale of Sir Thopas,” a kind of parodied romance, but he is interrupted by the Host, who claims the doggerel Chaucer uses is downright silly and lewd. Instead, Chaucer tells the story of Melibee/Meliboeus, in which Melibee debates with his wife the best way to deal with one’s enemies.

Because “The Monk’s Tale” was a tragedy that has saddened the company, Harry Bailly asks the Nun’s Priest to lighten their hearts with a merrier tale. In “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale,” Chauntecleer is a vain rooster. One night, as Chauntecleer sleeps beside his favorite hen, Pertelote, he dreams about a fox. Pertelote does not believe in dreams and chides him for cowardice. Although Chauntecleer thinks dreams have veracity, he flies down into the yard the next morning. Sir Russel, the fox, arrives and flatters Chauntecleer into singing. The fox seizes Chauntecleer and runs into the woods. Chauntecleer advises the fox to eat him immediately. When the fox opens his mouth to reply, Chauntecleer escapes.

“The Nun’s Priest’s Tale” is followed by “The Second Nun’s Tale,” “The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale,” “The Manciple’s Tale,” and finally “The Parson’s Tale,” a long prose tract. “The Second Nun’s Tale” recounts the life of the famous Roman martyr St. Cecilia. “The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale” is a story of a swindling alchemist that serves to denounce the trickery involved in alchemy. “The Manciple’s Tale,” a variation on the traditional telltale bird story, tells of the crow, who once was

white. After he tells his owner, Phoebus Apollo, that Apollo's wife has been unfaithful — and after Apollo slays her — the crow is turned black by the angry god. "The Parson's Tale," more a sermon than a story, is about penitence, various sins, and their remedies.

### **Critical Evaluation:**

The Canterbury Tales, Geoffrey Chaucer's last major work, was written between the mid-1380's and his death in 1400, although some of the stories, such as "The Knight's Tale," were composed earlier. It is considered one of the greatest works of English literature. Most of the work is poetic, but a few of the tales are written in prose. In the twenty-four tales, Chaucer demonstrates mastery of almost every literary genre known in the Middle Ages. Various pilgrims tell tales of romance (the Knight, the Wife of Bath), farce (the Miller), and beast fable (the Nun's Priest). Although many of the stories were not new, Chaucer transformed the material with an originality that made the tales unique. He imbued his characters with vivacity by skillfully playing the general types of stereotyped social classes and occupations against specific details of individuals' appearance and mannerisms.

The tales begin with a general prologue that sets up the frame narrative of the pilgrimage. It provides the rationale for the stories and introduces the pilgrims. The concept of a story collection has antecedents in medieval literature, including Decameron: O, Principe Galeotto (1349-1351; The Decameron, 1620), written in the fourteenth century by the Italian Giovanni Boccaccio. The frame of telling stories on a pilgrimage, however, was unprecedented and creates the potential for interaction among the storytellers, which Chaucer exploits. The descriptions of the pilgrims show how well Chaucer combines the typical with the particular. While the "true, perfect, gentle knight" represents the ideal estate of medieval knighthood, the Wife of Bath, a middle-class textile maker, comes to life with more individual details about her appearance and her ability to laugh and gossip.

"The Knight's Tale" is a romance, a medieval literary genre in which the setting is the distant past, the protagonists are from the nobility, and the plot stems from deeds based on love and chivalry. The tale is set in ancient Athens, the principal characters are knights, and the plot unfolds from their contest to win the love of a noble lady. Although Boccaccio's Teseida (1340-1341; The Book of Theseus, 1974) provided the idea for this tale, Chaucer shortened and changed the emphasis of Boccaccio's narrative. He also introduced new elements, particularly about the role of fate, from diverse sources. Individual character development is subordinated to maintaining the conventions of the romance genre.

With the drunken Miller's outburst, Chaucer poses a dramatic contrast between "The Knight's Tale" and "The Miller's Tale." The fable told by the Miller is the exact opposite of the Knight's refined, noble romance. Characters in a fable typically are from a lower social class, as is the Miller. John, the husband in the tale, is a carpenter; his young wife, Alison, is a pretty but common damsel. Her suitors are the student Nicholas and the clerk Absalom. The action takes place in Chaucer's

Oxford. The plot generates humor from sexual exploits, as Nicholas and Absalom vie for Alison's favors. Chaucer's inspiration for this tale came from similar themes characterizing medieval fabliaux. He created lively characters through their appearance and actions. For example, his lengthy description of Alison utilizes comparisons with animals ("skittish as a colt") to emphasize her playful attractiveness. Its fast-moving plot, contemporaneous setting, and earthy characters make "The Miller's Tale" memorable.

With the Wife of Bath, Chaucer returns to the romance genre. The Wife of Bath prefaces her tale with a lengthy discourse on marriage, in which she recounts her life with her trials and triumphs over five different husbands. The prologue to her tale allows Chaucer to develop her garrulous character. This passage is famous for the Wife of Bath's diatribe against medieval misogyny.

In contrast, the tale about a knight at King Arthur's court is restrained. Its source is probably English folklore, but it follows the requirements of romance with its setting in Arthurian England and a plot based on a love quest. The tale deals with nobility, not only in the social position of its main characters — including the knight and King Arthur's queen — but also in the old woman's discussion of nobility's true nature. While the tale's point about a wife's dominion over her husband supports the Wife of Bath's position on marriage, its courtly setting and economical narration diminish the impact of its message when compared to the vivid discourse and opinions in the wife expresses in her prologue.

The Nun's Priest tells a beast fable, in which animal protagonists provide a human moral. The tale of the cock, Chauntecleer, and the fox, Sir Russel, was a well-known beast fable that Chaucer transformed for his purposes. First, he amplified the plot with an extended commentary on the nature of dreams that drew on varied literary sources. Second, the full description of Chauntecleer, "the courtly cock," and his animated conversations with his favorite hen, Pertelote, created characters more real than the humans within the story or even than the storyteller. Chaucer again used his literary talents to create a memorable and distinctive story.

These selections provide only a glimpse into the variety that makes The Canterbury Tales such an intriguing literary work. This variety also introduces a question about the unity of The Canterbury Tales. The issue of this unity is complex because Chaucer died before finishing the work, and the order of the tales, in part, results from editorial efforts made from the fifteenth through the twentieth centuries to impart unity to what in fact remains a fragment of the intended whole. Many crucial elements contribute to the artistic integrity of The Canterbury Tales as a complete concept. The frame of the pilgrimage is maintained throughout, and dialogue among the pilgrims links some of the tales, as in the transition between "The Knight's Tale" and "The Miller's Tale." Particular themes repeat themselves: "The Wife of Bath's Tale," for example, is part of a larger group of tales discussing marriage. In its entirety, The Canterbury Tales provides an infinite source for entertainment and enlightenment and remains as engrossing a work of English literature as when

Chaucer first composed it.

Essay by: Karen Gould; revised by; Karen Gould; revised by Jane L. Ball

### Further Reading

Bloom, Harold, ed. Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Canterbury Tales." New ed. New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2008. Collection of essays analyzing the prologue and many of the individual tales.

Boitani, Piero, and Ji Mann, eds. The Cambridge Companion to Chaucer. 2d ed. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Collection of essays on topics including Chaucer's style, the literary structure of his works, the social and literary scene in England during his lifetime, and his French and Italian inheritances. Also includes four essays examining the use of romance, comedy, pathos, exemplum, and fable in The Canterbury Tales.

Brown, Peter. Chaucer at Work: The Making of "The Canterbury Tales." New York: Longman, 1994. Designed as an introduction to The Canterbury Tales; includes questions for discussion to guide readers in thinking about the workings of Chaucer's literary method. A good place to start a study of The Canterbury Tales.

Cooper, Helen. The Canterbury Tales. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989. A complete reference for all basic points about the literary character of The Canterbury Tales.

Howard, Donald R. The Idea of "The Canterbury Tales." Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976. Discusses the concept of The Canterbury Tales in terms of style and form as an unfinished but complete literary work.

Patterson, Lee, ed. Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Canterbury Tales": A Casebook. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. Ten essays explicate the prologue and the central themes of the most frequently taught tales. Designed for undergraduates and general readers.

Pearsall, Derek. "The Canterbury Tales." Winchester, Mass.: Allen & Unwin, 1985. Approaches The Canterbury Tales by genre of stories. Includes helpful discussions of the surviving manuscripts and the reception of The Canterbury Tales from 1400 through the twentieth century.

Rigby, S. H. Chaucer in Context: Society, Allegory, and Gender. New York: Manchester University Press, 1996. Rigby, a historian, examines and assesses the competing critical approaches that have been used to analyze The Canterbury Tales. Emphasizes the importance of viewing Chaucer within the historical, social, and political contexts of the writer's time.

Shoaf, R. Allen. *Chaucer's Body: The Anxiety of Circulation in "The Canterbury Tales."* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001. Explores the representation of the body in the poem, particularly the images of disease, contamination, and social and sexual intercourse.

Wetherbee, Winthrop. *Geoffrey Chaucer: "The Canterbury Tales."* 2d ed. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Places the poem within the context of the crisis in fourteenth century English society. Discusses its language, prologue, representation of women and of the courtly and material worlds, literary style, and reception. Designed for students and general readers.

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