

THE CANTERBURY TALES

by Geoffrey Chaucer



UNABRIDGED SELECTIONS WITH GLOSSARY AND NOTES

THE CANTERBURY TALES



Geoffrey Chaucer



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Notes

The selected tales in this book have been translated into Modern English and reproduced in their entirety. As such, some of the content, dealing with themes of a sexual nature and including vulgar language, may not be appropriate for some classes. Teacher discretion is advised.

What is a literary classic and why are these classic works important to the world?

A literary classic is a work of the highest excellence that has something important to say about life and the human condition with great artistry. A classic, through its enduring presence, has withstood the test of time and is not bound by time, place, or customs. It speaks to us today as forcefully as it spoke to people one hundred or more years ago, and as forcefully as it will speak to people of future generations. For this reason, a classic is said to have universality.

Geoffrey Chaucer

GEOFFREY CHAUCER was born around 1343, in London. His father and grandfather were prosperous wine-traders. As a young man, Chaucer was able to gain a position in the court of a countess, and later, he became a valet in the court of King Edward III.



Image of Chaucer as a pilgrim from Ellesmere Manuscript.

In his teens, Chaucer served in the Hundred Years' War, and while in France, was taken prisoner and ransomed by the king himself.

Chaucer traveled to Italy, where he became familiar with the works of the great Italian poets Dante (1265-1321) and Boccaccio (1313-1375). He was also influenced by the French poets, whose works he translated.



King Edward III, by unknown artist, late 16th century

After his service in the court, Chaucer was given various mid-level positions in the government, including Comptroller of the Port of London. In this role, he oversaw customs regulations on incoming goods. He also traveled to Flanders (modern-day Holland and Belgium) on a government mission. All of these experiences influenced the *Canterbury Tales*.

Another famous poem by Chaucer is *Troilus and Criseyde*, a love story of about 8,000 lines; he also wrote several shorter poetic works, authored a *Treatise on the Astrolabe* (an informative work about an important navigational tool used by sailors), and translated the late Roman philosopher Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* into English.

In the year 1400, Chaucer died of unknown causes; some scholars believe he was murdered by enemies of King Richard II. Though Europe was already undergoing tremendous change during his lifetime, Chaucer's death is often used as a marker of the end of the medieval period.



Geoffrey Chaucer. 19th century image. From *The Illustrated Magazine of Art*. 1:1 (ca. 1853).

Pointers

READING POINTERS

Reading Pointers for Sharper Insights

As you read *Canterbury Tales*, keep the following information in mind:

Historical Circumstances: In the fourteenth century, when Geoffrey Chaucer was writing, England was a savage place. War, plague, church scandal, and political controversy were all raging, and the author of the *Canterbury Tales* was in the middle of all of it.

The Hundred Years' War with France, which was actually a series of battles and not a continuous war, was in progress; Chaucer himself actually went to France as part of this war and was personally ransomed by King Edward III.

During the same time period, the Black Death, or bubonic plague, was devastating Europe. The chaos of the plague led to some dishonest behavior on the part of landowners, the clergy, and physicians but, more importantly, it permanently altered the order of European society. Whereas medieval society had generally been divided into three *estates* (clergy, aristocracy, and the freeman), the plague helped form a new category: the middle class. Since many workers died, there was a labor shortage; survivors, newly in demand, could lobby for higher wages and better working conditions. Eventually, their improvement in lifestyle became permanent.

The Peasants' Revolt of 1381 took place in response to a harsh tax on these laborers; Chaucer mentions one of the leaders of the Revolt, Jack Straw, in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*. As you read, notice how Chaucer both adheres to the idea of the three estates and departs from it. Which characters are easy to classify, and which seem to belong to more than one class?

The Catholic Church, by far the most important institution in Europe, was also experiencing internal strife. In 1378, a controversy over the papal election resulted in the naming of three popes, all of whom claimed legitimacy.

Within England, the theologian John Wycliffe was attacking the doctrine that priests must act as interpreters of God's word, and he asserted that each ordinary churchgoer had the power to understand God for himself. Wycliffe's followers, called *Lollards*, were attacked as heretics by the king, and several were beheaded. Can you find any hint of this religious violence in the *Canterbury Tales*?

Structure of the Church: The medieval church divided the clergy into two categories: *regular* and *secular*. The regular clergy were those men, like monks and friars, who belonged to a religious order and took vows of celibacy and poverty. Monks were supposed to live lives of quiet reflection, prayer and solitude, while friars were supposed to go out into their communities and help the people there. Friars were *mendicant*, which means that they owned no property and supported themselves on whatever money they were given by community members.

The secular clergy were men like the Parson; they were local priests and church officials who did not belong to any particular order.

In addition to these legitimate church employees, a number of other, less savory characters attached themselves to the Church to make money. Among these were *pardoners*, men who would dispense "pardon" from sin for a fee. *Summoners* call people to ecclesiastical (church) court, but for the right price, let the summons drop.

Finally, women had positions in the Church that mirrored those of some of the men; nuns, for instance, were the female equivalent of monks. However, unlike the monks, the nuns were not considered ordained clergy. The Prioress is an example of a high-ranking nun. How much does she have in common with the Monk and the Friar?

Economy: During the fourteenth century, Europe was gradually moving from an economy based on *feudalism* to a more open, money-based system. Under feudalism, society had been organized into different levels of lord and servant; at the bottom were the serfs, who owned no property and had no rights as citizens, and at the very top was the supreme lord, the king. This system dated from a time when Europe was primarily agricultural, and had relied on the trading of needed services—a serf, for example, would supply farm labor to his lord in return for housing and protection. Society was now becoming more *urbanized*, though, and its new economy was based on money and goods. The Knight, Squire, Yeoman, and Franklin, as well as the Reeve, are remnants of the old feudal system, while the Merchant, Five Guildsmen, and even the Wife of Bath reflect the emergence of the new system.

Of course, the transformation in Europe's economy was not as simple as an overnight conversion from feudalism to a money system; however, knowing that some of these changes were taking place, you can look for them in the *Canterbury Tales*.

Voice: Part of what makes the *Canterbury Tales* so complex is its multilayered structure. The narrator—who is not the same as Chaucer, the author—is retelling each pilgrim's story in that pilgrim's voice. Try to figure out who is really speaking: the author, the narrator, or the character. Is there ever a time when the character seems sincere, but the narrator or Chaucer is being ironic?

Language: You may be surprised at some of the words and images that Chaucer considered acceptable for literature. In fact, he himself, in the prologue to the Miller's Tale, apologizes for the obscenity he is "forced" to repeat. Why do you think he includes these kinds of stories?

Common Types of Story: Chaucer did not invent any of the stories he tells; he took the basic form of each from other sources. The Knight's Tale, for instance, is a typical story of *courtly love*—a romance in which a knight or gentleman goes to great lengths for a beautiful, seemingly unreachable woman. Tales that deliver a religious message or moral are based upon well-known fables and legends. What Chaucer does so creatively is to make these common stories say something about their teller. While we are reading about what happens in each tale, we are also sitting with the other pilgrims, watching the teller of the story and wondering about his or her own life.



The General

P R O L O G U E

- WHEN APRIL with his showers sweet with fruit
The drought of March has pierced unto the root
And bathed each vein with liquor that has power
To generate therein and sire the flower;
5 When Zephyr¹ also has, with his sweet breath,
Quickened again, in every holt² and heath,
The tender shoots and buds, and the young sun
Into the Ram³ one half his course has run,
And many little birds make melody
10 That sleep through all the night with open eye
(So Nature pricks them on to ramp and rage)—
Then do folk long to go on pilgrimage,⁴
And palmers⁵ to go seeking out strange strands,⁶
To distant shrines well known in sundry⁷ lands.
15 And specially from every shire's⁸ end
Of England they to Canterbury wend,⁹
The holy blessed martyr¹⁰ there to seek
Who helped them when they lay so ill and weak.
Befell that, in that season, on a day
20 In Southwark,¹¹ at the Tabard,¹² as I lay
Ready to start upon my pilgrimage
To Canterbury, full of devout courage,
There came at nightfall to that hostelry

¹the west wind

²wood

³the constellation
Aries

⁴a journey to a
sacred place; see
glossary

⁵pilgrims

⁶shores

⁷various

⁸countryside's

⁹go

¹⁰Thomas à Becket,
who was martyred
at Canterbury; see
glossary

¹¹an area south of
London bridge; in
Chaucer's time,
it had many inns
and taverns.

¹²the inn where
the pilgrims are
staying

- Some nine and twenty in a company
 25 Of sundry persons who had chanced to fall
 In fellowship, and pilgrims were they all
 That toward Canterbury town would ride.
 The rooms and stables spacious were and wide,
 And well we there were eased, and of the best.
 30 And briefly, when the sun had gone to rest,
 So had I spoken with them, every one,
 That I was of their fellowship anon,
 And made agreement that we'd early rise
 To take our way, as to you I'll devise.¹³
 35 But nonetheless, whilst I have time and space,
 Before yet farther in this tale I pace,
 It seems to me accordant with reason
 To inform you of the state of every one
 Of all of these, as it appeared to me,
 40 And who they were, and what was their degree,
 And also what array¹⁴ they all were in;
 And with a knight thus will I first begin.

THE KNIGHT

- A knight there was, and he a worthy man,
 Who, from the moment that he first began
 To ride about the world, loved chivalry,¹⁵
 Truth, honour, freedom and all courtesy.
 5 Full worthy was he in his liege-lord's war,
 And therein had he ridden (none more far)
 As well in Christendom as heathenesse,¹⁶
 And honored everywhere for worthiness.
 At Alexandria,¹⁷ he, when it was won;
 10 Full oft the table's roster he'd begun¹⁸
 Above all nations' knights in Prussia.
 In Latvia raided he, and Russia,
 No christened man so oft of his degree.¹⁹
 In far Granada at the siege was he
 15 Of Algeciras,²⁰ and in Belmarie.²¹
 At Ayas was he and at Satalye²²
 When they were won; and on the Middle Sea²³
 At many a noble meeting chanced to be.

¹³recount

¹⁴dress

¹⁵the code of
behavior for
knights

¹⁶heathen lands

¹⁷the site of a
Crusade; see glos-
sary

¹⁸He often sat at
the head of the
table.

¹⁹Few men partici-
pated in as many
battles as he did.

²⁰a city in
Southern Spain

²¹a city in Morocco

²²two cities in
Turkey

²³Mediterranean
Sea

- And he'd fought for our faith at Tramissene²⁴
 Of mortal battles he had fought fifteen,
 20 Three times in lists,²⁵ and each time slain his foe.
 This self-same knight had been also
 At one time with the lord of Palatye²⁶
 Against another heathen in Turkey:
 And always won he sovereign fame for prize.
 25 Though so illustrious, he was very wise
 And bore himself as meekly as a maid.
 He never yet had any vileness said,
 In all his life, to whatsoever wight.²⁷
 He was a truly perfect, gentle knight.
 30 But now, to tell you all of his array,
 His steeds were good, but yet he was not gay.
 Of simple fustian²⁸ wore he a jupon²⁹
 Sadly discoloured by his habergeon;³⁰
 For he had lately come from his voyage
 35 And now was going on this pilgrimage.

THE SQUIRE³¹

- With him there was his son, a youthful squire,
 A lover and a lusty bachelor,
 With locks well curled, as if they'd laid in press.
 Some twenty years of age he was, I guess.
 5 In stature he was of an average length,
 Wondrously active, aye, and great of strength.
 He'd ridden sometime with the cavalry
 In Flanders, in Artois, and Picardy,³²
 And borne him well within that little space
 10 In hope to win thereby his lady's grace.
 Embroidered was he, like a meadow bed
 All full of freshest flowers, white and red.
 Singing he was, or fluting, all the day;
 He was as fresh as is the month of May.
 15 Short was his gown, with sleeves both long and wide.³³
 Well could he sit on horse, and fairly ride.
 He could make songs and words thereto indite,
 Joust, and dance too, as well as sketch and write.³⁴
 So hot he loved that, while night told her tale,

²⁴a city in modern-day Algeria

²⁵duels

²⁶a city in Turkey

²⁷man

²⁸coarse cloth

²⁹sleeveless jacket

³⁰chainmail vest

³¹a gentleman ranked below a knight

³²sites in France and the Netherlands where English knights fought

³³the fashion of the day

³⁴Literacy was not widespread at this time, so this is a mark of the squire's class.

- 20 He slept no more than does a nightingale.
 Courteous he, and humble, willing and able,
 And carved before his father at the table.

³⁵a high-ranking
 servant

THE YEOMAN³⁵

- A yeoman had he, nor more servants, no,
 At that time, for he chose to travel so;
 And he was clad in coat and hood of green.
 A sheaf of peacock arrows bright and keen
- 5 Under his belt he bore right carefully
 (Well could he keep his tackle yeomanly:
 His arrows had no draggled feathers low),
 And in his hand he bore a mighty bow.
 A cropped head had he and a sun-browned face.
- 10 Of woodcraft knew he all the useful ways.
 Upon his arm he bore a bracer³⁶ gay,
 And at one side a sword and buckler,³⁷ yea,
 And at the other side a dagger bright,
 Well sheathed and sharp as spear point in the light;
- 15 On breast a Christopher of silver sheen.³⁸
 He bore a horn in baldric³⁹ all of green;
 A forester he truly was, I guess.

³⁶arm guard

³⁷shield

³⁸Christopher was
 the patron saint of
 travelers.

³⁹sash

⁴⁰the supervisor of
 an abbey

⁴¹or St. Eligius;
 the patron saint of
 goldsmiths

⁴²Her name means
 "honeysuckle."

⁴³usually spoken
 by the upper
 classes

⁴⁴a city outside of
 London

THE PRIORESS⁴⁰

- There was also a nun, a prioress,
 Who, in her smiling, modest was and coy;
 Her greatest oath was but "By Saint Eloy!"⁴¹
 And she was known as Madam Eglantine.⁴²
- 5 Full well she sang the services divine
 Intoning through her nose, becomingly;
 And fair she spoke her French,⁴³ and fluently,
 After the school of Stratford-at-the-Bow,⁴⁴
 For French of Paris was not hers to know.
- 10 At table she had been well taught withal,
 And never from her lips let morsels fall,
 Nor dipped her fingers deep in sauce, but ate

Glossary and Vocabulary

- amain** – excessively
- amercement** – punishment
- anon** – soon
- apothecary** – a pharmacist
- Aristotle** – the ancient Greek philosopher whose work was highly influential in the Middle Ages
- aught** – any
- avarice** – greed
- aye** – ever
- behest** – to command
- “Ben’cite”** – “The Lord bless you” (used as an interjection)
- bequeath** – to bestow property on another by last will
- beshrew** – to curse
- bewray** – to reveal
- blight** – a curse or source of destruction
- brazenfacedly** – shamelessly
- Canterbury** – a cathedral in the southeast of England; it was an important destination for Christian pilgrims because it was where Thomas à Becket was murdered.
- Catholic Church** – the center of religious practices in medieval Europe; churches other than the Catholic church did not come in existence until after 1519, when Martin Luther started the Protestant Reformation. However, some groups of people within the Church did rebel against what they thought were its sinful tendencies. Chaucer himself obviously had some problems with certain trends in the Church, like the selling of indulgences (practiced by The Pardoner) and the “buying off” of Church officials (like The Summoner).
- chide** – to scold
- chivalry** – the code of honor among knights, idealized in literature; this code dictated that knights must be honorable, brave, and courteous to women.
- churl** – a rude man
- clergy** – the order of religious people divided into *regular* and *secular*; regular clergy included monks and friars, while the secular clergy included local officials like the parson.
- contentious** – quarrelsome
- covetousness** – envy
- Crusades** – a series of wars fought on behalf of the Christian faith; the Crusade at Alexandria is mentioned in connection with The Knight.
- cuckold** – fool
- dalliance** – socializing; flirtation
- debase** – to corrupt or taint
- Diana** – the Roman goddess of the hunt, wild animals, and fertility
- divers** – several; various