The Canterbury Tales

Fifteen Tales and the General Prologue

Geoffrey Chaucer

Selected and Edited by
V. A. Kolve and Glending Olson

A Norton Critical Edition

Second Edition

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AUTHORITATIVE TEXT
SOURCES AND BACKGROUNDS
CRITICISM

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THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA AT LOS ANGELES

GLENDING OLSON
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Preface

The first part of this edition of *The Canterbury Tales: Fifteen Tales and the General Prologue*—the glossed Chaucer text—is addressed specifically to students making their first acquaintance with Chaucer in his own language, and it takes nothing for granted. All difficult words and constructions are translated, in glosses at the margins of the page or in footnotes at the bottom when longer explanations are required. Because we hope the book will serve introductory courses in literature as well as more specialized courses in medieval studies, the glossing is complete for each of the tales. They may be assigned in any number and in any sequence. We have selected tales generally considered among Chaucer's finest, and whenever possible we have included from Chaucer's framing story passages that locate each tale in its immediate dramatic context.

The glossing is frankly pedagogic, intended to help the student understand Chaucer in the original language rather than to provide a steadily idiomatic modern translation. *Thou*-forms of the verb, for instance, are glossed as such, though a modern translation would express them as *you*. Verbs are glossed in their exact tense, though medieval texts often shift between past and present forms in ways modern English declares ungrammatical. The glosses sometimes provide both a cognate word (which can help fix the original in mind) and a synonym that better conveys its contextual meaning. The glossing, more extensive than that in most modern editions, is intended not only to explain unfamiliar words but to confirm students' likely guesses about more recognizable ones. Chaucer's language is not so far removed from modern English that translation need be the aim of anyone's study. The poet can be understood in his own voice from the beginning.

The text is likewise conservative and pedagogic. This has not seemed to us an appropriate occasion to attempt a radically new edition of Chaucer's text, even if there were general agreement concerning the shape such an edition should take. Although some eighty-two manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales* survive, in full or in fragment, none is in Chaucer's own hand and none possesses his final authority. He died before the work was complete, and what has come down to us is, in even its earliest examples, scribal and implicitly editorial. Since we have neither autograph nor archetype, Chaucer's "original text" is in fact irrecoverable—and for editors attempting a definitive edition, as for critics specially concerned with Chaucerian metrics and stylistics, that is a great frustration. But the best manuscripts of the *Canter-*

bury Tales are, on the whole, very good, and the variations between them, word by word, reasonably few and only seldom of substantive importance. In the present case, we have used Skeat's landmark edition as our copy-text; for many specific readings we have consulted facsimile editions of the Ellesmere and Hengwrt manuscripts, the editions of Manly & Rickert, Robinson, Baugh, Donaldson, Pratt, Fisher, and the *Riverside Chaucer*, 3d ed., under the general editorship of Larry D. Benson. Skeat lightly normalized the spelling in the manuscripts, a feature we have retained as a convenience for beginning students, along with his use of a hyphen after the *y*-prefix in past participles. Our most systematic change has been to repunctuate the text, for the sake of clarity and in accordance with both medieval and contemporary usage. In matters of punctuation, less has seemed to us more. Finally, for ease of cross-reference, we have numbered the lines of each tale to accord with the standard numbering in the most widely used complete editions of Chaucer's poetry.

The second part of this book offers a collection of documents of various kinds—sources, analogues, or other medieval writings—which represent ways in which Chaucer or his first audiences might have known these stories from elsewhere or ways in which they might have thought about certain aspects of their meaning. Such documents can help students think in historically relevant ways about what Chaucer is most concerned with in these tales. In such study, they will find the differences at least as revealing as the similarities, for the differences help identify choices made, emphases added, roads taken and not taken.

To that end we have worked with a more generous definition of the relevant than do the two most important collections of sources and analogues of the *Canterbury Tales*.[1] We have brought together writings that cast an interesting and suggestive light on the tales included here and have made those writings accessible to students. Some of the translations that follow have been made specially for this volume; certain others, though previously published, have been difficult to come by and seem worth reprinting here. We have not glossed the Middle English writings in this section as extensively as we have the Chaucer texts, but even here we take for granted only a beginner's knowledge of Chaucer's language; a good deal of help is provided. Again, we have normalized certain features of these texts, substituting the appropriate modern letters for Middle English letters no longer current, regularizing *u/v* and *i/j*, eliminating certain scribal idiosyncracies, and modernizing punctuation and capitalization. We hope that both the new translations and the gathering together of what has been widely scattered or out of print will prove welcome, to teacher and student alike.

1. *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, ed. W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster (1941; New York: Humanities P, 1958); *Sources and Analogues of The Canterbury Tales, Vol. I*, ed. Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002). At the time of our writing Volume II has not yet appeared but is promised soon. The new *Sources and Analogues* volumes contain texts in their original languages with facing page translations, along with extensive introductions surveying the relation of each tale to its analogues and antecedents.

For reasons of space we have not been able to offer source and background material for every tale included in this edition. Students interested in exploring the relationship of the *Knight's Tale* to its source, Boccaccio's *Teseida*, may find a complete text with English translation in *Theseid of the Nuptials of Emilia*, trans. Vincenzo Traversa (New York: Peter Lang, 2002). There is also a full translation by Bernadette Marie McCoy, *The Book of Theseus* (Sea Cliff, NJ: Teesdale Publishing Associates, 1974), and extensive selections are translated in Nicholas Havely, *Chaucer's Boccaccio* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1980). A text and translation of the principal analogue to the *Summoner's Tale*, Jacques de Baisieux's *Tale of the Priest's Bladder*, appears in *The Literary Context of Chaucer's Fabliaux*, ed. and trans. Larry D. Benson and Theodore M. Andersson (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971). No clear analogues exist for the *Cook's Tale*: see the discussion by John Scattergood in Correale and Hamel, *Sources and Analogues of The Canterbury Tales, Vol. I*. For the other tales included here in their entirety we present at least one important source or close analogue, and for certain of Chaucer's richest and most widely discussed—the *General Prologue*, the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, the *Clerk's Tale*, the *Prioress's Tale*—we have tried to provide substantial contextual material.

The third part of the book brings together an updated selection of critical essays on Chaucer. Instead of trying to select a single definitive essay on each tale—beyond the scope of this book, and a difficult if not impossible task—we have chosen historically influential studies that treat the broader critical questions, questions that arise whether one is considering the stories individually or collectively. Hence Hoffman on the double focus, sacred and secular, of the pilgrimage; hence Donaldson on Chaucer the pilgrim, and Nolan on the governing voices of the *Canterbury Tales*; hence two excerpts from Kittredge's seminal work on Chaucer's psychological realism, one on the dramatic appropriateness of tale to teller and one on the dynamics of the "marriage group"; hence Patterson and Strohm on the literary and social implications of the collection's multivocal structure; hence Dinshaw on sexuality, gender, and interpretation. Preceding all these is a biographical essay by the historian F. R. H. Du Boulay that not only sets out the essential facts of Chaucer's life but evokes something of the social and intellectual environment in which he wrote. It can usefully serve as an introduction to this volume as a whole. In the Selected Bibliography at the back of this Norton Critical Edition, we offer suggestions for further reading, tale by tale as well as in Chaucer scholarship more generally.

We offer this expanded selection of fifteen *Canterbury Tales* and the Prologue that introduces them as exemplifying Chaucer's highest achievement in the art of story. His is a Gothic art, full of variety and contradiction, tension and transcendence, an art that dared to look at human life under so many guises and from so many points of view that it lays convincing claim, even in the twenty-first century, to having seen life whole.

In the making of the first edition of this book, the editors received the able assistance of Betsy Bowden, Thomas Cannon, Jr., Raymond Cormier, Rosa DelVecchio, Julie Bates Dock, Mary Dugan, Rita Hammond, Betty Hanson-Smith, and Jeanne Vanecko. Carol Stiles Bemis and Marian Johnson at W. W. Norton provided their careful and cooperative editorial work. For this expanded edition, we gratefully acknowledge the contributions of Jane Dugan, Christina Fitzgerald, and Toni K. Thayer. We thank Carol Bemis again, along with Brian Baker and Katharine Ings, all at Norton, for their attentive and collegial help.

Chaucer's Language

There are many differences between Chaucer's Middle English and modern English, but they are minor enough that a student can learn to adjust to them in a fairly short time. We have sketched below just a few of the principal differences. For fuller treatments see the section on language in the bibliography.

I. Pronunciation

The chief difference between Middle English (ME) and modern English (NE) is in pronunciation. The best way to learn ME is to hear it spoken, by a teacher or on records or tapes. For some good readings of Chaucer in ME see the entries on the Chaucer Studio Recordings and the Norton *Media Companion* in the Special Resources section of the Bibliography. The discussion below will pinpoint the principal sound differences, but it takes practice—listening and reading aloud—to develop a good ME pronunciation.

A. Vowels

ME distinguished between long and short vowels, whereas NE does not, even though it takes longer to say the vowel of "bad" than of "bat." In addition, ME long vowels underwent, over an extended period of time, a change known as the Great Vowel Shift, in which they systematically acquired new sound values. The beginning student can best cope with these differences by working backward from NE pronunciation and spelling, a procedure that will ensure reasonable though not perfect accuracy in ME pronunciation. Accordingly, in the following table of sounds, we have indicated not only Chaucer's spelling and pronunciation (both in International Phonetic Alphabet symbols and in NE equivalents) but also how the vowel sounds have evolved in NE.

Two further aspects of the pronunciation of vowels may be considered in connection with Chaucer's principles of versification. Although scholars are not in complete agreement about the nature of Chaucer's metrics, most assume that his lines are basically iambic pentameter with a good deal of metrical variation. Vowels occurring in combination should all be pronounced, as the meter often makes clear:

Aŭnd plesaŭnt was his absolucioun

More complex is the question of final *e*. Originally there was no such thing as "silent *e*" in English: the final *e* in ME words often represents a reduction of more distinctive Old English inflections. By Chaucer's time it is likely that in normal speech the final *e* was silent, but in his poetry it is frequently pronounced, with the schwa sound [ə] that we use in unstressed syllables such as those at the end of *sofa* and the beginning of *about*. Always pronounce final *e* at the end of lines, and within lines pronounce it or not depending on the requirements of the meter. In the following example the final *e*'s that should be pronounced are italicized:

Wĕl coúde hĕ sítte oñ hórs, ăand fáirĕ rýdĕ,
Hĕ cóudĕ sóngĕs mákĕ ăand wél ĕndýtĕ

As these instances indicate, final *e* is usually not pronounced when it appears before words beginning with vowels or weakly pronounced *h*'s.

B. Consonants

ME consonants are pronounced as in NE, with some exceptions:

1. In general, pronounce all consonants in clusters: *g* and *k* before *n* (*gnawe, knife*), although *gn* in French borrowings (*digne, signe*) is [n]; *w* before *r* (*write, wroth*); *l* before *f, v, k, m* (*half* or *halve, folk, palmer*); *ng* is usually pronounced [ŋg], the consonant cluster in *finger* rather than *singer*.
2. *gh* is pronounced with the guttural sound in German *ich*. There is no comparable sound in NE, except for *loch* when pronounced with a heavy Scots accent.
3. *ch* is always pronounced [č], as in NE *church*.
4. *r* should be trilled.
5. *h* is not pronounced at the beginning of words borrowed from French (*honour, hostelrye*); at the beginning of short ME words like *he, his, hit, him, hem*, it is also silent or only weakly pronounced.
6. Final *s* should not be voiced to [z] in stressed positions. At the end of lines Chaucer rhymes *was* with *glas* and *cas, is* with *this*.

II. Morphology

NOUNS: The usual ending for plural and genitive singular forms is *-es*, sometimes *-is*, generally pronounced as a separate syllable. The plural ending *-en* is more common than in NE: e.g., *eyen* instead of *eyes*.

PERSONAL PRONOUNS: Second-person pronouns have both singular forms—*thou, thy* or *thyn, the(e)*—and plural forms—*ye, youre, you* or *yow*. The latter set can be used with singular meaning in some cases.

The third-person singular neuter pronoun may be spelled *it* or *hit*; the possessive case of *it* is *his*, not *its*, which did not enter the language until the Renaissance.

CHAUCER'S SPELLING	EXAMPLES	ME PRONUNCIATION	EVOLUTION IN NE
VOWELS			
a	*after, at*	[a], as in NE *top*	usually becomes [æ], as in NE *after, at*
a, aa	*take, caas*	[a:], as in NE *father*	becomes [e], as in NE *take, case*
e	*best, hem*	[ɛ], as in NE *best*	no change
e, ee	*heeth, ese, see*	[ɛ:], as in NE *bed*	becomes [i], spelled *ea*, as in NE *heath, ease, sea*
e, ee	*swete, be, see*	[e:], as in NE *take*	becomes [i], spelled *e* or *ee*, as in NE *sweet, be, see*
i, y	*hit, in*	[ɪ], as in NE *hit, in*	no change
i, y	*I, ride*	[i:], as in NE *seed*	becomes [ai], as in NE *I, ride*
o	*of, oxe*	[ɔ], as in NE *long*	usually becomes [ə] or [a], as in NE *of, ox*
o, oo	*go, hope, so*	[ɔ:], as in NE *law*	becomes [o], as in NE *go, hope, so*
o, oo	*roote, to, good*	[o:], as in NE *note*	becomes [u] or [ʊ], as in NE *root, to, good*
u, o[1]	*up, but, come*	[ʊ], as in NE *put*	usually becomes [ə], as in NE *up, but, come*
ou, ow	*hous, town*	[u:], as in NE *to*	becomes [au], as in NE *house, town*
u, eu, ew	*vertu, salewe*	[y], as in Fr. *tu*[2]	no NE equivalent
DIPHTHONGS			
ai, ay, ei, ey	*day, sayn, they*	[æɪ], somewhere between NE *hay* and *high*	becomes [e], as in NE *day, say, they*
au, aw	*cause, draw*	[aʊ], as in NE *out*	becomes [ɔ], as in NE *cause, draw*
eu, ew[3]	*newe, reule*	[ɪu], close to NE *few*	becomes [ɪu] or [u], as in NE *few, rule*
oi, oy	*joye, point*	[ɔɪ], as in NE *joy*	no change
ou, ow	*thought, bowe*	[ɔʊ], a glide between the vowels of NE *law* and *put*	becomes [ɔ] or [o], as in NE *thought, bow*

1. A few words with the short [ʊ] sound in ME are spelled with *o* instead of *u*: *sone* (NE *son*), *sonne* (NE *sun*), *come, love, some*. These words were originally spelled with *u* in Old English; the *o* spelling is an orthographic change only.
2. This sound occurs only in a few words recently borrowed from French.
3. A few words—the most familiar are *fewe, lewed, shew, shrewe*—should be pronounced [ɛu] instead of [ɪu].

Chaucer's third-person plural forms are notably different from those in NE. *They, their,* and *them* are Scandinavian borrowings, which were assimilated into the language at different times in different ME dialects. Chaucer uses the nominative *thei* but retains the native forms for possessive and accusative case: *hir(e)* or *her(e)* instead of *their, hem* instead of *them.*

RELATIVE PRONOUNS: Chaucer uses *which, that,* or *which that* instead of *who* and *whom* when referring to human beings, as in "But I, that am exiled" and "a wyf, / Whiche that he lovede."

VERBS: The old infinitive form in *-en* appears frequently in Chaucer, but not consistently. For example, in the opening sentence of the *General Prologue* the infinitive of *seek* appears both as *to seken* and *to seke.*

The past participle is usually prefixed by *y-*, as in *hadde y-ronne.*

Verbs are inflected in the present tense as follows:

Indicative—Singular: 1. *take* 2. *takest* 3. *taketh*
Plural (all persons): *take(n)*

Subjunctive—Singular: *take*
Plural: *take(n)*

As in NE, ME verbs form past tense either by adding *-ed* or by a sound change within the word (e.g., *speke, spak*); the only difference is that some ME verbs that use a sound change have since shifted to the *-ed* form: in Chaucer the past tense of *shape*, for example, is *shop* rather than *shaped.*

ADVERBS: In addition to using *-ly* and *-liche*, Chaucer also uses the suffix *-e* to form adverbs, as in "ful loude he song."

III. Syntax

Chaucer's ME is more flexible in word order than NE, and he uses syntactic patterns no longer common today. Among the most frequent are:

object—subject—verb	But Cristes lore, and his apostles twelve, / He taughte
object—verb—subject	A Yeman hadde he
complement—subject—verb	Curteys he was
complement—verb—subject	Short was his gowne
verb—subject—object	Thus hath this pitous day a blisful ende
subject—auxiliary—object—verb	I have thy feith and thy benignitee . . . assayed

Other features of Chaucer's syntax also differ from standard NE practice. Often he shifts tense within a sentence:

And doun he *kneleth*, and with humble chere
And herte soor, he *seyde* as ye shul here . . .

The relative pronoun may be omitted:

With him ther was dwellinge a poure scoler,
Hadde lerned art . . .

As in spoken English, grammatical construction may shift in mid-sentence, or the subject may be repeated:

The reule of Seint Maure, or of Seint Beneit,
By cause that it was old and somdel streit,
This ilke monk leet olde thinges pace . . .

Upon that oother syde Palamon,
Whan that he wiste Arcite was agon,
Swich sorwe he maketh . . .

Negation is handled on the principle that if one negative element in a sentence creates denial, further negative elements make the denial even more emphatic. Hence one can find double, triple, and even quadruple negatives in Chaucer:

He *nevere* yet *no* vileinye *ne* sayde
In al his lyf, unto *no* maner wight.

Finally, Chaucer uses some verbs in impersonal constructions that have since become personal. *"Me thinketh it"* means "I think" (cf. "It seems to me"). Sometimes the "it" in such constructions is omitted: "*hym liste* ryde so" = "it pleased him to ride in that way."

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