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The Canterbury Tales

by Geoffrey Chaucer



Selected, edited, and translated by
A. Kent Hieatt and Constance Hieatt



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Selected, with translations, a critical
introduction, and notes by the editors



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Geoffrey Chaucer

was born in London about 1340, the son of a well-to-do and well-connected wine merchant. As a boy, he served as a page to the countess of Ulster, and later as a valet in the royal household. In 1360, after his capture while fighting in the French wars, Edward III paid his ransom, and later Chaucer married Philippa de Roet, a maid of honor to the queen and sister-in-law to John of Gaunt, Chaucer's patron.

Chaucer spent many years in royal employment, as comptroller of customs for the port of London, as justice of the peace for Kent, and as a member of Parliament. His appointments took him on various missions to France and Italy, where he probably met Boccaccio and Petrarch and discovered the poetry of Dante—influences that are manifest in his own writing.

Chaucer's oeuvre is commonly divided into three periods: the French (to 1372), consisting of such works as a translation of the *Roman de la Rose* and *The Book of the Duchess*; the Italian (1372–1385), including *The House of Fame*, *The Parliament of Fowls* and *Troilus and Criseyde*; and the English (1385–1400), culminating in *The Canterbury Tales*. In 1400, he died, leaving 24 of the apparently 120 tales he had planned for his final masterpiece. The 24 he wrote were sufficient. Chaucer became the first of England's great men to be buried in the Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey.

PREFACE

This book offers a massive selection from *The Canterbury Tales* together with a facing-page translation designed as both a help to the beginner and as an independently readable entity.

Most people who are acquainting themselves with Chaucer for the first time do so in a class in literature, where the time allotted to the *Tales* must be short. If they use a translation, they may read enough to begin to see how a number of tales illuminate each other and what the whole work is like, but they do not hear Chaucer's voice. This seems a pity, considering how much easier for us his language is than a foreign one. Contrariwise, if they read in the original "The Prologue" and two or three of the tales, they hear the voice but miss the variety and multiple reference.

The present book seeks to overcome this dilemma. We think that what we offer here speeds comprehension, so that more can be read, and provides flexibility, so that parts can be read in the original and parts in translation if necessary.

We think that a facing-page translation will bring understanding of the original faster than do marginal glossing and notes at the bottom of the page, because these latter aids often do not clarify some of the syntactical relationships that leave most beginners at sea. It is true that anyone who has an acquaintance with the syntax of the Revised Version, and with Latin, a Romance language, and one Germanic language besides English, needs little help with Chaucerian English; but any teacher who has attentively put an American undergraduate class through its first weeks or even months with the *Tales* knows that Chaucer is a little more difficult than ripe literary scholars are likely to imagine. Of course, an interlinear translation offers as much help as we do here, but its continual leapfroggings cannot be followed comfortably.

Like most other people who are interested in poetry, we want to help everyone to an understanding of as much Chaucer as possible, as rapidly as possible. We believe that this book offers the way to do it. We know as well as some of our readers the shortcomings of both our theory and our execution, and

we are exasperated by them; but we look in vain for a better way. "The dart is set up . . . Cacche who so may, who renneth best lat see." We have already heard the first question of those with classroom experience; our answer is that, for recitation purposes, an opaque object may be interposed. For the rest, if a student shows a comprehension of Chaucer's meaning, we do not think that it makes much difference where he got it.

We have based our text on that of W. W. Skeat (Clarendon Press, 1900), because his spelling is phonetically most consistent. In a beginner's book with translation, the admired alternatives (most nearly modern MS spelling for easiest recognition of words, or attachment to spellings of one MS) make less sense. Where Skeat's reading differs from that of the more modern texts of Robinson or Donaldson, we have made our own choice, generally after consulting the variants listed by Skeat and Robinson. We have departed from the authority of all seniors very infrequently, and at only one notable spot ("Nun's Priest's Tale" 3386, in Robinson's numbering). Something is said about our policy of translation, beginning on p. xxii. Each of our selections is complete, except that only the last eleven lines appear of the "Introduction to the Pardoner's Tale" (not "The Pardoner's Prologue," which is complete).

An asterisk in either text signals an explanatory note which may be located in a glossary at the end of the book. The glossary is arranged alphabetically, in each case under the word immediately preceding the asterisk in the text.

INTRODUCTION

Geoffrey Chaucer (ca. 1343-1400) and The Canterbury Tales

Little is known about Chaucer personally, although one must be very perverse not to like him after having read his poetry. It is safe to say, at any rate, that he was one of a number of court poets of the later Middle Ages in western Europe. Although such a man would find his place among courts and the nobility, he would probably be a bourgeois or a lesser noble; the high nobility generally had no time for the skills involved. He would often write of love in a long-standing tradition for a class that was publicly and privately much occupied with love's power. "Poet" in the strictly modern sense is not the word for such a writer, for besides short lyrics his output might include almost any of the forms of literature, narrative and otherwise, known to the day; and "court" is deceptive, too, since, aside from courtiers, his audience would probably include some churchmen, civil servants, and students and a growing class of literate bourgeois. Unlike a modern poet, he would almost automatically be held learned, or sage: whether or not his learning went very deep, he belonged to the world of letters, one of whose functions was the transmission of truth and wisdom; he was expected to be a source of information on the world and what was above and below it, to cite ancient saws and instances, and to know what was important in other books, particularly the Latin classics. He might also be (as Chaucer was) a cultural middleman in a more systematic sense—a translator into his own language of works of moral wisdom and the like. However secular or classical his poetic interests might be, these would finally be subordinated to a Christian view of things. But in spite of all this, it was not excluded that he should write both amusingly and satirically, and a liking for compositions so intended easily coexisted with a desire for more solemn kinds of writing in the minds of some of his audience. Finally, there would be something anomalous about his position as a writer *per se*: in spite of the theoretical respect of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance for letters, such a man did not have the institutional or economic standing that mass publication has given to later authors. His work did not

reach people through printed books but was recited and circulated in manuscript copies, and as a poet pure and simple he would be the kept man of one or a succession of patrons who did not view him as an established limb of the social order. If he did not become some kind of churchman or make himself useful as a kind of civil servant, he was likely to feel self-conscious and uncertain about his own role, as the extreme case of Dante shows.

For Chaucer this problem seems to have solved itself: he served his rulers, probably well, in nonpoetic capacities. From one point of view his career formed only a step in the rise of a bourgeois family. His grandfather and father were London wine merchants. A woman who is almost surely his granddaughter died a duchess. We first find Chaucer himself around age fourteen as, most likely, a page in the household of one of Edward III's daughters-in-law. In his subsequent career he was a trusted emissary to the Continent for Edward III and Richard II, held a number of fairly important administrative positions, and was highly though unevenly rewarded by these kings and by their successor, Henry IV. Part of his good fortune may have been due to his marriage: his sister-in-law was first mistress then wife of John of Gaunt, a powerful son of Edward III and the father of Henry IV.

Chaucer was, then, a widely traveled, substantial citizen with some gift for affairs. In addition, to survive and prosper, however chancily, under three kings and without a fixed place in any ecclesiastical or aristocratic hierarchy, he must have displayed tact, adaptability, and at least occasional hustle. Much beyond that, the known facts simply tantalize, because they can be interpreted in so many different ways. We know that he was well-educated and widely read, but we are not sure how much or in what way. He would naturally speak French, as the ruling classes had done since the Norman Conquest; he is the earliest poet of the first rank to write English since Anglo-Saxon times. His Latin is natural in a bookish man. His knowledge of Italian works, however, is rarer in an Englishman of his time; what part his missions to Italy played in this is not known. Apparently he liked the help of a French translation when he worked with a Latin or Italian manuscript. We do not know to what extent he really had reverses in his career (he very likely had some). We do not know whether he was always scrupulous, what his marriage and family were like, what kind of relationship he had with his closest associates. The innkeeper of the *Tales* describes him as "elvish"—retiring

and tending to stare at the ground; and Chaucer describes his regimen at one time as constant reading after he has returned from his work—like a hermit, except that he indulged in little eremitical abstinence. We do not know how much of this is irony.

Before coming to *The Canterbury Tales* in what may have been 1386, Chaucer had written a large number of works, some now lost. Those most read today are an elegy in "dream vision" form for the first wife of John of Gaunt (*The Book of the Duchess*), two other dream visions (*The House of Fame*, *The Parlement of Foules*), one of the great romances of the Middle Ages (*Troilus and Criseyde*), and a series of "Saints' legends of Cupid" generally called *The Legend of Good Women*. The *Tales* is the culmination of his career. He died while it was still unfinished. According to its "General Prologue," thirty or so people, who happen to represent almost every social type of the late Middle Ages, are to tell two tales each on a pilgrimage from London to the shrine of St. Thomas à Becket in Canterbury and two more tales on the way back. Such a program had nothing unnatural about it: pilgrimages to shrines were mass activities in the Middle Ages, partly because they were as likely to be vacations as religious observances. Wherever Chaucer got his idea for this scheme (there were a number like it in the fourteenth century, including Boccaccio's *Decameron*), what he made of it was different from anything else in literary history. The stories which the pilgrims tell are in widely different literary genres and styles, and almost each of these traditional medieval forms is turned into something surprisingly new. In addition, a story is often so well fitted to a pilgrim's character and opinion that tale and teller illuminate each other; and the interplay between the often very discordant temperaments and views of the pilgrims, both in direct interchanges and in their tales, is a further element in this highly complex and satisfying literary pattern.

Critics have generally praised in the Chaucer of the *Tales* the power to show, not simply people doing things for good or evil, but what those people and their actions are really like, so that their personalities become more vital and individual and life-enriching than those of many people whom we know intimately. Certainly he is the poet with an eye for those essences that make a woman a particular woman or even a rooster a particular rooster; and he is justly acclaimed for his healthy humanity, his joy in people and actions as they are—

not ideally powerful, beautiful, or wise, impotent, ugly, or stupid, good or evil, but fascinating particular creations which, if we are big enough men, we contemplate dispassionately and at the same time with gratitude and gusto. Another aspect of his mastery that is often stressed today is his humorous irony—what might be called manipulation without espousal: he has a great range and precision of feeling for levels of literary style and for the different ways of looking at life which are the springs of individuality, and he uses these to speak to us indirectly and ironically. The reality of a situation and the style in which he presents it may humorously clash, or one atmosphere of ideas and feelings, built up perfectly, may ironically undermine a previous one no less perfect, or a slight twist of expression may put into doubt a whole emotional effect; and the result in each case is a kind of double vision which implies a third thing of value. Admittedly, only very simple-minded people, or none, lack all irony of this kind, for most of us can visualize and even occasionally follow several mutually incompatible sets of reactions to a given situation. And it is true as well that only very single-minded authors do not consciously manipulate stylistic levels with ironic intentions. But Chaucer's virtuosity in this direction is such that one is tempted to say his work perfectly illustrates one view of what art, as contrasted with life, ought to be: where life, to be successful, conceives of event and action only as they subserve intention, belief, and need, art must attend to all aspects of what happens for their own sake, without interest in the attainment of a practical end. Finally, however, it is likely to be an unhistorical exaggeration to push this characterization of Chaucer's work to its conclusion, useful as it is, for many readers still register, behind his exquisite modulations of style and fertile creations of role (even one for himself) a unitary, if complex, personality and viewpoint.

Chaucer lived to complete only "The General Prologue" and twenty-two of his tales (two others are unfinished). There are many signs that he changed his plans as he worked. Since we do not have all the pilgrims' linking speeches between the tales, we are not sure in what order Chaucer wished his work to be read, if he ever completely made up his mind on this subject. The eighty and more sometimes widely differing manuscripts in which all or parts of the *Tales* survive are often contradictory on this point as on much else.

One point about the creative process behind most of these tales probably needs explanation. We are used to modern

novelists who use much personal experience in their books, and we do not say they lack invention for doing so; we ask, instead, whether they have formulated the elements of their stories, including, probably, personal experience, in such a way as to give a vision of life which is powerful and serviceable to us. The question is ultimately the same with Chaucer, but the most obvious plot elements which he formulates are likely to be some other author's story rather than personal experience (as is the case, incidentally, with the majority of authors before the nineteenth century). Thus "The Knight's Tale" depends for its plot and much else on a much longer tale by Boccaccio and on some other literary sources; "The Miller's Tale" belongs to a whole family of narratives of which the plots are very similar; and the climactic parts of "The Wife of Bath's Tale," "The Franklin's Tale," and "The Pardoner's Tale" belong, in the same way, to widespread plot families for which Chaucer did not invent the main incidents. "The Prioress's Tale" rests on legendary material. "The Nun's Priest's Tale" is very close in plot to certain previously written examples of the beast fable. Even "The Wife of Bath's Prologue" is an amalgam of literary materials from many quarters. In each case Chaucer was borrowing, sometimes very closely, but what we must ask is how he has developed the borrowed material. "The Knight's Tale," which is closest of these to its main source, is much shorter than Boccaccio's story, transfers the interest from Arcite to Theseus, deploys much less classical mythology, has a much firmer social context, is "philosophical" in a different way, and has, essentially, a different point. The other known instances of the plot of "The Miller's Tale" are, by and large, just dirty stories, without character development or detail. The borrowed plot elements in the tales of the Wife, the Franklin, and the Pardoner share only the most general similarity with their analogues. "The Prioress's Tale" contains more beautiful artifice than any other treatment of the motif of the martyr child. "The Nun's Priest's Tale" is like no other beast fable ever written, whatever the affinities of its plot may be.

"The Knight's Tale," the longest of the selections here, belongs to the flexible genre of the medieval romance—that is to say, it is a story in which men might see idealized images of human behavior, in the persons of the highest social classes behaving according to an exacting code in their special sphere of love and war. Action and language are stylized and formalized to a degree, and both joy and pathos are treated with

much rhetorical artifice. One way of looking at this romance is to see its affinities with the later Elizabethan world of Shakespeare, Edmund Spenser, and Sir Philip Sydney: man's soul, the state, and the universe are all viewed in terms of a kind of Christian Platonism, for much of which Chaucer depended upon a work he had translated, Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*. The nature of the good ruler, of friendship, and of love receive much attention. As in other tales, one needs to recognize the traditional medieval and Elizabethan embodiment of passionate love in a God of Love, who in one of his manifestations is a jealous and malign tyrant, arousing jealousy and strife among his adherents. As Cupid, he has a classical derivation, and other gods of the classical pantheon play large parts in the narrative. Traditionally, they exercise arbitrary and competitive astrological power from the planets which bear their names, and before these influences (which a modern biologist might call the hereditary and environmental factors) man seems to be helpless. Arrayed against them, however, a supreme power, called here the Prime Mover, works for a harmonious, freely chosen accord (love in its other sense): Theseus is its princely representative and the marriage with which the tale closes is its familial embodiment.

The romance is the most idealistic of the secular story forms of the Middle Ages; the tale told by the drunken and boorish Miller, which directly follows, belongs to the most cynical and earthy one, the fabliau. Examples of this form are generally peopled by the lower social orders. Its main convention is that people are usually (and for the most part cheerfully) motivated by lechery, gluttony, avarice, or sloth; only the very stupid live by any other principles. Uniquely, Chaucer transformed this kind of narrative so that what regularly is the baldly related plot and uproarious point of a lavatory story becomes a marvel of witty *double-entendre*, telling detail, and characterization.

It is worth noting that a pilgrim who had once been a carpenter tries angrily to keep the Miller from telling his tale, in which a carpenter is brought low. After "The Miller's Tale," this pilgrim tells another fabliau (not included here), in which a miller is made ridiculous. There are several such opposing pairs of storytellers in the *Tales*; they usually belong to groups proverbially at odds with each other. Carpenters were not regularly enemies of millers, but reeves, or estate managers, were; and the former carpenter is now the Reeve of the pilgrimage.

Another more subdued pairing of tales is possibly part of the plan in the case of the Monk (a member of the regular clergy) and the Nun's Priest (of the secular clergy). "The Monk's Tale" (not included here) consists of a series of mostly lugubrious, high-flown accounts, starting with Lucifer and Adam, of the fall of the exalted by Fortune's blow or Divine decree. They are capped by the Priest's instance of how someone in high degree fell but was subsequently raised up again (he ends up, in fact, at the top of a tree). Furthermore the story is embellished with modish philosophical reflections on Fortune and Providence, and with high-flown rhetoric and solemnly adduced exemplary tales. The heroic subject of all this is, however, a rooster, and what is more, a rooster who lives high, is subject to concupiscence (being in the pride of life, he is ripe for Fortune's blow), has visions, and suffers marital difficulties—like Adam, he wrongly accepts his wife's advice. This tale is a transformation of yet another medieval literary genre, the beast fable, or beast epic: stories of Renard the fox and his dupes were popular long before and after Chaucer, generally for their social satire. But Chaucer's many-layered, happily toppling pyramid of literary nonsense is an extremely bold, quite unprecedented development of the form.

Chaucer evokes various aspects of marriage through the words of the Knight, the Miller, and the Nun's Priest, but he focuses on this institution in the so-called Marriage Group, represented in this book by three of its most important tales, those of the Wife, the Merchant, and the Franklin. Their interrelationships are too complex to describe here. The last of these tales is, like "The Knight's Tale," a romance (a short variety called the Breton *lai*), and displays the only kind of love relationship which the mature Chaucer was apparently willing to take seriously in this highly serious genre: like the married pair in "The Knight's Tale," the man and wife here are matched in age and background. They are in accord in other respects as well, because only the free choice of love brought them together and because they are mutually forbearing and animated by true *gentillesse*—a key word here, in "The Knight's Tale," in Dante, and in the thirteenth-century French *Roman de la Rose*, which Chaucer translated, as he says.

A just sense of Chaucerian irony and humor is needed to balance this tale against the Wife's and Merchant's contributions. The Wife in a long prologue—a virtuoso piece of female monologue, recognizable to readers of both sexes—and

the aged, rich, and lecherous knight January in his behavior with his young wife have something in common. They both claim to know the divinely appointed purpose of marriage, but the actions of both show that they have an eye mainly to their own erotic and other satisfactions. They aim at the domination and manipulation of their consorts, not at a marriage of mutual forbearance and *gentillesse*: January essentially buys his bride, whom he wants to be young and pliable; the Wife defends her practice with the rule that the woman should have the mastery in marriage, and triumphantly enforces it through five marriages. Her tale illustrates her rule: it opens with the most violent act of mastery which a man can commit against a woman, and closes when that man attains his happiness by committing everything into his wife's hands. By a shrewd twist, "The Merchant's Tale," which is neither a romance nor quite a fabliau, but should probably be called a verse novella, shows the defeat of January: the young wife both deceives and masters him with particular grossness. It is a masterstroke of Chaucerian irony that this protagonist, the Merchant ostensibly telling the tale, and the reader find themselves viewing the same events with entirely different feelings.

Of the two remaining tales, the Pardoner's is a swift and deadly exemplum, an illustrative story embedded in a sermon on avarice by this disgustingly avaricious professional preacher; and the Prioress's is a highly formal narrative in the genre of "Miracles of the Virgin" or "Our Lady," having affinities with the Saint's Legend or tale of martyrdom. The simple pathos of its immolation of innocence by villainy represents another side of Chaucer's art, although some readers have suspected an ironical effect even here, in the contrast between the Prioress's approbation of the cruel punishment of the Jews in the tale and her gentleheartedness otherwise.

CHAUCER'S LANGUAGE: Pronunciation, Idiom and Versification

(Information on how to use the translation in this book is given in Sec. 45, 46, below.)

Practically speaking, Chaucer's language is in some respects a foreign one, in others identical with ours. What to do about pronouncing it? One analogy suggests that we should be very exact. We do not enjoy a rendition, no matter how soulful, of Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" by a man who knows little

English. Yet experience suggests that a poem has a high survival value and that its nascent pattern of sound and meaning can in large part be brought to life by someone whose mode of speech is quite different from the author's. Certainly Shakespeare would be astonished, and probably irritated, at our rendering of his verse, yet we think that we get along fairly well without learning what is known about pronunciation in his time.

If this latter argument appeals, the pronunciation of Chaucer's verse presents little difficulty: in order to preserve his meter, do as Sec. 2, below, directs, and for the rest proceed as in Modern English. Doing so, the reader may gain great satisfaction, like the old gentleman in the Red Cross swimming manual who swam a quarter-mile daily with a rudimentary and lethargic breaststroke.

But the ensuing dislocation of the vowel system and of many consonantal sounds of Chaucer's language stretches his poetry so close to the breaking point that many teachers demand a little more effort so as to preserve most of the music of his poetry as he himself probably heard it. Even so, he would find our reading strange, but perhaps no more so than, say, an Australian's rendering of Keats' ode seems to American ears. Although we are not certain of all features of fourteenth-century sounds, and although the following description simplifies on what we do know, the beginner will be poetically much safer in absorbing as much of it as he can. He may, incidentally, go much faster if he uses a recording of passages from *The Canterbury Tales*. (A reliable one, spoken by H. Kökeritz, is available from the National Council of Teachers of English.)

We call the English of Chaucer's time Middle English (ME): examples printed in *italics* below. He spoke and wrote the London dialect of it—the one which has evolved into Modern English (ModE): examples printed in **bold-face**. In becoming ModE, ME changed the sound of many of its vowels and lost many of its inflexions.

For introductory and review purposes, we may now summarize the rules that appear later below: Unstressed vowels are pronounced as in ModE except that final *e* in certain frequent conditions is pronounced and that the last *e* in words like *peyned* (**pained**) or *gates* must be sounded. Stressed vowels are short or long. Short vowels are pronounced as in modern American except that short *a* and *o* are pronounced in modern British fashion. Long vowels are generally pronounced (less

often spelled) like long vowel sounds in Continental languages; these sounds must be remembered. There are two kinds of long *e* and *o*. The sounds of five diphthongs must also be remembered: *ei* (*ey*, *ai*, *ay*), *au* (*aw*), *ew* (*eu*, *u*) *oi* (*oy*), *ou* (*ow*, also *o*, before *gh*). Long and short vowels are identified as such in various ways. Short *i* is so spelled; long *i* is generally spelled *y* in this book. Short *u* is spelled *u* or (next to certain letters) *o*; the long *u* sound is spelled *ou* or *ow*. *A*, *e*, and *o*, are long when doubled or in certain kinds of syllables; they are most often short in other situations. Apart from the long-short distinction, the two kinds of long *e* in ME words may be distinguished by the spelling in equivalent ModE words; the two kinds of long *o*, by the sounds in the equivalent ModE words. The diphthong spelled *ou* or *ow* is distinguished from long *u* spelled *ou* or *ow* by the sound of equivalent ModE words. The diphthong *ew* when spelled *u* is similarly distinguished from short *u*, so spelled. Consonants are pronounced as in ModE, except for *ch*. We now proceed to greater detail.

VOWEL SOUNDS

Unstressed vowels. (1) Unstressed (unaccented) vowels all verge on the sound of *a* in *sofa*, as in ModE. For example, all the vowels except the stressed one in **unaccented** verge on this sound, in natural utterance. In ME such sounds thus take care of themselves. But if the natural main stress, the length of the word, or the slow pace of utterance forces you to stress a vowel, follow the rules about stressed vowels. (2) But regularly give the sound of *a* in *sofa* to the unstressed *e* at the end of a word or syllable, unless the next word or syllable begins with a vowel or an *h*: Chaucer's *take* has two syllables, but in *take our way* it has only one. *Semely* (*seemly*) has three syllables. In *looth were him*, *were* has only one syllable (the *h* of *him* is scarcely sounded, if at all, so that *were* is really followed by a vowel sound). But if these rules do violence to meter in a particular line, they may be abrogated. (3) Sound the unstressed *e* in the endings *-es*, *-ed*, etc.: *peyned* (**pained**), *bedes* (**beds**) each have two syllables.

Stressed vowels. (4) Such vowels are either long or short. (5) Short *e*, *i*, *u* are pronounced as in the following ModE equivalents of the following ME words: *bed* (**bed**), *his* (**his**), *ful* (**full**). (6) Short *a* is like *o* in *lot* as most Americans pronounce it, or like the *a* in German *kann*: ME *sat*, *that*. (7) Short *o* as in Modern British *hot*, French *coq*: *lot*. Long *a* as in *father*: *maken* (**make**). (9) Long *e*. Two kinds. Close long *e*