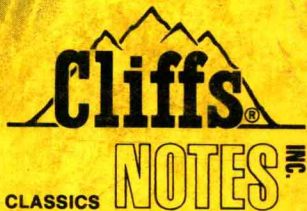


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**CHAUCER'S**

# **CANTERBURY TALES**



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# CANTERBURY TALES

## NOTES

*(Based upon the edition edited by F. N. Robinson)*

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- *Summaries and Commentaries*
- *Principal Characters*
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## CHRONOLOGY OF CHAUCER'S LIFE AND WORKS

c. 1340—Chaucer born in London.

1357—Became page to Countess of Ulster.

1359—Captured by French while serving in English army and later ransomed.

(1360-72?)—Completed translation of *Roman de la Rose*, and wrote *The Book of the Duchess* and *Legend of Good Women*.

1374—Became controller of customs in London.

(1374-1380?)—Completed *The House of Fame*, *Parliament of Fowls*, and several of the *Canterbury Tales*.

1386—Appointed Knight of the Shire and became member of Parliament; Richard II removed him for his customs offices.

(1380-1390)—Translated *Troilus and Criseyde* and resumed work on the *Canterbury Tales*.

1390—Appointed Clerk of King's Works at Windsor.

1399—Pension increased by Henry IV.

(1390-1399)—Completed *Treatise on the Astrolabe*, *Envoy to Scogan*, *Envoy to Bukton*, and *To His Empty Purse*.

1400—Chaucer died and buried in Westminster Abbey.

## GEOFFREY CHAUCER A SKETCH OF HIS LIFE AND TIMES

England in the fourteenth century had a population of about 2,500,000. London was the capital city which a contemporary writer described as "clean, white, and small," encompassing an area of about one square mile.

The English countryside was dotted with small market towns seldom populated by more than 150 persons, monasteries, churches, and manor houses. Between these landmarks were open fields and in some instances native forests. Travel was common and not too difficult because the cities were connected by stone-paved highways constructed during Roman times.

England, in Chaucer's time, was a nation in social ferment. Medievalism still was a dominant influence in the lives of Englishmen, but the renaissance had assumed definite form and the country stood on the threshold of the modern world. These were the forces which stood face to face: the medievalist believed in the spiritual and the abstract, that the community, not the individual, was the great ideal. Man, the medievalist asserted, had no right to think for himself or to make judgments, for man was a member of a great spiritual community, the church catholic and universal. The early renaissance man believed in developing his own social groups, and national interests, as opposed to a united Christendom.

In Chaucer's time there were many manifestations of rebellion against the old order of things. Wycliffe and his followers were sowing the seeds of the Protestant Reformation which placed the emphasis on the individual. Chaucer's countrymen began thinking of themselves as Englishmen, and national patriotism showed in the battles with France which ushered in the Hundred Years' War. The growth of manufacturing and commerce gave rise to a middle class which speeded the end of the feudal system. The people demanded more voice in the affairs of their government. The church became corrupt; this corruption in turn invited corruption among the people. And, in the midst of this social ferment, England was three times swept by the Black Plague which reduced its population by one half and dealt an almost mortal blow to its industry.

This great century of social, political, literary, and religious ferment was nearly half over when Geoffrey Chaucer was born in 1340. His father was a successful wine maker in London, and his mother, Agnes de Compton, a member of the Court. Chaucer was sent to the Inner Court at St. Paul's Almonry where he received an excellent education.

In 1357 Chaucer became page to the Countess of Ulster; he met some of the greatest men in England, among them John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster. Two years later Chaucer, as a soldier, went to France on an invasion excursion which was doomed to failure. He was captured, and in 1360 was successfully ransomed. No information is available about Chaucer again until 1366. By that time Chaucer's father was dead, his mother was remarried, and Chaucer was married to a woman named Philippa de Roet. Whether this was a marriage of love or convenience is not known. Philippa was a woman of high rank in the service of the Queen. In 1367 Chaucer was in the service of the King and was granted a life pension as a valet.

In 1370, Chaucer was employed by the King for diplomatic errands, and during the next ten years made seven trips abroad. In 1374 he was appointed controller of the customs in London. That same year he was given permission to quit the royal residence, and he leased a home in the city of London. Chaucer received other appointments from the King, the most important coming in 1386 when he became a Knight of the Shire.

That same year John of Gaunt, Chaucer's life-long benefactor, left England for a military foray in Spain. King Richard II promptly stripped Chaucer of all his customs appointments. When John of Gaunt returned in 1389, however, Chaucer was restored to his previous offices.

In the following eleven years Chaucer managed to retain royal favors and lived comfortably until his death on October 25, 1400. He was buried in Westminster Abbey. His grave there was the first in what has become known as the Poet's Corner.

There is some reliable evidence, therefore, which traces Chaucer's life as a civil servant. Very little evidence exists, however, to pinpoint the life of Chaucer as a poet.

It is now believed that Chaucer began writing about 1360, and by 1372 he completed most of the translation of *Roman de la Rose* and wrote *The Book of the Duchess* and the *Legend of Good Women*. By 1380 he completed *The House of Fame*, the *Parliament of Fowls*, and some of the stories which later appeared in the *Canterbury Tales*.

By 1385 he translated *Troilus and Criseyde*. About this time he began the *Canterbury Tales*. (They were never finished, and scholars in later centuries arranged them in the order thought most likely.) In 1391 he wrote *Treatise on the Astrolabe* and the following year *Envoy to Scogan*. Just before his death he wrote *Envoy to Bukton* and *To His Empty Purse*.

## CHAUCER'S PUBLIC

The public for which Chaucer wrote his tales is important to their understanding. As noted above, Chaucer moved in a high society and among the learned members of the Court. His audience, therefore, would have been a highly educated, sophisticated, and worldly audience. Chaucer probably read his tales aloud to this audience. Thus, his hearers would have had a knowledge of French, Latin, and English. They would also be familiar with the many types of stories, tales, and fabliaux that Chaucer imitated. Therefore, Chaucer could easily utilize various types of classical allusions, subtle satire, and irony, all of which would have been fully understood by his audience.

Chaucer's tales, of course, were not published or read by a general public, but many students of the English language think that they became so popular that the entire course of the English language was affected by them. At the time Chaucer wrote, there were five different accents spoken in English. These accents varied so much that a person of one section could understand another not at all or only with great difficulty.



## CHAUCER'S LANGUAGE

The language of Chaucer is Middle English, which, roughly speaking, extends from about 1100 to 1500 A.D. The following explanation may help clarify the linguistic divisions of English for the beginning student of English literature:

### OLD ENGLISH (or Anglo-Saxon) — 597 A.D. to 1100 A.D.

*Beowulf*, the most famous literary work of the period, is an epic poem in alliterative verse. The author is unknown, but the manuscript (Cotton Vitellius A xv) dates from 1000 A.D.

Example of an Old English half-line from *Beowulf*:

*Hwæt we gardena in geardagum* — Old English

*La. we the spear-Danes in the days of yore* — Modern English

(Notice the Germanic quality of the Old English.)

787 A.D. — Danish influence on Old English

### MIDDLE ENGLISH — 1100 A.D. to 1500 A.D.

Geoffrey Chaucer (1340-1400 A.D.) is the acknowledged literary master of the period, and the *Canterbury Tales* is his most famous work.

Example of Chaucer's poetry in Middle English:

*At mortal batailles hadde he been fiftene* — Middle English

*Of mortal battles he had fought fifteen* — Modern English

(Notice the French influence on Middle English; also, notice how much closer, linguistically, Middle English is to Modern English than Old English is to Modern English.)

### MODERN ENGLISH — 1500 A.D. to the present

Some famous English writers of this period — Shakespeare, Milton, Swift, Wordsworth, Dickens, Shaw

Some famous American writers of this period — Poe, Hawthorne, Twain, O'Neill, Faulkner

There is some argument among scholars about the dates for the linguistic periods, particularly regarding the shift from Old English to Middle English. Naturally there was no overnight change from Old to Middle English, but the action which triggered the greatest change was the Norman Conquest of England in 1066 A.D. — thereafter, the English language exhibited a French influence. Typical of the scholarly controversy which centers upon the assignment of an initial date to Middle English is an excellent twentieth-century article by Kemp Malone entitled "When Did Middle English Begin?" (See *Curme Linguistic Studies*.)

## TEXTS AND TRANSLATIONS

In many ways, the Middle English of the *Canterbury Tales* is much like

Modern English (unlike the almost foreign language of the Old English in *Beowulf*), and the student of Chaucer should read the Middle English text for full appreciation of Chaucer's poetry. Three excellent books which offer the original text are Vincent F. Hopper's interlinear edition of the *Canterbury Tales* (with selections only, in both Middle and Modern English, line by line), the John Matthews Manly expurgated edition of the *Canterbury Tales* (with helpful commentary and glossary), and the F. N. Robinson complete edition of *The Poetic Works of Chaucer* (including bibliography along with helpful introduction and glossary).

If the student is, for some reason, unable to read the original text of the poem, he should by all means get one of the good modern translations—for example, the poetic translations of J. U. Nicolson or Nevil Coghill. Nevil Coghill points out the variety of meaning which the translator encounters with Chaucerian words. Here is a Middle English line from the General Prologue, for example:

*He was a verray parfit gentil knyght*

Now according to Coghill, "verray" does not mean "very" but "true," "gentil" means "gentle" but also, and more importantly, of "high breeding" and "good birth." So, to render Chaucer meaningfully and rhythmically into one line, Coghill writes:

*He was a true, a perfect gentle-knight.*

## CHAUCER'S POETRY

Both Manly's and Robinson's explanations of Chaucer's versification are so good that the student or teacher ought to take time to read them. If these texts are not available, however, in the school or local library, the present summary should suffice temporarily.

1. "All of Chaucer's narrative verse, except the 'Monk's Tale,' is written either in rhymed couplets or in stanzas of seven lines."<sup>1</sup>
2. "There is...a difference between Chaucer's English and Present English which is of much importance to the versification. This consists in the fact that a majority of the words in Chaucer's English ended in an unstressed final *e* or *en* or *es*."<sup>2</sup>
3. "The general character of the verse was also affected by the fact that a large number of lines ended in so-called feminine rhymes."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>John Matthews Manly, editor, the *Canterbury Tales*, p. 131.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 123.

4. Chaucer used iambic pentameter a great deal (with couplets)—his usage was forerunner of the heroic couplet brought to perfection by Alexander Pope. There were, of course, variations. The heroic couplet is an effective poetic form for satire.
5. The “Tale of Melibeus” and the “Parson’s Tale” are the only tales written in prose; the rest of Chaucer’s tales are poetic.

## A GUIDE TO PRONUNCIATION

Much is lost if Chaucer’s poetry is read in translation. It is close enough to modern English so that the student with only a little practice can easily overcome the language barrier. The following brief list of aids will help with the basic differences.

Essentially, the vowels in Chaucer’s poetry resemble the modern continental sounds more than they do modern English. The following basic guide is not meant to be a complete pronunciation guide, but functions as a simplified approach to reading the poetry.

1) The “A” is always pronounced like the “a” in *father*. In words like “that” or “whan” the “a” sound is shorter than in words like “bathed.” See lines 1-3 of the general prologue.

2) The long “i” and “y” are both pronounced like the long “ee” sound found in such modern words as *machine*.

3) The long “e” has the sound of the “a” in such words as *late*, *hate*, *mate*, etc. If the “e” is short, give it the modern English pronunciation.

4) The “o” sounds are similar to those of modern English, that is, the majority take the “oh” sound.

5) The “u” is also pronounced approximately the same as in modern English.

6) The following three diphthongs are the most frequent:

A) the “ei,” “ey,” and “ay” all take the modern “ay” sound found in words like *day*, *way*, *pay*.

B) The “au” and “aw” are the “ou” sounds found in *house*, *mouse*, and *louse*.

C) The “ou” is something in between the “ou” of *you* and the “ew” sound of *few*.

7) The final “e”, “es” and “ed”; the final “e” is always pronounced *except* when the next word begins with a vowel (or “h”) and except when the rhythm would be violated in which case it resembles the “uh” and is never stressed.

8) The consonants are essentially the same as in modern English but with more emphasis.

## MIDDLE ENGLISH GENRES

According to Baugh’s *A Literary History of England*, the *Canterbury Tales* in its extent and variety offers a remarkable anthology of medieval literature.” Baugh then goes on to label the tales according to genre (or literary type); the following is a simplification of his discussion:

- Courtly Romance – Knight’s Tale
  - Man of Law’s Tale (of Constance)
  - Squire’s Tale (fragmentary)
- Breton Lay<sup>1</sup> – Franklin’s Tale
- Fabliaux<sup>2</sup> – Miller’s Tale
  - Reeve’s Tale
  - Merchant’s Tale
- Saint’s Legend – Prioress’ Tale
- Tragedy (through medieval eyes, at least) – the Monk’s Tale
- Exemplum<sup>3</sup> – Pardoner’s Tale
- Sermon (or didactic treatise) – Tale of Melibeus
  - Parson’s Tale
- Beast Fable – the Nun’s Priest’s Tale

## THE GENERAL PROLOGUE

In April the gentle rain, warming sun, and gentle winds, awakened nature from its winter sleep. Then man yearned to travel. In this season in England, from every corner of the land, people made their way to Canterbury to receive the blessings of “the holy blissful martyr” – St. Thomas á Becket.

One spring day in Southwark at the Tabard Inn, the narrator (Chaucer) awaited the next day when he would commence his journey to Canterbury. That evening a company of twenty-nine persons arrived at the inn, all of whom were Canterbury pilgrims. Chaucer was admitted to their

<sup>1</sup>A *lay*, in this case, is a short romantic poem, not a song.

<sup>2</sup>A *fabliau* is a short story with a snappy ending.

<sup>3</sup>The *exemplum* was one section of the medieval sermon – the part which set forth examples to illustrate the theme of text of the sermon.

company. Before the pilgrimage began, Chaucer took time to describe his companions.

### *The Knight*

The Knight is the perfect and genteel man who loved truth, freedom, chivalry and honor. He was truly a distinguished man. He had ridden into battle in both Christian and heathen lands and in every instance served his king well. Despite his valorous deeds, the Knight never boasted of his actions nor bored his listeners with his feats.

#### *Commentary*

The Knight is the most socially prominent person on the journey, and certain *obeisances* are paid to him throughout the journey. He tells the first story and many pilgrims offer him compliments. One fact that Chaucer's audience would be aware of is that of all the battles the Knight fought in, *none* were in the King's secular wars. They were all religious wars of some nature.

### *The Squire*

The Squire would be a candidate for knighthood. When not in battle, he thinks of himself as quite a lady's man. He takes meticulous care of his curly locks (hair) and is somewhat proud of his appearance. He could also sing lusty songs, compose melodies, write poetry and could ride a horse with distinction.

### *The Yeoman*

The Yeoman was a servant to the Knight and Squire. He dressed all in green and was known as an expert woodsman and an excellent shot with the bow and arrow.

### *The Prioress*

A Prioress named Madame Eglantine was also among the pilgrims. She was a gentle lady whose greatest oath was "by Sainte Loy." She was rather well educated, even though her French was not the accepted Parisian French. She was very coy and delicate. When she ate, she took great care that no morsel fell from her lips and that no stains were on her clothes. She was very courteous and amiable and tried to imitate the manners of the Court. She could not stand pain and would weep to see a mouse caught in a trap. She had three small hounds with her which she treated very gently and tenderly. Her dress was very neat and tidy and she wore a gold brooch with the inscription "*amor vincit omnia*."

#### *Commentary*

Chaucer's depiction of the Prioress is filled with gentle and subtle irony. Here is a picture of a lady who happens to be a nun, but she never forgets that she is a lady first. Her oath, "by Sainte Loy," implies that she has chosen the most fashionable and handsome saint who was also famous for his great courtesy. Her emphasis on her appearance and

her possessions (including her three dogs) suggest that she secretly longs for a more worldly life. Even the inscription "*amor vincit omnia* (love conquers all) is a phrase that was used both in religion and also in the many courtly romances. And the brooch *is* a piece of lovely jewelry. In general she would be the ideal head of a girl's finishing school in nineteenth century America.

### *Associates of the Prioress*

The Prioress had another nun with her who functioned as her secretary and also three priests.

### *Commentary*

Two of the three priests will relate tales, and one of these tales (The tale of Chaucer's *Chauncleer*) will prove to be one of the most popular of all the tales.

### *The Monk*

The Monk was an outrider for his monastery (that is, he was in charge of the outlying property). He owned several horses furnished with the finest saddles and bridles. He loved hunting, fine foods and lots of it; he had several good hunting dogs of which he was very proud. He dressed in fine clothes, some were even trimmed in fur. He was rather fat, very jolly and bald headed. His favorite food was a roasted swan. In general, he favored an outdoor life to that of a closed, indoor existence.

### *Commentary*

Chaucer's art is here demonstrated through his use of irony. While Chaucer never makes a comment about his characters, he arranges and selects his material so that the reader can come to a conclusion about the character. When the monk says that he doesn't approve of the solitary prayerful existence in a monastery, Chaucer pretends to be convinced that the Monk's argument is right. But we see that it is right only because this particular monk tries to justify his non-monastic activities and for this monk, it is the right existence. Everything that the Monk does is a violation of his monastic orders. His love of the worldly goods, food, and pleasures, and his dislike of the quiet monastery contradict his religious vows.

### *The Friar*

The Friar was a wanton and merry man who had helped many girls get married after he got them in trouble. When he heard confessions, he worked under the principle that the penance is best executed by money rather than by prayers. So the person contributing the most money received the quickest and best pardon. The Friar was the type who knew the taverns and inns better than he knew the leper houses and the almshouses. Chaucer says that there was no better man than the Friar when it comes to the practice of his profession. He was always able to get money from people. His name was Hubert.

### **Commentary**

The Friar was a person licensed to hear confessions and to beg for money. This Friar used every vicious and immoral method to extract money from the parishioners, so when Chaucer says there were none so good as Hubert in his profession, he is being ironical. That is, if we judge the Friar by how much money he extorted from people, then he is a great success. But essentially, this Friar is notoriously evil and cunning.

### **The Merchant**

The Merchant was a member of the rich and powerful rising middle class. He is shrewd and knows a good bargain. He talks and looks so solemn and impressive, and transacts his business in such a stately manner that few knew that he was deeply in debt.

### **The Clerk**

The Clerk, who was a student at Oxford, was extremely thin, rode a very thin horse, and his clothes were threadbare because he preferred to buy books rather than clothes and food. He did not talk often, but when he did, it was with great dignity and moral virtue.

### **Commentary**

The Clerk was probably working on his M.A. degree with the idea of attaining some type of ecclesiastical position. Next to the Knight, he is one of the most admired people on the pilgrimage.

### **The Sergeant of Law**

The Sergeant of Law was an able attorney who could recall every word and comma of every judgment, a feat which earned him high distinction and handsome fees. But he makes people think that he is busier and wiser than he really is. There is an implication that he has perhaps used his position to attain wealth without ever actually violating the letter of the law.

### **The Franklin**

The Franklin was a large landowner with a certain amount of wealth, but he was not of noble birth. He spent his money freely, enjoying good food, wine, and company. His house was always open and he was a true epicurean, devoting his energies to fine living and was generally liked by the other pilgrims.

### **The Haberdasher, The Dyer, The Carpenter, The Weaver, and The Carpet Maker**

These were men who belonged to a guild, an organization similar to a fraternity and labor union. Each was luxuriously dressed in the manner of his calling, and each was impressed with his membership in the guild to which he belonged. The guildsmen had a cook who was one of the best.

### **The Cook**

The Cook was a master of his trade. He knew how to boil, bake, roast and fry. But Chaucer thinks it a shame that he had a running sore on his

shin, because his best dish was a creamed chicken pie whose white sauce might be the same color as the pus from the running sore.

### *The Shipman*

The Shipman was a huge man and somewhat uncouth. He was the master of a vessel and knew all the ports from the Mediterranean to the Baltic. He could read the stars and knew how to fight well. But he did not ride a horse well. He looked like a fish out of water as he sat on his horse.

### *The Doctor of Physic*

There was no one who could speak so well about medicine as this doctor. He knew astronomy (astrology) and something of nature and could tell what humour was responsible for a sickness. But everyone thought he was in league with the druggist. He could quote all the medical authorities, but knew nothing of the Bible. He had apparently made a lot of money during the plague, but doesn't seem to spend it very readily. Since he prescribes gold for cures, he has a special love for this metal.

### *The Wife of Bath*

The Wife of Bath was somewhat deaf, but was an excellent seamstress and weaver. She made a point of being first at the altar or offering in church. Her kerchiefs must have weighed ten pounds and she wore scarlet red stockings. She has been married five times and has been on pilgrimages to Jerusalem, Rome, Bologna, Galice, and Cologne. She was gap-toothed and rode a horse easily. She enjoyed good fellowship and would readily laugh and joke. Her special talent was her knowledge of all the remedies of love.

### *The Parson*

The Parson was very poor, but was rich in holy thoughts and works. He would rather give his own scarce money to his poor parishioners than to demand tithes from them. His principle was to live the perfect life first, and then to teach it. His life was a perfect example of the true Christian priest, and by his good example, he taught, but first followed it himself.

### *Commentary*

Amid the worldly clerics and the false and superficial religious adherents, the poor Parson stands out as the *ideal* portrait of what a parish priest should be. The same can be said of the following portrait of the plowman. He is the *ideal* Christian man.

### *The Plowman*

The Plowman was a small tenant farmer who lived in perfect peace and charity. He loved God with all his heart. He was always honest with his neighbors and promptly paid his tithes to the church.

### *The Miller*

The Miller was a big brawny man who could outwrestle any man (and even a ram). He was short shouldered, broad and thick set. His red beard



and a wart on his nose from which bristly red hairs protruded made him look fearful. He played the bagpipes as the pilgrims left the town.

### *The Manciple*

The Manciple was a steward for a law school (or dormitory for lawyers) in London and was in charge of purchasing the food. He was not as learned as the lawyers, but was so shrewd in buying that he had been able to put aside a tidy little sum for himself.

### *The Reeve*

The Reeve was the manager of a large estate. He was a skinny man with a bad temper. His close cut beard and his short haircut accentuates his thinness and long legs. He was an able, efficient, and shrewd man who had reaped rich rewards from his master. The serfs, herdsman, and workers feared him dreadfully because of his unrelenting perseverance. Like the Manciple, he had reaped profits for himself by being so shrewd at buying. He was once a carpenter and rode last among the group.

#### *Commentary*

It is not important to the Reeve's characterization that he is a carpenter, but Chaucer is anticipating *The Reeve's Tale* later on. The Miller will tell a dirty story about a carpenter, and since the Reeve was once a carpenter, he feels the need for revenge by telling a dirty story about a miller.

### *The Summoner*

The Summoner (a man paid to summon sinners for a trial before a church court) had a fire-red complexion, pimples and boils, a scaly infection around the eyebrows, and a moth-eaten beard. Children were afraid of his looks. He treats his sores as leprosy. To make matters worse, he loved to eat garlic, onions, leeks, and drink strong wine. He could quote a few lines of Latin which he used to impress people. Chaucer calls him a gentil harlot (genteel fellow) and implies it would be difficult to find a better fellow, because for a bottle of wine, the Summoner would often turn his back and let a sinner continue living in sin. He was also well acquainted with "ladies of questionable reputation."

#### *Commentary*

The physical appearance of the Summoner fits his profession well. He is so ugly and so gruesome looking that a summons from him is in itself a horrible experience. Thus, Chaucer ironically implies that he is a good fellow. But furthermore, he is a good fellow because sinners could easily bribe him. The reader should be aware of these subtle ironic statements which are often made in paradoxical situations.

### *The Pardoner*

The Pardoner was a church official who had authority from Rome to sell pardons and indulgences to those charged with sins. He had just returned from Rome with a bagful of pardons which he planned to sell to the