

世界经典文学作品赏析(英汉对照)

Geoffrey Chaucer's CANTERBURY TALES

Joseph E. Grennen

杰弗里·乔叟的

坎特伯雷故事集

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CONTENTS

目 录

英文部分

Preface	1
General Introduction	4
The General Prologue	12
The Knight's Tale	26
The Miller's Tale	34
The Reeve's Tale	40
The Cook's Tale	44
The Man of Law's Tale	46
The Wife of Bath's Tale	52
The Friar's Tale	60
The Summoner's Tale	64
The Clerk's Tale	68
The Merchant's Tale	75
The Squire's Tale	81
The Franklin's Tale	84
The Physician's Tale	90
The Pardoner's Tale	93
The Shipman's Tale	98
The Prioress's Tale	101
Sir Thopas	105
The Tale of Melibeus	108
The Monk's Tale	109

The Nun's Priest's Tale	116
The Second Nun's Tale	123
The Canon's Yeoman's Tale	128
The Manciple's Tale	134
The Parson's Tale	136
Chaucer Takes His Leave	137
Critical Commentary	138
Review Questions & Answers:	
Discussion of Key Points	143
Suggestions for Further Reading	
and Research	149

中文部分

简介.....	153
总引.....	159
武士的故事.....	170
磨坊主的故事.....	176
管家的故事.....	181
厨师的故事.....	185
律师的故事.....	187
巴斯妇的故事.....	192
游乞僧的故事.....	198
法庭差役的故事.....	201
学者的故事.....	204
商人的故事.....	210
侍从的故事.....	215
自由农的故事.....	218
医生的故事.....	223
赦罪僧的故事.....	226
船手的故事.....	230

女修道士的故事·····	233
托巴斯先生·····	236
梅利比的故事·····	238
僧士的故事·····	239
女尼的教士的故事·····	245
第二个女尼的故事·····	251
寺僧的乡土的故事·····	255
伙食经理的故事·····	260
牧师的故事·····	262
乔叟的告别辞·····	263
评论·····	264

PREFACE

Anyone who presumes to add another book to the growing list of outlines, commentaries, modernizations—even children's versions—of Chaucer's poetry must begin with an apology. Modernizations (and there are some good ones) tend sometimes to be even more difficult than Chaucer's Middle English text; the existing outlines and commentaries are frequently filled with a riot of information about scholarly problems, or else are so sketchy, that they bear only a remote resemblance to the poems themselves. I am of course not referring to the works of scholarship and literary criticism which have, in the last two decades, enlightened us about Chaucer's meaning perhaps more than all the literary discussion of the five centuries past. But these are often beyond reach—and beyond the needs—of the audience this book is designed to serve. It may well be that for any number of reasons pupils in secondary schools should not be asked to come to grips with the subtleties of Chaucer. And the arguments could be put almost as strongly for college undergraduates. But there are riches in Chaucer's poetry—wisdom, humor, pathos, even invective and satire—which the adolescent mind can respond to. And despite the difficulties, Chaucer is being taught in our high schools and junior colleges.

The overwhelming problem facing anyone who tries to translate or re-tell Chaucer's stories, is that he was himself a re-teller of other men's stories. The modern version, therefore, may well turn out to be much closer to Chaucer's source than to Chaucer's own poetry. It is in the language itself—in the untranslatable suggestiveness—that

much of Chaucer's meaning lies. Somehow, the modern version must give a hint of what Chaucer was up to—what he saw in the original source, and what kind of shaping art he used in adapting it. With all this in view, and remembering the relatively unformed (and uninformed) minds encountering the strangeness of Chaucer's verse for the first time, I have adopted these principles as a guide in the summation and commentaries which make up the book:

1. To re-tell the story in outline form, in easily understandable language, yet, as far as possible, with a Chaucerian inflection.
2. To make Chaucer's characters and situations (within reason, and avoiding really ludicrous comparisons) comprehensible in modern terms.
3. To avoid controversial opinions, untried theories, and advanced critical views (especially to avoid murky critical terminology) ; at the same time to ignore textual problems, and questions of the dating and ordering of tales, in favor of purely literary considerations and more ample summaries.
4. To omit nothing truly Chaucerian merely on the ground that it may offend the taste of some readers, yet to avoid possibly inflammatory details and to omit those words (even though Chaucer used them) which are generally considered obscene.
5. Finally, to avoid critical generalities, and to concentrate on particulars. I find, for instance, that it is of little use to the student to be told that Chaucer was a master of the dramatic method, but that it is genuinely helpful for him to know that the apparently aimless, random course of events in the *knight's Tale* is intimately re-

lated to the main theme of the poem, which is concerned with the proper human attitude to strike in the face of the imponderable heavenly logic behind the visible surface of things.

The "Comments," interspersed in the text, are by no means exhaustive. They are meant to clear up crucial points of interpretation, or to suggest critical attitudes that may be useful at other points in the narrative as well. I have not observed strict proportions in the allotment of space; the General Prologue, and some of the more important tales, like the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, are given disproportionately lengthy treatment. The book does not pretend to be a work of criticism or of scholarship, though it is hoped that it will be found to be based on sound scholarship and defensible critical opinions. If it is an aid to the youthful reader, if it helps him to find his way through Chaucer—and *back* to Chaucer—it will have served its purpose.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

SOCIAL BACKGROUND Geoffrey Chaucer, who was born around 1340 and died in 1400, lived through a social and religious storm which has hardly been equalled in the history of the English nation. The Fourteenth Century of romantic story—a quaint society of jolly millers, rollicking friars, and amiable outlaws, of distant, fragile ladies and well-bred knights—is a far cry from the actual facts. And it is ironic that the *Canterbury Tales* themselves should have endured in the popular imagination as a reflection of that kind of world. England, in Chaucer's day, a country of perhaps four million people, was devastated by the Black Plague in 1349-50. Its population was practically cut in half. The ensuing shortage of farm labor sharpened an already existing class conflict, a conflict which led finally to the terrible Peasants' Revolt of 1381. A number of unpopular noblemen were lynched in the uprising, and despite Richard II's promise of amnesty, severe reprisals were taken against the commoners who had played any part in the rebellion. Villeins (serfs bound to the soil), escaping from their lords' estates, took refuge in the towns or joined lawless bands in the forests, which were still wild, and the subject of superstitious beliefs. Even a masterless man, trained in the use of the English long bow, might find service with an army destined for France, which was attacked and plundered constantly throughout the Hundred Years War (1337-1453). Feudalism, as an economic system, and chivalry, as a military system, were both in a process of decay. Life, for most people, was hard, violent, and competitive.

RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND The religious picture was no rosier. The church, in its upper ranks, was beset by political maneuvering among the bishops, and frequent resentment against Roman control; in its lower ranks it suffered from the existence of an extraordinary number of corrupt officials, ignorant priests, and wayward parishioners. And there was an unremitting struggle for dominance between ecclesiastical courts and the King's courts. John Wyclif, the "Morning Star of the Reformation," was a contemporary of Chaucer's. From an initial attack on the worldliness and ignorance of the lower clergy, he moved to a heretical denial of such basic church doctrines as the transubstantiation of the Eucharist. The church in England, however, did survive the corruption and incompetence of its members, and the attacks from without. Chaucer himself, by nature a conservative man, could satirize the corruption he observed without putting himself *outside* the church, and he remained a loyal Catholic.

INTELLECTUAL BACKGROUND There is always a tendency to think of past periods of civilization as foolish and benighted. Yet the average of human intelligence, and the number of geniuses, probably does not vary much from century to century. The Fourteenth Century was, in fact, a time of active intellectual probing, and it had its great thinkers—philosophers like William of Ockham, scientists such as Nicolas Oresme, and medical theorists like John Arderne. The question of free will vs. determinism, the physical nature of sound and light, and the development of a surgical technique for the treatment of fistula, for instance, were all subjects of scholarly investigation. Of course, these were not the days of massive popular education, nor was there really any wide circulation of books. Chaucer, however, was an extremely well-read man for his times, and his poetry in places has a very bookish quality to it. To

judge from the kinds of allusion he makes, he expected his audience to have some direct acquaintance with books both of a scholarly and a popular sort. Romantic stories of love, saints' lives and legends, sermon collections, encyclopedias, and philosophical and theological treatises are a few of the types of literature he refers to. Chaucer seems to have been very fortunate, indeed, in having a courtly audience which was cultured, sophisticated, sensitive, and socially aware.

CHAUCER'S LIFE As might be expected, very little is known of Chaucer's life. He was born probably around the year 1340. He came from a family of vintners (wine merchants). Somehow he became attached as a page to a branch of the royal family, and there is some evidence that he may have been in the service of King Edward III himself. While still a very young man, he saw military service abroad, and was several times employed as a royal emissary to the European continent. In the 1370's Chaucer made a trip to Italy, where he probably picked up a fair knowledge of the Italian language, and became acquainted with the works of the great Italian authors, notably Dante and Boccaccio. In 1374 he was given a civil service position as Controller of Customs, and from that point on held a variety of offices, continuing to act from time to time as a royal representative. That he was a respected and trustworthy public servant is proved by the record of annuities and pensions he received, and by the fact that toward the end of his life he was given the important post of Clerk of the King's Works. Upon his death in 1400 he was buried in Westminster Abbey. A study of even these sketchy facts leads to the following conclusions, important for an understanding of Chaucer's poetry:

1. Chaucer was himself a shrewd, sophisticated person, toughened

by a life of hard and complex experiences.

2. He was a man learned in the French, Italian, and Latin literatures.

3. Literature was an avocation (spare-time occupation) for him, rather than a full-time job. It was not a money-making proposition.

LITERARY CAREER It is customary to divide Chaucer's literary career into three parts:

1. Period of French influence: Chaucer's earliest poetry is sometimes a rather pretty and artificial affair. He was experimenting with rhythm and structure, and tended to use conventional and even hackneyed (over-worked) images and ideas. But his originality can be detected even in his earliest work. *The Book of the Duchess* is perhaps the most important poem of this period. It is first of all a *dream-vision*, that is, a poem in which the author pretends that he has fallen asleep, and that the substance of the poem has come to him in a dream. Secondly, it is an *elegy*—a poem lamenting the death of a beloved person. Thirdly, it is a *consolation*, that is, a work which tries to comfort someone's grief by explaining the nature of the forces which have caused it. *The Book of the Duchess* laments the death of Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster, and is an attempted consolation of her husband (Chaucer's patron), John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster. Chaucer pretends that in his dream he has become involved in a hunt, and has been led to the figure of a man in black, who is lost in grief. In the course of the dream, Chaucer prods this man into revealing the reasons for his sorrow, and thus helps to cure him of it.

2. Period of Italian influence: Chaucer certainly knew the works of the great poet, Dante, but he seems to have made more use of the poems of Boccaccio. The greatest of Chaucer's completed poems, *Troilus and Criseyde*, is based upon the *Filostrato* of Boccaccio. This poem, in five books, relates the tragedy of a young Trojan hero, Troilus, who spends the better part of three books pining away for the love of Criseyde. Criseyde finally grants him her love, but shortly after is made to join her father (a traitor) in the Greek camp, and falls in love with Diomedes, thus proving unfaithful to Troilus. The poem is actually a magnificent and complex treatment of the roles played by human love, Divine Love, free will, and chance (or fortune) in the affairs of men.

3. Period of so-called "realism:" This is the period of the *Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer seems, in later life, to have grown away from purely literary models, and to have concentrated more upon the teeming social life around him. Students of Chaucer have been so impressed by the lifelike quality of the Canterbury pilgrims, that they have been led to search old records for the real life models on which they believe Chaucer to have based them. It is not impossible that the poet had real persons in mind for some of the pilgrims, but there is a limit to how far this search can be useful in helping modern readers to appreciate the poem. In many subtle ways the *Canterbury Tales* is still the product of literary models, and of wide reading as well as of actual experience in the world.

THE CANTERBURY TALES Summary: Chaucer stops off at the Tabard Inn on his way to Canterbury to visit the shrine of Saint Thomas a Becket. He falls in with twenty-nine other pilgrims, and in the famous *General Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales*, describes them for us in great detail. All walks of life, from the lofty Knight

to the lowly Plowman, are represented there. Under the guidance of the innkeeper, Harry Bailly, the pilgrims are each to tell two tales on the way to Canterbury and two on the way back. The *Knight's Tale* is first (a long romance), followed by the *Miller's Tale* (a short, realistic story). The Miller provokes the Reeve, who tells a nasty story at the expense of millers. And so it goes, one story leading to another. At least that was the general plan. But the poem is fragmentary; Chaucer never lived to complete it or to make a final arrangement of even the parts which he did complete. There are dramatic outbursts, as, for example, when the Host offers a vile insult to the Pardoner and they almost come to blows. But the Knight steps in and acts the part of peacemaker. Some tales are grouped around a single theme, marriage, for instance, and explore different aspects of that theme. The *Nun's Priest's Tale* makes fun of the idea of tragedy, which the Monk has advanced so solemnly in his tale. The *Parson's Tale*, which is the last, is a long sermon which Chaucer apparently intended to be a kind of unifying element, bringing all themes to rest in a Christian framework. At the very end is a *Retraction*, in which Chaucer takes back all the sinful things he wrote and asks forgiveness and rest for his soul.

The *Canterbury Tales* can be looked at from any one of several points of view:

1. As an anthology (or cross-section) of medieval literary types: Almost every type of medieval literature is represented here. The *Knight's Tale* is a romance, the *Miller's Tale* a fabliau, the *Second Nun's Tale* a saint's legend, the *Prioresses Tale* a "miracle of the virgin." There are sermons, beast fables, contemporary anecdotes, and allegories; in short, it is a virtual storehouse of the *kinds* of literature to be found in Chaucer's day.

2. As the story of a pilgrimage: The pilgrims are, after all, on their way to Canterbury. This notion of religious veneration colors all the tales, and all the incidents which arise on the way. The themes and ideas expressed by the pilgrims (whether they are offered seriously or ironically) have to be measured against the kind of religious ideal which the shrine of the great martyr stands for. For example, it is impossible to read the *Franklin's Tale*, which deals with human integrity, without judging the characters in the light of the saintly integrity which Thomas himself displayed in his martyrdom.

3. As a representative view of fourteenth-century English society: For one thing, the gallery of portraits in the General Prologue covers the whole range of fourteenth-century occupations and professions. We have a knight, a lawyer, a doctor, a merchant, a parson, and so forth. It also covers an entire range of people considered in terms of folly and wisdom. The Parson is virtue pure and simple; the Pardoner is a thoroughly vicious scoundrel; and there are all sorts of gradations in between. The Manciple is wise (though unscrupulous), while the Clerk seems just a bit of a ninny; again, we can find shadings between. The tales themselves are not just idle entertainment but deal with important social and domestic issues. Who should wear the pants in the family? (*Wife of Bath's Tale*) How should guardians raise the children of their lords? (*Physician's Tale*) Is there any truth in the science of alchemy? (*Canon's Yeoman's Tale*) As a practical man of affairs Chaucer undoubtedly saw some of his tales as offering guides to proper social conduct.

4. As a framed story: The variety and the diversity in the characters and their tales is given an over-all unity, basically, by the device of the framed story. That is, Chaucer invented the scheme of a pil-

grimage to make realistic and effective the story—telling and the interplay of character. We do not know what gave him the idea, or, indeed, if he really needed any model for it. The notion of a pilgrimage as a basis for a story collection is not so very unusual, after all. He may have been influenced by earlier story collections like the *Decameron* of Boccaccio, or Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (which he knew well), and he may even have been influenced simply by seeing pilgrimages passing his house on their way to Canterbury. In any case, the *frame* gives the poem at least a kind of artificial unity. It consists of the General Prologue, occasional head-links and end-links (short sections relating things that happened on the way), prologues to individual tales, and a few interruptions by a pilgrim in the middle of someone else's tale (the Pardoner interrupts the Wife of Bath, for instance).

Connected with the idea of the frame, is the poet's conception of the narrator's personality. Of course, it is narrated by Geoffrey Chaucer. But, as is frequently the case in literature (compare it with *Gulliver's Travels*, for example), the personality Chaucer gives his narrator is a far cry from the actual personality of Chaucer himself. In his fictional character he allows himself to be taken in by the most outrageous examples of vice and hypocrisy. He pretends to have no literary judgment at all (he gives himself the absolutely worst tale to tell—*Sir Thopas*), and he ridicules his own appearance. In the final analysis, whatever unity the poem does possess is a result of the framing device, the character of the narrator, and the thematic connections between tales, all working together in a fairly harmonious fashion.