

Geoffrey Chaucer: THE CANTERBURY TALES

About *The Canterbury Tales*:

Geoffrey Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales*, a collection of stories in a frame story, between 1387 and 1400. It is the story of a group of thirty people who travel as pilgrims to Canterbury (England). The pilgrims, who come from all layers of society, tell stories to each other to kill time while they travel to Canterbury.

If we trust the General Prologue, Chaucer intended that each pilgrim should tell two tales on the way to Canterbury and two tales on the way back. He never finished his enormous project and even the completed tales were not finally revised. Scholars are uncertain about the order of the tales. As the printing press had yet to be invented when Chaucer wrote his works, *The Canterbury Tales* has been passed down in several hand-written manuscripts.

The Canterbury Tales is the most famous and critically acclaimed work of Geoffrey Chaucer, a late-fourteenth-century English poet. Little is known about Chaucer's personal life, and even less about his education, but a number of existing records document his professional life. Chaucer was born in London in the early 1340s, the only son in his family. Chaucer's father, originally a property-owning wine merchant, became tremendously wealthy when he inherited the property of relatives who had died in the Black Death of 1349. He was therefore able to send the young Geoffrey off as a page to the Countess of Ulster, which meant that Geoffrey was not required to follow in his ancestors' footsteps and become a merchant. Eventually, Chaucer began to serve the countess's husband, Prince Lionel, son to King Edward III. For most of his life, Chaucer served in the Hundred Years War between England and France, both as a soldier and, since he was fluent in French and Italian and conversant in Latin and other tongues, as a diplomat. His diplomatic travels brought him twice to Italy, where he might have met Boccaccio, whose writing influenced Chaucer's work, and Petrarch.

In or around 1378, Chaucer began to develop his vision of an English poetry that would be linguistically accessible to all—obedient neither to the court, whose official language was French, nor to the Church, whose official language was Latin. Instead, Chaucer wrote in the vernacular, the English that was spoken in and around London in his day. Undoubtedly, he was influenced by the writings of the Florentines Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, who wrote in the Italian vernacular. Even in England, the practice was becoming increasingly common among poets, although many were still writing in French and Latin.

That the nobles and kings Chaucer served (Richard II until 1399, then Henry IV) were impressed with Chaucer's skills as a negotiator is obvious from the many rewards he received for his service. Money, provisions, higher appointments, and property eventually allowed him to retire on a royal pension. In 1374, the king appointed Chaucer Controller of the Customs of Hides, Skins and Wools in the port of London, which meant that he was a government official who worked with cloth importers. His experience overseeing imported cloths might be why he frequently describes in exquisite detail the garments and fabric that attire his characters. Chaucer held the position at the customhouse for twelve years, after which he left London for Kent, the county in which Canterbury is located. He served as a justice of the peace for Kent, living in debt, and was then appointed Clerk of the Works at various holdings of the king, including Westminster and the Tower of London. After he retired in the early 1390s, he seems to have been working primarily on *The Canterbury Tales*, which he began around 1387. By the time of his retirement, Chaucer had already written a substantial amount of narrative poetry, including the celebrated romance *Troilus and Criseyde*.

Chaucer's personal life is less documented than his professional life. In the late 1360s, he married Philippa Roet, who served Edward III's queen. They had at least two sons together. Philippa was the sister to the mistress of John of Gaunt, the duke of Lancaster. For John of Gaunt, Chaucer wrote one of his first poems, *The Book of the Duchess*, which was a lament for the premature death of John's young wife, Blanche. Whether or not Chaucer had an extramarital affair is a matter of some contention among historians. In a legal document that dates from 1380, a woman named Cecily Chaumpaigne released Chaucer from the accusation of seizing her (*raptus*), though whether the expression denotes that he raped her, committed adultery with her, or abducted her son is unclear. Chaucer's wife Philippa apparently died in 1387.

Chaucer lived through a time of incredible tension in the English social sphere. The Black Death, which ravaged England during Chaucer's childhood and remained widespread afterward, wiped out an estimated thirty to fifty percent of the population. Consequently, the labor force gained increased leverage and was able to bargain for better wages, which led to resentment from the nobles and propertied classes. These classes received another blow in 1381, when the peasantry, helped by the artisan class, revolted against them. The merchants were also wielding increasing power over the legal establishment, as the Hundred Years War created profit for England and, consequently, appetite for luxury was growing. The merchants capitalized on the demand for luxury goods, and when Chaucer was growing up, London was pretty much run by a merchant oligarchy, which attempted to control both the aristocracy and the lesser artisan classes.

Chaucer's political sentiments are unclear, for although *The Canterbury Tales* documents the various social tensions in the manner of the popular genre of estates satire, the narrator refrains from making overt political statements, and what he does say is in no way thought to represent Chaucer's own sentiments.

Chaucer's original plan for *The Canterbury Tales* was for each character to tell four tales, two on the way to Canterbury and two on the way back. But, instead of 120 tales, the text ends after twenty-four tales, and the party is still on its way to Canterbury. Chaucer either planned to revise the structure to cap the work at twenty-four tales, or else left it incomplete when he died on October 25, 1400. Other writers and printers soon recognized *The Canterbury Tales* as a masterful and highly original work. Though Chaucer had been influenced by the great French and Italian writers of his age, works like Boccaccio's *Decameron* were not accessible to most English readers, so the format of *The Canterbury Tales*, and the intense realism of its characters, were virtually unknown to readers in the fourteenth century before Chaucer. William Caxton, England's first printer, published *The Canterbury Tales* in the 1470s, and it continued to enjoy a rich printing history that never truly faded. By the English Renaissance, poetry critic George Puttenham had identified Chaucer as the father of the English literary canon. Chaucer's project to create a literature and poetic language for all classes of society succeeded, and today Chaucer still stands as one of the great shapers of literary narrative and character.

General Prologue

At the Tabard Inn, a tavern in Southwark, near London, the narrator joins a company of twenty-nine pilgrims. The pilgrims, like the narrator, are traveling to the shrine of the martyr Saint Thomas Becket in Canterbury. The narrator gives a descriptive account of twenty-seven of these pilgrims, including a Knight, Squire, Yeoman, Prioress, Monk, Friar, Merchant, Clerk, Man of Law, Franklin, Haberdasher, Carpenter, Weaver, Dyer, Tapestry-Weaver, Cook, Shipman, Physician, Wife, Parson, Plowman, Miller, Manciple, Reeve, Summoner, Pardoner, and Host. (He does not describe the Second Nun or the Nun's Priest, although both characters appear later in the book.) The Host, whose name, we find out in the Prologue to the Cook's Tale, is Harry Bailey, suggests that the group ride together and entertain one another with stories. He decides that each pilgrim will tell two stories on the way to Canterbury and two on the way back.

Whomever he judges to be the best storyteller will receive a meal at Bailey's tavern, courtesy of the other pilgrims. The pilgrims draw lots and determine that the knight will tell the first tale.

The Knight's Tale

Theseus, duke of Athens, imprisons Arcite and Palamon, two knights from Thebes (another city in ancient Greece). From their prison, the knights see and fall in love with Theseus's sister-in-law, Emelye. Through the intervention of a friend, Arcite is freed, but he is banished from Athens. He returns in disguise and becomes a page in Emelye's chamber. Palamon escapes from prison, and the two meet and fight over Emelye. Theseus apprehends them and arranges a tournament between the two knights and their allies, with Emelye as the prize. Arcite wins, but he is accidentally thrown from his horse and dies. Palamon then marries Emelye.

Prologue to the Miller's Tale:

When the Knight had finished, everybody decided that he had told a noble story. The drunken Miller claims that he has a tale as noble as the one the Knight had told. The host tried to quiet the Miller, but he demanded to speak. He claims that he will tell the tale of a carpenter and his wife. His tale will be one of infidelity. The narrator attempts to apologize for the tale that will follow, admitting that the Miller is not well-bred and will therefore tell a bawdy tale

The Miller's Tale:

There was once an old oaf living in Oxford who took in boarders. Now living with him was a poor student who studied astrology (astronomy) named Nicholas. He was sly, demure and well-versed in love. The carpenter had wed a much younger wife and Alison. She was fair and slim, good enough for any lord to have as a mistress or any yeoman to honestly wed. While John the carpenter was away, Nicholas made a pass at Alison, then proclaimed his love for her. She warned him that her husband was jealous, but swore that she would meet him when she could do so safely. One day Alison was heading to the parish when she met Absolon, a jolly man known for singing and playing guitar. That night he came to Alison's home to serenade her, for he had fallen in love. Alison could only laugh at Absolon's attempts to woo her, for she loved Nicholas. One Saturday when John had gone to Oseney, Nicholas and Alison agreed that he should use his wit to trick the carpenter. If their ruse worked, then Alison would be free to spend the entire night with Nicholas. Nicholas spent an entire day confined alone in his room, and the carpenter wondered what was wrong. He told John that he had been studying his astrology and found that there will be a downpour equal to Noah's flood, and in less than an hour the world shall drown. Nicholas tells John to get three kneading tubs that the three can use as boats. The tubs shall be placed on the roof so that they will remain unseen. When the rain comes, only Nicholas, John and Alison shall survive. John believed Nicholas and did as he instructed. The three went up on the roof that night, and when John fell asleep Nicholas and Alison left to have sex. The next morning right before dawn, Absolon went to serenade Alison. She tells Absolon to leave, but he persists. She agrees to one kiss, and tells him to close his eyes - then she pulls down her pants and he kisses her rear end. Nicholas and Alison mock Absolon, who leaves embarrassed. He went to a nearby blacksmith and borrowed a hot forging iron. When he returned, he asked for another kiss. This time, Nicholas strips to have Absolon kiss him, and even intends to fart in his face - but Absolon instead burns his behind with the forging iron. Nicholas cried for water, waking John, who thought that the flood had come and cut the rope holding the tub. John fell from the roof. The entire town came to see what had happened. They declared that John had

gone mad and laughed over the proceedings. Each man got his punishment - John was injured and declared insane, Absolon was humiliated, and Nicholas burned.
