Introduction

Cambridge School Chaucer

The first encounter with a page of Chaucer in its original form can be a disconcerting experience. Initially, few words look familiar. Even when the meaning has been puzzled out, the reader is faced with an account of people who lived and died in a world very different from our own. The fourteenth century seems very far away, and you might be forgiven for thinking that *The Canterbury Tales* are 'too difficult'.

The aim of this series is therefore to introduce you to the world of Chaucer in a way that will make medieval language and life as accessible as possible. With this in mind, we have adopted a layout in which each right-hand page of text is headed by a brief summary of content, and faced by a left-hand page offering a glossary of more difficult words and phrases as well as commentary notes dealing with style, characterisation and other relevant information. There are illustrations, and suggestions for ways in which you might become involved in the text to help make it come alive.

If initial hurdles are lowered in this way, Chaucer's wit and irony, his ability to suggest character and caricature, and his delight in raising provocative and challenging issues from various standpoints can more readily be appreciated and enjoyed. There is something peculiarly delightful in discovering that someone who lived 600 years ago had a sense of humour and a grasp of personalities and relationships as fresh and relevant today as it was then.

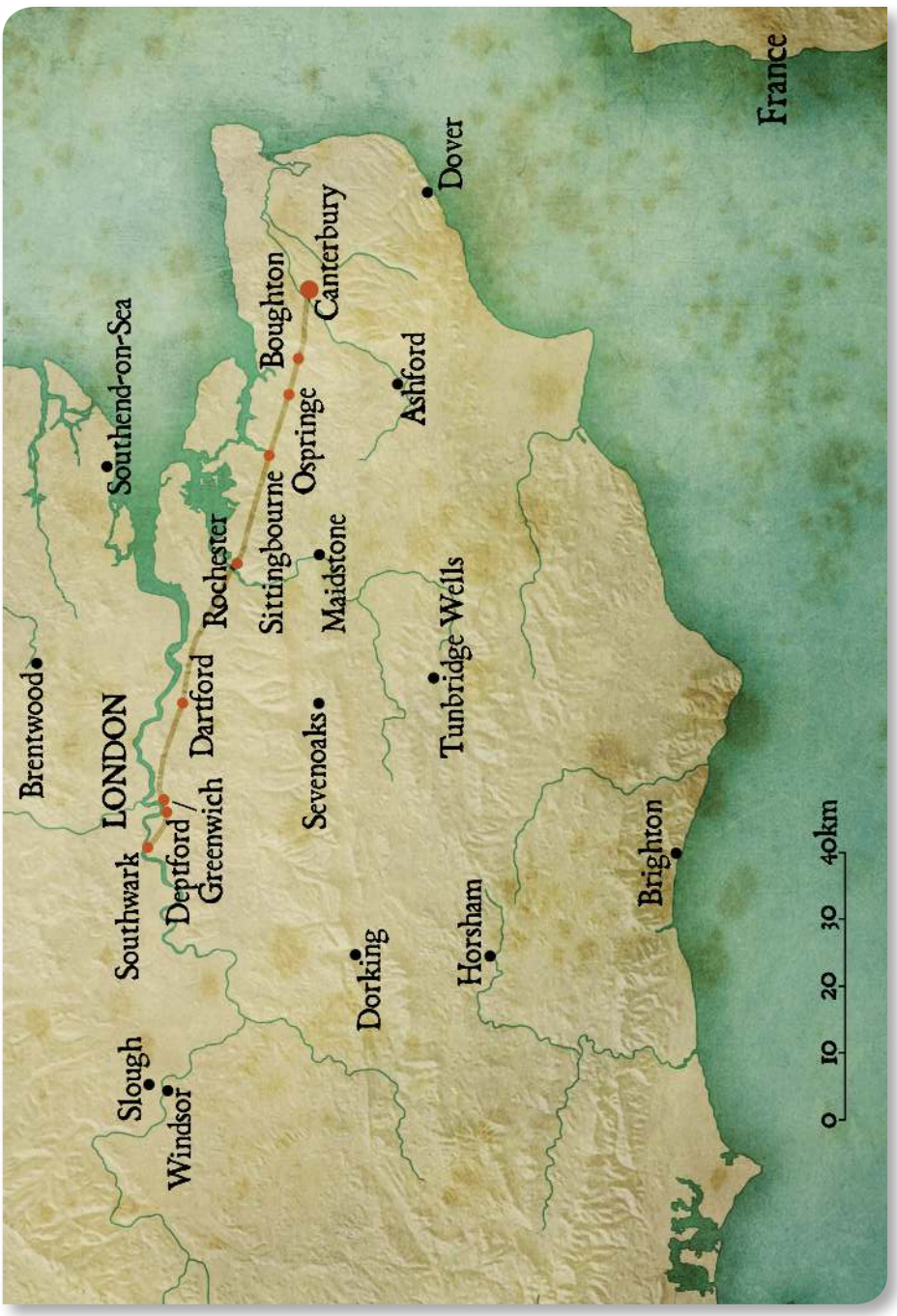
Each tale provides material for fruitful discussion of fourteenth-century attitudes and contemporary parallels. It is important to realize that the views expressed by the teller of any one tale are not necessarily Chaucer's own. Many of the activities suggested are intended to make you aware of the multiplicity of voices and attitudes in *The Canterbury Tales*. A considerable part of the enjoyment of the tales comes from awareness of the tongue-in-cheek presence of the author, who allows his characters to speak for themselves, thereby revealing their weaknesses and obsessions.

Essential information contained in each book includes a brief explanation of what *The Canterbury Tales* are, followed by some hints on handling the language. There is then a brief introduction to the teller of the relevant story, their portrait from *The General Prologue*, and an initial investigation into the techniques Chaucer uses to presents characters.

The left-hand-page commentaries give information applicable to the text. Finally, each book offers a full list of pilgrims, further information about Chaucer's own life and works, some background history, and greater discussion of specific medieval issues. Suggestions for essays and themes to be explored are also included. On page 82 there is a relatively short glossary of the words most frequently encountered in the text, to supplement the more detailed glossaries on the earlier pages.

Chaucer's tales are witty, clever and approachable, and raise interesting parallels with life today. His manipulation of the short-story form is masterly. We hope this edition brings *The Canterbury Tales* alive and allows you to appreciate Chaucer's art with ease and enjoyment.

This edition of **The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale** uses the text of the poem established by James Winny in **Selected Tales from Chaucer.**



▲ The traditional pilgrim route from London to Canterbury: 'from every shires ende of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende'.

What are The Canterbury Tales?

The tales are a collection of stories, loosely linked together, apparently told by a variety of storytellers with very different characters and from different social classes. In fact, both the storytellers and the tales are the creation of one man, Geoffrey Chaucer. Chaucer imagines a group of pilgrims, setting off from the Tabard Inn one spring day on the long journey from London to the shrine of St Thomas à Becket in Canterbury–a journey that on horseback would take about four days.

To make time pass more pleasantly, the pilgrims agree to tell stories to one another. Chaucer begins by introducing his pilgrims to the reader, in descriptions which do much to reveal the characters, vices and virtues of each individual. We learn more from the way each person introduces their tale, still more from the tales themselves and the way in which each one is told, and even further information is offered by the manner in which some pilgrims react to what others have to say. By this means, Chaucer provides a witty, penetrating insight into the attitudes, weaknesses and preoccupations of English men and women of the fourteenth century. Some of their behaviour and interests may seem strange to modern readers; at other times they seem just like us.

The tales

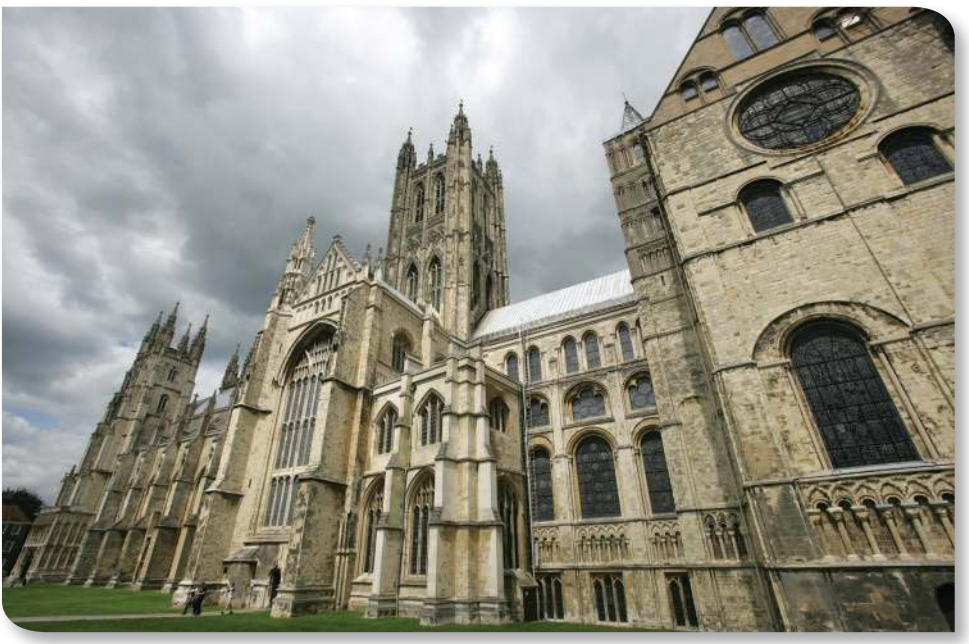
Although the complete text of *The Canterbury Tales* no longer exists, enough remains for us to appreciate the richness of texture and ironical comment Chaucer wove into his tapestry of fourteenth-century life. The tales themselves are quite simple–medieval audiences did not expect original plots, but rather clever or unexpected ways of telling stories that might already be known in another form. Chaucer's audiences of educated friends, witty and urbane courtiers, perhaps the highest aristocracy, and even the king and queen, were clearly able to appreciate his skills to the full. Storytelling was a leisurely process, since reading was a social rather than a private activity, and, since many people could not read, Chaucer would expect the tales to be read aloud. You could try to read them like this–you will find advice on pronunciation on page 9–and you will discover they become still more lively and dramatic when spoken rather than just read on the page.

Most of the tales include aspects of at least one of the following categories of tales familiar to Chaucer's audience.

Courtly romances These courtly love affairs were for the upper classes. They often told of unrequited love from a distance, the male lover suffering sleepless nights of anguish, pining away, writing poetry, serenading his beloved with love songs and performing brave feats of noble daring. Meanwhile the beloved (but untouchable) lady would sit in her bower and sew, walk in her castle gardens, set her lover impossible tasks to accomplish, and give him a scarf or handkerchief as a keepsake. Chaucer enjoys poking gentle fun at the rarefied atmosphere of such stories.

Fabliaux Extended jokes or tricks, these are often bawdy, and usually full of sexual innuendo.

Fables These are tales that make a moral point, often using animals as characters.



▲ The destination of the pilgrims – Canterbury Cathedral today.

Sermons Sermons were stories with a moral message. Since ninety-five per cent of society could not read, sermons had to be good, interesting and full of dramatic storytelling. The line between a good story and a good sermon was very thin indeed. Usually there was an abstract theme (gluttony, avarice, pride) and much use was made of biblical and classical parallels or exempla to underline the preacher's point.

Confessions Storytellers often look back over their own lives, revealing faults and unhappinesses to the audience. This aspect is usually introduced in their prologue to the actual story.

The Canterbury Tales vary widely in content and tone, since medieval stories, Chaucer's included, were supposed both to instruct and to entertain. Many, like *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, have an underlying moral; some, such as *The Pardoner's Tale*, are highly dramatic; and others, like those told by the Knight and the Squire, have their origins firmly in the courtly love tradition. But many are more complex than this suggests: Chaucer includes stories as sentimental as that of the Prioress, and as crude and bawdy as those of the Miller and the Reeve.

The device of using different characters to tell different tales allows Chaucer to distance himself from what is being said, and to disguise the fact that he controls the varied and opinionated voices of his creations. He can pretend, for instance, to have no way of preventing the drunken Miller from telling his vulgar story about the carpenter's wife, and he can absolve himself from blame when the tellers become sexually explicit. A modern audience may find his frankness and openness about sex surprising, but it was understandable, for there was little privacy, even for the well to-do, and sexual matters were no secret. The coarse satire of the fabliaux was as much enjoyed by Chaucer's 'gentil' audience as the more restrained romances.

Chaucer's language

The unfamiliar appearance of a page of Chaucerian English often prevents students from pursuing their investigations any further. It does no good telling them that this man used language with a complexity and subtlety not found in any writer of English anywhere before him. They remain unimpressed. He looks incomprehensible.

In fact, with a little help, it does not take very long to master Chaucer's language. Much of the vocabulary is the same as, or at least very similar to, words we use today. On page 82 there is a glossary of the unfamiliar words most frequently used in this text, and these will quickly become familiar. Other words and phrases that could cause difficulties are explained on the pages facing the actual text of the tales.

The language of Chaucer is known as Middle English–a term covering English as it was written and spoken in the period roughly between 1150 and 1500. It is difficult to be more precise than this, for Middle English itself was changing and developing throughout that period towards 'modern' English.

Old English (Anglo-Saxon) was spoken and written until around 1066, the time of the Norman Conquest. This event put power in England into the hands of the Norman lords, who spoke their own brand of Norman French. Inevitably this became the language of the upper classes. The effect was felt in the Church, for speedily the control of the monasteries and nunneries was given to members of the new French-speaking aristocracy. Since these religious houses were the seats of learning and centres of literacy, the effect on language was considerable. If you were a wealthy Anglo-Saxon, eager to get on in the world of your new overlords, you learned French. Many people were bi- or even trilingual: French was the language of the law courts and much international commerce; Latin was the language of learning (from elementary school to the highest levels of scholarship) and the Church (from parish church services to the great international institution of the papacy).

Gradually, as intermarriage between Norman French and English families became more common, the distinction between the two groups and the two languages became blurred. Many French words became absorbed into Old English, making it more like the language we speak today. In the thirteenth century, King John lost control of his Norman lands, and, as hostility between England and France grew, a sense of English nationalism strengthened. In 1362 the English language was used for the first time in an English parliament. At the same time, Geoffrey Chaucer, a young ex-prisoner of war, was sharpening his pens and his wit, testing the potential for amusement, satire and beauty in this rich, infinitely variable, complex literary tool.

Although some tales are partly, or entirely, in prose, *The Canterbury Tales* are written largely in rhyming iambic couplets. This form of regular metre and rhyme is flexible enough to allow Chaucer to write in a range of styles. He uses the couplet form to imitate colloquial speech as easily as philosophical debate. Most importantly, he wrote poetry 'for the ear': it is written for the listener as much as for the reader. Rhyme and alliteration add emphasis, and link ideas and objects together in a way that is satisfying for the audience. The words jog along as easily and comfortably as the imaginary pilgrims and their horses jogged to Canterbury.

Pronunciation

Chaucer spoke the language of London, of the king's court, but he was well aware of differences in dialect and vocabulary in other parts of the country. In *The Reeve's Tale*, for instance, he mocks the north country accents of two students. It is clear therefore that there were differences in pronunciation in the fourteenth century, just as there are today.

Having said that Chaucer wrote verse to be read aloud, students may be dismayed to find that they do not know how it should sound. There are two encouraging things to bear in mind. The first is that although scholars feel fairly sure they know something about how Middle English sounded, they cannot be certain, and a number of different readings can be heard. The second concerns the strong metrical and rhyming structure Chaucer employed in the writing of his tales.

Finding the rhythm Follow the rhythm of the verse (iambic pentameter), sounding or omitting the final 'e' syllable in the word as seems most appropriate. In the line:

So dronke he was, he nyste what he wroghte

it would add an unnecessary syllable if the final 'e' in 'dronke' and 'wroghte' were to be pronounced. An 'e' at the end of a word almost always disappears if it is followed by a word beginning with 'h' or a vowel.

In the case of these examples,

No lenger thanne after Deeth they soughte,

and

That oon of hem the cut broghte in his fest

the best swing to the regular ten-syllabled line is achieved by sounding the 'e' (as a neutral vowel sound, like the 'u' in put, or the 'a' in about) in the words 'thanne', but not in 'soughte' or 'broghte'.

Other points In words beginning with the letter 'y' (e.g. 'ywet', 'yknowe'), the 'y' is sounded as it would be in the modern 'party'. Many consonants now silent were pronounced–as in 'knight', 'wrong'. All the consonants would be given voice in words such as 'draughtes' and 'knight', and the 'gh' would be sounded like the Scots 'ch' in 'loch'. The combination 'ow' (e.g. 'yow', meaning 'you') is pronounced as 'how', and the 'ei' in 'streit' would be like the 'a' sound in 'pay'.

For more ideas of what the language might have sounded like, listen to the tapes of Chaucer published by Cambridge University Press and by the 'Chaucer Man' (Trevor Eaton).

- Choose a long, self-contained section from the text: lines 49–79 of *The Pardoner's Prologue* are a useful example. After a brief explanation of the content, if considered necessary, students can work in pairs, speaking alternately and changing over at each punctuation point. It should be possible to develop a fair turn of speed without losing the sense of the passage.
- Again in pairs, choose about 10 lines of text; as one of the pair maintains a steady beat [^/^/^/^/^/], the partner does their best to fit the words to the rhythm.
- Choose a long self-contained unit from the text. Students walk round the room, speaking the script, and turning left or right at each punctuation mark. An alternative to this might be to use

one 'speaker' to four or five 'listeners', representing Chaucer's audience. Each time the speaker reaches a punctuation mark, they should look at a new listener, who should respond by looking alert and animated, being only allowed to sink back into apathy when the speaker moves to the next one.

Grammatical Points

Emphatic negatives Whereas a person who stated that 'they weren't going nowhere, not never' might be considered grammatically incorrect nowadays, Chaucer used double or triple negatives quite often, to give a statement powerful added emphasis. One of the best known is in his description of the Knight in *The General Prologue*:

He never yet no vilenye sayde

In al his life, unto no manner wight.

Another occurs in *The Pardoner's Tale*:

Ne I wol nat take on me so greet defame,

You for to allie unto none hasardours.

In both cases the repeated negative strengthens the force of what is being said.

Word elision In modern written English, words and phrases are often run together (elided) to represent the spoken form of these words (e.g. 'didn't', 'can't', 'won't', 'I've'). Chaucer uses short forms of words too, especially in forming the negative. In his time it was usual to form a negative by placing 'ne' before the verb. With common verbs this was often elided into the verb. Thus 'ne was' is the Chaucerian form of 'was not', but it was often written as 'nas'. As was seen above, Chaucer writes 'nyste', short for 'ne wyste', meaning 'did not know'.

The 'y' prefix The past participle of a verb (particularly when the verb is passive) sometimes has a 'y' before the rest of the verb:

This tresor moste ycaried be This treasure must be carried

Shal been his sauce ymaked His sauce shall be made

The 'possessive' form of nouns In modern English we indicate possession by means of an apostrophe: 'the hat of the man' becomes 'the man's hat'. Middle English had a particular formation that is still used in modern German. Where we now use an apostrophe followed by an 's', Chaucer uses the suffix 'es'. So 'the man's hat' becomes 'the mannes hat', the extra 'n' indicating that the word has two syllables.

The Pardoner's contribution

Chaucer promises at the beginning of the tales that he will describe all his pilgrims, their status and their personality. He lists them in rough order of precedence, beginning with the Knight and his party, followed by a group of religious characters who have status and importance (the Prioress, the Monk and the Friar), and then down through the social ranks, with well-to-do middle-class individuals followed by more lowly commoners. He ends his list with two unashamedly corrupt servants of the church, the Summoner and the Pardoner. A list of the pilgrims who feature in the complete work may be found on page 67.

The Pardoner appears right at the end of the list, a man who declares his contempt for others and his desire for gain with no sign of embarrassment, let alone guilt. He dresses oddly, in a manner entirely unsuited to his rank and function; he is sexually ambiguous and physically repulsive. At the same time he is described as able to affect people with his eloquence and with his impressive bearing in church.

Chaucer gives this character sketch straightforwardly; the listeners have to draw their own conclusions about him, and different members of the party would no doubt draw different conclusions.

The Pardoner's contribution is as individual as he is. It opens with the Host, deeply affected by the fate of the innocent maid in The Physician's Tale, and trying very hard to ingratiate himself with the Physician. He then instructs the Pardoner to tell his tale, and to make it a respectable one. His professional eye has perhaps told him that the Pardoner is capable of unashamed smut. The Pardoner asserts his personality immediately–he is not at all put out by this hint of the Host's opinion of him, and he demands time for a drink while he thinks of something suitable.

When it comes, his story is largely about himself. As his prologue unfolds we learn all about his professional methods as he arrives in some parish to cheat the parishioners out of their tiny savings as they buy his pardons and his relics. Ironically this declaration is followed by 'a moral tale' of the price to be paid for debauchery, gluttony, avarice and murder. He follows the instruction of the Host, though very much in his own way, as he includes his own sermon in the tale. We feel the power of this unorthodox preaching as he blasts the sins arising from gluttony. Abruptly the story returns to the actions and fate of the three young men who seek death and find it. Then, just as abruptly, he returns to his sales pitch trying to sell relics and pardons to the pigrims. The Host makes his fury clear and delivers a blistering response that makes the Pardoner retreat into silence and anger. The Knight intervenes to bring about a form of reconciliation between the two before the remaining tales can be told.

Paradoxically, the Pardoner, a deeply sinful man with entirely selfish motives, is an effective preacher against sin. He should not be preaching–that was the prerogative of a priest–but he is an impressive churchman and his false relics reflected and encouraged real devotion. His story is more complicated than even he perhaps realizes.

The portrait of the Pardoner follows that of the Summoner, an official whose job was to summon people to the church courts. This Summoner is a corrupt man, exploiting people's fears of his powers for gain. The Pardoner is also corrupt, and lives by selling pardons, one of the most bitterly criticized