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.

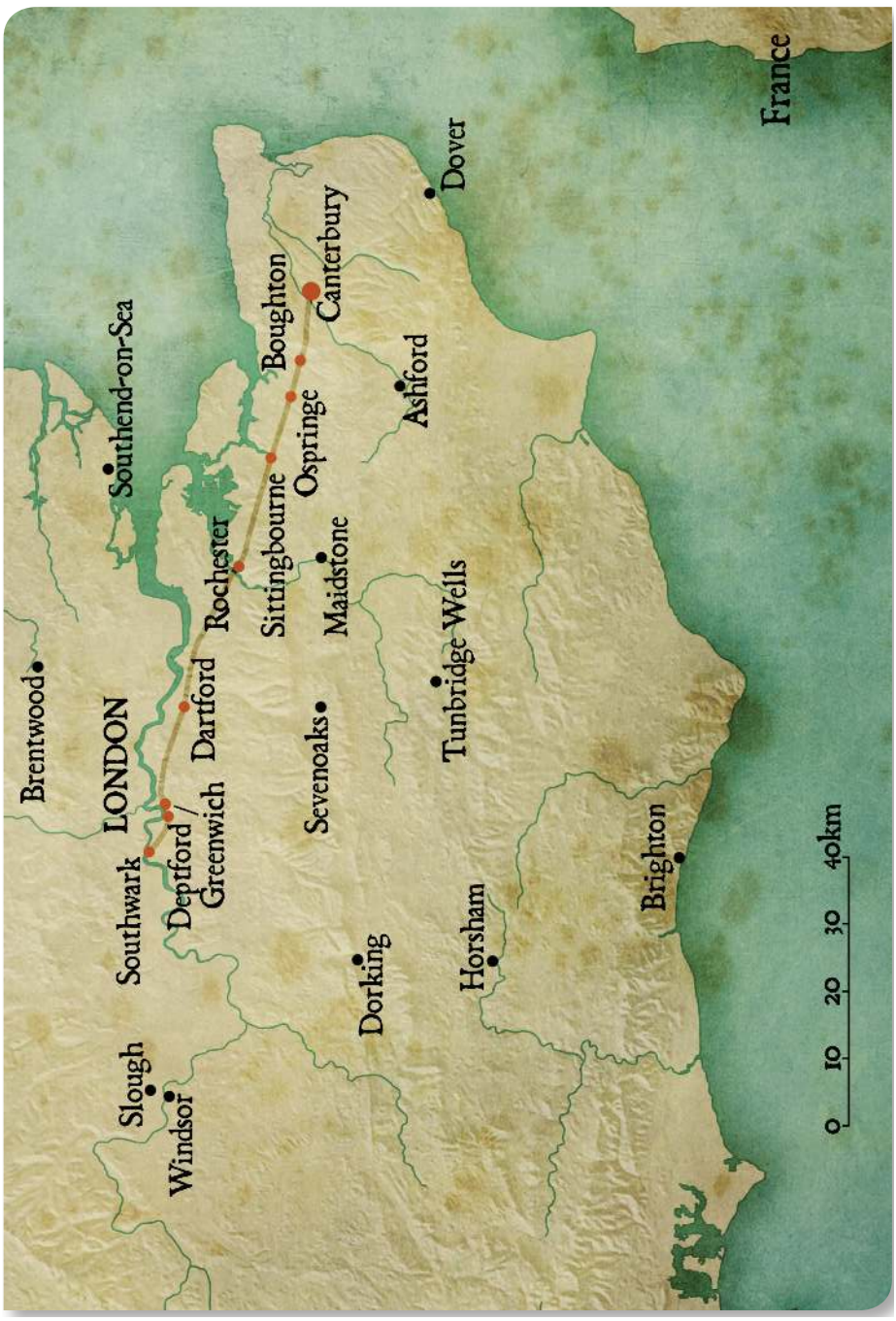
Each tale provides material for fruitful discussion of fourteenth-century attitudes and contemporary parallels. It is important to realize that the views expressed by the teller of any one tale are not necessarily Chaucer's own. Many of the activities suggested are intended to make you aware of the multiplicity 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 present 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. At the end of the book 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 Miller's 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.

Linking different tales together by imagining a group of people entertaining one another with storytelling was not a new idea. Boccaccio had famously used a similar notion in the *Decameron*; but he envisaged a group of friends from the same social group, of the same age, with similar interests. Chaucer's pilgrims come from widely differing groups and are very different from one another; they argue, mock, harangue and preach to one another and to us. Just as he depicts them in constant movement, on their unending journey towards Canterbury, so too do they represent the restlessly changing world they inhabited.

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 in the next section–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

▲ The destination of the pilgrims – Canterbury Cathedral today.

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.

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. At the end of the book 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

And stille he stante under the shot-windowe

it would add an unnecessary syllable if the final 'e' in 'stille', 'stante' or 'windowe' were pronounced. An 'e' at the end of a word almost always disappears if it is followed by a word beginning with a vowel or an 'h' :

He kiste hir sweete and taketh his sautrie

In the case of the following:

This clerk was cleped hende Nicholas.

Of deerne love he koude and of solas;

the best swing to the regular ten-syllabled line is achieved by sounding the final 'e' (as a neutral vowel sound, like the 'u' in put or the 'a' in about) in 'hende' and 'deerne', but not in 'koude'.

Other points Where a word begins with the letter 'y' (e.g. 'yfounde', 'yclad') 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 'neighebores' and 'knokketh', and the 'gh' would be sounded like the Scots 'ch' in 'loch'. The combination 'ow' ('seistow', 'yow') is pronounced as 'how', and the 'ei' in 'seist' would be like the 'a' sound in 'pay'.

For more ideas of what the language might have sounded like, listen to the recording of *The Miller's Tale*, published by Cambridge University Press.

- Take a section from *The Miller's Prologue* (ll. 12–41 work well) and in a group of four (narrator, Miller, Host and Reeve) read the words aloud, trying to get a sense of the feelings of the speakers.

- Choose a long, self-contained section from the text: lines 147–62 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 ten 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. The carpenter's 'rescue' of Nicholas (ll. 340–63) is a good example of a speech that gives ample opportunity for a splendidly melodramatic interpretation, as do lines 405–25. *The Miller's Tale* is one of the liveliest tales and maximum enjoyment can be obtained from dramatic presentation.

Grammatical points

Emphatic negatives Whereas a person who stated that they 'weren't going nowhere, not never' might be considered grammatically incorrect nowadays, Chaucer uses 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 ne sayde
In al his life, unto no manner wight.

This emphasis frequently occurs in *The Miller's Tale*, in lines such as:

In al the toun nas brewhous ne taverne
That he ne visited with his solas,

In both cases the multiple negatives strengthen 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 those words (e.g. 'didn't', 'can't', 'won't', 'I've'). Chaucer uses short forms of words too, usually when a character is speaking, and most frequently when they are using 'tow', meaning thou (you). Examples include the following:

willtow	will you	**hastow**	have you
woostow	do you know		

The 'y' prefix The past participle of a verb sometimes has a 'y' before the rest of the verb:

he was in a marle-pit yfalle	he had fallen in a clay-pit
fetisly ydight with herbes swoote	pleasantly decorated with sweet herbs

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': 'the man's hat' becomes 'the mannes hat', the extra 'n' indicating that the word has two syllables.

The Miller's contribution

The list of Canterbury pilgrims in *The General Prologue* not only indicates character and appearance but also status. By beginning with the Knight and his retinue, and ending with rogues and cheats (such as the Miller and the Reeve), Chaucer shows how important order of precedence was in medieval society. This list can be found on page 88.

The storytelling competition devised by Harry Baily, the Host, is intended to proceed in an orderly fashion, higher-ranking pilgrims speaking first. The Knight's courtly, romantic tale (p. 85) is well received by all; the Monk is invited to speak next. But this stately, conventional procedure is emphatically disrupted by the Miller's intervention, followed by the Reeve's. The ideal of ordered society, in which people know their place and stick to it, is shattered by the vociferous vigour of the lower classes. Any attempt to impose such a rigid pattern is questioned by the very shape of *The Canterbury Tales*.

The Miller tells a vulgar, amoral and funny parody of *The Knight's Tale*. Chaucer pretends that events and characters are beyond his control, and that this interruption is none of his doing, but by juxtaposing noble Knight and common Miller, and by allowing later pilgrims to argue, disagree and interrupt one another, he achieves an exuberant blend of styles, attitudes and material. All responses and points of view are open to question, by other pilgrims as well as the wider audience. Readers are invited to judge for themselves, and to see how each story reflects the disposition of the teller.

The Miller's Tale offers a riposte to the idealistic Knight's opening story. It also indicates to Chaucer's wider audience that in the world of the late fourteenth century the voice of a drunken Miller resounds as forcefully as a nobleman's. Social attitudes changed in the economic disruption following the Black Death. In 1381, Wat Tyler's peasant army marched from Canterbury to London demanding that the king heard their grievances. Chaucer's original audience would have noted the significance of the Miller's forceful intervention.

In *The General Prologue*, Robin the Miller is an ugly customer who wins prizes for brawling, and removes doors from their hinges by headbutting them. He swears he can 'quite' perform as well as the Knight with his 'noble' story. In fact it is markedly different in tone, structure and language from *The Knight's Tale*. The storytelling competition comes to life as the Miller offers his slant on questions raised by the Knight. Similar themes recur in later tales: marriage; women in society; religion and superstition; friction between workmen and students. By using many different storytellers, Chaucer adds immeasurably to the texture of his work, manipulating tales, tellers, attitudes and arguments, denying responsibility for what is said and concealing his own point of view. He insists it is all a game, thus releasing himself from the need for serious moral guidelines. Unsettling aspects of the changing world around him find voice in characters and stories. The position and content of *The Miller's Tale* sets the tone for the unresolved questions that concerned Chaucer's original audience and still engage us today.

In Chaucer's description of the Miller in *The General Prologue*, much of the Miller's character is revealed through his unpleasant physical appearance. Millers were powerful members of any community, and had a reputation for dishonesty and sharp practice.

- Discuss the way Chaucer deliberately emphasises certain aspects of the Miller's character here, through simile, tone and vocabulary. Using evidence obtained from the activities with which he is associated, and the way in which he is described, draw up a list of the Miller's main characteristics. You may wish to read some of the passage aloud, noting how often sound reinforces sense. If you prefer, make a drawing of the Miller, labelling your key points.
- Every community needed a miller to grind the corn from all the neighbouring fields. What, if any, information are you given here about this Miller's trade?
- Why is this man on a pilgrimage? See page 84 for information about pilgrimages.
- Write a description of someone from the twenty-first century similar to the Miller. Use Chaucer's method of building his character from small details of appearance and behaviour. You may wish to write in iambic pentameter.

▲ 'A baggepipe wel koude he blowe and sowne'

547–8 **stout carl . . . eek of bones** a very well-built ruffian indeed, brawny and thick-boned too
549 **over al ther he cam** above all others, wherever he went
550 **the ram** the traditional prize for wrestling
551 **short-sholdred . . . knarre** short-necked, broad, a thickset fellow
552 **no dore . . . harre** no door he was unable to heave off its hinges
553 **at a renning** by running at it
554 **reed** red [Red hair traditionally denotes a fiery temper.]
556 **cop** top
557 **werte** wart
558 **the brustles of a sowes eris** the bristles in a sow's ears
559 **nosethirles** nostrils
561 **greet forneys** huge furnace
562 **janglere and a goliardeys** loudmouth and teller of crude stories
563 **moost of sinne and harlotries** usually about sin and sexual exploits
564 **tollen thries** take three times his rightful portion for grinding the corn
565 **a thombe of gold, pardee** by God he had a golden thumb [Millers used their thumbs to judge the quality of the corn they ground; a good judge (or maybe a dishonest miller) would be a rich one.]
567 **baggepipe** a noisy instrument, typical of the countryside, sometimes played by devils in medieval illustrations