

Introduction



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. On page 96 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.

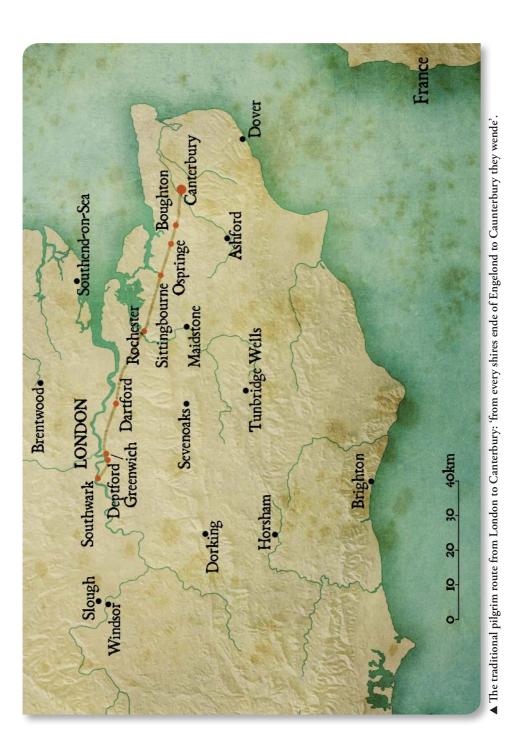
Chaucer's tales are witty, clever and approachable, and raise interesting parallels with life today. His manipulation of the short-story form is masterly. We hope this edition brings *The Canterbury Tales* alive and allows you to appreciate Chaucer's art with ease and enjoyment.

This edition of **The Franklin's Prologue and Tale** uses the text of the poem established by A. C. Spearing in **Selected Tales from Chaucer**.

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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.



WHAT ARE THE CANTERBURY TALES?





▲ 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 94 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. An 'e' before an 'h', for example, almost always disappears, as in the following:

His brother, which that knew of his penaunce,

Up caught(e)_him, and to bedd(e)_he hath him broght,

To sound the final 'e' at the end of 'caughte' or of 'bedde' in this case would be to add superfluous syllables. But in the case of this example,

Upon the morwe_whan that it was day,

To Britaigne tooke they the righte_way

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) on the two occasions indicated.

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 'neigheboures' and 'knight', and the 'gh' would be sounded like the Scots 'ch' in 'loch'. The combination 'ow' (e.g. 'seistow', 'yow') is pronounced as in '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 tapes of Chaucer published by Cambridge University Press and the 'Chaucer Man' (Trevor Eaton).

- Choose a long, self-contained section from the text: lines 89–133 provide a useful example, since the Franklin appears to be lecturing his audience, smugly and at considerable length, about the bliss of married life – a component of marriage many of them had clearly failed to find. 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 can walk round the room, speaking the script, and turning left or right at each punctuation mark. Dorigen's outburst about the black





rocks (II. 193–221) is a good example of a speech that gives ample opportunity for a splendidly melodramatic interpretation. Another section for 'acting out' might be Aurelius's declaration of love, and Dorigen's initial response (II. 295–315).

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.

Another occurs in The Franklin's Tale:

But they ne wiste why she thider wente.

He nolde no wight tellen his entente.

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', 'l'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:

seistow – you say **wenestow** – do you intend

hastow – you have **wostow why?** – do you know why?

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

yblessed moot he be he must be blessed

yflattered and yplesed were flattered and pleased

her joly whistle wel ywet her whistle had been well wet (i.e. she had had a great deal to

drink)

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 en' indicating that the word has two syllables.



THE FRANKLIN'S CONTRIBUTION

The Franklin's contribution

In *The General Prologue*, the fascinating opening section to the tales themselves, Chaucer introduces all the pilgrims, giving some idea of their status, personality and appearance. A list of the pilgrims who feature in *The General Prologue* can be found on page 78.

Significantly, he begins with those who are definitely at the top of the social scale. The Knight is a member of the aristocracy, the 'fighting class'. Chaucer begins with him and his party (his son, the Squire, and their yeoman servant). He continues with a group of religious characters, all of whom have status and importance (the Prioress, the Monk and the Friar), then moves through the social ranks, listing well-to-do middle class individuals, those of lesser wealth and influence, ending with two unashamedly corrupt servants of the Church, the Summoner and the Pardoner. This order of precedence is of particular significance to the Franklin, since he and his tale are both passionately concerned with status and social standards.

The Franklin's place is in the midst of the group of the well-to-do middle class, after the Merchant and the Clerk. The word 'franklin' derives from the word 'franc' or 'free', and implied a landowner, often a wealthy one, but not a member of the noble or 'gentil' classes. He accompanies the Sergeant of the Law and appears just before the Five Guildsmen. Chaucer offers copious details about the Sergeant of the Law's acquisitions and abilities, but not much other information about him – suggesting that the man boastfully advertised his importance – and the guildsmen with their status-conscious wives clearly consider themselves and their 'fraternity' to be of great consequence.

At first glance the Franklin is less obviously concerned with personal status. He enjoys a good life, is cheerfully hospitable and clearly expects a high standard from his servants. We are told that he is considered to be the 'Saint Julian' of his part of the country, a reputation that underlines his hospitality and might suggest he is the greatest landowner for many miles around. As such, he would naturally expect to be a person of some importance on the pilgrimage, but here he finds at least two people of greater social status - the Knight and his son, the Squire - and it is interesting to compare Chaucer's descriptions of these two characters with that of the Franklin. In The Franklin's Prologue especially, Chaucer creates wry social comedy by depicting a man anxious to prove that he is worthy of a high place on the social ladder. The tale Chaucer chooses to give him also seems appropriate. It is in the form of a Breton lay. This was a spoken, rhymed story of the type told in the courts of Brittany, made popular in twelfth-century England by the French poet Marie de France. This may have seemed old-fashioned even in Chaucer's time, but the tale itself is derived from Boccaccio (who died in 1375), and was therefore very new. It is concerned with love in and out of marriage and the binding nature of promises. It also provides a 'happy' alternative to the views of marriage revealed in the tales of the Wife of Bath, the Clerk and the Merchant – an alternative intriguingly less perfect than the Franklin himself realises. Detailed discussion of the Breton lay, and courtly love, can be found on pages 86. Gentillesse, a code of behaviour associated with the gentry, is discussed on pages 90-92.

 Working with a partner, build up a picture of the life of the Franklin from the description in the General Prologue – his interests, his social position and his day-to-day activities. Does Chaucer give any hints about his character? What reason might he have for his pilgrimage?



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The Franklin's Prologue and Tale

• Write your own description of a man or woman of today, using Chaucer's method of building up character from small details of dress, habit and appearance.

say to preserve food always top quality bettre envired nowher noon nowhere could be found a man with better wines Whit dayesye his beard was as white as a daisy [a bright, sturdy, common plant] sometime in the had a sanguine temperament [Medieval science believed human behaviour was dominated by the balance of four humours within each individual. The four character types were melancholic, choleric, phlegmatic and sanguine. A sanguine man could be recognised by a cheerful ruddy complexion, attractive appearance and outgoing personality] sop in wyn bread dipped in wine [This was probably flavoured with almond milk, saffron, sugar, ginger, cinnamon and mace or nutmeg. Two meals a day were customary: midday dinner and supper in early evening. This is a little extra snack.] sabe for he was felicitee parfit he followed the teaching of Epicurus, whom many thought encouraged the ceaseless pursuit of pleasure as the route to happiness [This Athenian philosopher believed true pleasure came from the pursuit of moral virtue, but his ideas were often distorted by pleasure-seekers. Chaucer suggests the Franklin is one of these, particularly in his enjoyment of food and wine.] 342 Seint Julian [patron saint of hospitality] say dispress a daivy ges after oon always top quality better wines with better wines Withoute bake mete and flessh his house never lacked cooked meats and fish ts newed koude thinke it seemed to snow food and drink in his house [Snow suggests the exuberant excess of food associated with the Christmas season.] After the sondry sesson of the yeer according to the various seasons of the yeer [It was not easy to preserve food, or obtain delicacies out of season.] breem in stuwe bream and pike in his fishpond [a necessary addition to the larder in any large household] Wo was al his geere it went badly for his cook if his sauces were not tasty and well-seasoned, or if he did not have everything in hand table dormant the fixed, main table in the central hall [Tirestles were				
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