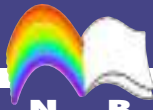


Pre-Intermediate



B1 (Threshold)

R A I N B O W S

# The Canterbury Tales

Geoffrey Chaucer



edisco



**R A I N B O W S**

Geoffrey Chaucer

# The Canterbury Tales

Adaptation, dossiers and activities  
by Raffaella Beolé



**edisco**

# The Canterbury Tales

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

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• Biography .....	4
• Introduction to <i>The Canterbury Tales</i> .....	6
<b>General Prologue</b> .....	13
• Extension: <i>Medieval pilgrimages</i> .....	24
<b>Tale 1 – The Knight’s Tale</b> .....	27
• Extension: <i>The Knight</i> .....	37
<b>Tale 2 – The Miller’s Tale</b> .....	40
• Extension: <i>The fabliau</i> .....	50
<b>Tale 3 – The Wife of Bath (Prologue and Tale)</b> .....	52
• Extension: <i>The loathly lady</i> .....	61
<b>Tale 4 – The Merchant’s Tale</b> .....	63
• Extension: <i>Trade in the Middle Ages</i> .....	72
<b>Tale 5 – The Pardoner’s Tale</b> .....	75
• Extension: <i>Stage and film adaptations</i> .....	84
• SUMMING-UP ACTIVITIES .....	86
• GLOSSARY .....	90



# The Author

## Geoffrey Chaucer



Although little is known about Geoffrey Chaucer's personal life, and even less about his education, existing records document his professional life. The poet was born in London in the early 1340s, the only son in his family. Chaucer's father was originally a wine merchant and became very wealthy<sup>1</sup> when he inherited<sup>2</sup> the property of some relatives who had died of the Black Death<sup>3</sup> in 1349. So he was able to send young Geoffrey to be a page<sup>4</sup> to the Countess of Ulster. Eventually<sup>5</sup>,

Chaucer served the Countess's husband, Prince Lionel, son to King Edward III. Chaucer served in the Hundred Years' War between England and France, both as a soldier and as a diplomat, because he was fluent in French and Italian and knew Latin and other languages. His diplomatic travels brought him twice to Italy, where he probably met Boccaccio and Petrarch, whose writing influenced Chaucer's work.

Around 1378, Chaucer began to develop his personal idea of an English poetry that could be linguistically accessible to all, making use neither of French (the official language of the court) nor of Latin (the official language of the Church). Instead, Chaucer wrote in the vernacular<sup>6</sup>, the kind of English that was spoken in and around London at that time. No doubt he was influenced by the writings of the Florentines Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio, who wrote in the Italian vernacular.

The nobles and kings (Richard II until 1399, then Henry IV) that Chaucer served were clearly impressed with Chaucer's skills as a negotiator as he received many rewards<sup>7</sup> for his service. These

1. *wealthy*: rich.
2. *inherited*: got money as a result of someone's death.
3. *Black Death*: bubonic plague which killed around 25 million Europeans.
4. *page*: boy who served a knight.
5. *eventually*: at an unspecified later time.
6. *vernacular*: the language spoken in a particular area or region by a particular group.
7. *reward*: something that you get because you have done something good.

eventually allowed<sup>8</sup> him to retire on a royal pension. In 1374, the King appointed him Controller of the Customs<sup>9</sup> in the Port of London. This meant that he was a government official working with cloth importers. His experience in this field is reflected in his frequent and detailed descriptions of the garments<sup>10</sup> and fabric<sup>11</sup> worn by his characters. Chaucer held this position for twelve years and then 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<sup>12</sup> of the King, including Westminster and the Tower of London. After retiring in the early 1390s, he worked primarily on *The Canterbury Tales*, which he had started writing around 1387. By the time of his retirement, Chaucer had already written a great amount of narrative poetry, including the celebrated romance *Troilus and Criseyde*.

Chaucer's private 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. Philippa was sister to the mistress of John of Gaunt, the Duke of Lancaster. Chaucer wrote one of his first poems for John of Gaunt, *The Book of the Duchess*, which was a lament for the premature death of Blanche, John's young wife. Chaucer probably had an extramarital affair but this is a controversial matter among historians. Almost certainly his wife died in 1387, and Chaucer himself expired in London on October 25, 1400.

8. *allowed*: permitted.

9. *Customs*: government department that collects taxes on imports.

10. *garment*: a piece of clothing.

11. *fabric*: cloth used for making clothes (e.g. cotton, silk, etc.).

12. *holding*: property.



*The Canterbury Pilgrims* (P. Hardy, 1903)

## INTRODUCTION

### CHAUCER'S TIMES

Chaucer lived in a time of incredible tension in English society. The **Black Death**, ravaging<sup>1</sup> England during Chaucer's childhood and remaining widespread afterwards, killed from thirty to fifty percent of the population. As a consequence, the labour force gained<sup>2</sup> increased influence and was able to ask for better pay. This led to resentment from the nobles and propertied classes<sup>3</sup>, who received another blow in 1381, when the peasantry<sup>4</sup>, helped by the artisan class, revolted against them. The merchants were also increasing their power over the legal establishment, as the **Hundred Years' War** created profit for England. Consequently, demand for luxury<sup>5</sup> was growing. When Chaucer was growing up, London was governed by an **oligarchy of merchants**, attempting<sup>6</sup> to control both the aristocracy and the artisan classes.

1. *ravaging*: causing great damage to.
2. *gained*: acquired.
3. *propertied classes*: people owning vast areas of land.

4. *peasantry*: people farming the land.
5. *luxury*: very great comfort and pleasure.
6. *attempting*: trying.



The Black Death (The Toggengurg Bible, 1411)

## THE MAKING OF MIDDLE ENGLISH

Modern English has its roots in the language of the **Germanic dialects** of the tribes of north-western Europe – Angles, Saxons and Jutes – who invaded Britain in the 5<sup>th</sup> century after the withdrawal<sup>7</sup> of the Romans. The term England first appears as *Englaland* around the year 1000. It means “the land of the *Engle*”, that is, the Angles. In fact, at a certain point the Angles became more powerful – and so more important – than the other two tribes. The language of these tribes came to be called *Englisc*.

In the 9<sup>th</sup> century, there was another wave of invaders, the Vikings, from Denmark, Sweden and Norway who also influenced *Englisc*. Today, we call *Englisc* **Old English** (OE). Old English was the language of the Anglo-Saxon people until 1066. The **Norman invasion** of England in 1066 brought French (F) to the land. The arrival of French accelerated changes that were already occurring in Old English. The Normans spoke French influenced by Germanic dialect. This dialect was Norman French. This led to the unusual situation in which the common people spoke one language (English), and the aristocrats another (Norman French). Naturally, the two languages began to mix together into what we now call **Middle English** (ME).

By the 13<sup>th</sup> century approximately 10,000 French words had come into English. About three-quarters of these French loans<sup>8</sup> are still in the language today. These new words duplicated ones that existed in Old English since Anglo-Saxon times. Sometimes one word replaced the other or both co-existed but developed slightly different meanings. For example, *doom* (OE) and *judgment* (F), *hearty* (OE) and *cordial* (F), and *house* (OE) and *mansion* (F). Spelling changes also occurred. The Norman scribes listened to the English they heard around them, and began to spell it according to the conventions they had previously used for French, such as *qu* for *cw* (*queen* for *cwen*). The scribes also introduced *gh* (instead of *h*) in such words as *night* and *enough*, and *ch* (instead of *c*) in such words as *church*. Another change introduced was *ou* for *u* (as in *house*). One more change was the use of *c* before *e* (instead of *s*) in such words as *cercle* (circle) and *cell*.

Other changes took place as Old English evolved into Middle English, such as less freedom in word order, loss of grammatical

7. *withdrawal*: the act of moving away from a place.

8. *loan*: (here) a word coming from another language.



gender and the later dominance of the **London dialect** as the standard spoken and written language, due to London's importance as a commercial centre and seaport. However, there were still many variances between Middle English dialects, which caused confusion at times as people from one dialect area of England travelled to another.

## CANTERBURY

**Canterbury** is located in east Kent, about 55 miles (89 km) east-southeast of London. Originally an important centre for the local Celtic tribe, the Cantiaci, it was renamed *Durovernum Cantiacorum* by the Roman conquerors in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. After becoming an important settlement<sup>9</sup> of the Jutes, it gained its English name Canterbury, derived from the OE Cantwareburh (Kent people's stronghold<sup>10</sup>). After the Kingdom of Kent's conversion to Christianity in 597, **St. Augustine** founded an episcopal seat<sup>11</sup> in the city, and became the first Archbishop of Canterbury. As a result of Thomas Becket's murder at Canterbury Cathedral in 1170, the cathedral became a place of pilgrimage for Christians.

9. *settlement*: group of houses or buildings where people live.

10. *stronghold*: fortress.

11. *seat*: official place of institutions.



Many historical structures remain in the city, including a city wall founded in Roman times and rebuilt in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the ruins of St. Augustine's Abbey and a Norman castle, and perhaps the oldest school in England, The King's School. Modern additions include the University of Kent, Canterbury Christ Church University and The Marlowe Theatre.

**Canterbury Cathedral** is one of the oldest Christian structures in England. The Cathedral was built on the site of a monastery that had been built in the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD. According to legend, St. Augustine himself founded it. The Cathedral itself was built in many stages from about the 12<sup>th</sup> century until the 1950s. It is the Cathedral of the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Head of the Church of England.

## THOMAS BECKET

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The shrine<sup>12</sup> that was close to Chaucer's heart was that of **Thomas Becket** of Canterbury. In 1162, Becket was made Archbishop of Canterbury. At that time, the Church reserved the right to try<sup>13</sup> clerical crimes in their own religious courts of justice and not in those of the crown. King Henry II wanted to end this custom and his great opportunity arose in 1163. After a church court had acquitted<sup>14</sup> a canon<sup>15</sup> accused of murder, King Henry tried to change the laws to extend his courts' jurisdiction over the clergy<sup>16</sup>. Becket stood against Henry and was forced to leave the country. Six years later on November 30<sup>th</sup>, 1170, Becket crossed the Channel and returned to his post at Canterbury. Unfortunately, the fight between Becket and the King continued until the afternoon of December 29<sup>th</sup>, when knights of the King killed Becket at the altar of Canterbury Cathedral. Soon after Becket's death, people started to report miracles. This helped to accelerate Becket's canonization, the creation of his tomb, and the beginning of the great **pilgrimage to Canterbury**.

12. *shrine*: tomb (of a saint).

13. *try*: (here) examine and judge legally.

14. *acquitted*: decided in a court of law that someone was not guilty of a

crime.

15. *canon*: a Christian priest who has special duties in a cathedral.

16. *clergy*: members of the Church.

## THE CANTERBURY TALES

At a tavern in Southwark, near London, the Tabard Inn, the narrator joins a company of twenty-nine pilgrims. These pilgrims, like the narrator, are travelling to the shrine of the martyr Saint Thomas Becket in Canterbury. The narrator gives a description of twenty-seven of these pilgrims.

The Host, Harry Bailey, suggests that the group ride together and entertain one another with some stories. The best storyteller will receive a meal at Bailey's tavern, offered by the other pilgrims. The pilgrims draw lots<sup>17</sup> and decide that the Knight will tell the first tale.

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 just **twenty-four**, when the party is still on its way to Canterbury.

Writers and printers soon recognized *The Canterbury Tales* as a highly original work. We know that Chaucer had been influenced by the great French and Italian writers of his age, but 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 then unknown to readers. Poetry critic George Puttenham identified Chaucer as the father of the English language because of his success in creating a literature and poetic language for all classes of society.

*The Canterbury Tales* were published by William Caxton, England's first printer, in the 1470s. The text of the Tales itself does not survive complete, but in ten fragments. Due to the fact that there are no links made between these ten fragments in most cases, it is extremely difficult to determine the precise order in which Chaucer wanted the tales to be read. The following is one of the most plausible sequences. The titles in **bold** are those included in this book.

**Fragment 1:** ***The General Prologue**, **The Knight's Tale**, **The Miller's Tale**, **The Reeve's Tale**, **The Cook's Tale** (unfinished)*

**Fragment 2:** *The Man of Law's Tale*

**Fragment 3:** ***The Wife of Bath's Tale**, **The Friar's Tale**, **The Summoner's Tale***

**Fragment 4:** *The Clerk's Tale, **The Merchant's Tale***

**Fragment 5:** *The Squire's Tale (interrupted), **The Franklin's Tale***

17. *draw lots*: choose somebody by luck