

Introduction to The Canterbury Tales

What Kind of Text is *The Canterbury Tales*?

The Canterbury Tales is a series of narrative poems written by Geoffrey Chaucer between 1386 and his death in 1400. Although each poem can be read and understood separately, Chaucer wrote them with the intention that all the tales would be compiled into a single collection.

Much of the work is written in [heroic couplets](#), which is a pair of rhyming lines written in iambic pentameter. Chaucer is the first recorded author to use the form repeatedly throughout his work. These tales are thought to be one of the earliest forms of [satire](#) and critique institutions such as the Church and traditional marriage. They also contain certain moral lessons, such as “love conquers all,” and are a good insight into medieval English culture at the time they were written.

Summary of the Text

These tales focus on a group of villagers who embark on a [pilgrimage](#) to Canterbury, which is the location of the tomb of [Saint Thomas á Becket](#) (also known as Saint Thomas of Canterbury or the Archbishop of Canterbury). All of the pilgrims meet at the Tabard Inn in London and engage in a bet with the innkeeper: each person will tell two tales on the way to Canterbury and on the way back, and whoever tells the best tales will have a free dinner upon his or her return. The text then goes into the first tale of each pilgrim.

Biography: Geoffrey Chaucer

Geoffrey Chaucer was born in London, England in sometime between 1342 and 1343. He came from a wealthy and respected family and likely had a decent



A facsimile of the original manuscript of *The General Prologue* ([Source](#): University of Arizona)

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education, which is evidenced by his various allusions to astrology, religious works, and Italian and Roman authors, such as Petrarch and Ovid.

Chaucer's wide knowledge of the various church and political positions he describes is attributed to his connection with English government. His first government position is thought to be a page in the household of Prince Lionel, who was the third son of King Edward III, and he went on to serve in various other government and military positions, even in different countries. In 1359, Chaucer served in Edward III's army and was captured in to during the attempted siege at Riems, and once he was released, he served as an English diplomat several other European nations. All of these positions gave Chaucer inside knowledge of the inner workings of the Church and the English government, which informed the characterization of his pilgrims and their accompanying tales.



A portrait of Chaucer ([Source](#): Historic UK)

Chaucer's writing career began relatively late in his life with 1369 success of "Book of the Duchess," which is a 1300-line poem in memory of the late Duchess of Lancaster. He wrote several other popular poems, including "Troilus and Cressyde" and "The Legend of Good Women" before starting *The Canterbury Tales* around 1387. Chaucer wrote only 23 of the promised 120 tales before he died, yet even in its unfinished state, *The Canterbury Tales* remain one of the most important works of medieval literature.

For information on Chaucer's life, [visit this website](#).

Language

One reason why *The Canterbury Tales* remains an important staple of the literary canon is that it is one of the first popular pieces of literature written and circulated in English. After the Normans invaded in what is now the UK, most educated (and therefore wealthy and/or high-class) people wrote in French, while the only the lower classes wrote in and spoke English. This means that the most impactful writings and the radical ideas they expressed were inaccessible to the lower class. By writing *The Canterbury*

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Tales in English, Chaucer both allowed the lower class to have access to his ideas and set a precedent for other important works to be written in the English vernacular.

More specifically, *The Canterbury Tales* was written in an early iteration of the English language called Middle English. Unlike Old English, the vernacular in which *Beowulf* was written, Middle English resembles our modern iteration of the language closely enough that it is possible to someone unfamiliar with the vernacular to read and understand without a translation. Follow the opening of *The General Prologue* [with this reading in the original Middle English](#) (modern translation included in the video):

Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote,
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
Whan Zephirus eek with his swete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his halfe cours y-ronne,
And smale foweles maken melodye,
That slepen al the nyght with open ye,
So priketh hem Nature in hir corages,
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,
And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,
To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;
And specially, from every shires ende

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Of Engelond, to Caunterbury they wende,
The hooly blisful martir for to seke,
That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke.

As you can see, it's possible to understand the Middle English without a modern translation. However, there are some words that are less intuitive than others. Here's [an extensive list](#) of the most common Middle English words in *The Canterbury Tales* and their meanings if you get stuck.

Conclusion

The next reading guides will focus on the individual tales we will read in class: *The Knight's Tale*, *The Miller's Tale*, and *The Wife of Bath's Tale*.

Happy reading!