

Follow-Up Activities

- Read The Squire's Prologue and Tale, discussing in particular its seemingly incomplete status, and compare this to the ending in the video. Have students complete the tale in their own way.
- Instruct students to find out more about Thomas Becket and his shrine at Canterbury. Have them present their findings in a biographical essay on Becket's life, achievements, and the importance of his shrine as a place of pilgrimage.
- Compare these versions of *The Canterbury Tales* with Chaucer's own to see what kinds of changes or adaptations have been made. Ask students to research a source of some of Chaucer's stories, referring them to primary sources such as Marie de France, Aesop, Giovanni Boccaccio, Francis Petrarch and Dante Alighieri.
- Have students construct a parallel series of contemporary *Canterbury Tales* based upon recognizably modern characters.
- Ask students to read the portrait of one of the travelers in Chaucer's general prologue and carefully compare and contrast the character with the animated one in the video.
- Have students write a modern frame story, describing at least seven individuals and telling one or two stories in the voice of one of the characters.
- Have students research and report on the life and work of one of the other famous writers or poets buried with Chaucer in the Poet's Corner at Westminster Abbey.
- Have students examine evidence about marriage in the Middle Ages and the role that women played in medieval society.

Suggested Internet Resources

- Periodically, Internet Resources are updated on our web site at www.LibraryVideo.com
- afdtk.uaa.alaska.edu/index.htm
"The Electronic Canterbury Tales" features annotations and links to Internet resources for each tale.
 - academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/webcore/murphy/canterbury/
Eighteen Canterbury Tales translated into modern English.
 - www.pitt.edu/~dash/type1423.html
This site provides a number of analogs to the Merchant's tale.
 - icg.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/cantales.html
The Harvard Chaucer page contains the text of each tale, with an introduction, a pilgrim's portrait and links to selected articles.

Suggested Print Resources

- Ackroyd, Peter. *Chaucer: Ackroyd's Brief Lives*. Doubleday Publishing, New York; 2005.
- Cooney, Barbara. *Chanticleer and the Fox*. Harper Collins, New York, NY; 1958. (This award-winning children's book is appreciated by all ages.)
- Hirsch, John C. *Chaucer and the Canterbury Tales*. Blackwell Publishers, Cambridge, England; 2003.
- Newman, Paul B. *Daily Life in the Middle Ages*. McFarland & Company, North Carolina; 2001.

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The Canterbury Tales

Grades 9 & up

A popular custom in Medieval England was to go on a journey to visit a holy place containing a religious relic — the physical remains of a saint or a martyr. These journeys, known as pilgrimages, were undertaken by the religious, sometimes as penance for the sins they had committed and sometimes in the hope of healing or protection from illness.

The Canterbury Tales is a collection of stories set within a framework of pilgrims on their way to Canterbury Cathedral to visit the shrine of Thomas of Canterbury, martyred in 1170. It is agreed among them that, to pass the time as they ride along, each pilgrim will tell a story, and the teller of the most wise and pleasing story will be rewarded with a meal paid for by all the other travelers.

The stories are framed by a brilliant general prologue and connecting narrative links that are solely Chaucer's creation; these parts of the masterpiece explain the reason for the trip and describe the colorful characters that have joined together for the journey. Most of the pilgrims' stories are drawn from existing tales that people of the time would have been familiar with and deal with themes of marriage, love, sex and the connections between them.



Geoffrey Chaucer

Geoffrey Chaucer was born in London between 1340 and 1344, the son of a vintner. As a representative of the king, Chaucer frequently traveled abroad on diplomatic missions. It was probably on these journeys that he heard many of the stories that he then incorporated into his own work. Geoffrey Chaucer began work on *The Canterbury Tales* about 1387, and 24 tales were written before his death on October 25, 1400. He was buried in Westminster Abbey, an unusual honor for a common man.

His masterpiece sets up a cross-section of English common culture, leaving out the high nobility. While Chaucer was fluent in French and Latin, both languages held in higher esteem than the lowly “common” English, he chose to write *The Canterbury Tales* in Middle English because of its accessibility to the growing middle class. The use of this language, spoken from the 1100s to the end of the 1400s, allowed his stories to be recited aloud and appreciated by all. Chaucer introduced into English what is now known as rhyme royal (seven-line stanza rhyming ababbcc), the eight-line stanza (rhyming ababbcbcb) and the heroic couplet. Chaucer’s *Tales* quickly spread throughout England in the early 15th century and provide an excellent mirror on the individual in society during the Middle Ages.

Tale Summaries

— Show I —

The Nun’s Priest’s Tale is a comical animal fable told in rhyming couplets. A fox tricks a proud rooster into singing with his eyes shut, then grabs him; the rooster, in turn, tricks the fox into speaking and escapes.

The Knight’s Tale is a traditional story of courtship and chivalry in which love turns cousins into mortal enemies. Their rivalry for a woman destroys their friendship, and when it is decided that they will compete for her in a tournament, one prays to the gods for success in love while the other prays for success in war. Each man gets what they pray for — the winner of the battle dies, due to the intervention of the gods, and the loser marries the woman of his dreams.

The Wife of Bath’s Tale is a romance set in the time of King Arthur and depicts a knight who is sentenced to death for raping a maiden unless he can explain to the queen what all women most desire. He is given the answer by an old woman who tells him that women want to rule in marriage. In exchange for his life, he is obliged to marry the old woman and is repulsed. She asks him if he would prefer to have her faithful, shriveled and old or deceitful, beautiful and young. He wisely lets her decide, and she transforms into a beautiful young woman who remains faithful and loving.

— Show II —

The Merchant’s Tale is a comic farce that tells of an old man, January, who marries a young girl, May. January goes blind and becomes increasingly possessive of his young wife, keeping her near him at all times. In order to meet and seduce her young lover, May tells him to wait for her in a pear tree in the garden, and then she and January stroll through the garden. May insists on climbing the tree, telling her husband she would like to eat a pear. While she is in the arms of her lover in the pear tree, January’s sight is restored and he catches her making love to the young man.

The Pardoner’s Tale is an allegory, a moral tale about three drunken men who go off to fight Death. They come across an ancient man shrouded in robes, who says that they can find Death underneath a nearby oak tree. When they reach the tree, they find bushels of gold; their greed and mistrust lead them to murder one another.

The Franklin’s Tale tells us of a knight who loved a lady and won her heart and hand, so that they were married. However, they agreed that he would continue to obey her; this tale has been taken by some to illustrate an ideal solution to the problem of power and authority in marriage.

— Show III —

The Squire’s Tale is a multi-stranded fantasy adventure in which a mysterious knight presents a king with the gifts of a brass horse that can travel anywhere in the world in an instant and a sword that can pierce through any armor. The king’s sons each use a gift with devastating results. He also presents the king’s beautiful daughter with a magic mirror and a ring that allows the wearer to understand the language of birds. The princess comes across an injured falcon who tells of the cruelty of men, and the princess decides she will never trust or love a man.

The Canon’s Servant’s Tale tells of the trickery of an alchemist who convinces a London priest that he has the power to change common metals into silver and gold. The greedy priest eagerly pays for the recipe, and the deceiving alchemist disappears.

The Miller’s and Reeve’s Tales are fabliaux — extremely rude, comical stories, designed to shock, that deal with adultery, deception and revenge. The Miller tells of a youth who has an affair with his landlord’s wife, while the Reeve counters with a story about two students who dupe a miller and sleep with his daughter and wife. In both stories, all the people associated with adultery end up pained and humiliated.

Vocabulary

beast fable — A fictional narrative in which animals speak and act like human beings.

courtly love — A concept of love based on the notion that a nobleman would gain honor and become a better man by showing courtesy, respect, obedience and loyalty to his lady.

fabliaux — Short, rude, comical tales made popular in the 12th and 13th centuries.

Middle English — The language spoken in England from about 1100 to about 1500 that eventually developed into Modern English, which is written and spoken today.

franklin — A free landholder who is not a noble.

squire — A knight’s attendant.

canon — A clergyman.

reeve — An officer of a manor, charged with taking care of the daily business transactions.

miller — One that operates a mill, grinding grain into flour.

yeoman — A servant.

alchemist — A medieval chemist who aims to turn base metals into gold and seeks a universal cure for disease.

General Discussion Questions

1. The tales themselves contain characters who are kings and queens, but why would there be no kings, queens or high nobles on this pilgrimage?
2. During what season does the pilgrimage take place?
3. Name the occupations of three pilgrims.
4. Describe the dress, mount and behavior of one of the pilgrims.
5. Who organizes the tale-telling game and what is the prize?
6. Who draws the shortest straw and wins the right to tell the first tale?
7. Is each tale what you expect of the teller? Why or why not?
8. While pilgrimages appear to be undertaken for religious reasons, do any of the pilgrims seem to be making the journey for other reasons? What might be another reason for the trip?
9. Do Chanticleer and his wife remind you of anyone in particular?
10. Which tale do you find the most amusing and instructive? Why?
11. Do the tales present religious values or social values? What is the difference?