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BRITISH LITERATURE

449 - 1798

In Classic and Modern English

Sample

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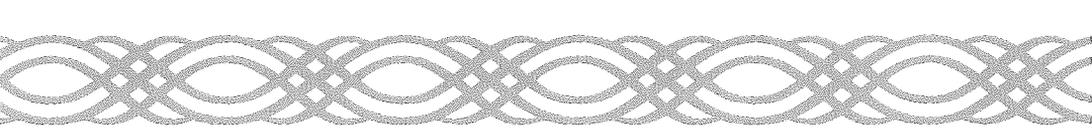
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Introduction to The Canterbury Tales

The 14th-century poet Chaucer was a remarkably learned and well-traveled man. His journeys brought him in contact with the most advanced ideas of his age and allowed him to observe people in all their richness and diversity.

Chaucer did a great deal to establish English as a literary language. England had been conquered by the French-speaking Normans back in 1066. Ever since then, French had been preferred to English as a language for poetry.

From the very start of his literary career Chaucer wrote poetry in English, even though his earliest works were heavily based on French styles and themes. For a time, Chaucer found it difficult to shake off his French influence and find a truly English voice.

Then, in the 1370s, Chaucer began to travel to Italy on diplomatic missions. There he became familiar with great Italian poets like Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio. Under the influence of these poets, Chaucer began to write English poetry in a new and exciting way.

In 1387, however, he began to write *The Canterbury Tales*—a story of travelers telling each other stories.

Chaucer's travelers are religious pilgrims—people on a religious journey. They are on their way to visit the shrine of St. Thomas á Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury who was murdered in 1170. They begin at an actual inn called the Tabard in the town of Southwark, just south of London.

Giving his poem a contemporary English setting and true English characters was a stroke of genius. In doing so, Chaucer made *The Canterbury Tales* an authentic English poem. At the same time, the pilgrims' stories come from many different ages and cultures. They give the poem amazing range and universality.

Chaucer's beautiful but earthy Middle English often captured the everyday speech of people he knew. And his portrayals of his pilgrims are incredibly vivid and varied.

The Pardoner is an especially striking character. Through him, Chaucer expressed his outrage at corrupt religious practices. Professional pardoners sold indulgences, documents that supposedly saved people from going to hell for their sins.

The Pardoner doesn't pretend that "pardoning" is an honest practice. In fact, he brags about this and other misdeeds, including the selling of phony religious relics. The Pardoner then tells a story of three young men who want to kill Death but die themselves because of their own selfishness.

Taken by itself, the story would make a powerful statement against greed. But because the man telling it is himself openly greedy, the story takes on a whole different edge. It completes Chaucer's portrait of the Pardoner, a man whose lies and falseness know no bounds.

Unfortunately, Chaucer didn't live to finish *The Canterbury Tales*. He planned to write 120 stories but only completed 24 before he died in 1400.



Miniature of John Lydgate and the Canterbury pilgrims leaving Canterbury, from a volume of Lydgate's poems (15th century).



from
The Canterbury Tales

Geoffrey Chaucer
translated by Nevill Coghill

The Prologue

When in April the sweet showers fall
And pierce the drought of March to the root, and all
The veins are bathed in liquor of such power
As brings about the engendering of the flower,
5 When also Zephyrus with his sweet breath
Exhales an air in every grove and heath
Upon the tender shoots, and the young sun
His half-course in the sign of the Ram has run,
And the small fowl are making melody
10 That sleep away the night with open eye
(So nature pricks them and their heart engages)
Then people long to go on pilgrimages
And palmers long to seek the stranger strands
Of far-off saints, hallowed in sundry lands,
15 And specially, from every shire's end
Of England, down to Canterbury they wend
To seek the holy blissful martyr, quick
To give his help to them when they were sick.





from
The Canterbury Tales

Geoffrey Chaucer
translated by Nevill Coghill

The Prologue

It was in April, when sweet showers fall,
piercing the dryness of March down to the root,
bathing each vein with a liquid
that gives birth to the flowers.

- 5 The sweet breath of the west wind
swept down through every grove and field
upon the tender shoots. The sun
had passed through the constellation Aries,
and all the little birds
- 10 that sleep at night with open eyes
(as nature urges them to do) were making melody.
It is then that people long to go on pilgrimages,
and travelers seek the strange and faraway homes
of saints well-known in many lands.
- 15 From every county throughout England,
they come especially to Canterbury
to seek the holy blissful martyr,
hoping for his help when they are sick.



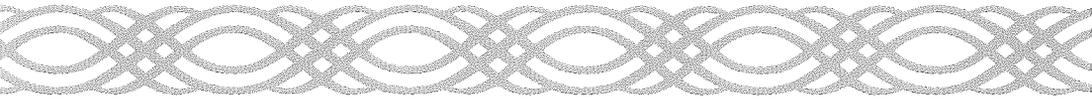


It happened in that season that one day
20 In Southwark, at *The Tabard*, as I lay
Ready to go on pilgrimage and start
For Canterbury, most devout at heart,
At night there came into that hostelry
Some nine and twenty in a company
25 Of sundry folk happening then to fall
In fellowship, and they were pilgrims all
That towards Canterbury meant to ride.
The rooms and stables of the inn were wide;
They made us easy, all was of the best.
30 And, briefly, when the sun had gone to rest,
I'd spoken to them all upon the trip
And was soon one with them in fellowship,
Pledged to rise early and to take the way
To Canterbury, as you heard me say.



35 But none the less, while I have time and space,
Before my story takes a further pace,
It seems a reasonable thing to say
What their condition was, the full array
Of each of them, as it appeared to me,
40 According to profession and degree,
And what apparel they were riding in;
And at a Knight I therefore will begin.
There was a *Knight*, a most distinguished man,
Who from the day on which he first began
45 To ride abroad had followed chivalry,
Truth, honor, generousness and courtesy.
He had done nobly in his sovereign's war
And ridden into battle, no man more,
As well in Christian as in heathen places,
50 And ever honored for his noble graces.





It all began in that season, when one day
20 I was staying in Southwark at the Tabard Inn,
ready to go on my pilgrimage
to Canterbury, feeling full of devout spirit.
That night, some 29 people
arrived at that inn—
25 various kinds of folk who happened to fall
in with one another. They, too, were all pilgrims
who planned to ride towards Canterbury.
The rooms and stables at the inn were large,
so we were comfortable, and all was of the best.
30 To put it briefly, when the sun went down,
I spoke to them all about the trip
and soon felt quite comfortable among them.
So we promised each other to rise early and start on our way
to Canterbury, as you heard me say before.



35 But nonetheless, while I have time and space
before my story goes much further,
it seems reasonable for me to say
something about these people.
I'll tell all about them as I saw them—
40 their appearances, professions, and social ranks,
and the clothes they wore for riding.
I'll begin with a knight—
a most distinguished man,
who began following the ways of chivalry
45 the very day he first began to ride,
devoting himself to truth, honor, generosity, and courtesy.
He'd served nobly in a war for his king—
none had served better. And he had ridden into battle
in both Christian and non-Christian lands,
50 and was always honored for his noble ways.



When we took Alexandria, he was there.
 He often sat at table in the chair
 Of honor, above all nations, when in Prussia.
 In Lithuania he had ridden, and Russia,
 55 No Christian man so often, of his rank.
 When, in Granada, Algeciras sank
 Under assault, he had been there, and in
 North Africa, raiding Benamarin;
 In Anatolia he had been as well
 60 And fought when Ayas and Attalia fell,
 For all along the Mediterranean coast
 He had embarked with many a noble host.
 In fifteen mortal battles he had been
 And jousted for our faith at Tramisene
 65 Thrice in the lists, and always killed his man.
 This same distinguished knight had led the van
 Once with the Bey of Balat, doing work
 For him against another heathen Turk;
 He was of sovereign value in all eyes.
 70 And though so much distinguished, he was wise
 And in his bearing modest as a maid.
 He never yet a boorish thing had said
 In all his life to any, come what might;
 He was a true, a perfect gentle-knight.



75 Speaking of his equipment, he possessed
 Fine horses, but he was not gaily dressed.
 He wore a fustian tunic stained and dark
 With smudges where his armor
 had left mark;
 Just home from service, he had
 joined our ranks
 80 To do his pilgrimage and render thanks.



The Knight



When we took Alexandria,¹ he was there.
And in Prussia, he often sat at a table in the chair of honor
above the knights of all other nations.
No Christian man of his rank rode so often
55 in Lithuania and Russia.
In Granada, when Algeciras lost his battle,
he had been there—and also in
North Africa, raiding Benamarin.
He had been in Anatolia, too,
60 and fought when Ayas and Attalia fell,
for all along the Mediterranean coast
he sailed with many noble armies.
He'd been in fifteen deadly battles,
and at Tramisene he jousted for his faith
65 three times, and always killed his man.
This same worthy knight also joined
once with the Bey of Balat, aiding him
against another non-Christian Turk.
Everyone held him in the highest respect,
70 and although he was so famous, he was wise,
and as modest as a maid.
He never said a single rude thing
in all his life to anyone, no matter what.
He was a true, perfect, gentle knight.



75 Regarding his equipment, he had
fine horses, but he was not gaily dressed.
He wore a stained, dark jacket of heavy cloth,
smudged where his armor had marked it.
He had just come home from service, and he joined us
80 to go on the pilgrimage and offer thanks.



1 *Alexandria* The Egyptian city of Alexandria was captured by Christians from Muslims in Chaucer's time. The following lines refer to other episodes of fighting between Christians and non-Christians.