

**SRIMAAN COACHING CENTRE-TRICHY-UG-TRB-  
ENGLISH -UNIT-1( NEW SYLLABUS) STUDY MATERIAL-  
TO CONTACT:8072230063.**

**2023-24  
SRIMAAN**

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## UG-TRB

## ENGLISH

**UNIT-I- HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH LITERATURE**

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**UG-TRB**



**ENGLISH**



**UNIT - I: HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE**

## **1. The Age of Chaucer**

### **Geoffrey Chaucer : The Age of Chaucer**

**Geoffrey Chaucer 14<sup>th</sup> 1340-1400**

**Born** → c. 1340s London, England

**Died** → 25 October 1400 (aged 56–57) London, England

**Resting place** → Westminster Abbey, London, England

**Occupations** → Author poet philosopher bureaucrat diplomat

➤ Age of Chaucer is a link bet the old and the New – age of transition 1373 – he began his Canterbury t n, Boccaccio furnished he ex for Chaucer's Canterbury tales greatest work of the ales.

- ✓ In his Decamero English period.
- ✓ C borrowed ideas for his C.T from Boccacio'sDecamaron .
- ✓ Fatter of English Poetry reason
  1. set up the standard English Lang
  2. First to teach the art of versification. C combines in himself the best elements of French and English

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Page 1

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culture. This is evident by comparing him with his two contemporaries – Langland and Gower .

- ✓ Langland seeks to revive old English tradition Gower stands for foreign culture chaucer stands midway bet Langland and Gower was familiar with the works of Virgil and Ovid and Latin prose writers.
- ✓ The Black Death Occured( **4 times**) in **England** during the reign of Edward III (1348-49).

## Period Period

The book of the Duchess(1369) offer consolation Italian English .To the of Gauant to the death of his French life —House of the famel Wife Blanche.

## Roman de la rose

- Allegory-love poem transacted in to English. Hundred years of war began (C.T –greater work of this period) in the reign of Edward III.

## Chaucer – The poet

C Introduced 7 line decasyllabic stanza riming abab bcc known as rime royal was also called Triolus verse, Cressida verse, the Chaucerian stanza.

- 7 line stanza (decasyllabic)
- 10 syllable couplet called heroic couplet (the five beat line, in stanza or couplet)

## Introduced

- Terzarima a seetian to —The complaint to his Lady
- Popularised Freeh formes – Roundel and the balled.

## Chaucer“ s Lang

(14th imp for growth growth of Eng. Lang during the first half of 14th French was the chief lang of nobility.

- ✂ In the age of Chaucer there were four dialects prevalent in England-northern southerly, the East midland and the west midland. Chaucer chose midland dialect because it was also used by the upper classes of society and it was really living.
- ✂ Poet of the lusty spring – Chaucer first great Eng humorist – Chaucer
  - In C's P. to C. tales he gives an account of (14th social and religious condition – because religion is a part of life by the middle of (14thEng was becoming the common tongue of the nation. parliament was opened by an English speech in 1363.
- ✂ The kind of humour C and Shakespeare revealis based on insight and

✂ sympathy 30 pilgrims – each has to tell a story

(The discussion was held a “Tabard Inn southwark”)

➤ On the way to the shrine of Thomas Becket Prologue is a picture of medieval society but it is in the process of disintegration.

✂ It tells about the society.

**The knight and —The squire** – represent old tradition of chivalry.

The friar, the monk, The pardoner parish priest, Oxford scholar – denounced the abuses and corruptions of the church.

**A shipman** – a blend of merchant Sailor and pirate –merchant, a number of guild members Miller, the Manciple, the Reeve and Wife of Bath – ugly things about the medieval church.

**The friar** – bears witness to the worldliness and corruptions growing up among the clergy. He was so popular with the Franklin and respectable women of the town – licenced to hear confessions. Let the sinner give silver to the poor Friars and his sins were remitted at once, friar ought to be led to poverty but he led a merry and jovial life. Paying little heed to religious concerns moved about like a master or Pope.

## Wife of bath

C's masterly creation quite respectable women in the society.

- ✂ Dressed fashionably
- ✂ First he go up to alter he make offerings
- ✂ Wide traveler – had been to Jerusalem
- ✂ 30 pilgrims including the host belong to diverse professions
- ✂ Knight and his son – represent war like elements

**Represent by the man of law the Doctor, the oxford clerk and the poet – The learned and the liberal**

- ❖ The machant and The shipman – Higher commercial community
- ❖ The wife of Bath – Expert cloth maker
- ❖ Haberdasher and his associates – Belong to the class of smaller London traders and manufacturers
- ❖ Playhman, the miller and the Franklin- Agriculturists

- ❖ Maniple and Reeve – Upper servants represent down
- ❖ Yeoman and cook – Lower servants represent country
- ❖ The monk, Themonastery the prioress from her convent, her attendant priests, the village parson, the roaming – Religious order people.
- ❖ Friar, the pardoner and the sumnour – Religious order people.
- ❖ C gives distinctions among these characters by pointing out the difference in their clothes, manner of speech habits and tendencies and the characteristics of each profession. These are real human beings.

**Example:-** The host, the reeve, the man of Law, the Franklin are drawn from living models.  
Some of the characters seem to live even today

**Example:-** The knight,  
The squire  
The prologue is rightly called – the social picture of England of the late 14th as Dryden says —  
There is God's plenty Chaucer is —the poet of the lusty spring—says H.A. Beers

## Chaucer – 1340 – 1400

### Born in London

**Chaucer lived during the period of three kings –Edward III Richard II and Henry IV**

During the rule of Edward III – there was medieval civilization in England Chaucer wrote knight's tale – it was a chronicle of historical accounts.

1. Trade expansion – resulted – increase of wealth
2. Living conditions of the people – Miserable
3. Terrific epidemic called Black Death many people died
4. During the French wars the condition of the country –worsened
5. There was necessity for taxing the people - these situations brought the symptoms of social unrest.

100 years of war began in his reign King Richard II was unwise. The conflict between the king and the people. In the age of Chaucer evil increased to a greater extent. There was corruption in churches. Chaucer lived in this period.

He wanted to reveal the shocking state of things of the churches. There was also another prominent person lived at this age.

**John Wyclif – morning star of reformation**

✧ Wanted to revive the spiritual Christianity of England.

- ✂ Wrote religious pamphlets.
- ✂ Produced the complete Eng version of the Bible.

Later part of the (14th– period of social umest and the beginning of a new religious movement and also new learning.

**Petrarch (1304-74) and Boccaccio (1313-75)** – considered to be the leaders of this revival.

- ✂ They spread the spirit of humanism in England. This situation later on gave rise to renaissance. But the spirit of humanism was infused in chaucer's age.

The divine comedy of Dante was the final and supreme expression of the world of medieval Christendom. The oxford scholars – Duns, Scotus William Occam – are among last of the medieval school men.

## Geoffrey Chaucer (1340-1400)

Son of John Chaucer. After his marriage, he became a valet in the kings chamber. Chaucer died in 1400 and was buried in the Westminster Abbey. The place afterwards came to be called poet's corner' [FP – Freeh Period, IP –Italian Period]

### ENGLISH PERIOD

#### Works

- 1369 – The Book of the duchess – (FP)
- 1372 – Troilus and Criseyde – (IP)
- 1377 – The parliament of fowls (IP)
- 1379 – The house of the fame(IP)
- 1384 – The Legend of Good women – (unfinished work) (adapted from latinwone of BoccacciosDe Claris Mulieribus)
- 1387 – The Centerbury tales (EP)
- 1391 – The complaint of Venus(EP)
- 1399 – the complaint of Chaucer to His Empty Purse. Chaucer was influenced by the Italian master of Dante and Boccaccio.

#### English period

In his Decameron, Boccaccio furnished the example for C. C. T –greatest wore of English period.

Chaucer – Not a poet of the people.

- ✓ Court poet
- ✓ Wrote only for the high class readers and cultured society
- ✓ Never took painful subjects
- ✓ Not a serious reformer

- ✓ Rightly called the morning star of Renaissance
- ✓ Mostly written in out of door atmosphere
- ✓ Father of English poetry
- ✓ First great painter of characters
- ✓ First great English humorist
- ✓ Calls himself an unlettered man
- ✓ First creator of human characters in English literature
- ✓ Poet of the lusty spring

### Characters of C.T

The knight, a squire and yeoman – military profession.

A prioress, a nun (her secretary) – connected with Christian church Ecclesiastical group. member of RC religious community. A monk, A friar, A summoner, A pardoner, A poor parson, parish prest, a clerk of oxford (student of divinity).

✂ A lawyer, A physician and many miscellaneous

### Characters

- Ruling Class: knight, squire
- Clergy: monk, friar, prioress, parson summoner, pardoner
- Middle Class: Franklin, Reeve, doctor, oxford student, wife of Bath, sergeant at law
- Trade Class: guildsmen, cook, miller, host, manciple, merchant.
- Peasants: skipper, plowman, yeoman

### The Narrator:

A character called Geoffrey Chaucer. We should be wary of accepting his words and opinions as Chaucer's own. In the General Prologue, the narrator presents himself as a gregarious and naïve character. Later on, the Host accuses him of being silent and sullen. The narrator writes down his impressions of the pilgrims from memory. What he chooses to remember about the characters tells us as much about the narrator's own prejudices as it does about the characters themselves.

### The Knight:

The first pilgrim Chaucer describes in the General Prologue and the teller of the first tale. The Knight represents the ideal of a medieval Christian man-at-arms. He has participated in no less than 15 of the great crusades of his era. Brave, experienced, and prudent, the narrator greatly admires him.

## The Wife of Bath:

A seamstress by occupation and an —expert on marriage. The Wife of Bath has been married five times and had many other affairs in her youth, making her well practiced in the art of love. She presents herself as someone who loves marriage and sex, but, from what we see of her, she also takes pleasure in rich attire, talking, and arguing. She is deaf in one ear and has a gap between her 10 front teeth, which was considered attractive in Chaucer's time.

She has traveled on pilgrimages to Jerusalem three times and elsewhere in Europe as well. Bath is an English town on the Avon River, not the name of this woman's husband.

## The Pardoner:

A charlatan, who —officially forgives people's sins for a price. Pardoners granted papal indulgences—reprieves from penance in exchange for charitable donations to the Church. Many pardoners, including this one, collected profits for themselves.

Chaucer's Pardoner excels in fraud, carrying a bag full of fake relics. For example, he claims to have the veil of the Virgin Mary.

The Pardoner has long, greasy, yellow hair and is beardless. These characteristics were associated with shiftiness and gender ambiguity in Chaucer's time. The Pardoner also has a gift for singing and preaching whenever he finds himself inside a church.

## The Miller :

Stout and brawny, with a wart on his nose and a big mouth, both literally and figuratively. He threatens the Host's notion of propriety when he drunkenly insists on telling the second tale. Indeed, the Miller seems to enjoy overturning all conventions:

He ruins the Host's carefully planned storytelling order, he rips doors off hinges, and he tells a tale that is somewhat blasphemous, ridiculing religious and scholarly clerks, carpenters, and women.

## The Prioress :

A nun who heads a convent. Described as modest and quiet, this Prioress aspires to have exquisite taste. Her table manners are dainty, she knows French (though not the French of the court), she dresses well, and she is charitable and compassionate.

## The Monk :

A monk given to corporeal pleasures. Most monks of the Middle Ages lived in monasteries according to the Rule of Saint Benedict, which demanded that they devote their lives to —work and prayer. This Monk

cares little for the Rule; his devotion is to hunting and eating. He is large, loud, and well clad in hunting boots and furs.

### The Friar:

An example of the unscrupulous friars of Chaucer's time. Roaming priests with no ties to a monastery, friars were great objects of criticism in Chaucer's time. Always ready to befriend young women or rich men who might need his services, the friar actively administers the sacraments in his town, especially those of marriage and confession. However, Chaucer's worldly Friar has taken to accepting bribes.

### The Summoner:

An official who brings persons accused of violating Church law to ecclesiastical court. This Summoner is a lecherous man whose face is scarred by leprosy. He gets drunk frequently, is irritable, and is not particularly qualified for his position. He spouts the few words of Latin he knows in an attempt to sound educated.

### The Host:

The leader of the group. The Host is large, loud, and merry, though he possesses a quick temper. He mediates and facilitates the flow of the pilgrims' tales. His title of —hostl may be a pun, suggesting both an innkeeper and the Eucharist, or Holy Host.

### The Parson:

The only devout churchman in the company. The Parson lives in poverty but is rich in holy thoughts and deeds. The pastor of a sizable town, he preaches the Gospel and makes sure to practice what he preaches. He's everything that the Monk, Friar, and Pardoner aren't.

### The Pardoner

- ✓ The Pardoner rides in the very back of the party in the General Prologue and is fittingly the most marginalized character in the company.
- ✓ His profession is somewhat dubious—pardoners offered indulgences, or previously written pardons for particular sins, to people who repented of the sin they had committed.
- ✓ Along with receiving the indulgence, the penitent would make a donation to the Church by giving money to the pardoner.
- ✓ Eventually, this —charitablel donation became a necessary part of receiving an indulgence.
- ✓ Paid by the Church to offer these indulgences, the Pardoner was not supposed to pocket the penitents' charitable donations.

- ✓ That said, the practice of offering indulgences came under critique by quite a few churchmen, since once the charitable donation became a practice allied to receiving an indulgence, it began to look like one could cleanse oneself of sin by simply paying off the Church.
- ✓ Additionally, widespread suspicion held that pardoners counterfeited the pope's signature on illegitimate indulgences and pocketed the —charitable donations themselves.
- ✓ Chaucer's Pardoner is a highly untrustworthy character. He sings a ballad—Com hider, love, to me!! (General Prologue, 672)—with the hypocritical Summoner, undermining the already challenged virtue of his profession as one who works for the Church.
- ✓ He presents himself as someone of ambiguous gender and sexual orientation, further challenging social norms. The narrator is not sure whether the Pardoner is an effeminate homosexual or a eunuch (castrated male). Like the other pilgrims, the Pardoner carries with him to Canterbury the tools of his trade—in his case, freshly signed papal indulgences and a sack of false relics, including a brass cross filled with stones to make it seem as heavy as gold and a glass jar full of pig's bones, which he passes off as saints' relics.
- ✓ Since visiting relics on pilgrimage had become a tourist industry, the Pardoner wants to cash in on religion in any way he can, and he does this by selling tangible, material objects—whether slips of paper that promise forgiveness of sins or animal bones that people can string around their necks as charms against the devil.
- ✓ After telling the group how he gulls people into indulging his own avarice through a sermon he preaches on greed, the Pardoner tells of a tale that exemplifies the vice decried in his sermon. Furthermore, he attempts to sell pardons to the group—in effect plying his trade in clear violation of the rules outlined by the host.

### The Squire

The Knight's son and apprentice. The Squire is curlyhaired, youthfully handsome, and loves dancing and courting.

### The Clerk

A poor student of philosophy. Having spent his money on books and learning rather than on fine clothes, the clerk is threadbare and wan. He speaks little, but when he does, his words are wise and full of moral virtue.

### The Man of Law

A successful lawyer commissioned by the king. He upholds justice in matters large and small and knows every statute of England's law by heart.

### The Manciple

A clever fellow. A manciple was in charge of getting provisions for a college or court. Despite his lack of education, the Manciple is smarter than the 30 lawyers he feeds.

### The Merchant

A trader in furs and cloth, mostly from Flanders. The merchant is part of a powerful and wealthy class in Chaucer's society.

### The Shipman

A well-traveled and well-tanned veteran sailor. The Shipman has seen every bay and river in England, as well as exotic ports in Spain and Carthage. He is a bit of a rascal, known for stealing wine while the ship's captain sleeps.

### The Physician

A talented doctor with expertise in diagnosing the causes and finding cures for most maladies. Though the Physician keeps himself in perfect physical health, the narrator calls into question the Physician's spiritual health: He rarely consults the Bible and has an unhealthy love of financial gain.

### The Franklin

A man of leisure. The word *franklin* means —free man. In Chaucer's society, a franklin was neither a vassal serving a lord nor a member of the nobility. This particular franklin is a connoisseur of food and wine—so much so that his table remains laid and ready for food all day.

### The Reeve

A shrewd steward of a manor. This reeve's lord never loses so much as a ram to the other employees, and the vassals under his command are kept in line. However, he steals from his master.

### The Plowman

The Parson's brother and an equally good-hearted man. A member of the peasant class, he pays his tithes to the Church and leads a good Christian life.

### The Guildsmen

A hatmaker, carpenter, weaver, clothing dyer, and a tapestry maker. The Guildsmen appear as a unit. English guilds were a combination of labor unions and social fraternities:

Craftsmen of similar occupations joined together to increase their bargaining power and live communally. All five Guildsmen are clad in the livery of their brotherhood.

### The Cook

The Guildsmen's cook. The Narrator gives little detail about him, but he does mention a crusty sore on the Cook's leg.

### The Yeoman

The servant who accompanies the Knight and the Squire. The Narrator mentions that the Yeoman's dress and weapons suggest he may be a forester.

### The Second Nun

Not described in the General Prologue. She tells a saint's life for her tale.

### **The Nun's Priest**

Also not described in the General Prologue. His story of Chanticleer, however, is well crafted and suggests that he is a witty, self-effacing preacher.

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- ✓ *The Canterbury Tales* is a collection of stories written in Middle English by Geoffrey Chaucer at the end of the 14th century.
- ✓ The tales (mostly in verse, although some are in prose) are told as part of a story-telling contest by a group of pilgrims as they travel together on a journey from Southwark to the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket at Canterbury Cathedral.
- ✓ In a long list of works, including *Troilus and Criseyde*, *House of Fame*, and *Parliament of Fowls*, *The Canterbury Tales* was Chaucer's magnum opus.
- ✓ He uses the tales and the descriptions of the characters to paint an ironic and critical portrait of English society at the time, and particularly of the Church. Structurally, the collection bears the influence of *The Decameron*, which Chaucer is said to have come across during his first diplomatic mission to Italy in 1372. However, Chaucer peoples his tales with 'sondry folk' rather than Boccaccio's fleeing nobles.

### Summary of the Poem

- In the beauty of April, the Narrator and 29 oddly assorted travelers happen to meet at the Tabard Inn in Southwark, London.
- This becomes the launching point for their 60-mile, four-day religious journey to the shrine of St. Thomas à Becket at the Cathedral in Canterbury. Great blessing and forgiveness were to be heaped upon those who made the pilgrimage; relics of the saint were enshrined there, and miracles had been reported by those who prayed before the shrine. Chaucer's pilgrims, however, are not all traveling for religious reasons. Many of them simply enjoy social contact or the adventure of travel.
- As the travelers are becoming acquainted, their Host, the innkeeper Harry Bailley, decides to join them. He suggests that they pass the time along the way by telling stories. Each pilgrim is to tell four stories—two on the way to Canterbury, and two on the return trip—a total of 120 stories. He will furnish dinner at the end of the trip to the one who tells the best tale. The framework is thus laid out for the organization of *The Canterbury Tales*.
- Chaucer, the Narrator, observes all of the characters as they are arriving and getting acquainted. He describes in detail most of the travelers which represent a cross-section of fourteenth-century English society. All levels are represented, beginning with the Knight who is the highest ranking character socially. Several levels of holiness and authority in the clergy are among the pilgrims while the majority of the characters are drawn from the middle class.
- A small number of the peasant class are also making the journey, most of them as servants to other pilgrims.

As the travelers begin their journey the next morning, they draw straws to see who will tell the first

tale. The Knight draws the shortest straw. He begins the storytelling with a long romantic epic about two brave young knights who both fall in love with the same woman and who spend years attempting to win her love.

Everyone enjoys the tale and they agree that the trip is off to an excellent start. When the Host invites the Monk to tell a story to match the Knight's, the Miller, who is drunk, becomes so rude and insistent that he be allowed to go next that the Host allows it. The Miller's tale is indeed very funny, involving several tricks and a very dirty prank as a young wife conspires with her lover to make love to him right under her husband's nose.

The Miller's fabliau upsets the Reeve because it involves an aging carpenter being cuckolded by his young wife, and the Reeve himself is aging and was formerly a carpenter. Insulted by the Miller, the Reeve retaliates with a tale about a miller who is made a fool of in very much the same manner as the carpenter in the preceding rendition.

After the Reeve, the Cook speaks up and begins to tell another humorous adventure about a thieving, womanizing young apprentice. Chaucer did not finish writing this story; it stops almost at the beginning.

When the dialogue among the travelers resumes, the morning is half gone and the Host, Harry Bailley, urges the Man of Law to begin his entry quickly. Being a lawyer, the Man of Law is very long-winded and relates a very long story about the life of a noblewoman named Constance who suffers patiently and virtuously through a great many terrible trials. In the end she is rewarded for her perseverance.

The Man of Law's recital, though lengthy, has pleased the other pilgrims very much. Harry Bailley then calls upon the Parson to tell a similar tale of goodness; but the Shipman, who wants to hear no more sermonizing, says he will take his turn next and will tell a merry story without a hint of preaching.

Indeed, his story involves a lovely wife who cuckolds her husband to get money for a new dress and gets away with the whole affair.

Evidently looking for contrast in subject matter, the Host next invites the Prioress to give them a story. Graciously, she relates a short legend about a little schoolboy who is martyred and through whose death a miracle takes place.

After hearing this miraculous narrative, all of the travelers become very subdued, so the Host calls upon the Narrator (Chaucer) to liven things up.

Slyly making fun of the Host's literary pretensions, Chaucer recites a brilliant parody on knighthood composed in low rhyme. Harry hates Chaucer's poem and interrupts to complain; again in jest, Chaucer tells a long, boring version of an ancient myth. However, the Host is very impressed by the serious moral tone of this

inferior tale and is highly complimentary.

Since the myth just told involved a wise and patient wife, Harry Bailley takes this opportunity to criticize his own shrewish wife. He then digresses further with a brief commentary on monks which leads him to call upon the pilgrim Monk for his contribution to the entertainment.

- ✂ The Monk belies his fun-loving appearance by giving a disappointing recital about famous figures who are brought low by fate. The Monk's subject is so dreary that the Knight stops him, and the Host berates him for lowering the morale of the party. When the Monk refuses to change his tone, the Nun's Priest accepts the Host's request for a happier tale. The Priest renders the wonderful fable of Chanticleer, a proud rooster taken in by the flattery of a clever fox.
- ✂ Harry Bailley is wildly enthusiastic about the Priest's tale, turning very bawdy in his praise. The earthy Wife of Bath is chosen as the next participant, probably because the Host suspects that she will continue in the same bawdy vein. However, the Wife turns out to be quite a philosopher, prefacing her tale with a long discourse on marriage. When she does tell her tale, it is about the marriage of a young and virile knight to an ancient hag.
- ✂ When the Wife has concluded, the Friar announces that he will tell a worthy tale about a summoner. He adds that everyone knows there is nothing good to say about summoners and tells a story which proves his point.
- ✂ Infuriated by the Friar's insulting tale, the Summoner first tells a terrible joke about friars and then a story which condemns them, too. His rendering is quite coarse and dirty.
- ✂ Hoping for something more uplifting next, the Host gives the Cleric his chance, reminding the young scholar not to be too scholarly and to put in some adventure. Obliging, the Cleric entertains with his tale of the cruel Walter of Saluzzo who tested his poor wife unmercifully.
- ✂ The Cleric's tale reminds the Merchant of his own unhappy marriage and his story reflects his state. It is yet another tale of a bold, unfaithful wife in a marriage with a much older man.

When the Merchant has finished, Harry Bailley again interjects complaints about his own domineering wife, but then requests a love story of the Squire. The young man begins an exotic tale that promises to be a fine romance, but Chaucer did not complete this story, so it is left unfinished.

The dialogue resumes with the Franklin complimenting the Squire and trying to imitate his eloquence with an ancient lyric of romance.

There is no conversation among the pilgrims before the Physician's tale. His story is set in ancient Rome and concerns a young virgin who prefers death to dishonor.

The Host has really taken the Physician's sad story to heart and begs the Pardoner to lift his spirits with

a happier tale. However, the other pilgrims want something more instructive, so the Pardoner obliges. After revealing himself to be a very wicked man, the Pardoner instructs the company with an allegory about vice leading three young men to their deaths. When he is finished, the Pardoner tries to sell his fake relics to his fellow travellers, but the Host prevents him, insulting and angering him in the process. The Knight has to intervene to restore peace.

The Second Nun then tells the moral and inspiring life of St. Cecelia. About five miles later, a Canon and his Yeoman join the party, having ridden madly to catch up. Conversion reveals these men to be outlaws of sorts, but they are made welcome and invited to participate in the storytelling all the same. When the Canon's Yeoman reveals their underhanded business, the Canon rides off in a fit of anger, and the Canon's Yeoman relates a tale about a cheating alchemist, really a disclosure about the Canon.

It is late afternoon by the time the Yeoman finishes and the Cook has become so drunk that he falls off his horse. There is an angry interchange between the Cook and the Manciple, and the Cook has to be placated with more wine. The Manciple then tells his story, which is based on an ancient myth and explains why the crow is black.

At sundown the Manciple ends his story. The Host suggests that the Parson conclude the day of tale-telling with a fable. However, the Parson preaches a two-hour sermon on penitence instead. *The Canterbury Tales* end here.

Although Chaucer actually completed only about one-fifth of the proposed 120 tales before his death, *The Canterbury Tales* reflects all the major types of medieval literature.

## Plot Overview

### General Prologue

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

The narrator gives a descriptive account of twenty-seven of these pilgrims, including a Knight, Squire, Yeoman, Prioress, Monk, Friar, Merchant, Clerk, Man of Law, Franklin, Haberdasher, Carpenter, Weaver, Dyer, Tapestry-Weaver, Cook, Shipman, Physician, Wife, Parson, Plowman, Miller, Manciple, Reeve, Summoner, Pardoner, and Host. (He does not describe the Second Nun or the Nun's Priest, although both characters appear later in the book.)

The Host, whose name, we find out in the Prologue to the Cook's Tale, is Harry Bailey, suggests that the group ride together and entertain one another with stories. He decides that each pilgrim will tell two stories on the way to Canterbury and two on the way back. Whomever he judges to be the best storyteller will receive

a meal at Bailey's tavern, courtesy of the other pilgrims.

The pilgrims draw lots and determine that the Knight will tell the first tale.

### **The Knight's Tale**

- ❖ Theseus, duke of Athens, imprisons Arcite and Palamon, two knights from Thebes (another city in ancient Greece). From their prison, the knights see and fall in love with Theseus's sister-in-law, Emelye. Through the intervention of a friend, Arcite is freed, but he is banished from Athens.
- ❖ He returns in disguise and becomes a page in Emelye's chamber. Palamon escapes from prison, and the two meet and fight over Emelye. Theseus apprehends them and arranges a tournament between the two knights and their allies, with Emelye as the prize. Arcite wins, but he is accidentally thrown from his horse and dies. Palamon then marries Emelye.

### **THE MILLER'S PROLOGUE AND TALE**

- The Host asks the Monk to tell the next tale, but the drunken Miller interrupts and insists that his tale should be the next.
- He tells the story of an impoverished student named Nicholas, who persuades his landlord's sexy young wife, Alisoun, to spend the night with him.
- He convinces his landlord, a carpenter named John, that the second flood is coming, and tricks him into spending the night in a tub hanging from the ceiling of his barn.
- Absolon, a young parish clerk who is also in love with Alisoun, appears outside the window of the room where Nicholas and Alisoun lie together.
- When Absolon begs Alisoun for a kiss, she sticks her rear end out the window in the dark and lets him kiss it.
- Absolon runs and gets a red-hot poker, returns to the window, and asks for another kiss; when Nicholas sticks his bottom out the window and farts, Absolon brands him on the buttocks.
- Nicholas's cries for water make the carpenter think that the flood has come, so the carpenter cuts the rope connecting his tub to the ceiling, falls down, and breaks his arm.

### **The Reeve's Prologue and Tale**

Because he also does carpentry, the Reeve takes offense at the Miller's tale of a stupid carpenter, and counters with his own tale of a dishonest miller.

The Reeve tells the story of two students, John and Alayn, who go to the mill to watch the miller grind their corn, so that he won't have a chance to steal any.

But the miller unties their horse, and while they chase it, he steals some of the flour he has just ground for them. By the time the students catch the horse, it is dark, so they spend the night in the miller's house. That

night, Alayn seduces the miller's daughter, and John seduces his wife. When the miller wakes up and finds out what has happened, he tries to beat the students. His wife, thinking that her husband is actually one of the students, hits the miller over the head with a staff. The students take back their stolen goods and leave.

### **The Cook's Prologue and Tale:**

The Cook particularly enjoys the Reeve's Tale, and offers to tell another funny tale. The tale concerns an apprentice named Perkyn who drinks and dances so much that he is called —Perkyn Reveler. Finally, Perkyn's master decides that he would rather his apprentice leave to revel than stay home and corrupt the other servants. Perkyn arranges to stay with a friend who loves drinking and gambling, and who has a wife who is a prostitute. The tale breaks off, unfinished, after fifty-eight lines.

### **The Man of Law's Introduction, Prologue, Tale, and Epilogue**

- ❖ The Host reminds his fellow pilgrims to waste no time, because lost time cannot be regained.
- ❖ He asks the Man of Law to tell the next tale. The Man of Law agrees, apologizing that he cannot tell any suitable tale that Chaucer has not already told—Chaucer may be unskilled as a poet, says the Man of Law, but he has told more stories of lovers than Ovid, and he doesn't print tales of incest as John Gower does (Gower was a contemporary of Chaucer).
- ❖ In the Prologue to his tale, the Man of Law laments the miseries of poverty. He then remarks how fortunate merchants are, and says that his tale is one told to him by a merchant.
- ❖ In the tale, the Muslim sultan of Syria converts his entire sultanate (including himself) to Christianity in order to persuade the emperor of Rome to give him his daughter, Custance, in marriage.
- ❖ The sultan's mother and her attendants remain secretly faithful to Islam.
- ❖ The mother tells her son she wishes to hold a banquet for him and all the Christians.
- ❖ At the banquet, she massacres her son and all the Christians except for Custance, whom she sets adrift in a rudderless ship.
- ❖ After years of floating, Custance runs ashore in Northumberland, where a constable and his wife, Hermengyld, offer her shelter. She converts them to Christianity. One night, Satan makes a young knight sneak into Hermengyld's chamber and murder Hermengyld.
- ❖ He places the bloody knife next to Custance, who sleeps in the same chamber. When the constable

returns home, accompanied by Alla, the king of Northumberland, he finds his slain wife.

- ❖ He tells Alla the story of how Custance was found, and Alla begins to pity the girl. He decides to look more deeply into the murder. Just as the knight who murdered Hermengyld is swearing that Custance is the true murderer, he is struck down and his eyes burst out of his face, proving his guilt to Alla and the crowd.
- ❖ The knight is executed, Alla and many others convert to Christianity, and Custance and Alla marry. While Alla is away in Scotland, Custance gives birth to a boy named Mauricius. Alla's mother, Donegild, intercepts a letter from Custance to Alla and substitutes a counterfeit one that claims that the child is disfigured and bewitched. She then intercepts Alla's reply, which claims that the child should be kept and loved no matter how malformed.
- ❖ Donegild substitutes a letter saying that Custance and her son are banished and should be sent away on the same ship on which Custance arrived. Alla returns home, finds out what has happened, and kills Donegild.
- ❖ After many adventures at sea, including an attempted rape, Custance ends up back in Rome, where she reunites with Alla, who has made a pilgrimage there to atone for killing his mother. She also reunites with her father, the emperor.
- ❖ Alla and Custance return to England, but Alla dies after a year, so Custance returns, once more, to Rome. Mauricius becomes the next Roman emperor. Following the Man of Law's Tale, the Host asks the Parson to tell the next tale, but the Parson reproaches him for swearing, and they fall to bickering.


### The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale


- ❖ The Wife of Bath gives a lengthy account of her feelings about marriage.
- ❖ Quoting from the Bible, the Wife argues against those who believe it is wrong to marry more than once, and she explains how she dominated and controlled each of her five husbands.
- ❖ She married her fifth husband, Jankyn, for love instead of money. After the Wife has rambled on for a while, the Friar butts in to complain that she is taking too long, and the Summoner retorts that friars are like flies, always meddling.
- ❖ The Friar promises to tell a tale about a summoner, and the Summoner promises to tell a tale about a friar.
- ❖ The Host cries for everyone to quiet down and allow the Wife to commence her tale. In her tale, a young knight of King Arthur's court rapes a maiden; to atone for his crime, Arthur's queen sends him

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on a quest to discover what women want most.

 An ugly old woman promises the knight that she will tell him the secret if he promises to do whatever she wants for saving his life. He agrees, and she tells him women want control of their husbands and their own lives. They go together to Arthur's queen, and the old woman's answer turns out to be correct.

 The old woman then tells the knight that he must marry her. When the knight confesses later that he is repulsed by her appearance, she gives him a choice: she can either be ugly and faithful, or beautiful and unfaithful. The knight tells her to make the choice herself, and she rewards him for giving her control of the marriage by rendering herself both beautiful and faithful.


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