

# The canterbury tales

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



The Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer

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Contrast.....

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.. 214 iiiIntroduction Geoffrey Chaucer began writing The Canterbury Tales sometime around 1387 A. D.; the uncompleted manuscript was published in 1400, the year he died. Having recently passed the six hundredth anniversary of its publication, the book is still of interest to modern students for several reasons. For one thing, The Canterbury Tales is recognized as the first book of poetry written in the English language. Before Chaucer’s time, even poets who lived in England wrote in Italian or Latin, which meant that poetry was only understandable to people of the wealthy, educated class. English was considered low class and vulgar. To a great degree, The Canterbury Tales helped make it a legitimate language to work in. Because of this work, all of the great writers who followed, from Shakespeare to Dryden to Keats to Eliot, owe him a debt of gratitude. It is because Chaucer



wrote in English that there is a written record of the roots from which the modern language grew. Contemporary readers might find his words nearly as difficult to follow as a foreign language, but scholars are thankful for the chance to compare Middle English to the language as it is spoken now, to examine its growth. In the same way that *The Canterbury Tales* gives modern readers a sense of the language at the time, the book also gives a rich, intricate tapestry of medieval social life, combining elements of all classes, from nobles to workers, from priests and nuns to drunkards and thieves. The General Prologue alone provides a panoramic view of society that is not like any found elsewhere in all of literature. Students who are not particularly interested in medieval England can appreciate the author's technique in capturing the variations of human temperament and behavior. Collections of stories were common in Chaucer's time, and some still exist today, but the genius of *The Canterbury Tales* is that the individual stories are presented in a continuing narrative, showing how all of the various pieces of life connect to one another. Copyright eNotes. This entry does not cover all the tales, only some of the most studied.

### Introduction 1 Overview

### Background

*The Canterbury Tales* is set in fourteenth-century London, one of the medieval period's great centers of commerce and culture. In England at this time, society was still very strictly ordered, with the King and nobles having all power in things political and the Catholic Church having all authority in spiritual matters. However, trade and commerce with other nations had expanded dramatically in this century, giving rise to a new and highly vocal middle class comprised of merchants, traders, shopkeepers, and skilled craftsmen. Their newly acquired wealth, their concentration in centers

of commerce, and their organization into guilds gave this newly emerging class increasing power and influence. However, the population of England remained for the most part agrarian, poor peasants working hard for a meager living farming on rented land, completely at the mercy of the landowner, mired in ignorance and superstition, and generally devoid of any opportunity to change their lot in life. These peasant people looked to the Church for consolation and defense. Sometimes they found nurture there, though, just as often, they confronted corruption and further victimization. As the clergy became landowners, they victimized the peasants as blatantly as did the nobility. The hierarchical organization of the Church and its dominance of education also gave rise to widespread shocking abuse and corruption. In the latter fourteenth century, there was a new and considerable resistance to the inflexible dominance of society by the nobility and the clergy. The Plague had struck three times in the century, killing one-third of the population of England. The resultant labor shortage at last gave the peasants the courage to insist on higher wages. They even staged what is known as "The Peasants' Rebellion" in 1381 in reaction to their enforced poverty, but their group was quickly subdued by the nobility. Geoffrey Chaucer witnessed this rebellion firsthand. He was the Controller of the Custom in London and resided rent-free in a house built onto the wall around London. His house was located just over the gate where the furious peasants descended on the city. One can only imagine his horror as he watched the rebels burn the elaborate castle of his patron, John of Gaunt. Chaucer's ability to give the reader his view of life in the city of London is but one of the sterling elements of The Canterbury Tales. Chaucer knew these angry

peasants and successful and outspoken merchants and tradesmen because he lived among them and dealt with them constantly in his work. His service to the nobility and his diplomatic duties gave him wide acquaintance among the clergy and the ruling class. All of these types of people are recreated in The Canterbury Tales, giving the reader an almost perfect picture of life in medieval England. Aside from the living people of England, the other major influences on The Canterbury Tales were the vast and widely varied works of literature with which Chaucer was unusually well-acquainted. Since he alludes so often to his sources in The Canterbury Tales, it is certain that Chaucer was familiar with all the classical writers, such as Ovid and Virgil and with the Christian apologists like Augustine and Boethius. He knew and corresponded with the French poet Descartes, and had studied French literature extensively. Unlike most of his English contemporaries, Chaucer was a devotee of the Italian poets Dante and Petrarch. He seems to have been greatly influenced by the Italian poet Boccaccio, as well; The Canterbury Tales has many elements in common with Boccaccio's Decameron. That Chaucer used many well-known models and sources for his tales, Chaucer himself admits. However, with The Canterbury Tales, Chaucer departed from the prevailing literary norm which held that all worthy writing was modelled on a work already in existence. While all of his tales contain elements borrowed from classical models, Chaucer's stories are all dramatically altered in some way so that they become something new, rather than a repetition of an old pattern. Few of his pilgrims are copies; they are essentially English; and the framing of the tales with a trip to Canterbury is a Chaucerian innovation which sets him apart totally from

his predecessors. One of the things that makes The Canterbury Tales unique is the frame just mentioned. As the title implies, The Canterbury Tales is a collection of all sorts of stories, but they are ingeniously united by being framed by a journey and told by the travellers on the journey. A frame of sorts existed in Boccaccio's Decameron, but Chaucer's use of this device is original in its completeness, polish, and brilliance. The work is also remarkable because it is written in English. In Chaucer's day, it was a foregone conclusion that all serious writing had to be done in Latin or French. Chaucer himself was fluent in both these languages, as well as in Italian. Yet his long experimentation with poetry written in these languages convinced him that it was not only possible, but desirable, to make poetic music in the vernacular, which, for him, was Middle English. This work was well-received. This is known because enough handwritten copies of it were in circulation for the famous printer William Caxton to make The Canterbury Tales one of the first works he printed when he imported his first printing press in 1478. Enough demand for the book existed for him to print a second edition in 1483; it must have been extremely popular, for both printing and purchasing books were very expensive at that time. Only a widely read and widely accepted book would have been given a second printing. The Canterbury Tales has never been out of print since that time.

List of Characters

The Narrator-Geoffrey Chaucer, the author, although he is never named

The Knight-father of the Squire; lord of the Yeoman (minor nobility)

The Squire-young man of 20, son of the Knight (minor nobility)

The Yeoman-a forester; servant of the Knight (peasant class)

The Prioress-superior of a monastery of nuns; attended by the Nun, the Monk, the Friar, and the Priest (clergy)

The

Monk-manages the estates of the Prioress and the monastery (clergy) The  
 Friar-a religious who has taken a vow of poverty and is licensed to beg  
 (clergy) The Nun-chaplain to the Prioress (clergy) The Priest-with the  
 Prioress; not described (clergy) The Merchant-wealthy and pompous (middle  
 class) The Cleric-a religious who is a scholar at Oxford (clergy) The Man of  
 Law-a lawyer, shrewd and wealthy (middle class) The Franklin-landowner;  
 wealthy (middle class; possibly minor nobility) The Haberdasher-hat and  
 clothing maker; guildsman (middle class) Overview 3The Carpenter-  
 guildsman (middle class) The Weaver-makes fabric; guildsman (middle class)  
 The Dyer-dyes fabric and leather; guildsman (middle class) The Tapestry-  
 Maker-makes large, intricate woven pictures which are decorative and  
 expensive; guildsman (middle class) The Cook-works for the five guildsmen  
 (peasant class) The Shipman-a sailor, commander of a merchant ship  
 (middle class) The Physician-well-educated; a lover of gold (middle class)  
 The Wife of Bath-has survived five husbands; prosperous, gregarious,  
 experienced (middle class) The Parson-poor because he is good; a true  
 pastor (clergy) The Plowman-brother of the Parish Priest; an honest, decent  
 farmer (peasant) The Miller-owns a mill; grinds grain into meal and flour  
 (middle class) The Manciple-a buyer for 30 lawyers who are administrators of  
 London courts (middle class) The Reeve-manager of a nobleman's estate;  
 prosperous (middle class) The Summoner-an agent of the Church courts who  
 summons sinners to answer charges before the court (clergy) The Pardoner-  
 traded on the gullibility of the populace; sold relics and indulgences (which  
 are pardons from the punishment due to sin) (clergy) The Host-owner of the  
 Tabard Inn where all the pilgrims meet; self-appointed leader; tour guide for

the pilgrims (middle class) \*The Canon—a clergyman, generally in charge of a cathedral (clergy) \*The Canon's Yeoman—servant to the Canon (peasant) \*The last two characters join the group when the journey is almost over.

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 Æ 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. Overview 4As 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. Overview 5 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. Overview 6It 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. They are defined for the reader as follows: Romance: a narrative in metrical verse; tales of love, adventure,

knightly combat, and ceremony. Fabliau: stories based on trickery and deception; often involves adultery Myth: a story originating in classical literature Breton Lais: a type of fairy tale; set in the Brittany province of France; contains fairies, elves, folk wisdom, and folktales Beast Fable: animals personify human qualities and act out human situations; usually teaches a lesson Sermon: a Christian lesson Exemplum: a story which teaches a well-known lesson Saint's Legend: inspiring story of the life and death of a saint Miracle Story: one in which a saint or the Virgin Mary intervenes with a miracle in response to the faithfulness of a follower Allegory: a tale in which persons represent abstract qualities; i. e., Death, Virtue, Love Mock Romance: parodies, or makes fun of, the usual subjects of a romance These genres are further explained in the analyses of individual tales. Estimated Reading Time The length of time necessary to read the entire work will depend on whether it is being read in Modern or Middle English. The reading in Modern English will go much faster; probably an hour for the prologue and an hour for The Knight's Tale, with the remainder of the tales requiring 30 to 45 minutes each. If the student is required to read the work in Middle English, with all the footnotes for interpretation, each part named above will take about twice as long. The reader can estimate a total of 14 hours for the Modern English version, or 28 hours for the Middle English. It is strongly suggested that the book be divided by the reader into manageable units for sittings of no more than two hours. Overview 7 Geoffrey Chaucer Biography Geoffrey Chaucer came from a financially secure family that owned ample wine vineyards but held no title, and so from birth he was limited in his capacity for social growth. His date of birth is uncertain but is

assumed to be around 1340—1345. While he was still a child in London, it became clear that Chaucer was a brilliant scholar, and he was sent to the prestigious St. Paul's Almonry for his education. In 1357, he rose in society by taking a position in the royal court of Elizabeth, Countess of Ulster. His duties as a squire in court would have included those that are usually associated with domestic help: making beds, carrying candles, helping the gentleman of the house dress. Chaucer was given an education in his association with the household, and he met some of England's exalted royalty. Geoffrey Chaucer He left in 1359 to join the army to fight the French in the Hundred Years' War (1337—1453). Captured near Rheims, he was ransomed the following year and returned to being a squire. Being intelligent and witty, he became increasingly valuable at court for the entertainment of his poetry. By 1367, he was the valet for the King himself, and that same year, he married a woman whose rank added to his social standing: Philippa de Roet, the sister to Catherine of Swynford, the third wife of John of Gaunt. John of Gaunt, the Duke of Lancaster, was later to take over the responsibility for ruling England when his father, Edward III, became too senile to rule before a successor was crowned. As a valued and trusted member of the court, Chaucer was sent on several diplomatic missions, giving him a rare opportunity to see Italy and France. The influences of these languages can be traced in his poetry, and the worldliness of travel affected his storytelling ability. His political influence grew with a series of appointments: to Comptroller of taxes on wools, skins, and hides at the Port of London in 1374; Comptroller of petty customs in 1382; Justice of the Peace for the County of Kent in 1385; and Knight of the Shire in 1386. In December

of 1386, he was deprived of all of this political influence when his patron, John of Gaunt, left the country on a military expedition for Spain and the Duke of Gloucester replaced him. It is assumed that it was during this period of unemployment that Chaucer planned out and started writing The Canterbury Tales. When John of Gaunt returned to England in 1389, he was given a new government post, and Chaucer lived a prosperous life from then on. Geoffrey Chaucer Biography 8 There is no record of his progress on The Canterbury Tales. The plan that he laid out in the Prologue was left unfinished when he died on October 25, 1400. He was buried in Westminster Abbey and was the first of the writers to be entombed there in the area known as the Poets' Corner. Geoffrey Chaucer Biography 9 Summary The Prologue In the Prologue to The Canterbury Tales Geoffrey Chaucer introduces the speaker of the poem as a man named Chaucer, who is traveling from London with a group of strangers to visit Canterbury, a borough to the southeast of London. This group of people is thrown together when they travel together on a trip to the shrine of Saint Thomas Æ Becket, who was murdered in Canterbury in 1170. The Prologue gives a brief description of the setting as they assemble at the Tibard Inn in Southwark to prepare for their trip. It describes each of the pilgrims, including ones who were meant to be discussed in sections of the book that were never written before Chaucer died. After the introductions, the Host, who owns the inn that they gather at and who is leading the group, suggests that they should each tell two stories while walking, one on the way to Canterbury and one on the way back, to pass the time more quickly. He offers the person telling the best story a free supper at the tavern when they return. The Knight's Tale

The first pilgrim to talk, the Knight, tells a long, involved tale of love from ancient Greece about two knights, Arcite and Palamon. They were captured in a war between Thebes and Athens and thrown into an Athenian prison to spend the rest of their lives there. From the tower they were locked in, they could see a fair maiden, Emily, in the window of her chamber every morning, and they each fell in love with her. An old friend of Arcite arranged for his release, and the ruler of Athens, Duke Theseus, agreed with just one condition: that Arcite had to leave Athens forever or be killed if he ever returned. In exile, all he could do was think about Emily, while Palamon, who was in prison, could at least look at her every day. For two years Arcite wandered, suffering so much from lovesickness that he became worn and pale. When the god Mercury came and told him to return to Athens, he realized that he did not even look like the man he had once been. Upon returning, he secured a job in Emily's court and became one of her servants. Meanwhile, Palamon, after seven years in prison, escaped. The two former companions soon ran into each other in the forest and fought. While they were fighting, Theseus stumbled upon them and, finding out who they were, was ready to have them both killed. His wife, however, was moved by their love for Emily and convinced them to settle their argument by leading the best soldiers in the land against each other, with the winner marrying Emily. The Knight's Tale goes on for hundreds of lines detailing the historic noble personages who participated in the battle and the preparations they made, including sacrifices to gods. In the battle, Palamon was injured, but no sooner was Arcite declared the winner than his horse reared up and dropped him on his head. He died that night and was given a hero's funeral, and

Palamon married Emily. They lived happily ever after: " Thus endeth Palamon and Emelye, " the Knight's Tale ends, " And God save al this faire companye! Amen. " The Miller's Tale The Miller is the next speaker; he is drunk and picks an argument with the Reeve before beginning a story about a carpenter at Oxford, who was rich and miserly. To make extra money, the carpenter rented a room to a poor student, Nicholas, who lived with the carpenter and his young, beautiful wife. Eventually, Nicholas and the young wife, Alison, started scheming about how they could have an affair without the carpenter finding out. They made use of the fact that the parish clerk, Absalon, had a crush on the wife, and would sing songs outside of her window at night. Once, Nicholas stayed up in his room, and didn't come down for days, having prepared by hoarding enough food for a long period. When the carpenter sent a servant to get him, he found Nicholas lying as if he had suffered a seizure. The fit was caused, Nicholas explained, by a startling discovery he had made while studying astrology: that a terrible flood was coming. He convinced the carpenter to hang three tubs from the roof, so that both men and Alison would be safe from the rising waters. On the appointed day, they climbed into their separate tubs, but once the carpenter was asleep Alison and Nicholas sneaked down to the bedroom together. While they were in bed, Absalon came to the window, and, thinking Alison was alone, demanded a kiss; she put her naked backside out the window, and he kissed it in the dark. When he climbed the ladder again to object, Nicholas put his own behind out and passed gas in Absalon's face. When John, the carpenter, came out of his basket, the young lovers told everyone in town that he was insane and had made up the crazy story about

the flood, ruining his reputation forever. The Wife of Bath's Tale The Wife of Bath's tale starts with a long Prologue, much longer than the tale she eventually tells, in which she describes to her fellow pilgrims the history of her five previous marriages and her views about relations between men and women. She defends at length the moral righteousness of people who marry often, as long as their spouses are dead, quoting the Bible as only stating that sexual abstinence is preferred but not required. In fact, she explains, the sexual organs are made to be used for sex and supports this claim with a quote from the Book of Proverbs, "Man shal yelde to his wyf hire dette" ("Man shall yield to his wife her debt"). After the Pardoner interrupts to say that he has been thinking of being married soon, the Wife of Bath describes marriage to him, using her own marriages as examples. The first three, she says, were to old men who were hardly able to have sex with her. She flattered these men by pretending to be jealous of them, using the excuse of keeping an eye on them as an explanation for why she was always out at night. She also argued with them constantly, bringing up every stereotype about women they had ever uttered and every suspicion that they'd had about her in particular so that she could argue from a defensive position. By arguing, she was able to make them appreciate her more when she did decide to be nice to them. Her fourth husband was younger, but he made her jealous by having a mistress so she made him miserable by making him jealous too: not, as she points out, by having a sexual affair, but simply by having a good time. Her fifth and last husband, Jankin, was physically abusive, but she loved him best nonetheless because he was a good lover. She met him while still married to her fourth husband when he was living



next door to her godmother. When her fourth husband died, she married Jankin and signed over to him all that she had inherited from her four previous husbands. She continued her active social life, and her sarcastic talk. One night, as Jankin was reading aloud from a scholarly work about the evils of women, she became exasperated and, reaching over, tore a page out of the book. He hit her, which permanently made her deaf, but when he realized what he had done he apologized, and after that, she explains, they have been happy together. There is a brief interval, during which angry words are exchanged between the Friar, who mocks the Wife of Bath for her long preface, and the Summoner, who tells him to leave her alone. The wife then begins her tale, which takes place during the time of King Arthur, which was ancient legend even in Chaucer's time. In the tale, a knight came upon a maiden walking beside the river one afternoon and raped her, for which he was condemned to death. The queen interceded, asking the king to spare the knight. When he could not answer her question about what women really desire most, the knight was sent off for a year to try to find the answer. The Wife of Bath relates several of the answers he received, including the one she favors, which is that women want to be flattered. On the day he was to return from his quest, the knight came across several dozen women in the forest, but when he approached them they disappeared, leaving an old lady in their place. She told him that the answer was that women wanted equality, which is what he told the queen, sparing his life. For giving him the right answer, the knight was obliged to marry the old woman. On their wedding night, when he would not take her to bed, she talked to him about the difference between being born noble and being truly noble. Gentleness is

a virtue, she told him, as are poverty and age. She then gave him a choice: he could have her old and ugly and faithfully devoted, or young and pretty and courted by other men. He left the choice to her, proving her equality with him, and for that she kissed him and turned into a young maiden, faithful to him forever after.

The Franklin's Tale A Franklin was a person who held property but no title of nobility. In the Prologue to his tale, the Franklin Summary 11 explains that he is going to tell a story that has been passed down in English from troubadours, who traveled from town to town, singing the story with musical accompaniment. He apologizes for lacking the verbal skill to color in the details of the story as clearly as a skilled speaker might be able to do. His tale takes place in Brittany, a region of France that was settled by English emigrants around the year 500 A. D. A knight loved a beautiful lady named Dorigene, and when she finally consented to marry him, he promised to never do anything that would embarrass her and treat her as a respected equal. When the knight, Arveragus, was called upon to fight in England, Dorigene was left home alone. Friends took her out for walks along the ocean, but all she noticed was the dangerous rocks along the shore that Arveragus' ship might crash onto when he returned. Her friends took her to a dance on the sixth of May, and there Dorigene was approached by a handsome young squire, Aurelius, who declared his love for her. Aurelius had all masculine attributes possible: he was " Yong, strong, right vertuous, and riche and wys, and wel biloved, and holden in great prys. " Dorigene was too in love with her husband to care about Aurelius. To discourage him, she told him that he could have her if he could clear all of the rocks off the shoreline within two years. Aurelius set about to pray to

various gods for help, asking them to raise the ocean. Meanwhile, Arveragus came home and was reunited with his wife. Aurelius' brother, a scholar, took him to the place where he had studied, and there they consulted with a man who had studied magic. This magician made them hallucinate so that they saw various scenes, including deer in a forest, knights battling, and Dorigene dancing. For a thousand pounds in gold, he agreed to make Dorigene think the rocks had sunk into the ocean. Aurelius went to Dorigene after the spell was cast on her and reminded her that she had agreed to go to bed with him. Distressed about the prospect of losing her honor by either breaking her word or being unfaithful to her husband, she considered killing herself. Arveragus noticed how upset she was, and she explained the situation. He told her that she would have to sleep with Aurelius rather than break her word. When she went to offer herself to Aurelius, he asked why she had changed her mind, and she explained that she was there because her husband had Dorigene should stay honest that he freed her from her promise without touching her. Then he realized that he was financially ruined by the thousand gold pieces he had promised to pay the magician. When he went to ask the magician to work out payment terms, Aurelius ended up telling him the whole story about letting Dorigene out of her promise. The magician was so impressed by his nobility, that he let Aurelius out of his own promise, and let him go without paying. The Pardoner's Tale Before telling his tale, the Pardoner expresses his need for a drink; this raises the fear in the other pilgrims that he will tell a crude or dirty joke, but he promises not to. The Prologue to "The Pardoner's Tale" is about his life, detailing how he makes his living by going from town to town with phony relics and

documents allegedly signed by the pope and curing such ailments as snake bites and jealousy. He announces his ability to charm simple people with a well-told story, noting that they love stories that they can remember and retell: " lewd (unlearned) peple loven tales of olde; / Swich thinges can they wel reporte and holde. " When he has had enough to drink the Pardoner starts telling a tale that he often tells, promising that it will be moral and not dirty. He starts his tale by mentioning a gang of tough youths in Flanders but soon digresses from them for a detailed discussion of sin, not only the specific sins committed by the rough characters in his story but sin in general. The irony of his lecture is that these are sins, like gambling and drinking and swearing, that the Pardoner himself is guilty of. The tale itself is about three men who were drinking in a tavern one morning Summary 12when they heard the funeral of an old friend going by. Their friend died that morning, a tavern employee explained, killed by the plague, his life ended by the thief called " Death. " They set off to find Death and came across an old man who complained that, as old as he was, he could not die, but he was able to direct them to a park where he had seen Death lingering. Instead of Death, they found a pile of gold coins. One of the three was sent off to get tools to carry the gold with, and while he was gone, the other two plotted to murder him and divide his share of the gold. He had the same basic idea, however, and returned with poisoned drinks for them. They fatally stabbed him, then drank the drinks, which in turn killed them. When he is done, the Pardoner tries to sell the other pilgrims pardons for their sins, taking advantage of their attention and their feelings of piety after hearing about such wicked men. The Host, annoyed, threatens to cut off his testicles

and make relics of them, which makes the Pardoner turn quiet, seething, until the Knight intercedes and has the two men make up. The Prioress's Tale

A Prioress is the head nun at an abbey, or convent, and is therefore a very religious person. The irony of the tale that this Prioress tells is that she piously invokes the name of the Virgin Mary and then goes on to tell one of the most violent, bloody tales in the whole collection. The Prioress starts her short piece with an introductory poem, praising God for His goodness and praising Mary for Her great humility. From the introduction, readers are led to expect the Prioress to be a meek person who tells a simple, gentle story. Instead, she talks about an unnamed Christian town in Asia that had a Jewish ghetto. The inhabitants of the ghetto, the Prioress explains, were full of hate and anger toward the Christians, but the country's ruler kept the Jews around for their value in money-lending, or usury. As she puts it, they were "sustained by a lord of that contree / For foule usure and lucre of vileynye, / Hateful to Crist and to his compaignye." A seven-year-old boy, the son of a widow, lived in that town. One day, when the boy heard the other children singing the Latin hymn *O Alma Redemptoris*, he was immediately smitten with the beauty of the song, so he set about to learn it, even though he didn't understand the words. One day, he walked through the Jewish ghetto singing the hymn, and the Jews, offended, hired a murderer to kill the boy. He was chased down an alley and had his throat slit and his body thrown into a drainage ditch that collected bodily waste. The boy's mother went searching for him when he did not come home. She found no sign of him until, passing by the drain, she heard him singing *O Alma Redemptoris*. A lawman was summoned, and he passed a harsh sentence against the Jews,

commanding that their bodies be drawn apart by horses and then hung on spikes from a wagon. Then an abbot came and asked the boy how he was still able to sing when his throat seemed to be cut. The boy explained that his throat was indeed cut, to the bone, but that Mary came down to him and commanded that he keep singing. She placed a piece of grain on his tongue, he explains, and told him that he would only stop singing when the grain was removed. The abbot removed the grain, the singing stopped, and the boy was buried. The tale ends with the Prioress calling for guidance for Hugh of Lincoln, a martyr who was also murdered as a child.

The Nun's Priest's Tale

When the Knight declares the story that they have just heard to be too depressing, the Host asks the priest who is travelling with the nun to tell them a story that is more uplifting. His story concerns a widow who, he says, lived long ago on a farm. The widow's two daughters, three pigs, three cows, and a sheep also lived on the farm. A rooster named Chanticleer and seven hens, who were his wives, lived in the yard. One morning, Chanticleer told the prettiest of his wives, Pertelote, that he had dreamt about being attacked by a hound-like creature. She responded by calling him a coward for being afraid of a dream, explaining that dreams were a sign of an unsettled digestive system. She offered to make him a laxative that would empty his system out. In response, he cited numerous examples from the Bible and from ancient mythology that illustrated how dreams accurately predicted the future. Having said this, he let the matter drop, and it was forgotten for a little over a month.

Summary 130

On the third of May, a fox sneaked into the farm yard, waiting patiently until Chanticleer came down out of the barn rafters and onto the ground. Chanticleer was alarmed, and ready to fly

away, until the fox flattered him, telling him that he had a beautiful singing voice, as did his mother and father. At the fox's request, Chaunticleer threw back his shoulder, ready to sing out a song, when the fox reached over and grabbed him by the neck. When all of the hens he was married to screamed an alarm, the fox tried to escape with the rooster in his mouth, but the widow and her daughters, hearing the alarm, ran out of the house and joined the other barnyard animals in chasing the fox. Coming to his senses, Chaunticleer suggested to the fox that he should taunt the people chasing him, telling them that they could never catch him; when the fox opened his mouth to do this, Chaunticleer flew free. The fox tried once more to convince the rooster that it was all a misunderstanding, that he actually had a secret reason for carrying him away in his mouth, but Chaunticleer, having learned his lesson, refused to go near him. The Nun's Priest ends this tale by reminding his listeners about the dangers of falling for flattery. In the epilogue to this story, the Host expresses his delight with the story that they have just heard, and he congratulates the Priest for being such a strong, brawny man, which is not what one expects from someone in his profession.

Summary 14  
Summary and Analysis 1: General Prologue  
Summary and Analysis  
New Characters  
The Narrator: Geoffrey Chaucer the author, although he is never named  
The Knight: father of the Squire; lord of the Yeoman  
The Squire: young man of 20, son of the Knight  
The Yeoman: a forester; servant of the Knight  
The Prioress: superior of a monastery of nuns; attended by the Nun, the Monk, the Friar, and the Priest  
The Monk: manages the estates of the Prioress and the monastery  
The Friar: a religious who has taken a vow of poverty and is licensed to beg  
The Nun: chaplain to the

Prioress The Priest: with the Prioress; not described The Merchant: wealthy and pompous The Cleric: a religious who is a scholar at Oxford The Man of Law: shrewd and wealthy The Franklin: landowner; wealthy The Haberdasher: hat and clothing maker; guildsman The Carpenter: guildsman The Weaver: makes fabric; guildsman The Dyer: dyes fabric and leather; guildsman The Tapestry-Maker: makes large, intricate woven pictures which are decorative and expensive; guildsman The Cook: works for the five guildsmen The Shipman: commander of a merchant ship The Physician: well-educated; a lover of gold The Wife of Bath: has survived five husbands; prosperous, gregarious, experienced Summary and Analysis 15 The Parson: poor because he is good; a true pastor The Plowman: brother of the Parish Priest; an honest, decent farmer The Miller: owns a mill; grinds grain into meal and flour The Manciple: a buyer for 30 lawyers who are administrators of London courts The Reeve: manager of a nobleman's estate; prosperous The Summoner: an agent of the Church courts who summons sinners to answer charges before the court The Pardoner: traded on the gullibility of the populace; sold relics and indulgences (which are pardons from the punishment due to sin) The Host: owner of the Tabard Inn where all the pilgrims meet; self-appointed leader; tour guide for the pilgrims Summary Chaucer begins the Prologue with a beautiful announcement of spring. This introduction is the voice of the Poet, polished, elegant, and finished. He tells us that just as Nature has a predictable course through the seasons, so does human nature follow a seasonal pattern which causes people to want to break out of winter's confinement and go traveling in the spring. Thus the stage is set for Chaucer, who is the Narrator of this poem. Twenty-nine



travelers meet at the Tabard Inn in London before undertaking a journey to the Shrine of St. Thomas Æ Becket in Canterbury. The group is assembling as Chaucer arrives and, as he observes the group and interacts with some of them, he decides that he will join their party. From his vantage point as anonymous Narrator, Chaucer describes the scene and the pilgrims as they arrive. The Knight is introduced first, which is appropriate as he is the highest ranking character socially. This old soldier has spent a lifetime fighting battles for Christianity all over the world and has consistently distinguished himself. He is dedicated to the knightly ideal of chivalry, courtesy, truth, honor, and generosity. 1: General Prologue Summary and Analysis 16The Priest Accompanying the Knight is his 20-year-old son, the Squire, who is very much in contrast to his father. While he has been in a few skirmishes, " to impress his lady," the Squire is obviously still young and inexperienced. He is dressed in the height of fashion with carefully arranged curls. Devoted to the rituals of courting, the Squire appears to be in love with love. The Yeoman is a servant to the Knight. He is a forester, in charge of the Knight's woodlands and appears to be the ideal simple, loyal peasant; yet he is so well-equipped with elaborate weapons and perfect arrows that his simplicity is suspect. When the Narrator adds that the forester understood all the tricks of woodcraft, he seems to be suggesting that the Yeoman is profiting in some way as he manages forests which are not his. The next group of pilgrims arrives with the Prioress, Madame Eglantine. While obviously intelligent and able, the Prioress is described as being very concerned that others view her as ladylike and refined. She is apparently tenderhearted to the point of sentimentality. The Prioress is accompanied by

the Nun, who is her chaplain. The reader is told nothing about the Nun or about the Priest who is also with the Prioress. Her estate manager, the Monk, however, is vividly described.

1: General Prologue Summary and Analysis

17He is very careless of his religious vows, devoting all of his time and energy to the management of the Prioress's estates. He manages them to prosper, though, so that he himself may be denied none of the pleasures and luxuries of the hunt. The third priest in company with the Prioress is the Friar, wanton, merry, and quite irreligious. Supposedly sworn to helping the poor, Hubert grants absolution to anyone who gives him money, much of which he pockets rather than distributing it to the poor. Socially, the middle class ranked third behind the nobility and the clergy; thus, the third type of character Chaucer presents is a successful and very busy Merchant who is representative of the rather recent prosperity and importance of his class. The Merchant talks of nothing but business and thinks himself an expert on all matters related to trade. Following the Merchant, the Cleric arrives. He is very, very poorly dressed and mounted in stark contrast to other members of the clergy previously introduced. Unlike them, he is completely devoted to scholarship and oblivious to material wealth. He speaks primarily on moral themes. The Man of Law is another sterling representative of the middle class who comes next under the Narrator's scrutiny. All of the Man of Law's great skill in legal matters is detailed; his wealth is reported; yet the Narrator confides that although the man brags constantly about how busy he is with his cases, his "busy-ness" may be more imagined than real. With the Man of Law is the Franklin, who is a wealthy landowner who lives for his own sensual pleasure. The delights of the table obsess this gentleman. As an aside, the

reader is told that he has served as a justice of the peace and a member of Parliament, but these are only incidental as far as he is concerned. Grouped together next are five wealthy and important craftsmen, all officials in their guilds. These include the Haberdasher, the Carpenter, the Weaver, the Dyer, and the Taperstry-Maker. It is implied that all of these men curry favor with their wives who would have been highly unpleasant had not their husbands prospered. The guildsmen have brought their own Cook. Apparently, he is quite able and experienced, but repugnant to the Narrator because he has a large sore on his leg. To medieval observers such an affliction rendered a person unclean and to be avoided. The Sailor, or Shipman, is described next. He rides his horse so poorly that it is obvious the man is much more comfortable on the sea than on the land. On board ship, however, the Shipman is expert, knowledgeable, and successful. He has surmounted many storms on the sea, but at the same time he has taken advantage of the merchants who use his vessel to ship their goods. In fact, he is reported to have no scruples at all. There is a Physician among the pilgrims. Chaucer tells the reader of his great learning, yet holds him in contempt because this doctor loves gold so much and overcharges his patients for remedies that do them no good. For all his great learning, this Physician has not studied the Bible, the implication being that he lacks the concern and mercy of the true healer. The Wife of Bath, the third of the female pilgrims, is introduced next. She is quite outrageous and is one of the most famous characters in all of literature. Slightly deaf and with gaps between her teeth, the Wife wears an incredible and ostentatious outfit. The Wife is skilled at weaving and is extremely prosperous. She has survived five husbands and is said to have

great knowledge about love. Reportedly good-humored and full of life, the Wife of Bath is going to Canterbury to find her sixth husband. 1: General Prologue Summary and Analysis 18 Behind the raucous Wife of Bath comes the Parson, a poor and humble priest who is devoted to his parishoners and serves them faithfully and well. He teaches the Gospel by his example and is never severe with sinners. With the Parson is his brother, the Plowman, a decent and hardworking peasant, similar in nature and goodness to the Parson. The burly, red-haired Miller is juxtaposed beside the two preceding, mild-mannered travelers. He is large and exceptionally strong with a bulbous nose and a generally ugly appearance. His manners and conversation are as coarse as his appearance; in addition, the Miller is none too honest with his customers. The Manciple (Maunciple) is a friendly fellow whose job it is to do the purchasing and keep the accounts for a group of 30 lawyers. This friendly fellow has tricked his employers by embezzling profits in his shady deals for them, leaving them to live frugally as he spends the money he stole from them. Next comes the Reeve, a comical-looking man who is very skinny with legs like long sticks. Like the Manciple, the Reeve manages the affairs of another man, a wealthy lan