

Context

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



Context The Canterbury Tales is the most famous and critically acclaimed work of Geoffrey Chaucer, a late-fourteenth-century English poet. Little is known about Chaucer's personal life, and even less about his education, but a number of existing records document his professional life. Chaucer was born in London in the early 1340s, the only son in his family. Chaucer's father, originally a property-owning wine merchant, became tremendously wealthy when he inherited the property of relatives who had died in the Black Death of 1349. He was therefore able to send the young Geoffrey off as a page to the Countess of Ulster, which meant that Geoffrey was not required to follow in his ancestors' footsteps and become a merchant. Eventually, Chaucer began to serve the countess's husband, Prince Lionel, son to King Edward III. For most of his life, Chaucer served in the Hundred Years War between England and France, both as a soldier and, since he was fluent in French and Italian and conversant in Latin and other tongues, as a diplomat. His diplomatic travels brought him twice to Italy, where he might have met Boccaccio, whose writing influenced Chaucer's work, and Petrarch. In or around 1378, Chaucer began to develop his vision of an English poetry that would be linguistically accessible to all—obedient neither to the court, whose official language was French, nor to the Church, whose official language was Latin. Instead, Chaucer wrote in the vernacular, the English that was spoken in and around London in his day. Undoubtedly, he was influenced by the writings of the Florentines Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, who wrote in the Italian vernacular. Even in England, the practice was becoming increasingly common among poets, although many were still writing in French and Latin. That the nobles and kings Chaucer served

(Richard II until 1399, then Henry IV) were impressed with Chaucer's skills as a negotiator is obvious from the many rewards he received for his service. Money, provisions, higher appointments, and property eventually allowed him to retire on a royal pension. In 1374, the king appointed Chaucer Controller of the Customs of Hides, Skins and Wools in the port of London, which meant that he was a government official who worked with cloth importers. His experience overseeing imported cloths might be why he frequently describes in exquisite detail the garments and fabric that attire his characters. Chaucer held the position at the customhouse for twelve years, after which he left London for Kent, the county in which Canterbury is located. He served as a justice of the peace for Kent, living in debt, and was then appointed Clerk of the Works at various holdings of the king, including Westminster and the Tower of London. After he retired in the early 1390s, he seems to have been working primarily on *The Canterbury Tales*, which he began around 1387. By the time of his retirement, Chaucer had already written a substantial amount of narrative poetry, including the celebrated romance *Troilus and Criseyde*. Chaucer's personal life is less documented than his professional life. In the late 1360s, he married Philippa Roet, who served Edward III's queen. They had at least two sons together. Philippa was the sister to the mistress of John of Gaunt, the duke of Lancaster. For John of Gaunt, Chaucer wrote one of his first poems, *The Book of the Duchess*, which was a lament for the premature death of John's young wife, Blanche. Whether or not Chaucer had an extramarital affair is a matter of some contention among historians. In a legal document that dates from 1380, a woman named Cecily Chaumpaigne released Chaucer from the accusation of

seizing her (raptus), though whether the expression denotes that he raped her, committed adultery with her, or abducted her son is unclear. Chaucer's wife Philippa apparently died in 1387. Chaucer lived through a time of incredible tension in the English social sphere. The Black Death, which ravaged England during Chaucer's childhood and remained widespread afterward, wiped out an estimated thirty to fifty percent of the population. Consequently, the labor force gained increased leverage and was able to bargain for better wages, which led to resentment from the nobles and propertied classes. These classes received another blow in 1381, when the peasantry, helped by the artisan class, revolted against them. The merchants were also wielding increasing power over the legal establishment, as the Hundred Years War created profit for England and, consequently, appetite for luxury was growing. The merchants capitalized on the demand for luxury goods, and when Chaucer was growing up, London was pretty much run by a merchant oligarchy, which attempted to control both the aristocracy and the lesser artisan classes. Chaucer's political sentiments are unclear, for although *The Canterbury Tales* documents the various social tensions in the manner of the popular genre of estates satire, the narrator refrains from making overt political statements, and what he does say is in no way thought to represent Chaucer's own sentiments. Chaucer's original plan for *The Canterbury Tales* was for each character to tell four tales, two on the way to Canterbury and two on the way back. But, instead of 120 tales, the text ends after twenty-four tales, and the party is still on its way to Canterbury. Chaucer either planned to revise the structure to cap the work at twenty-four tales, or else left it incomplete when he died on October 25,

1400. Other writers and printers soon recognized *The Canterbury Tales* as a masterful and highly original work. Though Chaucer had been influenced by the great French and Italian writers of his age, works like Boccaccio's *Decameron* were not accessible to most English readers, so the format of *The Canterbury Tales*, and the intense realism of its characters, were virtually unknown to readers in the fourteenth century before Chaucer. William Caxton, England's first printer, published *The Canterbury Tales* in the 1470s, and it continued to enjoy a rich printing history that never truly faded. By the English Renaissance, poetry critic George Puttenham had identified Chaucer as the father of the English literary canon. Chaucer's project to create a literature and poetic language for all classes of society succeeded, and today Chaucer still stands as one of the great shapers of literary narrative and character.

Language in *The Canterbury Tales*

The Canterbury Tales is written in Middle English, which bears a close visual resemblance to the English written and spoken today. In contrast, Old English (the language of *Beowulf*, for example) can be read only in modern translation or by students of Old English. Students often read *The Canterbury Tales* in its original language, not only because of the similarity between Chaucer's Middle English and our own, but because the beauty and humor of the poetry—all of its internal and external rhymes, and the sounds it produces—would be lost in translation. The best way for a beginner to approach Middle English is to read it out loud. When the words are pronounced, it is often much easier to recognize what they mean in modern English. Most Middle English editions of the poem include a short pronunciation guide, which can help the reader to understand the language

better. For particularly difficult words or phrases, most editions also include notes in the margin giving the modern versions of the words, along with a full glossary in the back. Several online Chaucer glossaries exist, as well as a number of printed lexicons of Middle English. The Order of The Canterbury Tales The line numbers cited in this SparkNote are based on the line numbers given in The Riverside Chaucer, the authoritative edition of Chaucer's works. The line numbering in The Riverside Chaucer does not run continuously throughout the entire Canterbury Tales, but it does not restart at the beginning of each tale, either. Instead, the tales are grouped together into fragments, and each fragment is numbered as a separate whole.

Nobody knows exactly in what order Chaucer intended to present the tales, or even if he had a specific order in mind for all of them. Eighty-two early manuscripts of the tales survive, and many of them vary considerably in the order in which they present the tales. However, certain sets of tales do seem to belong together in a particular order. For instance, the General Prologue is obviously the beginning, then the narrator explicitly says that the Knight tells the first tale, and that the Miller interrupts and tells the second tale. The introductions, prologues, and epilogues to various tales sometimes include the pilgrims' comments on the tale just finished, and an indication of who tells the next tale. These sections between the tales are called links, and they are the best evidence for grouping the tales together into ten fragments. But The Canterbury Tales does not include a complete set of links, so the order of the ten fragments is open to question. The Riverside Chaucer bases the order of the ten fragments on the order presented in the Ellesmere manuscript, one of the best surviving manuscripts of the tale.

Some scholars disagree with the groupings and order of tales followed in *The Riverside Chaucer*, choosing instead to base the order on a combination of the links and the geographical landmarks that the pilgrims pass on the way to Canterbury. 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 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. The Friar's Prologue and Tale The Friar speaks approvingly of the Wife of

Bath's Tale, and offers to lighten things up for the company by telling a funny story about a lecherous summoner. The Summoner does not object, but he promises to pay the Friar back in his own tale. The Friar tells of an archdeacon who carries out the law without mercy, especially to lechers. The archdeacon has a summoner who has a network of spies working for him, to let him know who has been lecherous. The summoner extorts money from those he's sent to summon, charging them more money than he should for penance. He tries to serve a summons on a yeoman who is actually a devil in disguise. After comparing notes on their treachery and extortion, the devil vanishes, but when the summoner tries to prosecute an old wealthy widow unfairly, the widow cries out that the summoner should be taken to hell. The devil follows the woman's instructions and drags the summoner off to hell.

The Summoner's Prologue and Tale The Summoner, furious at the Friar's Tale, asks the company to let him tell the next tale. First, he tells the company that there is little difference between friars and fiends, and that when an angel took a friar down to hell to show him the torments there, the friar asked why there were no friars in hell; the angel then pulled up Satan's tail and 20,000 friars came out of his ass. In the Summoner's Tale, a friar begs for money from a dying man named Thomas and his wife, who have recently lost their child. The friar shamelessly exploits the couple's misfortunes to extract money from them, so Thomas tells the friar that he is sitting on something that he will bequeath to the friars. The friar reaches for his bequest, and Thomas lets out an enormous fart. The friar complains to the lord of the manor, whose squire promises to divide the fart evenly among all the friars.

The Clerk's Prologue and Tale The Host asks the Clerk to cheer

up and tell a merry tale, and the Clerk agrees to tell a tale by the Italian poet Petrarch. Griselde is a hardworking peasant who marries into the aristocracy. Her husband tests her fortitude in several ways, including pretending to kill her children and divorcing her. He punishes her one final time by forcing her to prepare for his wedding to a new wife. She does all this dutifully, her husband tells her that she has always been and will always be his wife (the divorce was a fraud), and they live happily ever after.

The Merchant's Prologue, Tale, and Epilogue The Merchant reflects on the great difference between the patient Griselde of the Clerk's Tale and the horrible shrew he has been married to for the past two months. The Host asks him to tell a story of the evils of marriage, and he complies. Against the advice of his friends, an old knight named January marries May, a beautiful young woman. She is less than impressed by his enthusiastic sexual efforts, and conspires to cheat on him with his squire, Damien. When blind January takes May into his garden to copulate with her, she tells him she wants to eat a pear, and he helps her up into the pear tree, where she has sex with Damien. Pluto, the king of the faeries, restores January's sight, but May, caught in the act, assures him that he must still be blind. The Host prays to God to keep him from marrying a wife like the one the Merchant describes.

The Squire's Introduction and Tale The Host calls upon the Squire to say something about his favorite subject, love, and the Squire willingly complies. King Cambyuskan of the Mongol Empire is visited on his birthday by a knight bearing gifts from the king of Arabia and India. He gives Cambyuskan and his daughter Canacee a magic brass horse, a magic mirror, a magic ring that gives Canacee the ability to understand the language of birds, and a sword

with the power to cure any wound it creates. She rescues a dying female falcon that narrates how her consort abandoned her for the love of another. The Squire's Tale is either unfinished by Chaucer or is meant to be interrupted by the Franklin, who interjects that he wishes his own son were as eloquent as the Squire. The Host expresses annoyance at the Franklin's interruption, and orders him to begin the next tale. The Franklin's Prologue and Tale The Franklin says that his tale is a familiar Breton lay, a folk ballad of ancient Brittany. Dorigen, the heroine, awaits the return of her husband, Arveragus, who has gone to England to win honor in feats of arms. She worries that the ship bringing her husband home will wreck itself on the coastal rocks, and she promises Aurelius, a young man who falls in love with her, that she will give her body to him if he clears the rocks from the coast. Aurelius hires a student learned in magic to create the illusion that the rocks have disappeared. Arveragus returns home and tells his wife that she must keep her promise to Aurelius. Aurelius is so impressed by Arveragus's honorable act that he generously absolves her of the promise, and the magician, in turn, generously absolves Aurelius of the money he owes. The Physician's Tale Appius the judge lusts after Virginia, the beautiful daughter of Virginius. Appius persuades a churl named Claudius to declare her his slave, stolen from him by Virginius. Appius declares that Virginius must hand over his daughter to Claudius. Virginius tells his daughter that she must die rather than suffer dishonor, and she virtuously consents to her father's cutting her head off. Appius sentences Virginius to death, but the Roman people, aware of Appius's hijinks, throw him into prison, where he kills himself. The Pardoner's Introduction, Prologue, and Tale The Host is

dismayed by the tragic injustice of the Physician's Tale, and asks the Pardoner to tell something merry. The other pilgrims contradict the Host, demanding a moral tale, which the Pardoner agrees to tell after he eats and drinks. The Pardoner tells the company how he cheats people out of their money by preaching that money is the root of all evil. His tale describes three riotous youths who go looking for Death, thinking that they can kill him. An old man tells them that they will find Death under a tree. Instead, they find eight bushels of gold, which they plot to sneak into town under cover of darkness. The youngest goes into town to fetch food and drink, but brings back poison, hoping to have the gold all to himself. His companions kill him to enrich their own shares, then drink the poison and die under the tree. His tale complete, the Pardoner offers to sell the pilgrims pardons, and singles out the Host to come kiss his relics. The Host infuriates the Pardoner by accusing him of fraud, but the Knight persuades the two to kiss and bury their differences.

The Shipman's Tale The Shipman's Tale features a monk who tricks a merchant's wife into having sex with him by borrowing money from the merchant, then giving it to the wife so she can repay her own debt to her husband, in exchange for sexual favors. When the monk sees the merchant next, he tells him that he returned the merchant's money to his wife. The wife realizes she has been duped, but she boldly tells her husband to forgive her debt: she will repay it in bed. The Host praises the Shipman's story, and asks the Prioress for a tale.

The Prioress's Prologue and Tale The Prioress calls on the Virgin Mary to guide her tale. In an Asian city, a Christian school is located at the edge of a Jewish ghetto. An angelic seven-year-old boy, a widow's son, attends the school. He is a devout Christian,

and loves to sing Alma Redemptoris (Gracious Mother of the Redeemer). Singing the song on his way through the ghetto, some Jews hire a murderer to slit his throat and throw him into a latrine. The Jews refuse to tell the widow where her son is, but he miraculously begins to sing Alma Redemptoris, so the Christian people recover his body, and the magistrate orders the murdering Jews to be drawn apart by wild horses and then hanged.

The Prologue and Tale of Sir Thopas The Host, after teasing Chaucer the narrator about his appearance, asks him to tell a tale. Chaucer says that he only knows one tale, then launches into a parody of bad poetry—the Tale of Sir Thopas. Sir Thopas rides about looking for an elf-queen to marry until he is confronted by a giant. The narrator’s doggerel continues in this vein until the Host can bear no more and interrupts him. Chaucer asks him why he can’t tell his tale, since it is the best he knows, and the Host explains that his rhyme isn’t worth a turd. He encourages Chaucer to tell a prose tale.

The Tale of Melibee Chaucer’s second tale is the long, moral prose story of Melibee. Melibee’s house is raided by his foes, who beat his wife, Prudence, and severely wound his daughter, Sophie, in her feet, hands, ears, nose, and mouth. Prudence advises him not to rashly pursue vengeance on his enemies, and he follows her advice, putting his foes’ punishment in her hands. She forgives them for the outrages done to her, in a model of Christian forbearance and forgiveness.

The Monk’s Prologue and Tale The Host wishes that his own wife were as patient as Melibee’s, and calls upon the Monk to tell the next tale. First he teases the Monk, pointing out that the Monk is clearly no poor cloisterer. The Monk takes it all in stride and tells a series of tragic falls, in which noble figures are brought low: Lucifer, Adam,

Sampson, Hercules, Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, Zenobia, Pedro of Castile, and down through the ages. The Nun's Priest's Prologue, Tale, and Epilogue After seventeen noble "falls" narrated by the Monk, the Knight interrupts, and the Host calls upon the Nun's Priest to deliver something more lively. The Nun's Priest tells of Chanticleer the Rooster, who is carried off by a flattering fox who tricks him into closing his eyes and displaying his crowing abilities. Chanticleer turns the tables on the fox by persuading him to open his mouth and brag to the barnyard about his feat, upon which Chanticleer falls out of the fox's mouth and escapes. The Host praises the Nun's Priest's Tale, adding that if the Nun's Priest were not in holy orders, he would be as sexually potent as Chanticleer. The Second Nun's Prologue and Tale In her Prologue, the Second Nun explains that she will tell a saint's life, that of Saint Cecilia, for this saint set an excellent example through her good works and wise teachings. She focuses particularly on the story of Saint Cecilia's martyrdom. Before Cecilia's new husband, Valerian, can take her virginity, she sends him on a pilgrimage to Pope Urban, who converts him to Christianity. An angel visits Valerian, who asks that his brother Tiburce be granted the grace of Christian conversion as well. All three—Cecilia, Tiburce, and Valerian—are put to death by the Romans. The Canon's Yeoman's Prologue and Tale When the Second Nun's Tale is finished, the company is overtaken by a black-clad Canon and his Yeoman, who have heard of the pilgrims and their tales and wish to participate. The Yeoman brags to the company about how he and the Canon create the illusion that they are alchemists, and the Canon departs in shame at having his secrets discovered. The Yeoman tells a tale of how a canon defrauded a priest by

creating the illusion of alchemy using sleight of hand. The Manciple's Prologue and Tale The Host pokes fun at the Cook, riding at the back of the company, blind drunk. The Cook is unable to honor the Host's request that he tell a tale, and the Manciple criticizes him for his drunkenness. The Manciple relates the legend of a white crow, taken from the Roman poet Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and one of the tales in *The Arabian Nights*. In it, Phoebus's talking white crow informs him that his wife is cheating on him. Phoebus kills the wife, pulls out the crow's white feathers, and curses it with blackness. The Parson's Prologue and Tale As the company enters a village in the late afternoon, the Host calls upon the Parson to give them a fable. Refusing to tell a fictional story because it would go against the rule set by St. Paul, the Parson delivers a lengthy treatise on the Seven Deadly Sins, instead. Chaucer's Retraction Chaucer appeals to readers to credit Jesus Christ as the inspiration for anything in his book that they like, and to attribute what they don't like to his own ignorance and lack of ability. He retracts and prays for forgiveness for all of his works dealing with secular and pagan subjects, asking only to be remembered for what he has written of saints' lives and homilies. Character List The Pilgrims The Narrator - The narrator makes it quite clear that he is also a character in his book. Although he is called 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. Because the narrator writes down his impressions of the pilgrims from memory, whom he does and does not like, and what he chooses and chooses not 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 fifteen of the great crusades of his era. Brave, experienced, and prudent, the narrator greatly admires him. The Wife of Bath - Bath is an English town on the Avon River, not the name of this woman's husband. Though she is a seamstress by occupation, she seems to be a professional wife. She 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 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. The Pardoner - Pardoners granted papal indulgences- reprieves from penance in exchange for charitable donations to the Church. Many pardoners, including this one, collected profits for themselves. In fact, 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, the Miller has 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 clerks, scholarly clerks, carpenters, and women.

The Prioress - Described as modest and quiet, this Prioress (a nun who is head of her convent) 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 - 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 - Roaming priests with no ties to a monastery, friars were a great object 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 - The Summoner 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, although he possesses a quick temper. He mediates among the pilgrims and facilitates the flow of the tales. His title of "host" 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 is everything that the Monk, the Friar, and the Pardoner are not. The Squire - The Knight's son and apprentice. The Squire is curly-haired, youthfully handsome, and loves dancing and courting. The Clerk - The Clerk is a poor student of philosophy. Having spent his money on books and learning rather than on fine clothes, he 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 manciple was in charge of getting provisions for a college or court. Despite his lack of education, this Manciple is smarter than the thirty lawyers he feeds. The Merchant - The Merchant trades in furs and other cloths, mostly from Flanders. He is part of a powerful and wealthy class in Chaucer's society. The Shipman - Brown-skinned from years of sailing, the Shipman has seen every bay and river in England, and exotic ports in Spain and Carthage as well. He is a bit of a rascal, known for stealing wine while the ship's captain sleeps. The Physician - The Physician is one of the best in his profession, for he knows the cause of every malady and can cure most of them. 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 - 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 reeve was similar to a steward of a manor, and this reeve performs his job shrewdly-his 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 Plowman is the Parson's brother and is equally good-hearted. A member of the peasant class, he pays his tithes to the Church and leads a good Christian life. The Guildsmen - Listed together, the five 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 Cook works for the Guildsmen. Chaucer gives little detail about him, although he mentions a crusty sore on the Cook's leg. The Yeoman - The servant who accompanies the Knight and the Squire. The narrator mentions that his dress and weapons suggest he may be a forester. The Second Nun - The Second Nun is not described in the General Prologue, but she tells a saint's life for her tale. The Nun's Priest - Like the Second Nun, the Nun's Priest is not described in the General Prologue. His story of Chanticleer, however, is well crafted and suggests that he is a witty, self-effacing preacher. Characters from the Five Tales Analyzed in This SparkNote The Knight's Tale Theseus - A great conqueror and the duke of Athens in the Knight's Tale. The most powerful ruler in the story, he is often called upon to make the final judgment, but he listens to others' pleas for help. Palamon - Palamon is one of the two imprisoned Theban soldier heroes in the Knight's Tale. Brave, strong, and sworn to everlasting friendship with his cousin Arcite, Palamon falls in love

with the fair maiden Emelye, which brings him into conflict with Arcite. Though he loses the tournament against Arcite, he gets Emelye in the end. Arcite - The sworn brother to Palamon, Arcite, imprisoned with Palamon in the tower in the Knight's Tale, falls equally head over heels in love with Emelye. He gets released from the tower early and wins Emelye's hand in a tournament, but then dies when a divinely fated earthquake causes his horse to throw him. Emelye - Emelye is the sister to Hippolyta, Theseus's domesticated Amazon queen in the Knight's Tale. Fair-haired and glowing, we first see Emelye as Palamon does, through a window. Although she is the object of both Palamon's and Arcite's desire, she would rather spend her life unmarried and childless. Nevertheless, when Arcite wins the tournament, she readily pledges herself to him. Egeus - Theseus's father. Egeus gives Theseus the advice that helps him convince Palamon and Emelye to end their mourning of Arcite and get married. The Miller's Tale Nicholas - In the Miller's Tale, Nicholas is a poor astronomy student who boards with an elderly carpenter, John, and the carpenter's too-young wife, Alisoun. Nicholas dupes John and sleeps with Alisoun right under John's nose, but Absolon, the foppish parish clerk, gets Nicholas in the end. Alisoun - Alisoun is the sexy young woman married to the carpenter in the Miller's Tale. She is bright and sweet like a small bird, and dresses in a tantalizing style—her clothes are embroidered inside and outside, and she laces her boots high. She willingly goes to bed with Nicholas, but she has only harsh words and obscenities for Absolon. Absolon - The local parish clerk in the Miller's Tale, Absolon is a little bit foolish and more than a little bit vain. He wears red stockings underneath his floor-length church gown, and his leather shoes are

decorated like the fanciful stained-glass windows in a cathedral. He curls his hair, uses breath fresheners, and fancies Alisoun. John - The dim-witted carpenter to whom Alisoun is married and with whom Nicholas boards. John is jealous and possessive of his wife. He constantly berates Nicholas for looking into God's " pryvetee, " but when Nicholas offers John the chance to share his knowledge, John quickly accepts. He gullibly believes Nicholas's pronouncement that a second flood is coming, which allows Nicholas to sleep with John's wife. The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale The First Three Husbands - The Wife of Bath says that her first three husbands were " good" because they were rich and old. She could order them around, use sex to get what she wanted, and trick them into believing lies. The Fourth Husband - The Wife of Bath says comparatively little about her fourth husband. She loved him, but he was a reveler who had a mistress. She had fun singing and dancing with him, but tried her best to make him jealous. She fell in love with her fifth husband, Jankyn, while she was still married to her fourth. Jankyn - The Wife of Bath's fifth husband, Jankyn, was a twenty-year-old former student, with whom the Wife was madly in love. His stories of wicked wives frustrated her so much that one night she ripped a page out of his book, only to receive a deafening smack on her ear in return. The Knight - Arthur's young knight rapes a maiden, and, to avoid the punishment of death, he is sent by the queen on a quest to learn about submission to women. Once he does so, and shows that he has learned his lesson by letting his old ugly wife make a decision, she rewards him by becoming beautiful and submissive. The Old Woman - The old woman supplies the young knight with the answer to his question, in exchange for his promise to do whatever she wants. When

she tells him he must marry her, the knight begrudgingly agrees, and when he allows her to choose whether she would like to be beautiful and unfaithful or ugly and faithful, she rewards him by becoming both beautiful and faithful. Arthur's Queen - Arthur's queen, presumably Guinevere, is interesting because she wields most of the power. When Arthur's knight rapes a maiden, he turns the knight over to his queen allows her to decide what to do with him. The Pardoner's Tale The Three Rioters - These are the three protagonists of the Pardoner's Tale. All three indulge in and represent the vices against which the Pardoner has railed in his Prologue: Gluttony, Drunkenness, Gambling, and Swearing. These traits define the three and eventually lead to their downfall. The Rioters at first appear like personified vices, but it is their belief that a personified concept-in this case, Death-is a real person that becomes the root cause of their undoing. The Old Man - In the Pardoner's Tale, the three Rioters encounter a very old man whose body is completely covered except for his face. Before the old man tells the Rioters where they can find " Death, " one of the Rioters rashly demands why the old man is still alive. The old man answers that he is doomed to walk the earth for eternity. He has been interpreted as Death itself, or as Cain, punished for fratricide by walking the earth forever; or as the Wandering Jew, a man who refused to let Christ rest at his house when Christ proceeded to his crucifixion, and who was therefore doomed to roam the world, through the ages, never finding rest. The Nun's Priest's Tale Chanticleer - The heroic rooster of the Nun's Priest's Tale, Chanticleer has seven hen-wives and is the most handsome cock in the barnyard. One day, he has a prophetic dream of a fox that will carry him away. Chanticleer is also a bit vain about his clear

and accurate crowing voice, and he unwittingly allows a fox to flatter him out of his liberty. Pertelote - Chanticleer's favorite wife in the Nun's Priest's Tale. She is his equal in looks, manners, and talent. When Chanticleer dreams of the fox, he awakens her in the middle of the night, begging for an interpretation, but Pertelote will have none of it, calling him foolish. When the fox takes him away, she mourns him in classical Greek fashion, burning herself and wailing. The Fox - The orange fox, interpreted by some as an allegorical figure for the devil, catches Chanticleer the rooster through flattery. Eventually, Chanticleer outwits the fox by encouraging him to boast of his deceit to his pursuers. When the fox opens his mouth, Chanticleer escapes.

Analysis of Major Characters The Knight The Knight rides at the front of the procession described in the General Prologue, and his story is the first in the sequence. The Host clearly admires the Knight, as does the narrator. The narrator seems to remember four main qualities of the Knight. The first is the Knight's love of ideals—"chivalrie" (prowess), "trouthe" (fidelity), "honour" (reputation), "freedom" (generosity), and "curteisie" (refinement) (General Prologue, 45—46). The second is the Knight's impressive military career. The Knight has fought in the Crusades, wars in which Europeans traveled by sea to non-Christian lands and attempted to convert whole cultures by the force of their swords. By Chaucer's time, the spirit for conducting these wars was dying out, and they were no longer undertaken as frequently. The Knight has battled the Muslims in Egypt, Spain, and Turkey, and the Russian Orthodox in Lithuania and Russia. He has also fought in formal duels. The third quality the narrator remembers about the Knight is his meek, gentle, manner. And the fourth is his "array," or

dress. The Knight wears a tunic made of coarse cloth, and his coat of mail is rust-stained, because he has recently returned from an expedition. The Knight's interaction with other characters tells us a few additional facts about him. In the Prologue to the Nun's Priest's Tale, he calls out to hear something more lighthearted, saying that it deeply upsets him to hear stories about tragic falls. He would rather hear about "joye and greet solas, " about men who start off in poverty climbing in fortune and attaining wealth (Nun's Priest's Prologue, 2774). The Host agrees with him, which is not surprising, since the Host has mentioned that whoever tells the tale of "best sentence and moost solaas" will win the storytelling contest (General Prologue, 798). And, at the end of the Pardoner's Tale, the Knight breaks in to stop the squabbling between the Host and the Pardoner, ordering them to kiss and make up. Ironically, though a soldier, the romantic, idealistic Knight clearly has an aversion to conflict or unhappiness of any sort. 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 "charitable" 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 Wife of Bath One of two female storytellers (the other is the Prioress), the Wife has a lot of experience under her belt. She has traveled all over the world on

pilgrimages, so Canterbury is a jaunt compared to other perilous journeys she has endured. Not only has she seen many lands, she has lived with five husbands. She is worldly in both senses of the word: she has seen the world and has experience in the ways of the world, that is, in love and sex. Rich and tasteful, the Wife's clothes veer a bit toward extravagance: her face is wreathed in heavy cloth, her stockings are a fine scarlet color, and the leather on her shoes is soft, fresh, and brand new—all of which demonstrate how wealthy she has become. Scarlet was a particularly costly dye, since it was made from individual red beetles found only in some parts of the world. The fact that she hails from Bath, a major English cloth-making town in the Middle Ages, is reflected in both her talent as a seamstress and her stylish garments. Bath at this time was fighting for a place among the great European exporters of cloth, which were mostly in the Netherlands and Belgium. So the fact that the Wife's sewing surpasses that of the cloth makers of "Ipres and of Gaunt" (Ypres and Ghent) speaks well of Bath's (and England's) attempt to outdo its overseas competitors. Although she is argumentative and enjoys talking, the Wife is intelligent in a commonsense, rather than intellectual, way. Through her experiences with her husbands, she has learned how to provide for herself in a world where women had little independence or power. The chief manner in which she has gained control over her husbands has been in her control over their use of her body. The Wife uses her body as a bargaining tool, withholding sexual pleasure until her husbands give her what she demands.

Themes, Motifs & Symbols

Themes Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work. The Pervasiveness of Courtly Love The phrase "courtly love"

refers to a set of ideas about love that was enormously influential on the literature and culture of the Middle Ages. Beginning with the Troubadour poets of southern France in the eleventh century, poets throughout Europe promoted the notions that true love only exists outside of marriage; that true love may be idealized and spiritual, and may exist without ever being physically consummated; and that a man becomes the servant of the lady he loves. Together with these basic premises, courtly love encompassed a number of minor motifs. One of these is the idea that love is a torment or a disease, and that when a man is in love he cannot sleep or eat, and therefore he undergoes physical changes, sometimes to the point of becoming unrecognizable. Although very few people's lives resembled the courtly love ideal in any way, these themes and motifs were extremely popular and widespread in medieval and Renaissance literature and culture. They were particularly popular in the literature and culture that were part of royal and noble courts. Courtly love motifs first appear in *The Canterbury Tales* with the description of the Squire in the General Prologue. The Squire's role in society is exactly that of his father the Knight, except for his lower status, but the Squire is very different from his father in that he incorporates the ideals of courtly love into his interpretation of his own role. Indeed, the Squire is practically a parody of the traditional courtly lover. The description of the Squire establishes a pattern that runs throughout the General Prologue, and *The Canterbury Tales*: characters whose roles are defined by their religious or economic functions integrate the cultural ideals of courtly love into their dress, their behavior, and the tales they tell, in order to give a slightly different twist to their roles. Another such character is the Prioress, a

nun who sports a “ Love Conquers All” brooch. The Importance of Company
Many of Chaucer’s characters end their stories by wishing the rest of the “
compaignye, ” or company, well. The Knight ends with “ God save al this
faire compaignye” (3108), and the Reeve with “ God, that sitteth heighe in
magestee, / Save al this compaignye, grete and smale! ” (4322—4323).

Company literally signifies the entire group of people, but Chaucer’s
deliberate choice of this word over other words for describing masses of
people, like the Middle English words for party, mixture, or group, points us
to another major theme that runs throughout The Canterbury Tales.

Company derives from two Latin words, com, or “ with, ” and pane, or “
bread. ” Quite literally, a company is a group of people with whom one eats,
or breaks bread. The word for good friend, or “ companion, ” also comes
from these words. But, in a more abstract sense, company had an economic
connotation. It was the term designated to connote a group of people
engaged in a particular business, as it is used today. The functioning and
well-being of medieval communities, not to mention their overall happiness,
depended upon groups of socially bonded workers in towns and guilds,
known informally as companies. If workers in a guild or on a feudal manor
were not getting along well, they would not produce good work, and the
economy would suffer. They would be unable to bargain, as a modern union
does, for better working conditions and life benefits. Eating together was a
way for guild members to cement friendships, creating a support structure
for their working community. Guilds had their own special dining halls, where
social groups got together to bond, be merry, and form supportive alliances.
When the peasants revolted against their feudal lords in 1381, they were

able to organize themselves well precisely because they had formed these strong social ties through their companies. Company was a leveling concept—an idea created by the working classes that gave them more power and took away some of the nobility's power and tyranny. The company of pilgrims on the way to Canterbury is not a typical example of a tightly networked company, although the five Guildsmen do represent this kind of fraternal union. The pilgrims come from different parts of society—the court, the Church, villages, the feudal manor system. To prevent discord, the pilgrims create an informal company, united by their jobs as storytellers, and by the food and drink the host provides. As far as class distinctions are concerned, they do form a company in the sense that none of them belongs to the nobility, and most have working professions, whether that work be sewing and marriage (the Wife of Bath), entertaining visitors with gourmet food (the Franklin), or tilling the earth (the Plowman). The Corruption of the Church By the late fourteenth century, the Catholic Church, which governed England, Ireland, and the entire continent of Europe, had become extremely wealthy. The cathedrals that grew up around shrines to saints' relics were incredibly expensive to build, and the amount of gold that went into decorating them and equipping them with candlesticks and reliquaries (boxes to hold relics that were more jewel-encrusted than kings' crowns) surpassed the riches in the nobles' coffers. In a century of disease, plague, famine, and scarce labor, the sight of a church ornamented with unused gold seemed unfair to some people, and the Church's preaching against greed suddenly seemed hypocritical, considering its great displays of material wealth. Distaste for the excesses of the Church triggered stories and anecdotes about greedy,

irreligious churchmen who accepted bribes, bribed others, and indulged themselves sensually and gastronomically, while ignoring the poor famished peasants begging at their doors. The religious figures Chaucer represents in *The Canterbury Tales* all deviate in one way or another from what was traditionally expected of them. Generally, their conduct corresponds to common medieval stereotypes, but it is difficult to make any overall statement about Chaucer's position because his narrator is so clearly biased toward some characters—the Monk, for example—and so clearly biased against others, such as the Pardoner. Additionally, the characters are not simply satirical versions of their roles; they are individuals and cannot simply be taken as typical of their professions. The Monk, Prioress, and Friar were all members of the clerical estate. The Monk and the Prioress live in a monastery and a convent, respectively. Both are characterized as figures who seem to prefer the aristocratic to the devotional life. The Prioress's bejeweled rosary seems more like a love token than something expressing her devotion to Christ, and her dainty mannerisms echo the advice given by Guillaume de Lorris in the French romance *Roman de la Rose*, about how women could make themselves attractive to men. The Monk enjoys hunting, a pastime of the nobility, while he disdains study and confinement. The Friar was a member of an order of mendicants, who made their living by traveling around and begging, and accepting money to hear confession. Friars were often seen as threatening and had the reputation of being lecherous, as the Wife of Bath describes in the opening of her tale. The Summoner and the Friar are at each other's throats so frequently in *The Canterbury Tales* because they were in fierce competition in Chaucer's time—summoners,

too, extorted money from people. Overall, the narrator seems to harbor much more hostility for the ecclesiastical officials (the Summoner and the Pardoner) than he does for the clerics. For example, the Monk and the Pardoner possess several traits in common, but the narrator presents them in very different ways. The narrator remembers the shiny baldness of the Monk's head, which suggests that the Monk may have ridden without a hood, but the narrator uses the fact that the Pardoner rides without a hood as proof of his shallow character. The Monk and the Pardoner both give their own opinions of themselves to the narrator—the narrator affirms the Monk's words by repeating them, and his own response, but the narrator mocks the Pardoner for his opinion of himself.

Motifs Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, and literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.

Romance The romance, a tale about knights and ladies incorporating courtly love themes, was a popular literary genre in fourteenth-century literature. The genre included tales of knights rescuing maidens, embarking on quests, and forming bonds with other knights and rulers (kings and queens). In particular, the romances about King Arthur, his queen, Guinevere, and his society of "knights of the round table" were very popular in England. In *The Canterbury Tales*, the *Knight's Tale* incorporates romantic elements in an ancient classical setting, which is a somewhat unusual time and place to set a romance. The *Wife of Bath's Tale* is framed by Arthurian romance, with an unnamed knight of the round table as its unlikely hero, but the tale itself becomes a proto-feminist's moral instruction for domestic behavior. The *Miller's Tale* ridicules the traditional elements of romance by transforming the love between a young wooer and a willing maiden into a

boisterous and violent romp. Fabliaux Fabliaux were comical and often grotesque stories in which the characters most often succeed by means of their sharp wits. Such stories were popular in France and Italy in the fourteenth century. Frequently, the plot turns or climaxes around the most grotesque feature in the story, usually a bodily noise or function. The Miller's Tale is a prime experiment with this motif: Nicholas cleverly tricks the carpenter into spending the night in his barn so that Nicholas can sleep with the carpenter's wife; the finale occurs when Nicholas farts in Absolon's face, only to be burned with a hot poker on his rear end. In the Summoner's Tale, a wealthy man bequeaths a corrupt friar an enormous fart, which the friar divides twelve ways among his brethren. This demonstrates another invention around this motif—that of wittily expanding a grotesque image in an unconventional way. In the case of the Summoner's Tale, the image is of flatulence, but the tale excels in discussing the division of the fart in a highly intellectual (and quite hilarious) manner. Symbols Symbols are objects, characters, figures, and colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts. Springtime The Canterbury Tales opens in April, at the height of spring. The birds are chirping, the flowers blossoming, and people long in their hearts to go on pilgrimages, which combine travel, vacation, and spiritual renewal. The springtime symbolizes r