

CANTERBURY TALES

Chaucer

Overview Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is a collection of 22 plus tales, purportedly narrated by pilgrims on their way to worship at the Shrine of St. Thomas à Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury who was murdered in his Cathedral in 1170. In these tales, written in the last decade of his life, Chaucer created a wide spectrum of social and cultural types, drawn from his imagination but based on a lifelong observation of the human landscape of his time. His initial intent was to write 120 tales in the sequence, which indicates how broad his ambition was.

Story *The Canterbury Tales* is an epic narrative, composed in *rime royale*, and created by the English writer and businessman, Geoffrey Chaucer, starting in the early 1380's. The story concerns a pilgrimage to the shrine of Archbishop Thomas a Beckett, who was murdered in 1170 by henchmen of the English King, with whom Thomas had been in heavy disagreement. Religious tradition lay behind this pilgrimage, to a revered martyr and saint of the Anglican and Catholic Churches, and yet Chaucer has no trouble reaching to the nitty gritty of daily life, as he lets twenty two pilgrims tell their personal stories in The Tabard Inn, a well known way stop on the road from London to Canterbury. As Chaucer never completed this epic we are not confident of its ultimate point. Was he, like Dante a century earlier, leading his pilgrims toward any omega point of understanding, or was he simply painting a broad, almost sociological canvas of the people of his time and acquaintance? Chaucer's own career—a student of law, a spy and a diplomat with substantial travel in Europe, a father of several children, above all a responsible handler of funds—will lead us to consider the fact that Chaucer was above all interested in the characteristic nuances that distinguish individuals, and the tales those individuals tell, in coming to terms with their own lives.

The tale tellers, in Chaucer's world-picture, are a diverse set, many familiar from earlier mediaeval texts, all familiar from daily life in Chaucer's England: the squire, the housewife, the miller, the monk, the prioress, the knight, the pardoner, the parson. Chaucer deploys before us, through their speeches, these various familiar figures of the society of his time, so that each speaker comes before us with a distinct ID attached. Fine difference among the characters, in fact, is one of the startling skills Chaucer seems easy with, excelling in the finesse with which he outlines the attitudes of particular characters to one another, the odd character fashioning his tale to contradict that of his predecessor, the tale of one character, say the Wife of Bath, provoking counter or supporting tales from following speakers.

The General Prologue to the *Tales* features profiles of the characters who will make up the epic, and offers us an overall glimpse of the vision of the poem. Breadth and detail interweave, here, after a fashion that Chaucer makes uniquely his own. The Wife of Bath is finely chiseled: she has had five husbands, each one properly wedded at 'the church door,' in addition to 'other company' when she was young. She is robust, heavily dressed in skirts and head ties—the latter weighing a good 'ten pounds'—and well spurred on horseback. Lusty she was and well skilled in the 'olde daunce' of love. What we touch, as we 'summarize' some the Wife of Bath's features, is Chaucer's ability to nail down details—head clothes, spurs, 'bold was her face and fair and red of hue,' 'gat-toothed' was she—a sexy smile, and on her head a hat as broad as a shield. Inside the details—because Chaucer hews them so skillfully—is the living lusty sympathetic bold personality of the Lady.

Themes

Details. Chaucer is a master of identifying his characters in terms of clothing items, ways of dressing, ways of speaking, neatness, messiness. The theme is that the whole person is one.

Interrelations. The individual is part of the social whole. Not only is each individual trademarked by distinctive clothing, taste in foods, but each individual is given its particular style by its relation to others in its society.

Afterlife. This Platonic view, deeply Chaucer's through his translations of Boethius, infects the whole social-cultural world of the *Tales*.

Characters

The Knight was a 'very perfect gentle knight,' freshly back from fighting in the Crusades but for all his military bearing a true gentleman who had never uttered a curse word, or frightened a lady. He was himself just heading out on pilgrimage.

Nun prioress. The nun prioress is a good natured religious, cheerful to all, neat and precise—from her small well-formed mouth no morsel fell—and wore the proudest of manna on her golden brooch, *Love Conquers All*.

A merchant is among the crowd, an upright and financially astute man. His conversation is all about successful investing, and holding a good place in society. We can really see him, in his beaverskin hat and his tightly clipped on boots!

MAIN CHARACTERS

WIFE OF BATH (in Chaucer's **Prologue to her Tale** and in her **Tale**) (Extravert)

Character The Wife of Bath herself comes down to us as a lusty and dominant extravert, and delights us with her audacious energy for life. She is a Moll Flanders or Fanny Hill, happy with sex, dominant over her men—she marries five times—and lover of life's appetites. However Christian tradition, in which Chaucer was writing, had long viewed marriage as a necessary evil, nothing more, and looked down on sexuality. The Wife of Bath, therefore, reads as a delight to us, though to Chaucer she is something more complex: a delightful but abusively sensuous character.

Parallels The Wife of Bath does not match up easily, for her blend of **extravert** lustiness with defence of womanly rights clouds over the border between Feminism and the realm of women delighting in heterosexual pleasure. The latter delights get pronounced expression in literary characters like Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722) or in the yet lustier *Fanny Hill* (1748) while a bias toward female independence from male-led social-sexual repression is among the Feminists often combined with a stress on Female sexual fulfillment. (Cf. this blended perspective in Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (1970) or in Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which urges women to free themselves from the fake belief that they can be fully realized as housewives.)

Illustrative moments

Husband-loving In the *Prologue to the Wife of Bath's Tale*, The Wife comes on boldly with a defence of her own marital life. She harks back to the saying of Jesus, to the Samaritan woman at the well, that she has had five husbands, 'and he whom now thou hast is not thy husband.' With all respect to the Christ, the Wife of Bath asks what evidence there is for a numerical limit on husbands? Why is she subject to criticism for having had five husbands? Bustuous and lusty, she swings forth right and left, with her defence of marriage and—what God commanded—the multiplying of souls. She is extraverted in the name of God.

Lusty In defending marriage—countering St. Paul's adage that it is better to be celibate than to marry—The Wife of Bath refers to the physical difference between the sexes, and asks why that difference should be so pronounced if we were not intended to procreate? Men are bound to pay their wives their due, and 'with whatever else would he make payment if he didn't use his little instrument?' 'I mean to use my gadget, as generously as my Maker gave it,' she concludes, hiding nothing, exulting in her directness. She piously cites St. Paul's admonition that husbands should follow the wishes of their wives.

Scheming The Wife of Bath devotes a lengthy peroration to the power of a smart woman in marriage. She herself has had two aged husbands, who were sexually lifeless, and she has doted on the inheritance she will have from them. And of course, as she adds, the smart wife can have other men in a pinch: 'for any astute wife, who knows what's what, can make her husband think that black is white, with her own maid as witness in support.' Robust sexual love makes the best marriage, but if the cards don't fall that way, don't sulk: look around, or wait for the inheritance.

Hard-headed Sexual politics in the bed is right up the Wife of Bath's alley. Much as she likes to use 'her little gadget,' she must think foremost of the economics of marriage. 'I wouldn't stop a moment in the bed, if I felt my husband's arm over my side...no, not until his ransom had been paid.' This she says in speaking of her fourth husband, but at that point the Wife of Bath wanders on to the question of age, and of her own loss of bloom. In other words a sadness enters her lustiness. 'But age, alas, that cankers everything, has stripped me of my beauty and spirit.'

Discussion questions

Does it make sense to view the Wife of Bath in terms of mediaeval anti-woman literature, which picked up the Biblical argument that marriage and sex should best be avoided? Does the Wife seem to be answering that perspective, as it is found, say, in Saint Paul?

How does the Wife view her husbands? Did she love some of them? Was she on the whole a 'loving person'?

Is the Wife of Bath? Can you imagine a dialogue between Germaine Greer, a leading American feminist (*The Female Eunuch*, 1970), and The Wife of Bath? What would be their leading points of disagreement?

THE MILLER (in *The Reeve's Tale*) (Unconscientious)

Overview *The Reeve's Tale* is the third story in the *Canterbury Tales*, and takes us into both the economic nitty-gritty and the bawdy of Chaucer's world. The reeve himself is the local administrator of a large estate, who uses dirty tricks to win profit for his boss—and who is therefore well placed to appreciate the chicaneries of a local miller, who is the butt of the tale which follows. The tale itself links closely into one of the tales in Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1353), and perfectly illustrates the rowdy of the *fabliau* tradition.

Character The miller himself was a key figure in Chaucer's culture, standing between the agricultural producer and the consumer of ground wheat and corn, of flour. Much money was to be made in this profession, and the miller of the present tale is a master of every kind of cheating, including simply stealing considerable amounts of the grain brought to him. With his pompous wife and his 'elitely' educated 20-year old daughter, he cuts a pretentious local figure, and will probably seem to us to deserve what he gets. He is at worst unscrupulous, at best naïve.

Parallels In Homer's *Odyssey* Menelaus's cuckolding by Paris, who steals his wife and ignites the epic, is itself mocked by the various scenes in which we see Menelaus and Helen sitting at home at their ase after Helen has been returned to her marital hearth. Agamemnon, to stick with antiquity, may be said to have been cuckolded by Clytemnestra, not to mention having been avenged by his son. In the Renaissance, the theme of horns and cuckolding is amply clear: Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing* (1598) deals constantly with the horns Beatrice is placing on the head of Benedick; the protagonist of Molière's *L'école des femmes* (1622) mocks cuckolds, then becomes one himself; Rabelais' *Gargantua* (1546) abounds to tedium in the acquisition of horns. Indeed the pleasure imagining others or even yourself cuckolded is of such general fascination that it has a name, *Candaulism*, borrowed from a famous scene in Herodotus' *Histories*.

Illustrative moments

Ludicrous The miller lives in a prototypical mill-house setting. 'There runs a brook, and over it a bridge,' says the reeve, preparing us for the rural context in which this pretentious miller conducts his career. Since the whole tale will be concerned with revenge on the miller, it is practical to establish him, from the start, as a good subject for ridicule. 'Round was his face, and flattened was his nose; he had a

skull as hairless as an ape's...' The reeve is leaning hard against this figure, so we will feel gratified by the bitter conclusion of the tale.

Braggart While at first we see the gifts of the miller—'he was as proud and gay as any peacock'—who is good at music and fishing, and can 'turn cups upon a lathe,' we also learn that he is a 'market braggart,' and 'never missed a chance to steal.' He is, in other words, gifted and cunning enough that he will be a plausible candidate for our delight in his downfall at the end of the tale. It adds to this delight that the miller has planfully married the daughter of a priest, who is therefore illegitimate—and who would have had to be married off with a large dowry.

Possessive The miller was crazy about his wife, and possessive of her, and as he was well armed with a dirk, a blade, and a sword it was not likely that anyone would make a pass at this lady. He was also in love with his two children, a robust 20-year old girl—'her buttocks broad, her bosom round and high'-- and a baby of 6 months. His lady, happy to be so desired, 'stank with pride, like water in a ditch,' and the miller basked in the charming status of upright family man, forming, with his brood, a 14-th century version of a pretentious nouveau riche family.

Plunderer The miller has one client, Solar Hall at Cambridge University, 'whose wheat and malt were always ground by him.' It had long been the miller's custom to cheat the Hall, by stealing from the supplies he prepared for them, but in the sick-leave absence of the Hall's manciple, the miller saw an opportunity to dip even deeper into the foodstuffs he prepared for the University. He becomes 'a barefaced plunderer,' eager to multiply his own wealth, and the power and dignity of his family. The Warden of the Hall 'makes a great to do,' but the miller pays no attention.

Discussion questions

Is there any sympathy for the miller, when we see his whole household turned upside down sexually? Do we feel bad that the 'miller's lass' has been screwed three times during the night? We should feel bad, no? Or do we want to share in the action?

Does the bad behavior of the miller, as Chaucer presents it—the man is a cheat, a robber—justify the behavior of the University lads? Or are they painted with the same dirty brush the miller is painted with? Do we even care about the bad treatment of the miller's wife?

We drub the miller with the word 'unconscientious.' Are you satisfied with that header word? What should the miller have done, to protect himself, that would have saved him from the indignities of this tale?

NICHOLAS (in Chaucer's Miller's Prologue and in his Tale) **Unconscientious**

Overview The listeners to the Tales, in the Tabard Inn, have just heard the Knight's Tale, a classic version of Courtly Love, and they are ready for coarser meat. The host of the Inn calls for another tale, and is immediately besieged by the boisterous miller, who insists on telling his story, even though he is 'half-seas over with drink.' The miller prevails, and pulls out a story about a carpenter who is comically cuckolded, in the course of it becoming the point of dispute between two claimants for his beautiful young wife; and in the end finding himself befuddled and cuckolded by his unscrupulous lodger, Nicholas.

Character The carpenter is a 'rich old gaffer who took in paying guests,' and one of those guests, the most fully drawn figure in the tale, is a young lodger named Nicholas, who occupies a room in the carpenter's house. The carpenter's wife is fascinated with Nicholas, as is he with her, and the two make out, and make plans. Those **cynical** plans involve Nicholas' elaborate trick on the houseowner. Also at play is the ingenuity of the unkind lodger, who invents an elaborate Flood tale to win some time in the bed of the lady of the house, and who eventually makes the carpenter the butt of the humor of the whole town.

Parallels The cuckold and the cuckold—who of course fit together—are an immortal pair in world literature. Nicholas could not exceed, in ingenuity, the machinations of Zeus on the trot for Europa, or the passive shaming of Pentheus, in Euripides' *Bacchae* (405 B.C). Shakespeare's drama—that of the Renaissance altogether—is saturated with cuckolding and the fear of it: in *Othello* 1603, where the master fears Iago; in *Much Ado about Nothing*, 1598 (where horns dominate the conversation). The Restoration

drama of Wycherley, as in *The Country Wife* (1675), is preoccupied with a simple trick: the protagonist fakes impotence, and finds his way to the beds of any number of charming, and married, city ladies. Those who enjoy that line of joking may want to add Saint Joseph to their cuckold list, but there opinions differ.

Illustrative moments

Lover Nicholas is a 'needy hard up scholar, learned in the liberal arts.' As a paying guest, he finds himself offered a room in the house of a carpenter—in this tale told by the miller of the Tabard Inn group. The lodger, Nicholas, calculatingly rents a room not far from the room of his host and hostess; who know nothing of Nicholas' widespread (and justified) reputation as a lover. 'For love sub rosa, he'd a great knack, although he looked demure as a maid.' He 'prettily furnished his room and bed with sweet delicious herbs.'

Sharpster Nicholas is not only a lover but a scholar—which throws him into the sharpest contrast with the carpenter. Nicholas was particularly skilled at astrology, and at predicting meteorological events; he was also fastidious about himself, as he was about his bed; he was 'as sweet as ginger,' thus makes another sharp contrast to the carpenter. Nicholas' astrolabe and other instruments were neatly stacked beside his bed, proving him a young guy who had his act exceptionally well put together—though with a gloss of the unconscientious rascal on him.

Artistic Nicholas is also gifted as a musician. At night he would play sweet melodies on a 'splendid psaltery' which hung over his bed. He would fill his room with such song as 'The Angel to the Virgin.' And so this genial student spent his time, living on his friends' money and his own, and presenting to the world the antithesis of the carpenter. The ingenuity of Nicholas' tricks is amply prepared by the care with which he arranges the furnishings of his own life. A dandy, an aesthete, and an unscrupulous trickster, god sent to plague the carpenter.

Ardent One day when the lady's husband is away, Nicholas hits up the carpenter's wife Alisoun, and 'on the quiet caught her by the cunt,' and 'held her by the haunches hard and tight,' with such obvious purpose that she wrenched herself away from him, protesting. He agrees to let her go—she does not really want to—if they can arrange a genuine rendez- vous. They plan for a day when the old guy will be absent. He 'strokes her loins' before leaving Alisoun, and then heads to his room to evolve his unscrupulous plot.

Discussion questions

Does Nicholas feel any pity, or even sympathy, for the gulled carpenter? Or does that braggadocio deserve whatever he gets?

Does Nicholas devise his seduction plan from day one in his lodgings, or does the plan evolve? How calculatedly unconscientious is Nicholas?

Is Nicholas' learning and artistry a calculated put on, with which from the start he plans to win the carpenter's daughter?

THE PARDONER (unconscientious)

Overview The *Pardoner's Tale*, in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (1387-1400) follows the very downbeat *Physician's Tale*, and precedes *The Shipman's Tale*; the Pardoner's Tale is a response to the host's request for a cheerful narration, after the gruesome story of the Physician. We must judge for ourselves whether the host's request is satisfied: the pardoner himself (*pardoner: a mediaeval priest tasked with collecting indulgences or free will offerings*) is an ambiguous person with an ambiguous story to tell. As a man of the cloth he stresses constantly that money is the root of all evil, and yet in his self-descriptions he presents himself as full of all the vices, especially the love of money. Chaucer keeps us on our toes with this one!

Character The pardoner, as observed above, is not himself virtuous, in fact he is cynically content with his vices. As he describes himself, at the host's request, we see that he is a con man with a sleeveful of tricks, by which he keeps himself comfortable: he is a collector and seller of fake 'relics,' power-giving

remains of holy men and women who have passed; holy bones; and fast talking stories with which he can convince a widow to share her inheritance with him. For all that, however, he constantly mutters the apothegm, *money is the root of all evil*, and generally comes on pious, especially when he tells his tale of the three hoodlums who decided to kill Death, but instead killed one another. The pardoner is that consecrated mediaeval cleric whose own faults do not undermine the validity of the sound doctrine he preaches.

Parallels Chaucer's multi angled *Pardoner's Tale* invites parallels of several sorts. Try these: Odysseus, in the cave of the Cyclops (in the *Odyssey*), is a master con man who rivals the pardoner in deception—pulling the wool over Cyclops' eye, by convincing the bestial creature that no one (nobody) is in his cave, and then blinding him; Ingmar Bergman, in the *Seventh Seal (1957)*, creates a dreadful filmic Death, dressed in a blackness the pardoner summons up in the 'old man's' direction-giving to the bad guys; the bilingual German novelist B.Traven, in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre (1927)*, takes us scorchingly through a tale of money hunger among three treasure hunters who ultimately destroy one another.

Illustrative moments

Ambiguity The pardoner's tale targets three unsavory guys who find themselves in the taverns of Flanders. 'In Flanders there was a company of young folk that amidst rioting and gambling gave themselves up to folly in the taverns.' With this preface, the pardoner, who has been describing his own dubious life-practice, adopts the moral high road. His tone, carefully calculated, is Chaucer's own trick, to set us wondering what this ambiguous text is all about. The pardoner is, after all, expected to provide some upbeat, and yet he is with considerable aplomb taking us straight into the underworld. What is this trip we are taking?

Vices The pardoner is off and running, with an account of the vices favored by such as the 'three unsavory guys' in Flanders. He opens with gambling and gluttony, describing the kinds of savory sauces dear to the stomach-centered no-good, then goes on to hazardry, or gambling—the impious betting on God's plan—'the very mother of lies and deceit and cursed foreswearing.' Chaucer continues hereby to tease us with sermonizing from a pardoner who has introduced himself quite proudly as a rogue. This tease, we may say, is the 'cheerful tale' the host of the Tabard Inn has called for. Will he be satisfied?

Tale The three 'unsavory guys'—as the pardoner's tale goes on to relate--take off through the countryside, their quest to kill Death—the obvious enemy of pleasure. The three guys come on an old man, who directs them to a tree under which Death will be sitting. 'The revellers hastened til 'they came to that tree, and there they found coins in fine round gold, well nigh eight bushels of florins.' (In a sense it was death that they found, as the pardoner has insisted in his prefatory references to money as the root of all evil.) The upshot of the discovery of this cache is that the three unsavory buffoons manage to kill one another off completely, until nothing, literally, remains of their quest to kill Death except their own deaths. Money and death have been equated, and the search for either is neither more nor less than fatal.

Complex The pardoner, as he has told us about himself, has a checkered past of which he has no shame. He delights in his skills as a con man, and yet, when called upon to produce a tale which will illustrate the dangers of playing fast and easy with the virtues, he is adept and subtle. It is in fact, of course, Chaucer—entering his own text as the persona of the pardoner—who is reflecting moralistically onto the life-practice of the pardoner. That life-practice, as with more space we could have let Chaucer show us, included fascinating lack of sexual self-confidence, in displaying which the pardoner distinguishes himself as a tale teller well disposed to boosting his own ego as a con artist.

Discussion questions

Do you think the host of the Tabard Inn will have been pleased with the change of tone and pace provided by the Pardoner's Tale?

What is the pardoner's attitude toward himself? Is he a moralist and proud of it? Or a scoundrel?

Do you think the pardoner is making a conscious comparison between money as the root of all evil, and the coins which lie at the root of the tree to which the 'old man' directs the three bad guys? If so, what is the comparison?

PALAMON (in *The Knight's Tale*) **Emotional**

Overview *The Knight's Tale* is a vignette (or highly verbal video) of the kind of situation that might have arisen in mediaeval Europe. Chaucer was of course a pre-modern urbanite, a diplomat and bureaucrat, and a sophisticate around town when he decided to turn to a series of tales, *The Canterbury Tales*. In those tales he could draw special attention to lifestyles which were trend-setting in the 12th and 13th centuries: *The Knight's Tale* goes to the heart of those already romanticized cultures, a century plus in Chaucer's past, with their traits of courtly love and chivalry.

Character Palamon is one of two knightly cousins, who find themselves imprisoned in the palace cell block of Lord Theseus of Athens, after the victory of that Lord over King Creon. Palamon (like his cousin) is in part a generic chivalrous knight, like his cousin, but also in part a figure out of courtly love, profoundly devoted to his *bien-aimée*. Circumstances place Palamon at a unique angle to the main narrative—he remains longer in prison than his cousin—and he prevails (thanks to divine intervention) in the battle to win Theseus' daughter Emily.

Parallels Knightly heroes abound in mediaeval literature—and into the Renaissance, where a gentleman like Sir Walter Raleigh shone like a latter day knight—courteous and brave. Indeed Beowulf himself extends the vital timeframe for the knights, intent as he was on expelling gross evil from Britain. The great names in literary knightliness cluster around the Chaucerian period, and would include Lancelot and Parzifal, questers for the Grail and the purity of Christ's example, or Roland or El Cid, whom Romance epic transformed out of history into universality.

Illustrative Moments

Desolate 'And Palamon, and his friend Arcita, are in a tower in misery and grief...' Thus Palamon appears to us—a figure viewed very much from the outside, little exploration of his unique perceptions or attitudes. Not long before, the bodies of these two cousins had been extracted from a pile of nearly dead warriors, after Theseus' victory over the forces of Creon. Throughout the start of the Tale, the two cousins are almost indistinguishable: two noble knights in deep trouble.

Amazed Palamon walks disconsolately through the chambers of his palace prison. He bemoans his fate, and sees no way ever to escape from his wretched lot. As he laments, however, his eyes fall on a beautiful woman—'I don't know if she's woman or goddess'—and he emits a cry 'as though he had been bitten to the heart.' His cry is an expression of amazement and passion, and at once he falls on his knees before the goddess Venus, begging for some way to escape from prison.

Outraged As Palamon swoons, at the sight of the gorgeous daughter of King Theseus, Arcita too looks out the window, and exclaims, just like his cousin, that he has never before seen such beauty. At this statement, Palamon goes wild: 'I loved her first and told you my desire,' says Palamon to his cousin, thereby introducing his fidelity to the chivalric tradition, which dictates that one knight is sworn not to interfere with the love relations of a fellow knight. Palamon belongs deeply to his code. He is genuinely outraged.

Jealous Not much later, Arcita is freed from prison—an old friend of Theseus intervenes on his behalf—on the condition that he will leave Theseus' realm forever. When Palamon learns that his cousin has been freed, 'the fire of jealousy awoke within his breast,' for he imagined that now Arcita would be in a position to get in touch with Emily. He bemoans man's wretched fate, and the indifference of destiny to human desire. He feels he will never again breathe freely in the outside air.

Discussion questions

Do we sympathize with Palamon's emotions, or simply observe them from the outside?

What is Chaucer's attitude toward the chivalric struggle between the two cousins? Is he ironic—looking back on the mediaeval world, which he is no longer fully living in?

What is the trigger for Palamon's 'love at first sight'? Is he simply stir-crazy, or is he overwhelmed by beauty, the way Dante was by Beatrice?