

# *The Canterbury Tales*

**By Geoffrey Chaucer**

**1340?--1400**

# A Few Significant Facts!

- **Completed during the third, mature phase of Chaucer's writing career, the end of 1300s.**
- **Written in English (Middle English) at a time when French remained the language of England's royal court and members of the English upper-class.**
- **Established English as the equal to the French language in creating literature.**

- Established the English literary tradition (future English authors would write in English, influenced by Chaucer's works).
- *The Canterbury Tales* begun about 1386 and never completed.
- The *Prologue* and 24 tales were completed.

# The Basic Premise:

- **A group of religious pilgrims are making their way to the shrine of Saint Thomas á Becket, the martyred Archbishop of Canterbury who was assassinated in 1170 by knights of King Henry II.**
- **The shrine is the cathedral in Canterbury, 55 miles southeast of London, the scene of Becket's murder.**

The pilgrims (about 29 people) represent **a cross-section of English society** in Chaucer's time, with representatives of the **three main social classes:**

- the aristocracy,
- the clergy,
- the common people (upper-, middle-, and lower- class commoners)

- The pilgrims become acquainted when they all stop for the night at **The Tabard**, an inn in **Southwark**, a London suburb at that time.
- Their host at the inn, **Harry Bailey**, urges them to travel together and decides to join them.
- To make the journey more entertaining, Bailey suggests each pilgrim tell **two stories on the way** to Canterbury and **two on the way back**.
- **Do the math!** That's a lot of stories and probably explains why *The Canterbury Tales* is incomplete!

- **According to Bailey, the pilgrim who tells the best story will be rewarded with a feast given by the other pilgrims.**
- **Bailey himself will judge the storytelling competition. (Only fair—it is his idea.)**
- **The next morning, the group sets out.**
- **The knight tells the first tale, followed by 23 other stories.**

# Literary Structure in *The Canterbury Tales*

- *The Canterbury Tales* is an example of a “**frame tale**” (numerous stories are found inside the “frame” of the basic premise).
- The *Prologue* serves to establish the “frame” and to introduce the various pilgrims.
  - The pilgrims are identified as to their **vocations, backgrounds, and personalities**.
  - Their **physical descriptions** are given, as well, so that the reader can see them clearly.



- Each pilgrim who tells a story begins by saying a few words (or many words!), revealing more about himself.
- Following this, the pilgrim tells the story.
- In the complete collection, there usually are **links** (transition passages) that guide the reader from one character and his story to the next.
- The stories themselves reveal even more about the pilgrims telling them. (The story reflects the character of the person choosing to tell it.)

## The result?

*The Canterbury Tales* gives us . . .

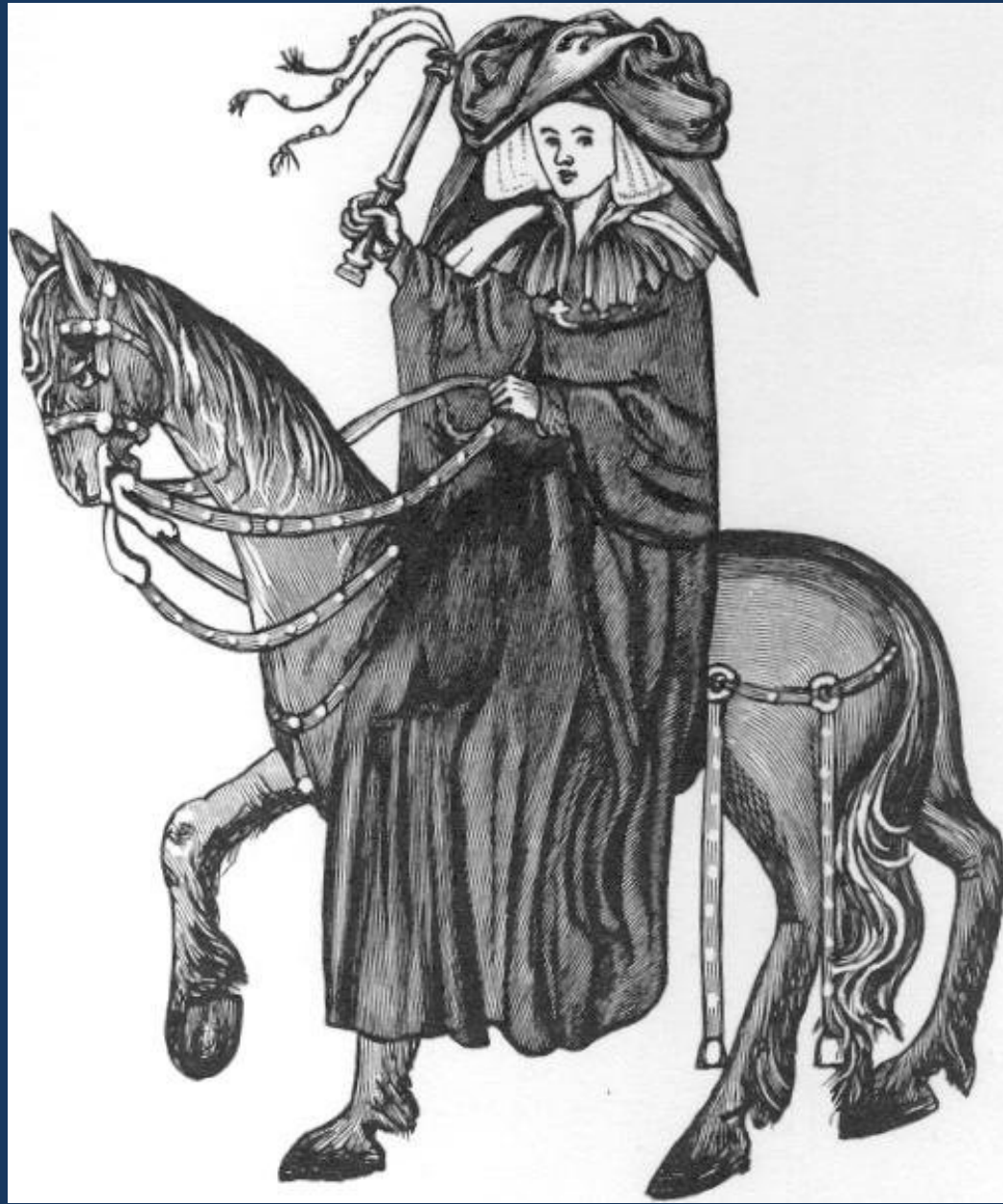
- **A great understanding of English society at the time of Chaucer.**
- **Rich portraits of some very different kinds of people and the roles they play in society.**
- **Many insights into human nature—the good, the bad, and the ugly!**
- **And some really hilarious stories (some quite racy), along with other stories that are very instructive or full of adventure.**

To read *The Canterbury Tales*,  
with its sharp characterizations,  
rich descriptions, and engrossing stories,  
is to spend time in 14<sup>th</sup> century England  
and get a *real feel* for what life was like  
during the days of Geoffrey Chaucer.

**And now,  
a few pictures . . .**



Detail of a miniature of Lydgate and pilgrims on the road to Canterbury, at the beginning of the prologue of the *Siege of Thebes*.  
Attributed to Gerard Horenbout. c. 1516-1523.  
British Library MS Royal 18 D II f. 148.



Enygnt

**L**ang domos postius Scythice post aspera gentis  
 Lpella Langgeis re

These bigneth the Enygntes tale

**N**ow as olde stories tellen us  
 Was a Dur of dighte thesere  
 Of Athens he was lord and gouernour  
 And in his tyme was a compejour  
 That genery was they noon vnder the soune  
 Ful many a yere contree hadde he soune

What with his wysdom and his chualtye  
 he conquered al the regne of ffraunce  
 That shuld be that helpe of Scythia  
 And dedde the queene ypolita

And bryghte his honur all hym in his contree  
 With mychel glorie and gret condempnyte  
 And eek by fayne dustre Emulye  
 And thus with quene and with melodye  
 Lete that noble Dur to Athens yde  
 And all his hoost in Agues hym byde  
 And eek if it were to long to seene  
 I shalde yow haue told fully the manere  
 How he was the regne of ffraunce  
 By thesere and by his chualtye  
 And of the gret battelle for the nonce  
 Between Athens and Amaronce  
 And how asseges was ypolita  
 The fayne pappy queene of Scythia  
 And of the fepe of was at his weddyng  
 And of the requyt at his houm comyng  
 But al that thyng I moot ad noon forseie  
 I haue goddoot a luge feeld to seie  
 And maye been the oye in my planght  
 The remenant of the tale is long ynough  
 I wol nat letten eek noon of this jante  
 Nat euery felawe telle his tale aboute  
 And nat ee noon. I ho shal the opeyng  
 And they I seite. I wol aseyen bignure

**H**is Dur of eshou I make mencoun  
 When he was come almost yn to the toum  
 In al his wale and in his wooste pde  
 He was waynt he raise his eye a seie  
 Where that they fueded in the weye  
 A compejour of ladyes. there and there

M. D. N. A. T.





Portrait of Chaucer as a Canterbury pilgrim, from the Ellesmere manuscript of The Canterbury Tales.





Canterbury Cathedral