



# CANTERBURY TALES

## Background:

A group of pilgrims are journeying to the grave of **Thomas a Becket** and stop at the **Tabard Inn**. The innkeeper decides to accompany them on the remainder of their journey and to act as a judge for a storytelling competition. They each agree to tell 4 tales, two on the way there and two on the way back. In the end each traveler tells only one tale and no winner is chosen. The innkeeper closes the tales by apologizing for any material that may have been offensive.

## Tales:

These tales are not in the order they appear in the work; they are in a more quiz-bowl relevant order, with more frequently-asked tales at the beginning.

- **The Knight's** -- Cousins **Arcite** and **Palamon** are imprisoned by Theseus, duke of Athens. While in prison they see **Emily** and both fall in love. Eventually they are released from prison, but return to Athens to seek the hand of Emily. They end up fighting a duel for her that Arcite wins, but he dies before he can claim the prize and so Emily marries Palamon.
- **The Nun's Priest's** -- **Chanticleer**, a rooster, is disturbed by a dream of his own demise at the jaws of a fox. He wakes his favorite wife, **Pertilote**, and tells her of his dream, which she dismisses as indigestion. A fox, **Sir Russell**, waits for Chanticleer and plays to his pride, saying he would love to hear the rooster crow. Chanticleer obliges him, and the fox grabs the rooster around the throat and runs off into the woods. Chanticleer then plays the fox, persuading him to turn and talk to the pursuers. The fox drops Chanticleer to gloat and the rooster flies up a tree and will not again be tricked by the fox.
- **The Wife of Bath's** -- Better known for the teller's own personality. The wife of Bath has been married many times and her husbands die. Her tale is continually interrupted with dialogue from the other travelers. In her tale an Arthurian knight rapes a woman in the field. For his punishment the queen sends him on a quest, giving him a year to discover what it is women want most. Failing to find the answer he encounters an old hag on the way back to the queen's palace. The hag offers to spare the knight's life by giving him the answer, if he will swear to grant her request. He agrees and she tells him the answer is for women to have sovereignty. She then asks him to marry her and they are wed despite his protests. When he expresses his dissatisfaction at her ugliness and low birth she asks whether he would prefer her to

be ugly and faithful or beautiful and unfaithful. He tells her to decide and she becomes beautiful and faithful.

- **The Miller's** -- The miller insisted on telling his tale though drunk. The tale is vulgar and displeasing to the rest of the company. It deals with the student **Nicholas** who wishes to spend the night with his landlord's wife, **Alison**. To do so he convinced the landlord, John, that there is a flood coming and that he and his wife must put themselves in tubs suspended from the barn roof. Alison and Nicholas then sneak off. Another student, **Absolon**, comes to a peep hole and, not knowing what is going on, asks for a kiss. Ribaldry ensues, ending with Nicholas screaming for help because Absolon has burned his bottom, which wakes John who falls from the rafters and is considered mad by the townspeople.
- **The Reeve's** -- considered the miller's tale a mockery of his former profession (carpentry) and tells his tale to return the insult. Two students, **John** and **Alan** are sent to the thieving miller **Symkyn** to try and catch him stealing. Realizing their intent, the miller unties their horse and steals all of their flour while they chase the horse. Returning late in the evening, the students offer to pay for lodging and are put up in the same room as the miller, his wife, his daughter, and baby. By trickery, Alan sleeps with the daughter, while John sleeps with the Miller's wife. In the morning, with the help of the Miller's daughter **Malyne**, they escape the Miller's wrath with the flour cake, the horse, and without paying.
- **The Clerk's** -- the clerk is one of the few characters in the *Tales* portrayed in a good light. He is presented as a model student. The Clerk's tale deals with a marquis, **Walter of Saluzzo**. Walter is well loved by his subjects, and to assuage their fears for the future by providing an heir he marries the fair peasant girl **Griselda**. He decides to test her loyalty, and has their first daughter taken away, though Griselda believes she has been killed. When she has a son, he too is taken away. Walter then obtains a papal annulment (divorce) and asks Griselda to help arrange his new marriage. He has the children brought back from Bologna, pretending the daughter is his intended bride. Eventually he reveals the truth to Griselda and they live happily ever after.
- **The Franklin's** -- A knight, **Arveragus**, marries his love, **Dorigen**, and they promise to have an equal partnership, although Arveragus will appear to be in charge. When Arveragus goes to England, Dorigen is approached with overtures of love by **Aurelius**. She says she will give him what he wishes if he will remove the rocks she fears will crash her husband's ship. Arveragus returns, but soon after Aurelius commissions a magician to create the illusion that the rocks have been removed. Disturbed, Dorigen reveals her bargain to Arveragus, who tells her that she must keep her promise to Aurelius. Aurelius, moved by the act of charity, releases Dorigen from her promise. Moved by Aurelius's story, the magician releases him from his large debt.
- **The Merchant's** -- The elderly **January** wishes to marry, and given advice by his brothers Placebo and Justinus, decides to do so. He weds the beautiful and much younger **May**, for whom he has a lustful attraction. Soon afterwards however, he becomes blind and develops a more meaningful relationship with her. Meanwhile, May and her lover, **Damyan**, have decided to have an affair, which they carry out in a pear tree above January's head. Interfering, Pluto returns January's sight, but Proserpine gives May the ability to talk her way out of trouble. May and January presumably live happily after that.

- **The Pardoner's** -- Three men set out to kill death. An old man tells them that they can find him at the base of a tree. Reaching the tree they find a pile of gold and forget about their original quest. One is sent to get provisions and buys poisoned wine while the others plot his death. They kill him when he returns and drink the poison wine and die also.
- **The Prioress's** -- A widow's son memorizes the first line of a hymn to the Virgin Mary. As he is walking through the Jewish quarter of his town the devil incites the Jews to kill the boy. Finding his body on the compost heap, the Christians of the city have the Jews drawn and quartered. The boy's body however, is still singing the hymn. He says that although his throat has been cut Mary laid a grain of sand on his tongue and he can't stop singing until it is removed.
- **The Friar's** -- an attack on the profession of summoner, of which he has no particular love. Follows a Summoner and a Yeoman, who is really a daemon from hell and takes the Summoner to hell at the end of the story.
- **The Summoner's** -- a satirical attack on friars (and a response to the friar's mocking tale of a Summoner) the summoner's tale is actually several short stories, all uncomplimentary to friars. One involves a sick man giving a friar a fart which he says must be shared equally among the 13 friars of the order.
- **Chaucer's** -- (there is a character in the *Tales* named Geoffrey Chaucer) **Sir Thopas** goes on a quest to find his elf queen, but is obstructed by a run in with the giant **Sir Oliphant**. The tale is cut short by the host.
- **The Cook's** -- unfinished. Main character is Perkyn (Perkin)
- **The Man of Law's** -- Christian princess, Cunstance (Constance) is betrothed to a Muslim sultan, whom she must convert to Christianity.
- **The Squire's** -- Deals with a king, Cambusin, and his daughter Canace, who finds a falcon who complains of being left by her mate for a lowly kite. Is interrupted midway through by the Franklin.
- **The Physician's** -- Tells the story of Roman noble Virginius, his daughter Virginia, and the judge Apius.
- **The Monk's** -- seventeen tragic tales. People in the tales include Lucifer, Adam, Samson, Hercules, Nebuchadnezzar, Nero, Julius Caesar, and others.