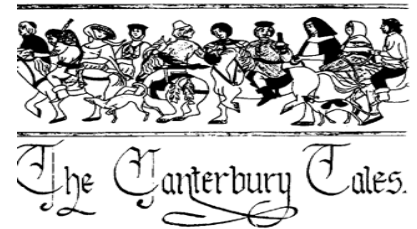


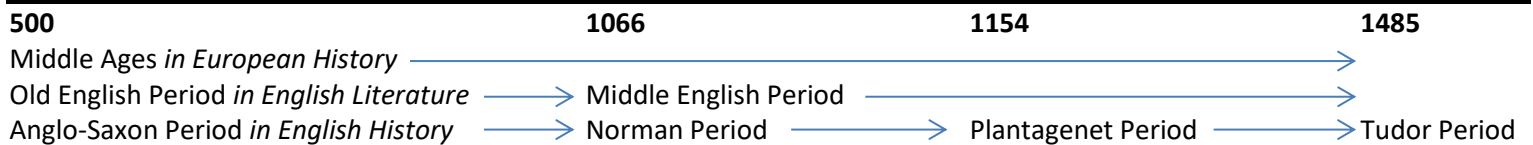
British Literature Lecture 04



Middle Ages – 500 (Fall of Rome) to 1500 (Protestant Reformation/Renaissance/Turkish invasion of Constantinople)

Middle English Period was the second half of Middle Ages in England – 1066 to 1485

- From Normand Invasion of 1066
- To Battle of Bosworth of 1485 marking the end of the War of the Roses and the beginning of the Tudor Reign



Historical Context

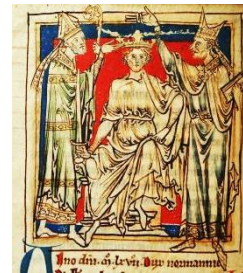
Battle of Hastings - 1066

- Bayeux Tapestry
- William the Conqueror introduced feudalism to England
 - Feudalism based on the Lord and Vassal relationship

Henry II ruled 1154 - 1189

Henry II is known for three main things:

- Rule by precedent – a basis for English & American common law
- Trial by Jury
- Thomas 'a Becket murder



Richard the Lionhearted ruled 1189 – 1199

- Son of Henry IIand a famous Crusader!
- The famous Third Crusade: 1189 – 1192 (All the crusades took place from 1095 – 1291)



Infamous **King John** ruled 1199 - 1216

- Son of Henry II and little brother of Richard
- Forced by barons to sign Magna Carta (1215) – the foundation of our founding documents

Hundred Years War 1337 - 1453

- England versus France - House of Valois in France versus House of Plantagenet in England
- Direct result of feudal system
- Longbows & Gunpowder
- Joan of Arc



During those years of the Hundred Years War many things happened:

- **Black Death** / Bubonic Plague – 1348 - 1349
- **John Wycliffe** challenges the organized church – 1324 - 1384
- Invention of the movable-type **Printing Press!** :-D



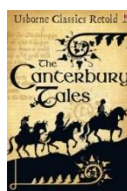
War of Roses (about 1455 – 1485)

- Civil War in England lasting on and off for about thirty years
- House of Lancaster versus House of York – vying for the throne – both sides had claims
- Ended with Battle of Bosworth – Richard III died in battle against Henry VII
- Houses were united with marriage of Henry VII (Lancaster) and Elizabeth of York (niece of Richard III)
- Elizabeth didn't mind marrying the "enemy of the Yorks – her uncle had (probably) had her little brothers killed!

This week's Authors:

Geoffrey Chaucer

Canterbury Tales



Geoffrey Chaucer – Canterbury Tales

Features

Frame Story

- It's just like in *1001 Nights*, where Scheherazade must tell a new story every night to delay her execution. It's also similar to Boccaccio's *Decameron*, which compiles the 100 stories told during an excursion from Florence to avoid the Black Plague that's devastating the city. Like the *Decameron* on which Chaucer modeled his tales, all of these classic works of literature have at least one thing in common: the **frame story**.

Social Satire

- Social satire is a major feature of *The Canterbury Tales*.
- The medieval society had strict class divisions: the nobility, the church, the new middle class, and the peasantry.
- Chaucer's satire targets all segments of society.
- He addresses medieval social issues, human immorality, and depraved hearts at all levels of society.
- Social satire in *The Nun's Priest's Tale* - satirizes courtly love using the rooster Chanticleer and his love Dame Partlet.
- *The Wife of Bath's Tale* satirizes how people use the Bible to justify their behavior. The wife interprets the Bible verses in her own way to support her behavior and way of life – such as her five marriages.

Poetry or prose?

A combination of both

Poetic Style

- The majority of *The Canterbury Tales* is written in **verse**, meaning that poetic elements such as a particular rhythm and rhyme pattern are utilized.
- Chaucer wrote his verse with lines that contain ten syllables and often had rhyming pairs of lines called **couplets**.
- The **meter**, or rhythm, formed with ten syllables per line eventually evolved into the meter called **iambic pentameter**, the meter that Shakespeare wrote his plays in.

Sections in Prose

- Though the majority of the writing in *The Canterbury Tales* is in verse and is usually categorized as poetry, there are **two tales** that are written in **prose**, or non-poetic writing with no rhythm, rhyme, or other poetic structures.
- These two stories are "The Parson's Tale" and "The Tale of Melibee." Chaucer's choice to switch from poetry to prose probably is a reflection on the characters telling the story.

Themes

False Virtue vs True Virtue

Chivalric Code

- The first tale in *The Canterbury Tales* is the Knight's tale. The first pilgrim described in the general prologue is also the Knight. It is not certain whether Chaucer wrote about the Knight and his son the Squire to intentionally show the dramatic differences between the Knight and the corrupt church. Regardless, it does provide a stark contrast.
- The **chivalric code** of the Middle Ages had many rules that focused on **piety and faith**. Although knights were defenders and fighters in battles, they **fought for God**. Another set of rules covered how to take care of and fight for those who could not, like women, children, and the sick. A knight's job was to be a shining example of God and morality, which points to Chaucer's need to discuss and compare religion within his novel.

The Knight and the Squire

- The Knight is one of the few characters not ironically discussed or mocked by the narrator or by Harry Bailly.
- The Knight is described by the inn's host as 'valiant' and a lover of chivalry. Bailly sees the Knight as an example of chivalry and all of its requirements.
- The description of the Knight is completely opposite to most of the religious figures on the journey. He fights battle after battle, fighting for his Lord, and chooses humility over vanity.
- Though the Knight is not a religious figure like the Friar, he is stronger in faith and displays more piety than those employed by the church.
- This theme is prevalent in Chaucer's novel; the people who focus on riches and are well-clothed (like the Friar and Monk) are also corrupt.

- The men who wear functional, non-fancy clothing are the honest ones, including the Knight and the Parson.
- Chivalry is emphasized when the Knight's deeds are described -- the Knight has won so many battles and accomplished so much in his profession that he has the ability to brag, yet he does not. He is also humble and treats all with respect, no matter who they are.
- The Knight's son (the Squire) also exemplifies elements of chivalry. The Squire is kind and extremely respectful to his father and others. He's gone to battle with his father and shown talent in war, jousting, and courtly love, all of which are chivalric ideals.

Social Class

- Class or status is a notable theme in *The Canterbury Tales*. This theme is explored through the [comparison](#) of the people who belong to a better class with those who attempt to appear as an upper class.
- Chaucer writes heavily about class in *The Canterbury Tales*. Most often, class is explored by contrasting characters who try to appear of a better class than they really are with characters who embrace their social class. For example, Chaucer paints the Prioress (a nun) as a woman who attempts to keep up the appearance of a well-to-do woman; however, because she is a member of the church, her social class is lower than she'd like others to see her in. She makes a point to show excellent manners to appear of a different rank than her actual profession.
- To highlight issues with social class and ranking, Chaucer contrasts the Prioress's behavior and appearance with that of the Parson, a clergyman who dresses and behaves according to his profession and class.

Religious Corruption

- Religious corruption is one of the largest themes in *The Canterbury Tales*. The main idea in the corruptible characters seems to be that they're all too preoccupied with something secular to spend too much time on faith.
- The Friar is more focused on money and horses than taking care of his monastery. He also likes to seduce women, then find them husbands to keep from getting in trouble.
- The Prioress is preoccupied trying to be the court lady, instead of trying to help her nunnery.
- The Pardoner is proud of his ability to get coin for providing physical pardons for sins, and he even tries to sell his relics to the pilgrims on the way to see a shrine of a martyr; and finally
- The Monk, who was supposed to pledge his life to poverty, instead takes money for forgiveness, refuses to help the poor, and pays other beggars to leave certain areas alone so that he will get all the money.
- Although most of the religious characters appear to show the corruption of the church and its people, there are two characters that Chaucer creates to show faith as he seems to believe it should be. The two characters we hear from that are not belittled for their lack of faith is the Nun's Priest and the Parson.
- The Nun's Priest doesn't have almost any character development; all we hear about is his tale about Chanticleer, the rooster.
- However, we do get to hear about the Parson. A parson is a preacher of a church that is not held to the standard or responsibilities of the larger church of Catholicism in England and Ireland during those days. So, the Parson ran a small church but did not have the large institutional corruption that Chaucer infers throughout in the other characters.
- Instead, the Parson believes he is meant to take care of his people and that he has a responsibility to be a good example for the church.
- During the prologue, the Host talks about the Parson without teasing and has apparent respect for this figure, and respect for faith in the simpler forms.
- The Parson's Tale was a sermon, showing that even in his frivolity he focused on faith and how to help people get to heaven.
- The main purpose of these contradictions is to show that religion and spirituality of the times weren't ideal. Members of the church weren't following their oaths, and the use of religious artifacts were used to control religious followers. Chaucer has artistically painted the picture of the custodians of the church having spoiled the true spirit of Christianity.
- In Chaucer's time, his work may have been read as a call to action among citizens to reevaluate the corruption of the church due to its powerful position in society.

Lies & Deception

- Lies and deception are prominent themes in the poem. Many characters present a façade that doesn't speak to the truth of their position. The revelation of these characters' true identities is done through the perspective of the narrator. Not only do many of the characters lie about their position in society, but they use deception to make a living.

- First, the Merchant, much like the Prioress, hides his true status from the others by pretending to be a financially stable person, but as the narrator reveals, the Merchant is in debt. The Merchant wants everyone to think that he is well-off by wearing a fancy coat and a 'Flemish beaver hat', but according to the narrator, the Merchant is poor and has to continue borrowing from others in order to maintain his way of life.
- While the Prioress and the Merchant are lying to appear of a higher social ranking, some characters in *Canterbury Tales* go beyond superficial deceit. For example, the Miller and the Pardoner commit crimes to make a living. The Miller sells his flour at three times the cost of the market rate and he cuts the flour with filler, so his customers aren't getting a genuine product.
- Likewise, the Pardoner sells fake relics to folks he comes across. He tells his clients that the relics are genuine and that they possess religious powers. For example, he claims to have stones touched by Jesus Christ, but really, 'he hadde pigges bones.'

Helpful Links

The Canterbury Tales: Background & History (6:21 mins)

<https://study.com/academy/lesson/the-canterbury-tales-background-history.html>

For What Purpose Did Chaucer Write The Canterbury Tales? (6:21 mins)

<https://study.com/academy/lesson/for-what-purpose-did-chaucer-write-the-canterbury-tales.html>

What Is the Main Frame Story of The Canterbury Tales? (3:02 mins)

<https://study.com/academy/lesson/what-is-the-main-frame-story-of-the-canterbury-tales.html>

Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer (11:01 mins)

<https://study.com/academy/lesson/canterbury-tales-by-geoffrey-chaucer.html>