

## THE CANTERBURY TALES – CHARACTER TALES

### THE KNIGHT'S PROLOGUE

The shrine of St. Thomas a Becket to which the pilgrims are going was reputed to have great healing qualities. Thus, some of the pilgrims are undoubtedly going for health rather than religious reasons. For example, The Wife of Bath was somewhat deaf, The Pardoner was beardless, The Cook had a sore, The Summoner had boils and other skin trouble, The Miller had a awful wart on his nose, The Reeve was choleric, etc.

### THE KNIGHT'S TALE

#### PART I

Long ago there was once a Duke called Theseus who was the Lord and Governor of Athens. He was also a great soldier who vanquished every foe he met. Among his victims was a realm once known as Scythia, ruled by women called Amazons. Returning home with his amazon wife Hippolyta and her sister, Emelye, Theseus met a group of women dressed in black who were weeping and wailing. They told how each had been a queen or duchess, but had lost their husbands during the siege of Thebes. The cruel tyrant Creon now plans to dishonor the dead bodies.

The Duke, smitten with rage and pity, ordered Queen Hippolyta and her beautiful sister Emelye to return to Athens where they were to dwell in peace. Then, in anger, the Duke and his army marched on Thebes. There, on a chosen field of battle, King Creon was slain and the bones of their dead husbands were restored to the mourning ladies.

After the battle was over, two young warriors of Thebes, fearfully wounded, were brought before Theseus. He recognized them as young men of noble birth and was informed they were royal knights named Arcite and Palamon. In appearance, the two knights were very similar, being the sons of two sisters. Theseus ordered that they be returned to Athens as prisoners who could not be ransomed for any sum. There were, he said, to be his prisoners in perpetuity.

Several years passed by, and Arcite and Palamon lay in the prison tower in grief and anguish. On a fair morning in May, however, the beautiful Emelye arose and wandered happily about in her garden, which was adjacent to the prison tower.

At that moment, Palamon, the sorrowful prisoner, glanced down through the prison bars and saw the beautiful Emelye. He cried out in pain. Arcite, alarmed, asked him what evil had befallen him. Palamon replied that the beauty of the young lady had caused him to cry out. Arcite's curiosity was aroused and he peered from the tower window. When he saw the fair Emelye, he cried out that unless he could see her everyday he would die.

When Palamon heard this, he was enraged. After all, he cried to Arcite, I found her first. To counter his argument, Arcite maintains that he loved her first. Thus, even though they are kin and had sworn eternal friendship, they decided that in love it is every man for himself. And so the argument continued until their friendship gave way to hostility.

About this time, a famous Duke called Perotheus, a friend of both Theseus and Arcite, arrived in Athens. He implored Duke Theseus to release Arcite on the condition that Arcite would leave Athens forever, and if he happened to return, he would be immediately beheaded.

Arcite then bemoans his fate. Even though he is now in prison, he can catch a glimpse of his beloved, but in banishment, he will never again see the fair Emelye. He acknowledges that Palamon is the winner since he can remain in prison and near to Emelye. But Palamon is equally disturbed because he thinks that Arcite can raise an army in exile, return to Athens and capture the fair Emelye. Chaucer then asks the reader which position is worse, that of Arcite or Palamon.

#### PART II

Arcite returned to Thebes where he lived for two years moaning his hard fate. His lamenting began to change his physical appearance. One night a vision appeared before him and urged him to return to Athens and the fair Emelye. Arcite arose and looked at himself in the mirror and realized that his grief had drastically changed his appearance. So he took the name of Philostrate and returned to Athens where he was employed as a page in the house of Emelye. Several years passed, and Philostrate rose to a high and well-to-do position in the Court of Theseus, even becoming a trusted friend of Theseus himself.

Meanwhile, Palamon languished in the prison tower. One night, however, he escaped. He hid in a field the next morning to escape detection. That same day, by chance, Arcite arrived at the same field. Arcite was so changed in appearance that Palamon did not recognize him. Archite, thinking himself alone, began to recite his entire history aloud.

Palamon, hearing the confession, jumped out of hiding and cursed Arcite as a traitor.

Arcite admitted his identity and challenged Palamon to a duel. The winner was to have Emelye. The next morning Arcite brought armor, food, and sword to Palamon. The duel began, and they fought fiercely. At this time, Theseus and his entourage arrived upon the bloody scene.

Palamon explained who they were and why they were fighting. The King, in a rage, condemned them to death. The ladies of the Court, including Emelye, cried bitterly. Theseus finally agreed to give both of them their freedom on this condition: they should return to Athens in a year, each with one hundred knights. A joust would be held, and the winner would get the hand of Emelye. Arcite and Palamon returned to Thebes.

#### PART III

During the year, Theseus spent his time building a magnificent stadium in which the fight was to take place. He built an altar to Venus (goddess of love), to Mars (god of war), and to Diana (goddess of chastity). These altars and the entire stadium were richly decorated with elegant details which the Knight enjoys describing. At the end of the year, Arcite and Palamon, each at the head of one hundred knights, returned to Athens for the joust. Theseus welcomed them all and entertained them in high fashion with wine, foods, singing, dancing, and other forms of entertainment. Again, the Knight enjoys relating all aspects of this magnificent feast.

Before the battle, Palamon goes to the altar of Venus and prays that he be granted possession of the fair Emelye. If he can't have his beloved one, he would rather die by Arcite's spear. Emelye also prays before the altar of Diana. She asks that Arcite and Palamon's love be extinguished, and if not, that she be given the one who loves her the most. Diana tells her that it is destined that she marry one of the young knights, but she was not free to tell which one. Finally, Arcite appears and asks Mars for victory in the battle. Mars appears and assures Arcite that he will be victorious.

The three prayers and promises caused some confusion in heaven until Saturn, god of destiny, promised that Palamon would win his love and Arcite would win the battle.

#### PART IV

The great day for the joust dawned bright and beautiful. The entire populace of Athens swarmed excitedly into the amphitheater. The contestants, on excited steeds, gathered at the ends of the arena facing each other. The great King Theseus arrived and announced that once a warrior was badly wounded he would be removed from the field of battle by the King's marshal, in order to determine the winner without needless loss of life. The milling battle began. Finally, Palamon was badly wounded. Although he resisted the marshals, he was taken from the field.

The victorious Arcite, in his blood-spattered uniform, rode his horse triumphantly around the arena to receive the plaudits of the multitude and the smiles of the fair Emelye. But all of a sudden a fury arose from the ground and so frightened Arcite's horse that the victorious warrior was plunged to the earth. Arcite was badly hurt.

The King returned to his Court, and the populace was happy because in all the spectacle of the arena not one man was killed. Even Arcite, it was thought, would survive his injury.

The Duke of Theseus summoned his physicians to attend Arcite. But Arcite was dying. Gasping for breath, Arcite protested an eternal love for Emelye and then adds that he knows no person better than Palamon and begs her to think about accepting Palamon in marriage.

Arcite died. His earthly remains were reduced to ashes in a great funeral pyre. After a long period of mourning, Theseus summoned Palamon to Athens. Then in the presence of Emelye and the court, Theseus declared that Jupiter, "the King, The Prince and Cause of all and everything," had decreed that Thebes and Athens should live in peace and that Palamon and Emelye should be joined in marriage. They were wed and lived out their lives in "a love unbroken."

## THE CANTERBURY TALES – CHARACTERS TALES

### THE MILLER'S TALE: PROLOGUE

When the Knight had finished his story, everyone said it was a fine story and worthy to be remembered. The Host then calls upon the Monk to tell a tale that will match the Knight's for nobility. But the Miller, who was drunk, shouted that he had a noble tale, and he would match the Knight's tale with his. The Host tried to stop the Miller because of the Miller's drunkenness, but the Miller insisted. He announced that he was going to tell a story about a carpenter, and the Reeve objects. The Miller, however, insists. Chaucer then warns the reader that this story might be a bit vulgar, but it is his duty to tell all the stories because a prize is at stake.

### THE MILLER'S TALE

Some time ago, the Miller said, there was a rich, old carpenter who lived in Oxford and who took in a lodger named Nicholas. Nicholas was a clerk and was also a student of astrology who, among other things, was able to forecast the likelihood of drought or showers. Nicholas was also a clever young man, neat-appearing, a marvelous harp player and singer, and a lover whose passions were carefully clocked beneath a shy boyish manner and appearance.

Now it happened that the carpenter was married to an eighteen-year-old girl named Alison, and many years younger than the carpenter. Alison was a bright, lively, pretty girl. It was not long before Nicholas fell in love with her. One day he grasped her and cried, "O love-me-all-at-once or I shall die!" At first, Alison made a pretense of objecting, but the young clerk soon overcame her objections. They worked out a plan whereby they would play a trick on her husband, Old John the carpenter. Alison, however, warned Nicholas that John was very jealous.

It happened that sometime later, Alison went to church and there another young clerk saw her, and he was immediately smitten with her beauty as he passed the collection plate. He was the parish clerk and was named Absalon. Chaucer describes this clerk as being very dainty and particular. He is even somewhat effeminate. The final touch to his personality is that he is so dainty that the one thing he could not tolerate was people who expelled gas in public.

That evening with guitar in hand he strolled the streets looking for tarts when he came to the carpenter's abode. Beneath Alison's window he softly sang, "Now dearest lady, if thy pleasure be in thoughts of love, think tenderly of me." The carpenter was awakened but discovered his wife unimpressed with the youth's entreaties.

One day, when the ignorant carpenter had gone to work at a nearby town, Nicholas and Alison agreed that something must be done to get the carpenter out of the house for a night. Nicholas agreed to devise a plan.

And so it happened that Nicholas, gathering plenty of food and ale, locked himself in his room. After several days the carpenter missed the youth's presence. When told Nicholas might be dead in his room, the carpenter and his serving boy went to Nicholas' room and pounded on the door. When there was no answer, they knocked down the door and found the youth lying on his bed, gaping as though dead, at the ceiling. The carpenter aroused the youth who then told of a vision seen in his trance that Oxford was soon to be visited with a rain and flood not unlike the one experienced by Noah. The alarmed carpenter wondered what could be done to escape the flood. Nicholas counseled him to fasten three boat-like tubs to the ceiling of the house, provision each with food and drink enough to last one day after which the flood would subside, and also include an axe with which they could cut the ropes and allow the tubs to float. And finally, the three tubs should be hung some distance apart.

The tub-like boats were hung in place by the stupid carpenter and the evening before the predicted flood all three entered their boats and prayed. When the carpenter fell into troubled sleep, Alison and Nicholas descended the ladder from their boats and sped downstairs, without a word, to bed.

Meanwhile, later that night the young parish clerk Absalon, having heard the carpenter was away from the city, stole beneath Alison's window and begged her for a kiss. "Go away," she cried, "there's no come-up-and-kiss-me-here for you." But he entreated her and Alison, afraid the youth would arouse the neighbors, agreed to give him a kiss. But deciding to play a trick on this bothersome clerk, she extended her rear end out the window which the young clerk kissed most savorously.

When he discovered how Alison had tricked him, young Absalon strode away in anger. He was not completely cured of his lovesickness. He therefore plans revenge. He goes across the street and arouses the

blacksmith and borrows a red-hot poker. Returning to the carpenter's house, Absalon knocked at the window again and pleaded for one more kiss. Nicholas decided that Alison's trick was so good that he would now try the same thing, so he presents his rear to be kissed. When Absalon called for Alison to speak to him, Nicholas expelled gas which, as Chaucer says, was like a stroke of thunder. It almost knocked poor dainty Absalon off his feet, but recovering rapidly, Absalon applied the hot poker to Nicholas' arse.

"Help! Water! Water! Help!" shouted Nicholas. The carpenter was startled from his sleep. "Heaven help us," he thought, "here comes Nowel's Flood!" With an axe, he cut the ropes which held his boat to the eaves of the house. Down he crashed. Alison and Nicholas shouted "Help!" and "Murder!" and the neighbors rushed to the house. Nicholas told them of the carpenter's preparation for a flood. All laughed at this lunacy, and none would help him for they considered him mad. And to conclude it all, the carpenter received a broken arm from the fall.

## THE CANTERBURY TALES – CHARACTER TALES

### THE REEVE’S TALE: PROLOGUE

After everyone has laughed at the Miller’s tale, the Reeve becomes sullen because the tale was unfavorable to a carpenter. The Reeve, whose name is Osewold, promises to repay the Miller with a story. He then tells how he resents the carpenter’s advanced age because he is also somewhat advanced in age and can enjoy only a limited amount of things. He points out that in old age, man can only boast or lie or covet. The Host interrupts him and tells him to get on with the tale. Osewold warns the group that his tale will employ the same rough language as was found in The Miller’s Tale.

Commentary: Once again, the reader should keep in mind the idea that one tale is often told to repay another. Thus since the Reeve is upset over the Miller’s tale, he is now going to tell a tale whereby a miller is ridiculed.

### THE REEVE’S TALE

At Trumpington, not far from Cambridge, there lived a Miller. He was a heavy-set man, a bully, who carried several knives and knew how to use them. No one dared lay a hand on the man for fear of their lives. He was also a thief and always stole corn or meal brought to his mill for grinding. He wife was a portly creature who was the daughter of the town clergyman. She has been raised in a nunnery. The Miller wed her because he was something of a social climber and wanted a refined wife. But Chaucer implies that being the daughter of the town clergyman, she was probably illegitimate. But both of them were proud of their twenty-year old daughter and six-month baby boy.

The Miller levied excessive charges for his work, in addition to stealing what he could. This was particularly true of the corn brought to him for grinding from a large-sized college at Cambridge. One day when the manciple (steward) was too ill to go to the mill to watch the Miller grind his corn, the man sent to the mill was duped and robbed outrageously.

Two students at the college, John and Alan, were enraged when news of the theft reached them. They volunteered to take a sack of corn to the mill for grinding and beat the Miller at his own game. They arrived and

announced they would watch the milling. The Miller sensed the students would try to prevent him from stealing some of the grain. He decided therefore that he would take even more than usual so as to prove that the greatest scholar is not always the wisest or cleverest man.

When he had a chance, the Miller slipped out to the students’ horse, untied it, and away it ran to the wild horses in the fen. The Miller returned and ground and sacked the corn. The students discovered their horse was missing and chased the spirited animal until dark before catching it. While they were gone, the Miller emptied half the flour from the sack and gave it to his wife.

When John and Alan returned from catching their horse, it was already dark. They asked the Miller to put them up for the night and offered to pay for food and lodging. The Miller sarcastically said to them that his house was small, but that college men could always make things seem to be what they aren’t. He challenges them to make his one bedroom into a grand chamber. But he agrees to put them up and sends his daughter for food and drink. Meanwhile, he makes a space in his only bedroom for John and Alan, thus all slept in the same room but in three separate beds: the Miller and his wife in one, John and Alan in another, and the daughter in the third. The baby’s cradle was at the foot of the Miller’s bed.

After drinking for a long time, everyone went to bed and soon the Millers and his family were asleep. But John and Alan lay awake thinking of ways in which to get revenge. Suddenly, Alan gets up and goes over to the daughter’s bed. Apparently, they got along just fine. But John stayed in his bed and grumbled about his fate. He then got up and moved the cradle next to his bed. Shortly after that, the wife had to relieve herself of all the wine she had drunk. Returning to her bed, she felt for the baby’s cradle and couldn’t find it. She felt in the next bed and discovered the cradle and climbed in bed beside John. He immediately “tumbled” on her, “and on this goode wyf he” layed it on well.

As dawn neared Alan said goodbye to the daughter who suggested that as they left the mill, they look behind the main door and find the half sack of flour her father had stolen. Alan walked over to wake John and, discovering the cradle, assumed he was mixed up and went to the Miller’s bed and hopped in. He shook the pillow and told John to wake up. Alan immediately told how he had already had the Miller’s daughter three times in this one short night. The Miller rose from his bed in a fury

and started cursing. The Miller's wife, thinking she was in bed with the Miller, grabbed a club, and mistaking her husband for one of the clerks, struck him down. Then Alan and John fled the premises.

## THE CANTERBURY TALES – CHARACTER TALES

### THE COOK'S TALE: PROLOGUE

The Cook, Roger, is laughing over *The Reeve's Tale*. He thought the Mill was well repaid for arguing that his house was too small. He promises to tell a tale that really happened in his town. The Host interrupts and tells him he will have to tell a good one to repay the company for all the stale pies he has sold to them. Then the Host tells that he is only joking. Roger then turns to his tale.

### THE COOK'S TALE

There was an apprentice cook working in London named Perkin Reveler who was as full of love as he was full of sin. At every wedding he would dance and sing rather than tend the shop. And when he wasn't dancing or singing or drinking, he was gambling. His master finally decided that one rotten apple could spoil the whole barrel. Thus, the master dismissed Perkin. The young man, obeying another proverb, "birds of a feather flock together," joined another young man of the same habits as his. The friend's wife kept a shop, but this shop was just a front to her loose and immoral activities.

## THE CANTERBURY TALES – CHARACTER TALES

### THE MAN OF LAW'S INTRODUCTION

The Host, noting the rapidly passing day, reminds the company that they must proceed with the tales. Then addressing himself of the Man of Law in what he considers the best of legal language, the Host exhorts the Man of Law to acquit himself by fulfilling his contract to tell a tale. The Man of Law protests that Chaucer has already written about all the good stories of the world and has left nothing else to be told. He also protests that he will not tell his story in rhyme. I am not a poet, he said, but a plain spoken man who will tell a story plainly.

### THE MAN OF LAW'S TALE

#### PART I

There once dwelt in Syria a company of wise, honest, and prosperous merchants. Their trade in spices, gold, satins, and many other articles was far-flung. It happened that some of these merchants decided to go to Rome to determine if there were opportunities for trade.

During their sojourn in Rome, they heard of Constance, the daughter of the emperor. She was praised for her beauty, her goodness, and her innocence. She was reputed to be the perfect woman, untainted by any of the frivolity of life.

Upon the return of these merchants to Syria, the young Syrian Sultan was, as always, anxious to hear of their good fortune in trading. As the merchants spoke of the wonders they had seen in Rome, they also made special mention of the Lady Constance.

The young Sultan was enraptured with their description of her, and soon his heart was set upon having her as his wife. No one else would do. He took the matter before his council and told them that he must perish if he could not win her hand.

The councilors saw great difficulties. For one thing, the Emperor of a Christian land would not find it convenient to form such an alliance with a nation which worshipped Mahomet. The Sultan cried: "Rather than that I lose/The Lady Constance, I will be baptized." Brushing aside objections it was arranged that all of his subjects should become Christians.

All was made ready in Rome for the voyage to Syria. But on the day of departure Lady Constance arose pale and sorrowful for she sorely regretted leaving her homeland and friends.

As plans were being made for the big wedding, the mother of the Sultan was conspiring against Constance and her son. She was angry that her son was making her give up her old religion for the sake of this foreign girl. She called together certain of the councilors and protested that she would rather die than depart from the holy teachings of Mahomet. They all agreed that they would pretend to accept the new religion, but at the climax of the feast, would attack the group and slay them all. The first part ends with the Man of Law attacking the baseness and falseness of the Sultan's mother.

#### PART II

The Christians arrived in Syria and, amid great pomp, journeyed to the Sultan's palace where he and Lady Constance were overcome with great joy. The wedding ceremony was completed and the dazzling array of dignitaries sat down to a sumptuous feast. At that moment the confederates of the Sultan's mother swept into the banquet hall and all of the Christians including the young Sultan were slain – all, that is, except Lady Constance. She was put aboard a sailing vessel, well provisioned, and cast upon the sea. For days on end her little ship roamed the seas. Finally, one day, the ship beached in the northern isle of Northumberland.

There she was found by the Constable and his wife who took her in and cared for her. This was a pagan land but Constance secretly kept her faith with Jesus Christ. Soon, Hermengild, the Constable's wife, became a Christian and then the Constable himself.

Then one night Satan (in the person of a Knight) entered the Constable's home and slit the throat of Hermengild, and when the Constable returned he found the murder weapon in Constance's bed. Forthwith, the Constable took Constance before his king – Alla – who ruled with a wise and powerful hand. The King sentenced her to death but there was such a wailing among the women of the Court, the Knight was asked again if he had killed Hermengild. No, he cried, it was Constance. At that moment he was stricken dead, and a voice was heard to say that the King had unjustly judged a disciple of Christ.

The court was awe-stricken, and soon all were converted to Christianity. All rejoiced at this but Donegild, mother of the King. The King and Constance fell in love and were soon wed. While the King was away at



war with the Scots, a beautiful son was born to Constance. But Donegild intercepted the message and wrote a false letter saying the child was terribly disfigured. But the King said if this was God's will, let it be done. Enraged, Donegild intercepted the King's message and wrote a false message that it was the King's will to have the son destroyed. The embittered Constance, aided by the Constable, was taken to a sailing ship and she and her beloved son sailed beyond the horizon.

#### PART III

King Alla returned from the war, dismayed with the news of his falsified messages and grief-stricken at the loss of his son and wife. Donegild was soon discovered responsible, and she was put to death.

In the meantime, the Emperor of Rome heard of the tragic news of the death of the Christians and sent an army to Syria; the culprits were put to death. As the Romans were returning they saw the vessel steered by Constance. Not recognizing her, they took her to Rome where she lived in obscurity, for she lost her memory and she did not recognize her homeland.

The grief-stricken Alla decided to make a pilgrimage to Rome to seek penance for the foul play which befell his beloved Constance. There, while in the company of a Senator, he chanced to see a child whose face strongly resembled that of Constance. Upon inquiring, he learned of the circumstances. When led to the dwelling place of Constance, Alla told her how his true feeling for their son had been distorted by his mother.

A joyous reunion followed, and then Constance went before the Emperor and acknowledged that she was his daughter. There was great joy in the land. Alla and Constance returned to Northumberland, but within a year the King died. Constance and her son, Maurice, returned to Rome where he later became Emperor.

## THE CANTERBURY TALES - CHARACTER TALES

### THE WIFE OF BATH'S TALE: PROLOGUE

The Wife of Bath begins her prologue by announcing that she has always followed the rule of experience rather than authority. And since she has had five husbands at the church door, she has had a great amount of experience. She sees nothing wrong with having had five husbands, and cannot understand Jesus' rebuke to the woman at the well who had also had five husbands. She prefers the biblical injunction to "increase and multiply." She reminds the pilgrims of several biblical incidents: Solomon and his many wives, the command that a husband must leave his family and join with his wife, and St. Paul's warning that it is better to marry than to burn. Having shown herself to have knowledge of the Bible, she asks where it is that virginity is commanded. It is, she admits, *advised* for those who want to live a perfect life, but she admits that she is not perfect. Moreover, she asks, what is the purpose of the sex organs. They were made for both functional purposes and for pleasure. And unlike many cold and bashful women, she was always *willing* to have sex whenever her husband wanted to. The Pardoner interrupts and says that he was thinking of getting married, but having heard the Wife of Bath, he is glad that he is single. She responds that she could tell more, and the Pardoner encourages her to do so.

The Wife then relates stories concerning her five husbands. She recalled that three of them were very old and good and rich. And she will now reveal how she was able to control each one. Her techniques were very simple. She accused her husbands (the first three) of being at fault. She scolded them when they accused her of being extravagant with clothes and jewelry when her only purpose was to please her husband. She railed at her husband when he refused to disclose the worth of his land and the value of his coffers. She described the husband who considered her as property. She denounced men who refused her the liberty of visiting her friends for women, like men, like freedom. She decried the husband who suspected her chastity was in danger every time she smiled at another gentleman to whom she wished only to be courteous. She denounced the husband who hired spies to determine if she was unfaithful, and indeed, hired her own witnesses to testify to her faithfulness to her marriage bed.

Each time she gained complete mastery over one of her husbands, he would then die. But her fourth husband was different. He kept a mistress and this bothered her because she was in the prime of life and full of passion. Thus, while not being actually unfaithful to her fourth husband, she made him think so. Thus "in his own Greece I made him fry." But now he is dead, and when she was burying him, she could hardly keep her eyes off a young clerk named Jankyn whom she had already admired. Thus, at the month's end, she married for a fifth time even though she was twice the clerk's age. And this time she married for love and not riches. But as soon as the honeymoon was over, she was disturbed to find that the clerk spent all of his time reading books, especially books which disparaged women. In fact, he collected all the books he could which told unfavorable stories about women and he spent all his time reading from these collections.

One night, he began to read aloud from his collection. He began with the story of Eve and read about all the unfaithful women, murderesses, prostitutes, etc., which he could find. The Wife of Bath could not stand this any more, so she grabbed the book and hit Jankyn so hard that he fell over backwards into the fire. He jumped up and hit her with his fist. She fell to the floor and pretended to be dead. When he kneeled over her, she hit him once more and pretended to die. He was so upset that he promised her anything if she would live. And this is how she gained "sovereignty" over her fifth husband. And from that day on, she was a true and faithful wife for him.

### WORDS BETWEEN THE SUMMONER AND THE FRIAR

The Friar thinks that this was a rather long preamble for a tale. The Summoner reminds the Friar that he is rather long-winded. The Summoner and the Friar then exchange a few words.

### THE WIFE OF BATH'S TALE

Once, long ago, a knight was returning to King Arthur's Court when he saw a fair young maiden all alone, and raped her.

The countryside was revolted by the knight's act, and King Arthur was petitioned to bring the knight to justice. The king condemned the knight to death. The queen, however, begged the king to permit her to

pass judgment on the knight. When brought before her, the queen informed him he would live or die depending upon how successfully he answered this question: "What is the thing that women most desire?" The knight confessed he did not have a ready answer; so the gracious queen bade him return within one year.

The knight roamed from place to place. Some women said they wanted wealth and treasure. Others said jollity and pleasure. Others said it was to be gratified and flattered. And so it went. At each place he heard a different answer.

He rode toward King Arthur's court in a dejected mood. Suddenly, in a clearing in the wood, he saw twenty-four maidens dancing and singing. But as he approached them they disappeared, as if by magic. There was not a living creature to be seen save an old woman, whose foul looks exceeded anything the knight had ever seen before.

The old woman approached the knight and asked what he was seeking. She reminded him that old women often know quite a bit.

The knight explained his problem. The old woman said she could provide the answer, provided that he would do what she would require for saving his life. The knight agreed, and they journeyed to the Court.

Before the queen the knight said he had the answer to what women desired most, and the queen bade him speak.

The knight responded that women most desire sovereignty over their husbands. None of the women of the Court could deny the validity of this answer.

The knight was acquitted. Then the old crone told the Court she had supplied the knight's answer. In exchange the knight had, upon his honor, agreed to honor any request she made of him. She said that she would settle for nothing less than to be his very wife and love. The knight, in agony, agreed to wed her.

On their wedding night the knight turned restlessly paying no heed to the foul woman lying next to him in bed. She said, "Is this how knights treat their wives upon the whole?" Then the knight confessed that her age, ugliness, and low breeding were repulsive to him.

The old hag then gives the knight a long lecture in which she reminds him that true gentility is not a matter of appearances but rather virtue is the true mark of the gentle and noble. And poverty is not to be spurned because Christ Himself was a poor man as were many of the fathers of the church and all saints. All the Christian and even pagan

authorities say that poverty can lead a person to salvation. Then she reminds him that her looks can be viewed as an asset. If she were beautiful, there would be many men who would desire her; so as long as she is old and ugly, he can be assured that he has a virtuous wife. She offers him a choice: an old ugly hag such as she, but still a loyal, true and humble wife, or a beautiful woman with whom he must take his chances in the covetousness of handsome men who would visit their home because of her and not him.

The knight groaned and said the choice was hers. "And have I won the mastery?" she said. "Since I'm to choose and rule as I think fit?" "Certainly, wife," the knight answered. "Kiss me," she said. "...On my honor you shall find me both...fair and faithful as a wife...look at me" she said. The knight turned, and she was indeed now a young and lovely woman. And so, the Wife concluded, they lived blissfully ever after.

## THE CANTERBURY TALES – CHARACTER TALES

### THE FRIAR'S TALE: PROLOGUE

When the Wife of Bath had finished her tale, the Friar wonders if such academic problems shouldn't be left to the authorities. He now offers to tell a tale about a summoner, but the Host admonishes him to let the Summoner alone and tell something else. But the Summoner interrupts and says the Friar can do as he likes and will be repaid for a tale about a summoner by one about a friar.

### THE FRIAR'S TALE

There was once a summoner for a bishop who had developed his craft to a very high degree. He had a crew of spies, including harlots, who would seek out information on all of the persons living in the parish and such information was to be used against them by the church. Once the derogatory information was in hand, he called upon the miscreants and squeezed exorbitant tribute from them so that their names would not be entered among those doing evil.

Then one day the Summoner, as he made his rounds blackmailing the rich and poor alike, met a gay young yeoman bearing bows and arrows and wearing a jacket of bright green and a black hat. The yeoman inquired of his calling, and the Summoner replied that he was a bailiff. "Well, I'll be damned!" the yeoman said. "Dear brother, /You say you are a bailiff? I'm another."

The yeoman said he lived in the far north country and was on his way there. Soon the conversation turned to their vocation of bailiff. "From year to year I cover my expenses," the yeoman said. "I can't say better, speaking truthfully," "It's just the same with me," the Summoner said. "I'm ready to take anything." They agreed to enter into a partnership.

The Summoner then suggested a swapping of their names.

"Brother," the smiling yeoman replied, "would you have me tell? I am a fiend, my dwelling is in Hell."

The surprised Summoner then asked the fiend how he could appear in various shapes. But the fiend said in effect that the Summoner was too ignorant to understand. Nonetheless the Summoner said he had made a bargain to join forces with the yeoman, even if he was Lucifer

himself, and he would honor his word. The bargain was sealed, and they began the journey to the next village.

Somewhat further on, they came upon a farmer whose cart full of hay was stuck in the mud. No matter how he whipped his horses the cart would not move. In exasperation he shouted for the Devil to take all – cart, horse, hay and all. The Summoner urged the fiend to do as he was bid, but the Devil explained that since the curse was not uttered from the heart and in sincerity, he had no power to do so.

Later they went to the home of a rich widow who had consistently refused to pay the Summoner bribes. The Summoner demanded twelve pence, but she again refused. Then he threatened to take her new frying pan. She then became so exasperated at the Summoner's continued threats, she cried "the Devil take you and the frying pan." The Devil asked her if she really meant these words and she said yes, unless the Summoner repented. The Summoner refused. The fiend thereupon dragged the Summoner, body and soul, off to Hell where summoners have very special places. The Friar ends his tale by hoping the summoners can someday repent and become good men.

## THE CANTERBURY TALES – CHARACTER TALES

### THE SUMMONER'S TALE: PROLOGUE

After hearing *The Friar's Tale*, the Summoner arose in his stirrups and was so angry that he shook like an aspen leaf. He suggested that the Friar told a well-documented story since Friars and fiends are always good friends. He then recalls the story of the Friar who once had a vision of hell. He had an angel guiding him through hell, but he saw no friars. He then inquired if there were no friars in hell. The angel then asked Satan to lift up his tail, and suddenly millions of friars were seen swarming around Satan's arse-hole. The Friar awoke from his dream, quaking with fear over the very thought of his future home.

### THE SUMMONER'S TALE

In Yorkshire, in a marshy district known as Holderness, there was a Friar who went about praying for his parishioners, and casting a spell over them so that they would contribute money to the Friars. But despite his obvious piety, this priest would go from door to door promising prayers and supplications to the Lord in exchange for anything his parishioners could give him. Following him from door to door was a servant carrying a large sack into which the gifts were poured. Once back to the convent, the priest promptly forgot to make his prayers.

One day he came to the home of Thomas who had been ill abed for many days. The old man reproached the Friar for not having called upon him for a fortnight. The Friar replied that he had spent his entire time praying in Thomas' behalf.

At this time, the old man's wife entered the house and the Friar greeted her excitedly and kissed her sweetly, chirping like a sparrow. He tells her he came to preach a little to Thomas. She asks him to talk about anger, because Thomas is always so crabbed and unpleasant. But before she goes, she offers the Friar some dinner. The Friar accepted and then suggested that since he lived a life of poverty, he needed little food, but then he suggested a menu sumptuous enough for a king.

The wife adds one more word before she goes. She reminds the Friar that her baby had died very recently and the Friar quickly acknowledged (or pretends) that he knows it because he and the other

Friars had seen the child being lofted upward in angelic flight, and they had offered a *Te Deum*, and they had also fasted. He then gives the wife a long sermon or lecture on the virtues of fasting and on the sin of gluttony. He quotes the examples of Moses' forty-day fast, the fast of Aaron and other priests in the temple, and even suggested that Eve was gluttonous.

The Friar then turns to Thomas and embarks upon a long sermon on the necessity of avoiding excessive wealth and the blessings to be received by the "poor in spirit." He recited how those at the convent lived a life of poverty, carefully avoiding excesses of gluttony, wealth, and drink. He ends by telling Thomas how the entire convent prays for him every night, and Thomas should repay him for his prayers by donating a portion of his gold for an improvement in the convent.

Thomas responds that he has given quite a bit to the friars in the past and he can't see that it has helped very much. The Friar then points out that he has diversified his gifts too much by giving a bushel of oats to one convent, some groats to another, and a penny to this and that Friar. What Thomas should do is concentrate his gifts and give everything to the Friars who then would be the sole authority for Thomas' betterment.

The Friar then returns to his sermon on anger, quoting many authorities connecting the sin of anger with Satan and vengeful women. Once Seneca pointed out how a ruler brought about the death of three innocent men because of anger; angry Cambyses, who was also a drunkard, once slew an innocent man, so beware of both anger and drink; and angry Cyrus of Persia once destroyed a river because his horse had drowned in the river. The Friar then tells Thomas to leave off his anger, and instead give of his gold to the Friars. Thomas says that he has given enough, but the Friar insists on something for his cloister. But the sermon on anger and the Friar's insistence only made Thomas angrier.

Thomas then thought a moment and said he had a gift for the Friar if it would be equally shared by all the Friars at the convent. But the Friar would have to swear to share it. He quickly agreed. "Reach down...Beneath my buttocks," said Thomas, and there "you are sure to find/Something I've hidden there." Hurriedly the Friar placed his hand on the old man's buttocks. At that moment, the old man let an enormous fart. The enraged priest stomped from the house and made his way to a wealthy lord's house. There, shaking with anger, he told how the old man had offended him. "I'll pay him out for it," the Friar shouted. "I can

defame him! I won't be...bidden divide what cannot be divided/In equal parts."

The lord's valet, standing nearby, suggested a way the fart could be equally divided. He suggested that a thirteen-spoke wheel be secured. At the end of each spoke should kneel a friar. Strapped to the hub of the wheel would be the old man. When he passed his gas, the wheel could be turned and thus each Friar could share equally. The lord and lady, all except the Friar, thought the valet's answer all they could desire.

## THE CANTERBURY TALES – CHARACTER TALES

### THE CLERIC'S TALE: PROLOGUE

After the Summoner concluded his story, the Host turned to the Clerk from Oxford. "You haven't said a word since we left the stable," the Host said. "'for goodness' sake cheer up...this is no time for abstruse meditations./Tell us a lively tale.'" The Clerk bestirred himself and agreed to tell his story, which he said was told to him by a learned gentleman of Italy named Petrarch.

### THE CLERIC'S TALE

#### PART I

In the region of Saluzzo in Italy, there lived a noble and gracious king named Walter. His subjects held him in high esteem. Yet there was one thing that concerned him. Walter enjoyed his freedom to roam the countryside and refused to be bound by marriage.

One day a delegation or the lords of the kingdom called upon him and humbly beseeched him to seek a woman whom he would wed. The king was so impressed with their petition that he agreed to marry. Concerned lest he did not mean it, they asked him to set a date and this was done.

The lords even offered to find a suitable bride. To this the king demurred. He would choose the woman and would marry her if they would agree to be subservient to her forever. The lords agreed.

#### PART II

The day of the wedding arrived and all preparations were completed. The populace was puzzled, for the king had not selected his bride. It happened, however, that nearby there lived the poorest man, named Janicula. He had a beautiful and virtuous daughter named Griselda. The king often saw her as he traveled about and looked upon her form and beauty with a virtuous eye.

Shortly before the wedding was to take place, Walter went to Janicula and asked for permission to marry his daughter. The old man agreed and then Walter sought out Griselda and won her consent. Walter, however, made one condition: he made Griselda promise to always obey his will and to do so cheerfully even if it caused her pain. And furthermore,

she is never to balk or complain about any of his commands. Griselda assented to these conditions and they were married.

In marriage, those qualities of patience, virtue, and kindness which Griselda had always possessed began to increase so that her fame spread to all the lands far and wide. People came from great distances simply to behold this paragon of virtue. Shortly afterwards, Griselda bore her husband a daughter. There was great rejoicing because now the people knew that she was not barren and would perhaps bear him a son.

#### PART III

While the baby was still suckling at her mother's breasts, the king resolved to banish any doubt about his wife's steadfastness to him. He called her to him and told her that one of his courtiers would soon call for the child. He expressed the hope that taking the child from her would in no way change her love for him. She said it would not.

The king's agent arrived and took the child. Griselda did not utter one word which indicated hate for her husband. Time passed, and never in any way did Griselda show loss of love for her husband.

#### PART IV

Four years passed and then Griselda bore her husband a son, and the people were happy that an heir to the throne has been born. When the son was two years old Walter again decided to test his wife's patience and fidelity. He went to her and told her that she must give up her son. Again she took the news patiently and said that if this was her husband's wish she would abide by his decision in good grace.

When Walter's daughter was twelve years old and the son ten, he decided to put Griselda to one final test. He had a Papal Bull forged declaring Walter free of Griselda and giving him permission to marry another woman. Then he ordered his sister, with whom the children had been placed, to bring his daughter and son home. Plans were then set in motion for another wedding.

#### PART V

Walter now decided to put Griselda to her greatest test. He called her before him and showed her the counterfeit Papal permission and told her of his intent to marry again. He explained that his subjects thought Griselda of too low a birth and he must take a woman of higher birth. Griselda took the news with a sad heart, but again with great patience and humility, she said that she would abide by her husband's decision and would return to her father's house. She takes nothing with her and

explains to Walter that she came naked from her father's house and will return the same, but asks for permission to wear an old smock to cover her nakedness. So she returned to her father who received her with sadness, and there she remained for a short time.

#### PART VI

Through it all, Griselda went patiently and in good grace about her work helping to prepare the beautiful young girl, whom she did not recognize as her daughter, for the wedding. But Walter could stand his cruelty no longer. He went to Griselda and confessed that the beautiful young girl and the handsome boy were their children and that they had been given loving care in Bologna. He confessed that the cruel tests had been perfectly met by Griselda and that he could find no more patient and steadfast woman. They lived in bliss and when Walter died, his son succeeded to the throne.

The Clerk ends by saying that women should not follow so completely Griselda's example, but everyone should be constant in the face of adversity. And then, addressing the Wife of Bath, he says he will sing a song praising the gentle virtues of Griselda.



## THE CANTERBURY TALES – CHARACTER TALES

### THE MERCHANT'S TALE: PROLOGUE

The Merchant begins by saying he has no such wife as Griselda. He makes it clear that his story will characterize wives of a different sort. The Merchant, who is very old and only recently married, says he got a wife who has put him through hell in only two short months of marriage. His intolerable wife makes his life miserable. The Host begs him to impart a portion of his sorrow.

### THE MERCHANT'S TALE

In Lombardy, in the town of Pavia, the Merchant began, there lived a prosperous knight name January. When he passed his sixtieth year, the knight decided to abandon a life of wanton lust and marry a beautiful young maiden who lived in the city. His reasons were clear enough. He wished to fulfill God's wish that man and woman should marry. He also wished to have a son to inherit his estates.

The Merchant offers such high praise of marriage and such praise of the role of the wife that it becomes apparent that he is being sarcastic. He then provides many examples of good women – women like Rebecca, Judith, Abigail, Esther, and quotes freely from Seneca, Cato, and the Bible. (In actuality, the examples of the good woman are cases where the woman had been the cause of the destruction of a man.)

The matter was discussed with his brother Justinus, and with Placebo. Justinus argued vehemently against marriage, pointing out the faithfulness of women as a major pitfall. Placebo, however, argued the other way and counseled January to make up his own mind, for this was not a matter on which to seek advice.

January finally decided to marry. He looked over the crop of young maidens and chose the beautiful young girl named May. He then called his friends together in order to announce his wedding and ask help in solving a dilemma. He wants to know about the old saying that marriage is heaven on earth. And if he is supposed to have heaven on earth, how can he be sure of choosing the right wife. His friend, Justinus, said that perhaps his wife would be more of a purgatory than a heaven. But January went ahead with the wedding plans. The wedding feast was a sumptuous

affair, but it lasted so long that January became impatient for the guests to leave so that he might enjoy his wedding bed. Finally, he was obliged to ask his guests to leave, and when the priest had blessed the marriage bed, he fulfilled his role as husband. The next morning, he sat up and sang like a bird in bed, and his loose skin around his neck also shook like a bird's neck.

It happened that one of January's serving men was a handsome youth named Damian who was smitten with love the moment he first saw the fair May. So remorseful was his unrequited love that he was taken to bed. Upon learning of this, January sent his wife and other women of the Court to Damian's bedside to comfort him. Damian found this an opportunity to pass a note to May in which he professed an undying love for her. Later May responded with a note to Damian acknowledging his desires.

One day January was suddenly stricken with blindness. His heart was sad and as the blindness continued, his evil thoughts of jealousy toward his wife could hardly be contained. He now insisted that May remain by him all the time. He would not let her to go anywhere unless he had hold of her hand. She was nevertheless able to send messages to Damian. By prearrangement, May admitted Damian to the Knight's garden which was kept under lock and key for his personal use. Later that day, May led January into the garden and signaled for Damian to climb up a pear tree.

We leave Damian in the pear tree and visit the gods. Pluto and his wife were discussing the situation involving January and May. Pluto said that he was going to restore January's sight because women are so deceitful, but he will wait till just the right moment to do so. But his wife, Proserpina, said men are so lecherous that she will provide May with a believable excuse.

Later, May led January to a pear tree where Damian was perched. Then she offered to climb up into the pear tree, beneath which they sat, and pluck a ripe pear for his enjoyment. In the tree above, of course, sat Damian. Soon the young couple was locked in amorous bliss. At that moment, January's sight was miraculously restored. He looked up and saw the young couple in an embrace. He bellowed with rage. May, however, was equal to the occasion. His sight was faulty; it was the same thing as awakening from a deep sleep when the eyes are not yet accustomed to the bright light and see strange things dimly. She then jumped down from the tree, and January clasped her in a fond embrace.

## THE CANTERBURY TALES – CHARACTER TALES

### THE SQUIRE'S TALE: PROLOGUE

The Host turns to the Squire and requests another tale of love. The Squire says he will not tell a tale of love but a tale of something else, requesting that he be excused if he says anything amiss.

### THE SQUIRE'S TALE

At Tzarev in the land of Tartary there lived a noble king named Cambuskan. He was excellent in everything and his subjects held him in high esteem. This compassionate monarch begat two sons of his wife Elpheta. They were Algarsyf and Cambalo. Another child, a daughter, was named Canace and no fairer creature ever graced this earth.

At the time of his twentieth anniversary as king, cambuskan ordered that a lavish celebration be held. In the banquet hall, as the revelry was at its height, there suddenly appeared at the doorway a knight unknown to the people of Tzarev. With humility and grace, this knight named Gawain announced that he had come to the celebration bearing gifts from his sovereign lord, the king of India and Araby.

One gift was a brass horse which could fly faster and farther than any known creature. By pressing a magic lever in the horse's ear, the animal would transform itself from a rigid piece of statuary into a lively yet gentle horse.

The second gift was a mirror which could inform the owner of the innermost thoughts of friends and enemies, and recount the past, and foretell the future.

The third gift was a ring which would enable the wearer to understand the language of any living thing, be it bush or bird; further, the ring enabled the wearer to speak in the language of all these living things.

The fourth gift was a sword which would slay any beast, known or unknown, and cut through even the hardest rock.

The knight was thanked profusely for his gifts and bidden to join the feast. The king, meanwhile, gave the ring to his beautiful daughter. Early the next morning she arose, dressed, slipped on the ring, and entered the palace garden. In a nearby tree sat a female hawk crying piteously. Smitten with compassion, Canace climbed into the tree and, through the

power of the ring, inquired of the hawk what had caused her unhappiness. The hawk related the story of how a handsome young male hawk had wooed and won her in marriage and how he tired of her and took up with a beautiful kite. So remorseful was the jilted female hawk that she left her homeland and wandered aimlessly about the earth. Canace took her to the palace and restored the hawk back to health.

The Squire said he would also tell of how the mirror, horse, and sword profoundly affected the lives of the king and his sons. At this moment, the Franklin breaks in and insists on telling his story.

### WORDS OF THE FRANKLIN TO THE SQUIRE

The Franklin interrupts the Squire's tale to compliment him on his eloquence and gentility. He wishes that his own son were more like the Squire or would imitate the Squire's manners and virtues. But the Host is not concerned with gentility, and he instructs the Franklin to tell a tale.

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### THE FRANKLIN'S TALE: PROLOGUE

The Franklin interrupts *The Squire's Tale* to compliment him on his eloquence, and he says he will repeat this tale to the pilgrims, but they must forgive him for his rude and plain speech because he never learned rhetoric and never studied the classic orators. And the only colors he can use to enrich his tale are those he has noticed in the meadows.

### THE FRANKLIN'S TALE

In the land of Brittany, in France, there lived a knight named Arveragus. He was noble, prosperous, and courageous. Yet with all these blessings he wished to take a wife. He found a beautiful maiden named Dorigen. They vowed that they would always respect each other and practice the strictest forbearance towards each other's words and actions. Thus solemnly pledged, they were wed.

Soon after the marriage, Arveragus had to go to a distant land for two years to replenish his wealth. While he was absent, Dorigen was so unhappy, forlorn, and grief stricken with her husband's absence that she sat and mourned and refused to join her neighbors in revelry.

Nearby to Dorigen's Castle was the rocky coast of France. In her grief, she often sat on the shore, observed the rocks, and meditated on the reason of existence. The sight of the grisly bare rocks made her apprehensive for her husband's safety because many men had lost their lives upon these dreadful rocks. She even wonders why God allowed so many men to be killed on these rocks, and wishes they would disappear into hell.

One day in May, however, she attended a gay picnic. Also present was Aurelius who had been secretly and madly in love with Dorigen. He

mustered enough courage to approach and tell her of his love for her. She repudiated his advances. He became so despondent she believed she must do something to raise him from his depths of despair. She said, half-jokingly, that she'd agree to his embraces if he would remove all the rocks from the coast of Brittany. But this was impossible, he cried. Aurelius returned home where he prayed to Apollo to send a flood which would cover the rocks so that he might then hold Dorigen to her promise. He went into a spell of complete despondency and was cared for by his brother.

Meanwhile Arveragus returned home and was joyfully reunited with Dorigen. But to return to Aurelius; for two years he lay sick because of his unrequited love for Dorigen. During this time, his brother cared for him and was told of his love. Then the brother thought of a way to solve the dilemma. He knew of a student in southern France who claimed to have deciphered the secret codes of magic found in rare books. Aurelius went to him and promised payment of 1,000 pounds if his magic would clear the coast of rocks. The student agreed and the deed was performed. Aurelius then asked Dorigen to keep her promise. When Arveragus returned, he found his wife prostrate with grief. She told him the story of the bargain and he said she must keep her promise, although it would grieve him deeply. Dorigen presented herself to Aurelius. When he learned of the nobility and sacrifice of Arveragus, he could not force himself to possess Dorigen and sent the relieved woman back to her husband. Aurelius gathered all of his gold together and found he could only pay half of his fee owed the student. The student, when told that Dorigen was relieved of her part of the bargain, acquired a noble demeanor and forgave Aurelius of his debt. The Franklin concluded, "Which seemed the finest gentleman to you?"

## THE CANTERBURY TALES – CHARACTER TALES

### THE PHYSICIAN'S TALE

There was once a knight named Virginius who was rich, kindly, and honorable. The knight had only one child, a beautiful fourteen-year old daughter. Her beauty was beyond compare, and she was endowed with all the other noble virtues: patience, kindness, humility, abstinence, and temperance. The Physician then departs from his story and addresses all people who are involved with bringing up children, telling them that they must set the example for the child.

Returning to his story, the Physician said the girl and her mother went to the town one morning. On the street a judge named Appius saw her. He was taken by her beauty and was determined to have her. After pondering on a scheme, he sent for the town's worst blackguard, called Claudius and paid him well to take part in the plan.

Claudius then accused the noble knight of having stolen a servant girl from his house many years ago and has kept her all these years pretending that she is his daughter. Before the knight had a chance to call witnesses, Appius the judge ruled that the child must be brought to him immediately as a ward of the court.

Virginius returned home and called his daughter into his presence. She must, he said, accept death, or shame at the hands of Claudius. Since the knight could never accept the shame, he withdrew his sword and cut off his daughter's head. Holding it by the hair, he went to the judge and handed it to him. The judge ordered the knight hung for murder. At that moment a throng of citizens, aroused by the judge's treachery, threw the judge into prison. Claudius was to be hung but the knight pleaded for his life and suggested only exile, which was done. "Here," said the Physician, "one can see how sin is paid its wages."

### WORDS OF THE HOST TO THE PHYSICIAN AND THE PARDONER

The Host was terribly upset by *The Physician's Tale*. He called the judge a low blackguard and treacherous man. The Host thinks that the pilgrims need a merry tale to follow and turns to the Pardoner who agrees to tell a merry tale. The more genteel members of the company fear that the Pardoner will tell a ribald story and ask for something with a moral. The Pardoner asks for something to drink, and he will tell a moral tale.

## THE CANTERBURY TALES – CHARACTER TALES

### THE PARDONER'S TALE

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#### THE PARDONER'S TALE: PROLOGUE

The Pardoner explains to the pilgrims his methods used in preaching. He always takes as his text *Radix malorum est* (Love of money is the root of all evil). His technique is as follows: first, he shows all of his official documents, then he uses some latin; following that he shows his relics which include a sheep bone for good luck in preventing diseases in animals and will bring a man wealth and cure jealousy; a mitten which will bring more money when the Pardoner receives his money for the relic. Addressing himself to the audience, he announces that he can do nothing for the really sinners, but if all the good people will come forward, he will sell them relics which will absolve them from sins. In this way he had won a hundred marks in a year. Next, he stands in the pulpit and preaches very rapidly over the sin of avarice so as to intimidate the members into donating money to him. He acknowledges that many sermons are the result of selfish and evil intentions, and he even admits that he spits out venom under the guise of holiness; and even though he is guilty of the same sins he is preaching against, he can still make other people repent.

The Pardoner then admits that he likes money, rich food, and fine living. And even if he is not a moral man, he can tell a good moral tale.

#### THE PARDONER'S TALE

In Flanders, three young men sat in an inn after drinking, gambling, and swearing all night long. The Pardoner now stops his tale and

give a rather long sermon directed against drinking, gambling, and swearing, and gluttony. He suggests that gluttony was the cause of Lot's incest, it caused Herod to have John the Baptist beheaded, and it caused Eve to eat the fruit. He quotes St. Paul and elaborates more on the sin of eating and drinking to excess. He then attacks cooks who contribute to gluttony by preparing dishes too succulently. He turns to wine and drunkenness and quotes authorities and examples to affirm the evil of drinking. This leads him into saying how evil gambling is since it leads to lying, swearing, and waste of property. He cites again the history of gambling. He closes his sermon with a long diatribe against swearing.

He returns to these three rioters "of which I telle" who were drinking when they heard bells sounding which signified that a coffin was passing the inn. The young men asked the servant to go and find out who had died. The lad told them it was not necessary since he already knew. The dead man was a friend of theirs who was stabbed in the back the night before by some sneaky thief called Death – the same thief who took so many lives in the neighboring town recently. The young rioters thought that Death might still be in the next town, and they decided to seek him out and slay him. On the way, they met an extremely old man dressed rather poorly. The rioters comment on his advanced age. He explains that he must wander the earth until he can find someone who will be willing to exchange youth for age. He says that not even Death will take his life. Hearing him speak of Death, the three young rioters ask the old man if he knows where they can find Death. He told the three men that he had last seen Death under a tree at the end of the lane. The rioters rush to the tree and find instead eight bushels of gold. They decide to keep the gold for themselves, but are afraid to move it in the daytime. They decide to wait for the night, and they draw straws to see which one will go into town to get food and wine to hold them over. The youngest of the three drew the shortest straw and started for town. As soon as he had left, the two decided to kill the youngest and split the money between them. But the youngest decided that he wanted all of the money. He goes to the druggist and buys poison that will kill rats quickly. He buys three bottles of wine and pours the poison into two of them. When he approaches the tree, the two immediately stab him and then they sit down and drink all of the wine. Thus ended these homicides.

The Pardoner now decries against sin and reminds the pilgrims that he has pardons that they can buy. He invites them to buy from him

and he will immediately record their names as purchasers. He suggests that they Host should begin since the Host is the most sinful. But in turn, the Host attacks the Pardoner, intimating that the Pardoner is not a full man. The Pardoner became so angry he could not speak. The Knight restored peace and they rode forth on their way.

## THE CANTERBURY TALES – CHARACTER TALES

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## THE SHIPMAN'S TALE

There once was a merchant in St. Deny's, the Shipman began, who was rich and had an uncommonly beautiful wife. They lived in a splendid house which, more often than not, was filled with guests.

Among these guests was a handsome young monk about thirty years old. The young monk was on the best of terms with the kind hearted merchant. Indeed, to avail himself of the merchant's hospitality the young monk stated that they were cousins, or very nearly related, since both were born in the same town. So happy was the merchant about this relationship he vowed he would always regard the monk as a brother.

It happened that the merchant, as was the custom in those days, planned to go to Brussels to purchase wares. He invited the young monk to his home for a few days before he left. The monk gladly accepted.

On the third day of the monk's visit the merchant went to his counting room to total up his debts and money to see where he stood financially before he left for Brussels. While the merchant was thus engaged, the monk was in the garden. Soon the merchant's wife entered the garden. The monk remarked that she looked quite pale and suggested wryly that perhaps her husband had kept her awake all night at play. "No, cousin mine," the merchant's wife protested, "things aren't like that with me." She then said she could kill herself because things had gone so badly with her.

The monk then said, "God forbid...unfold your grief..." She agreed to tell him her problem of marital neglect if both swore themselves to secrecy. They took a solemn vow, and she told the story, and apologized for berating the monk's cousin. "Cousin indeed!" the monk cried, "He's no more cousin to me/than is this left, here, hanging on the tree."

Finally, the merchant's wife begged the monk to loan her one hundred francs to buy some things her frugal husband had denied her. The monk agreed to bring her the money as soon as the merchant left for Brussels. Then he drew the wife to him and kissed her madly.

After dinner that night, the monk drew the merchant aside and begged him for a loan of one hundred francs to purchase some cattle. The merchant gladly gave him the money.

The next day the merchant left for Brussels. Soon after, the monk arrived at the merchant's home and, as agreed, in exchange for the money, the wife agreed to spend the night in bed with the monk.

Some time later the merchant made another business trip and on his way stopped by the monk's abbey to pay a social call, but not to collect the loan. The monk, however, said he had paid the money to the merchant's wife only a day or two after it had been loaned.

When the merchant returned home, he chided his wife for not having told him the loan had been repaid. Then she explained that she had used the money to buy fine clothes. The merchant saw that there was no point in scolding her further and concluded, "Well, I forgave you what you spent,/But don't be so extravagant again."

## THE CANTERBURY TALES – CHARACTER TALES

### THE PRIORESS' TALE: PROLOGUE

The Prioress begins by addressing the Virgin Mary and extolling the praises of Mary. The prologue is thus a hymn of praise, in which the virtues of the Virgin are praised.

### THE PRIORESS'S TALE

In a Christian town in Asia, there was one quarter of the town where Jews lived. They were kept by the lord of the town for usurious purposes.

At the far end of the street through the ghetto stood a school for young Christian children. The children were free to walk through the street to and from school.

One of the pupils was a mere child who had not learned to read and was only beginning to recognize the Latin of his prayers. At school he heard the older children singing *O Alma Redemptoris*. Day after day he drew near as they sang and listened carefully. Soon he had memorized the first verse even though he had no notion of what the Latin meant. One day he begged another lad to tell him what the song meant and the old lad said:

“This song, I have herd seye,  
Was maked of our blissful Lady free,  
Hire to salve, and eek hire for to preye...”

Then when the child learned that the song was in praise of the Virgin Mary, he was delighted and decided to learn the entire song so that on Christmas day he would pay reverence to Christ's mother.

So every day the child would go along the Jewish street singing the song boldly and clearly. At about this time the Serpent Satan whispered to the Jews that this singing boy was a disgrace to them and the singing was being done to spite the Jewish Holy Laws.

The Jews then began conspiring. A murderer was hired and one day he grasped the child, slit his throat, and tossed his body in a cesspool.

The child's mother, a widow, waited all that night. When the sun rose, she went to the school where she got the news her son was last seen

in the street of the Jews. She made inquiry of the Jews from house to house, and all said they knew nothing of the child. Then Jesus put in her thoughts the direction to the alley where he had been murdered and the pit where her boy was cast.

As the widow neared the place, the child's voice broke forth singing *O Alma*. The Christian people gathered around in astonishment. The Provost of the city was called, and upon seeing the child, bade all Jews be fettered and confined. They were later drawn by wild horses and then hanged.

The child was taken to a neighboring abbey. As the burial mass drew near, the child continued to sing *O Alma* loud and clear. He then told the abbots that Christ had commanded him to sing until his time for burial and that, at the same moment, the Virgin Mary laid a grain upon his tongue.

“ ‘And...I must sing,’ “ the child said, “ ‘For love of her,.../Till from my tongue you take away the grain.’” The monk took away the grain, and the child “gave up the ghost...peacefully.” Later a tomb of marble was erected as a memorial to the young boy.



## THE CANTERBURY TALES – CHARACTER TALES

### THE MONK'S TALE: PROLOGUE

The Host, true to his middle-class upbringing in medieval England, was delighted with the marvelous tale of dame Prudence, the benign, gentle, and understanding woman. Crowed he: "As I'm an honest man...I'd rather have had my wife hear this tale..." His wife, he explained, drove him continually to acts of dishonesty and violence.

Then the Host turned to the Monk and demanded a story which he confidently expects to be a merry tale, but he is disappointed, for the Monk began a series of tales in which tragedy was the theme. Some of the stories he warned might be familiar to his hearers and some might not.

### THE MONK'S TALE

After reciting briefly the fall of *Adam* and *Lucifer*, the Monk told the story of *Samson* whose great feats of strength made him ruler of Israel. But tragedy befell him when he married Delilah and told her one night that his strength was in his hair. To his enemies Delilah sold the secret. They clipped away his hair, put out his eyes, and threw him in a cave where he was the subject of jeers. One day he was asked to show his feats of strength and, his power restored, he destroyed the temple of his enemies and its 3,000 inhabitants. The monk moralized that men should not tell their wives secrets that should remain secret.

Next the Monk related the story of *Hercules* and how his great feats of strength and bravery led him into all the regions of the earth where he slew an infinite variety of monsters. Hercules fell in love with the beautiful Deianira and soon she fashioned him a gay shirt, but its fabric was poisoned and when he donned it his life ebbed. Disdaining death by poison, Hercules threw himself into a fire. Let all successful men, the Monk moralized, beware how Fortune elects to plot their overthrow.

The Monk continued with the stories of *Nebuchadnezzar* who was turned into an animal until he repented his idolatrous sins, and of *Balthasar* who refused to abandon the ways of the wicked, despite God's warning, and ultimately lost his kingdom.

The Monk's seventh story was of *Zenobia*, a Persian woman who was not only beautiful but of great strength and courage. She feared

neither man nor beast. One day she met and fell in love with Prince Idenathus, also a great warrior. They were wed and she bore him two sons. Zenobia and her husband swept all foes before them and ruled a vast region as far away as the Orient. The Prince died but Zenobia and her sons continued to rule and showed their captive nations no mercy. Then one year Aurelius, the great Roman emperor, invaded Zenobia's kingdom, took her and her sons captive, and in Rome they were jeered and gaped at.

The Monk then said that the mighty must always be on guard against treachery. He related briefly stories to prove his point. *King Peter of Spain* was betrayed and slain by his own brother. *King Peter of Cyprus* was slain by his own companions. *Bernabo of Lombardy* was killed in prison at the instigation of his nephew. *Count Ungolino of Pisa* was imprisoned with his three children and left to starve. After some time, the children began to cry out for bread. Then the youngest died. The count began to gnaw his own arm and one of the children offered his own flesh. Finally the other children starved and later the Count also died from starvation. Thus many of the mighty, after reaching the height of power, are betrayed and brought low.

Men who rise to power and fame are also dangerous to themselves. *Nero* rose to great fame. He loved all the fine and delicate thing in the world. To satisfy his imagination, he had Rome burned, he killed people simply to hear the sounds of weeping and he even killed his mother so as to cut open her womb and observe his place of birth. But when his time was up, he could find no person who would shelter him or even kill him. He finally had to kill himself.

*Holofernes* was once so powerful that he made the entire world give up worship of individual gods and pay homage to Nebuchadnezzar. But as he lay drunk in his tent one night, Judith slipped in and cut off his head.

Good fortune smiled so readily upon *Antiochus* that he considered it possible for him to reach the stars. Out of his hatred for the Jews, he attempted to destroy them, but God sent down invisible pains upon him. In spite of the pain, he still proceeded to execute his plans. God then caused him to be crippled and made his body stink so badly that all people avoided him. Finally, he died a wretched and lonely death.

*Alexander* was so courageous that nothing could keep him from great deeds of valor and heroism. But eventually his own people turned against him and poisoned him.

*Julius Caesar* rose from a simple birth to become the mightiest man in the world. He was indeed blest with good fortune for a long time. But finally even fickle fortune turned against him. Brutus and his cohorts stabbed Caesar to death, but even in death, Caesar remained a man as indicated by the way he covered himself with his cloak when he was dying.

The king of Lydia, *Croesus*, considered himself lucky after he was sentenced to death by fire and a heavy rain came and put out the fire. From there on, he thought himself immune to death. But he had a dream which was explained by his daughter as meaning that he would soon die by hanging.

Here the Knight interrupts the Monk.

## THE CANTERBURY TALES – CHARACTER TALES

### THE NUN'S PRIEST'S TALE: PROLOGUE

The Knight interrupts the Monk crying that his tales of woe are too much to bear. He asks the monk to tell a tale about a poor man who rises to good fortune. The Host agrees with the Knight and adds that the stories were so boring that he almost went to sleep. He entreats the Monk to tell a merry tale, but the Monk wants someone else to take a turn. The Host turns to the Nun's Priest and calls for a tale.

### THE NUN'S PRIEST'S TALE

Once long ago in a small cottage near a meadow, the Nun's Priest began, there lived a widow and her two daughters. They had barely enough to keep them comfortable. Among her possessions was a cock called Chaunticleer. This rooster was a beautiful sight to behold, and nowhere in the land was there a cock who could match him in crowing. Chaunticleer was the master in some measure of seven hens. The loveliest of these was a beautiful and gracious hen named Lady Pertelote. She held the heart of Chaunticleer.

Now it so happened that one spring dawn as these birds sat on their perch, Chaunticleer began to groan and lurch. "O dearest heart, What's ailing you?" said Pertelote. Chaunticleer then recounted a terrible dream he had of a king of beast or hound roaming in the yard trying to seize him. His color and marking were much the same as a fox.

"For same," Pertelote said, "fye on you." She told him that it was cowardly to be afraid of dreams, and by showing such fear he had lost her love. She told him he dreamed because he ate too much and that no one should be afraid of dreams. It is well known that dreams have no meaning. She quotes Cato who says that dreams have no significance. Thus, she recommends a good laxative for Chaunticleer, and explains the relative value of each laxative. She even offers to prepare the cathartic, to be followed by a feast of choice worms.

Chaunticleer graciously thanks Pertelote, but he will quote a few authors who maintain that dreams have a very definite meaning. He recalled the story of two pilgrims who arrived in a busy town. There was a large crowd so they could not find lodging together. The first pilgrim found

one room in an inn, but the second has to sleep in a nearby barn. During the night, the second pilgrim appeared to the first in a dream, saying that he was being murdered and crying for help. But the first pilgrim put this dream out of his mind and went back to sleep. Then in a second dream, the companion appeared again and said that the murderer was tossing his body in a dung cart which would be found at the city's gate the next morning. The next morning the companion arose and sought his friend in the barn. He was told that his friend was gone. The first pilgrim searched for the dung cart, and sure enough there was the body of his friend.

Chaunticleer then moralizes on murder, and is very pleased with his story, so pleased that he tells another one. Two men were to set sail then next day, but one dreamed that they were sure to be drowned and refused to go. His companion laughed at him for believing in dreams and went by himself. But as the ship was just a short distance out to sea, it sank and everyone was drowned.

Chaunticleer sees that his narration is affecting Pertelote, so he quotes several more authorities. He reminds her of St. Kenelm who saw his own murder in a dream. Furthermore, the *Dream of Scipio*, Daniel and Joseph's interpretation of dreams, and Andromache's dream should be remembered. And thus he ends his long speech with the conclusions that he needs no laxative.

Chaunticleer then felt that he had perhaps been too harsh on dear Pertelote, and he turns and compliments her on her looks and quotes to her the Latin phrase "In principio, mulier est hominis confusion" which he translates as "Woman is man's sole joy and bliss."

The Nun's Priest leaves Chaunticleer in his victory and pride with his seven ladies, and turns to the fox. This fox named Daun Russel has been hiding near the farmyard. The Nun's Priest now comments on traitors such as this fox, and compares him with such traitors as Judas and Ganelon. He follows this with a discussion of divine foreknowledge.

Returning to the plot, the Nun's Priest relates how Chaunticleer was watching a butterfly when he caught sight of the fox. He began immediately to run, but the fox called out in a gentle voice for Chaunticleer not to be afraid of a friend. He explains that he only came to hear Chaunticleer's beautiful voice. He maintains that he has only once before heard such a fine voice and the belonged to Chaunticleer's father. Now the fox wants to see if Chaunticleer can sing as well as his father could.

Thus, the vain cock shut his eyes and burst into song. At that moment the fox raced to the cock, grasped him about the neck, and made off with him. The hens in the barnyard made such a terrible commotion that they aroused the entire household. Soon the Widow, her two daughters, the dogs, hens, geese, ducks and even the bees were chasing the fox. It was so noisy that one would think the heavens were falling down.

Chauticleer then says to the fox, "Why don't you turn around and throw a few insults at them." The fox thought this a good idea and as soon as he opened his mouth, Chauticleer escaped and flew to a tree top. The fox tried to lure Chauticleer down by compliments and sweet talk, but Chauticleer had learned his lesson.

The Nun's Priest closes his tale by suggesting that his tale does have a moral.

## THE CANTERBURY TALES – CHARACTER TALES

### THE CANON'S YEOMAN'S TALE: PROLOGUE

After the tale of Saint Cecilia, two men rode rapidly up to the pilgrims. One was judged to be a Canon by his black dress. The other was the Canon's Yeoman. Both seemed polite and the Host welcomed them and asked if either had a tale he could tell. The Yeoman answered immediately that his master knew lots about mirth and jollity. He then proceeded to tell about the Canon. They lived on the edges of towns and avoid the main roads. When asked why his face is so discolored, the Yeoman explained how he had to work with furnaces and fires, and his color is from his continually blowing. The Yeoman begins to tell the secrets of their trade, and all he knows about alchemy. The Canon attempts to stop him, but the Host will allow no threats. When the Canon sees that the Yeoman is going to tell everything, the Canon slips away in shame.

### THE CANON'S YEOMAN'S TALE

#### PART I

Part one is actually a type of prologue where the Canon's Yeoman explains about their occupation and attempts at alchemy. He says that he is so deep in debt now that he will never be able to repay it all, and as a result of all his labors he has received this complexion and weak eyes. He explains about the various objects and equipment that they use in the practice of their craft. And everytime an experiment fails, the master tells him to begin again.

#### PART II

Once a Canon lived in London and practiced alchemy. He once borrowed a mark from a priest who reportedly had plenty of silver, and promised to return the mark in three days. The priest agreed but didn't expect to see his mark again. Therefore, the Canon offered to reveal a couple of his discoveries. He sent for some quicksilver, and by tricks made the priest think that the quicksilver has been turned into real silver. The priest, not noticing the trick, was very pleased. The Canon then pretended to put an ingot of chalk into the fires, but he slipped a real ingot of silver in when the priest looked away. Again, the priest thought the chalk had been turned into silver. For a third time, the Canon filled a hollow stick with

silver and plugged it with wax. When he placed it in the fire, the wax melted and silver poured forth. The beguiled priest wanted to buy the secret. The Canon asked for forty pounds and made the priest promise not to reveal the secrets to anyone. The Canon then promptly disappeared.

The remainder of the tale is an attack on the subject of alchemy and a conglomeration of all the ridiculous terms used by alchemists.

## THE CANTERBURY TALES – CHARACTER TALES

### THE MANCIPLE’S TALE: PROLOGUE

As the party moved on towards Canterbury, the Host noticed the Cook swaying in his saddle. The Cook was drunk and despite the Host’s efforts to rouse him, he fell from his horse. The party of pilgrims halted and with great effort, the Cook was restored to his saddle. Then the Host turned to the Manciple and demanded a story.

### THE MANCIPLE’S TALE

In a faraway land there lived a man named Phoebus. He was a great warrior, a skilled musician, very handsome, and kind. Phoebus had a wife whom he loved more than life itself. He bestowed upon her all the kindness and love at his command. But there was another side to Phoebus’ character. He was extremely jealous.

Phoebus also kept in his house a marvelous, white-feathered crow which could repeat words of anything he heard. Now it happened that Phoebus was called out of town. While he was gone, his wife’s secret lover came to the home and made passionate love to her.

When Phoebus returned, the crow told him the scandalous sight he had seen. In a rage, Phoebus killed his wife. As his rage cooled, the sight of his wife’s dead body brought on great remorse. In anger he turned to the crow and pulled all of its white feathers out and replaced them with black ones. And before throwing him out, he removed the crow’s ability to sing and speak. The Manciple ends his tale by admonishing all people to restrain their tongues.

## THE CANTERBURY TALES – CHARACTER TALES

### THE PARSON'S TALE: PROLOGUE

It was dusk and the pilgrims neared a small village. The Host turned to the last of the group, the Parson, and bid him tell his story and to be quick about it since it would soon be dark. The Parson said he was no rhymester, nor would he have a story that would amuse and entertain. Rather, he said, he had a sermon designed for those who wished to make the final mortal pilgrimage to the Heavenly Jerusalem.

### THE PARSON'S TALE

God desires no man to perish, the Parson said, and there are many spiritual ways to the celestial city. One noble way is *Penitence*, the lamenting for sin, and the will to sin no more. The root of the tree of *Penitence* is *contrition*; the branches and the leaves are *confession*; the fruit, is *satisfaction*; the seed, is *grace*; and the heat in that seed is the *Love of God*.

*Contrition*, the Parson continued, is the heart's sorrow for sin. There are seven deadly sins, the first of which is *pride*. *Pride* takes many forms: arrogance, impudence, boasting, hypocrisy, and joy at having done someone harm. The remedy for *pride* is *humility*.

*Envy* is sorrow at the prosperity of others and joy in their hurt. The remedy for *envy* is to love God, your neighbor, your enemy.

*Anger* is the wicked will to vengeance. The remedy for *anger* is *patience*.

*Sloth* does all tasks with vexation, slackly, and without joy, the remedy is *fortitude*.

*Avarice* is the lecherous desire for earthly things. The remedy is *mercy*.

*Gluttony* is an immeasurable appetite for food and drink. The remedy is *abstinence*, *temperance*, and *sobriety*.

*Lechery* is theft. The remedy is *chastity* and *continence*.

*Confession* must be freely willed and made in good faith. It must be considered, and frequent.

*Satisfaction* consists in alms-giving, penance, fastings, and bodily pains. Its fruit is endless bliss in Heaven.