

## THE LIFE AND TIMES OF GEOFFREY CHAUCER

### TURBULENT TIMES

Geoffrey Chaucer lived in one of the most turbulent times in English history. He was born in about 1340 and died in 1400. During that time the English King changed three times and the crown passed from **Edward III** to **Richard II** and then to **Henry IV**. This was very important, particularly, if like Chaucer, you worked for the government. In fact, some of his friends lost their heads or had to leave the country quickly because they were not in the **current king's favour**.

It was also the time of the **Hundred Years' War** between England and France, in which Chaucer served both as a soldier and a diplomat, as he was fluent in French, Italian and Latin – the language of negotiation and commerce at that time.

Even though Chaucer was a political man in many ways, he never directly commented on the political events of his time in his writings, probably because he considered it too dangerous.

### BORN IN A COUNTRY OF TWO LANGUAGES

Not much is known about the early life of Geoffrey<sup>5</sup> Chaucer. He was born in London around 1340. His father was a wine merchant, like his father and grandfather before him. Although a **middle class family**, they had connections in London's high society of the time, which were certainly useful to Chaucer's career.



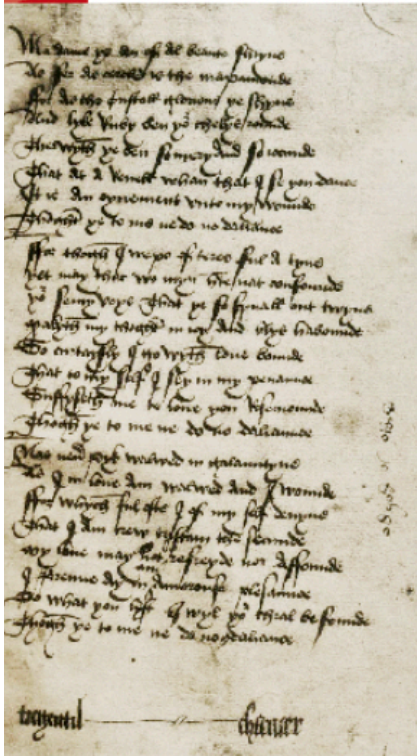
**BABYLON**  
Lingue Straniere



A traditional  
portrait of Chaucer



At that time, Latin was the language of European commerce, so merchants sent their sons to **Grammar Schools**, where all the lessons were taught in Latin. Chaucer probably heard French spoken frequently, too.



An original manuscript written by Chaucer

After the Norman Conquest of Britain in 1066, **French** was the language of the English Court and nobility for more than 300 years. The common people spoke English (what is now called **Middle English**, consisting of three regional dialects: Southern, Northern and Midlands).

However, in 1367, Edward III spoke in Parliament for the first time in English rather than in French. The period in which England was a country of two languages was coming to an end, and this is reflected in Chaucer's work and his decision to **write in English**.

5. **Geoffrey** = pronunciation: *jefri*

## THE CANTERBURY TALES

The narrator opens the General Prologue with a description of the return of spring. He describes the April rains, the burgeoning flowers and leaves, and the chirping birds. Around this time of year, the narrator says, people begin to feel the desire to go on a pilgrimage. Many devout English pilgrims set off to visit shrines in distant holy lands, but even more choose to travel to Canterbury to visit the relics of Saint Thomas Becket in Canterbury Cathedral, where they thank the martyr for having helped them when they were in need.

The narrator tells us that as he prepared to go on such a pilgrimage, staying at a tavern in Southwark called the Tabard Inn, a great company of twenty-nine travelers entered. The travelers were a diverse group who, like the narrator, were on their way to Canterbury. They happily agreed to let him join them. That night, the group slept at the Tabard, and woke up early the next morning to set off on their journey.

Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,  
Then folk long to go on pilgrimages,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mVG77xTPH6E&t=1s>

1     **Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote**  
    When April with its sweet-smelling showers  
2     **The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,**  
    Has pierced the drought of March to the root,  
3     **And bathed every veyne in swich licour**  
    And bathed every vein (of the plants) in such liquid  
4     **Of which vertu engendred is the flour;**  
    By which power the flower is created;  
5     **Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth**  
    When the West Wind also with its sweet breath,  
6     **Inspired hath in every holt and heeth**  
    In every wood and field has breathed life into  
7     **The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne**  
    The tender new leaves, and the young sun  
8     **Hath in the Ram his half cours yronne,**  
    Has run half its course in Aries,  
9     **And smale foweles maken melodye,**  
    And small fowls make melody,  
10    **That slepen al the nyght with open ye**  
    Those that sleep all the night with open eyes  
11    **(So priketh hem Nature in hir corages),**  
    (So Nature incites them in their hearts),  
12    **Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,**  
    Then folk long to go on pilgrimages,  
13    **And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,**  
    And professional pilgrims to seek foreign shores,  
14    **To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;**  
    To distant shrines, known in various lands;  
15    **And specially from every shires ende**  
    And specially from every shire's end  
16    **Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende,**  
    Of England to Canterbury they travel,  
17    **The hooly blisful martir for to seke,**  
    To seek the holy blessed martyr,  
18    **That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke.**  
    Who helped them when they were sick.

When the sweet rains of April arrive and the flowers come out, when the West Wind blows through the fields and trees, when the spring sun is in the sky and the birds sing all day long, then is the time that people go on pilgrimages: some to distant lands, some to Canterbury to visit the shrine of Thomas Beckett, who helps them when they are sick.

One April day, while I was waiting at the Tabard Inn in Southwark in London, ready to make my pilgrimage to Canterbury, a group of twenty-nine pilgrims arrived to stay the night. The rooms and the stables for their horses were spacious, and we were all very comfortable. In the evening, after the sun went down, I spoke to them and we decided to ride together to Canterbury.

But before I tell my story, I will tell you the qualities of some of them, what sort of people they were, their social position and what they were wearing. I will begin with the knight.

THE KNIGHT

THE CLERK

THE SQUIRE

THE SERGEANT OF THE LAW

THE YEOMAN

THE FRANKLIN

THE NUN/PRIORESS

THE PHYSICIAN

THE MONK

THE WIFE OF BATH

THE FRIAR

THE SUMMONER

THE MERCHANT

THE PARDONER

## THE NARRATOR (Chaucer)

### AND....WHO IS THE HOST?

While Chaucer never openly criticized the Church, “The Canterbury Tales” give the reader an idea of its state of decline.

He shows the corruption of the Clergy through characters like the Prioress, the Monk, the Friar, the Summoner and the Pardoner. Their interests in fashion, food, wine, hunting and selling false holy relics are all satirized, and are in strict contrast to Chaucer’s description of the ideal Parson.

Recent studies suggest that perhaps there is a hidden message in “The Canterbury Tales”, centered around the tavern-keeper, the Host, who offers to accompany the pilgrims to Canterbury.

The word HOST comes from the Latin word HOSPES meaning both “host” and “guest”. HOST in medieval times in England also meant “consecrated bread” or “hostia” in Latin, which represent the body of Christ in the Eucharist..

There are elements in the description of Chaucer’s Host which could suggest that he represent the figure of Christ:

- He is the only character who is not physically described, although he is always present;
- He welcomes the pilgrims and offers them food and wine;
- He appears at the beginning, middle and end of each tale and his comments are kind, wise and sometimes humorous.

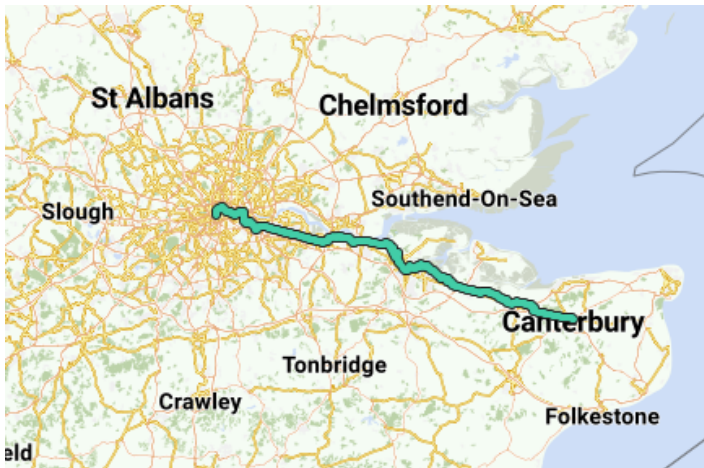
If we accept that the Host is the figure of Christ, then his comments may help us to understand more about Chaucer’s views on religion and the Church in his time.

### WHY CANTERBURY?

This story is told by Ken Follett in his novel “The Pillars of the Earth”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-TrpO69sM-c>





## FROM CANTERBURY TO ROME, YESTERDAY AND TODAY

In Chaucer's time, pilgrimages were very common. As a result, Canterbury became a rich, mediaeval tourist town. A pilgrimage was similar to a modern holiday for many people. The Wife of Bath had been on pilgrimages to Jerusalem, Boulogne, Rome, Santiago in Galicia and also to Cologne.

The older pilgrim route in Europe, the "Via Francigena", goes from Rome to Canterbury and was the route St. Augustine of Canterbury walked in 597 on his first mission to England. It is 2000 km long and passes through Switzerland and France. In mediaeval times it was the most important pilgrim route in Europe, but at some point in the past, it fell into decline.

In 2009 the Italian government began a project to re-open the whole Italian section of the route. It takes four months to walk along the whole Via Francigena, so many people prefer to walk only a short part, particularly through Italy and Switzerland. Today, like one thousand years ago, sleeping accommodation is offered in hostels, monasteries and church buildings.



## THE WIFE OF BATH'S TALE

) “My personal experience,” began the Wife of Bath, “is sufficient to qualify me to speak about that tribulation called marriage. I was twelve years old when I was first married and since then I have had five husbands. Someone said to me that I could marry only once, but I have never seen anything in the Bible that tells you how many times you can marry. Some people never marry, they want a life of virginity, they want to be perfect, but that is not for me. I prefer to use my flower in the acts and fruits of marriage.”

“What is the purpose<sup>1</sup> of men and women’s private parts if not for procreation? Some say it is only for urination, I do not agree, but because we have nuns, priests and friars riding with us, I will say they are made for both business and pleasure. I do not say that every person has to have many children, but that as a wife, I can always accommodate my husband. For this, he will always be in my debt and must play his part well.”

“I have had three good husbands and two bad. The three good men were rich, but old, so they could not pay their debt to me. They loved me, and I had control of all their land and money, so I did not need to please them. So, listen wives, this is what you must do. Be hard with your men. I tormented mine with accusations: the way they looked at other women, why they were sleeping with them, even if it was not true. They thought I was jealous, so they were happy! I said that I walked out at night to discover who they were sleeping with, but of course I was out enjoying myself. You

see, in the end I always got what I wanted, because God made women naturally good at lying, crying and spying.”

“My fourth husband liked the ladies. I liked dancing, singing and sweet wine. And when I think of wine, I think of Venus. And it is hard to stop men’s advances when you are drunk. Oh! What fun I had when I was young! It does my heart good to think of it! But age has taken my energy and my beauty. My flower has gone, but that is life.”

“Yes, I was furious to think my fourth husband had other women. But I made him fry<sup>2</sup> in his own grease<sup>3</sup>! How I made him suffer! I tormented him in so many ways. He died when I returned home from Jerusalem. I put him in a simple tomb – anything better would have been a waste<sup>4</sup> of money!”

“My fifth husband, may God save him from hell, was the worst to me and beat me often, but he was so fresh and merry in bed. I believe that I loved him best, because he never showed his love. We women, to tell the truth, are strange in this; we always want what we cannot have. I married him for love and not for riches.”

“So help me God, I fell in love with him at my fourth husband’s funeral, when I saw what fine legs he had. He was just twenty winters old, and if I must tell the truth, I was forty. I had a gap between my teeth, a sign of Venus, and I was rich and pretty. We were married a month later. I gave him all the land and riches that I had received from my other husbands, but it was a bad idea. He beat me often, and once hit me on the ear so hard, that still today I cannot hear. He had a book of stories about evil women from which he read to me, but I never listened. It was written by a man, of course!”

“He read me stories from the Bible, from Greece, from Rome and he knew more proverbs than blades<sup>5</sup> of grass grow in this world: ‘It is better to live with a lion or a dragon, than with a woman who torments you,’ or ‘It is better to live on the roof, than in the house with an angry woman’ or ‘A beautiful woman, unless she is a virgin, is like a gold ring in a pig’s nose!’ So I took his book and ripped out<sup>6</sup> some pages. Then he hit me so hard that I nearly died. After that he was so frightened of losing me that he gave me control of the house and money, and of his tongue and hands as well! And I made him burn his book immediately. And since that day we have never had a dispute. Now I will tell my story.”

The Friar laughed and said, “Finally! It will be a great pleasure, Madame, after this long introduction to your tale!”

“I am all ready, Sir Host,” she said a little irritated, “if I have the permission of the good Friar.”

“Yes, Madame,” answered the Friar, “please tell your tale now and I will be quiet.”



In the days of **King Arthur**, this land was entirely filled with magic power. The elf-queen and fairies often danced in the green fields, but in our times there are no more elves or demons. Now women can walk around safely, and in the bushes and trees no one is hiding – except friars!

One day it happened that one of King Arthur's knights came riding along the river and saw a pretty girl, whom he desired. He had her, in spite of all her resistance. People were so angry that they asked King Arthur to condemn the knight to death. But the Queen and other ladies asked the King for mercy. He decided that the Queen should choose if she wanted to save the knight or let him die.

"Knight," she said, "I will give you your life if you can tell me what thing it is that women desire most. You can tell me now or I will give you twelve months and a day to find an answer. But before you leave, you must promise to return."

The knight was sad and had no answer. At last he chose to return in a year. He set off on his journey. He looked everywhere and asked every woman he met what she desired most – some said riches, some said happiness, some said honour, some said clothes, some wanted their husbands to die, some wanted freedom, some wanted compliments and attention.

Many answers came near the truth, but although he travelled far, the knight could not discover the final answer. The year had nearly passed and it was time to return to the queen.

As he was riding near a forest, he saw twenty-four ladies dancing. He rode towards them on his horse, ready to ask his question, but they all disappeared before he arrived. There was only a woman sitting on the grass, and she was the ugliest creature he had ever seen.

As he approached, the old woman said, "Sir Knight, there is no road this way. What are you looking for? Old people know many things, so maybe I can help you."

"My good woman," said the knight, "I am a dead man unless I can say what thing it is that women desire most. If you can help me, I will pay you well for your work."

"Promise me," she said, "that you will do whatever I ask, if it is in your power; then I will tell you the answer."

"I promise," said the knight.

"Then your life is safe," she said. "You will see that the Queen

agrees with me. Let us go now to the court." Then she whispered<sup>7</sup> a word in his ear, and told him to be happy and not afraid.

When they arrived at the court on the day he had promised, the knight was ready. Many noble wives were assembled to hear his answer, and many maidens<sup>8</sup>, and many widows<sup>9</sup> (because they are wise); and the Queen herself sat as judge, waiting for his answer.

"My Lady," he said in a clear voice, "I have the answer. Everywhere in the world a woman wishes to have power over her husband and lover, and to have the final say<sup>10</sup> in all things. This is women's greatest desire."

In all the court no woman contradicted what he said, but all declared he should have his freedom<sup>11</sup>. And hearing that word, the old woman came forward. "Mercy, my Lady!" she said. "I taught the knight this answer, and he promised to do what I asked of him. Before the court, then, I ask you, Sir Knight, to take me as your wife, because I have saved your life."

The knight answered, "Oh no! I know that this was my promise. But for the love of God, please choose another request! Take all my possessions, but not me!"

"No," she answered, "I may be ugly, poor, and old, but I do not want pieces of metal or coins, I want to be your wife, and your love also."

"My love!" he said, "No, it would be my ruin and disgrace!"

But he had no choice. He married her secretly the next morning. There was no joy or celebration, only sadness in his heart as he took his old, ugly wife home.

In bed that night, he tossed and turned<sup>12</sup> many times. His old wife lay smiling, and said, "Ah, dear husband! Does every knight act this way with his wife? I am your own love and your wife also, and I have saved your life. Why do you act this way on our first night? What have I done? Tell me, for the love of God, and if I have the power, I will find a solution."

"A solution!" said the knight. "No! There is no solution! You are so ugly, old and poor. You have no position; you are not of the nobility!"

"If this is all," she replied, "I can change it, but you must treat me better. You speak of nobility, but when it only comes from family money, it is arrogance. The wise poet of Florence, who is named Dante, speaks well about this in his poetry: 'Rarely does a man climb to excellence on his own slim branches<sup>13</sup>, because God desires that our nobility comes from Him'. Your ancestors'<sup>14</sup> nobility is not your nobility."

symbol of via Francigena is taken from one of the pilgrims depicted on the facade of the cathedral in Fidenza, a town on the ancient route.

“You say I am poor; but God himself chose freely to live in poverty. I pray you, sir, do not hate me for my poverty. And you say I am old and ugly: but then you have no fear of losing your wife to another man! But I know what you desire and I will content you.”

“Choose one of these two things,” she said, “to have me ugly and old until I die, but a true and modest wife, or to have me young and beautiful, and be prepared to compete with other men. Now choose yourself which you prefer.”

The knight thought hard about it and sighed. At last he spoke: “My lady and love, and my dear wife, you are wise. Please choose which may be the greatest pleasure and greatest honour to you; it is sufficient for me to please you.”

“Kiss me,” she said, “for I promise I will be beautiful, yes, and good. And if in the morning I am not as beautiful to see as any lady or queen, then kill me if you like.”

And when he saw her in the morning, she was so beautiful and so young that he took her in his two arms and his heart was full of joy. He kissed her a thousand times. And so they lived in perfect happiness to the end of their lives.

And I pray to Jesus to send us strong young husbands, to give us the grace to live longer than them, to shorten the lives of husbands who will not be controlled by their wives, and to the angry old misers<sup>15</sup> may he send a true pestilence!

Here ends the Wife of Bath's Tale.