

CHAUCE, THE CANTERBURY TALES, AND THE “WIFE OF BATH”

Western Canon 1 | Brendan Shea, PhD (Brendan.Shea@rtc.edu)

“The General Prologue” (Middle English)	Modern Translation
Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote The droghte of March hath perced to the roote, And bathed every veyne in swich licour Of which vertu engendred is the flour, Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth Inspired hath in every holt and heeth The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne Hath in the Ram his halve cours yronne, And smale foweles maken melodye, That slepen al the nyght with open ye (so priketh hem Nature in hir corages), Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages, And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes, To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes; And specially from every shires ende Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende, The hooly blisful martir for to seke, That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke.	When April with his showers sweet with fruit The drought of March has pierced unto the root And bathed each vein with liquor that has power To generate therein and sire the flower; When Zephyr also has, with his sweet breath, Quickened again, in every holt and heath, The tender shoots and buds, and the young sun Into the Ram one half his course has run, And many little birds make melody That sleep through all the night with open eye (So Nature pricks them on to ramp and rage)- Then do folk long to go on pilgrimage, And palmeres to go seeking out strange strands, To distant shrines well known in sundry lands. And specially from every shire's end Of England they to Canterbury wend, The holy blessed martyr there to seek Who helped them when they lay so ill and weak

Geoffrey Chaucer was born somewhere around 1343 and died in 1400. A brief overview of his life and times:

- We don’t know a ton about his early life. His family was “middle class”, but likely inherited a fair amount of money as a result of the **“Black Death”** that hit England when Chaucer was still young (a huge number of people in London died, including most of Chaucer’s aunts and uncles). He ended up serving as a page to a Countess, which introduced him to the nobility.
- Along with English, he was fluent in (at least) French, Italian, and Latin. It’s unclear where/when he learned all of these languages, though this wouldn’t have been too unusual for someone in his position.
- His “professional” career was as a government official, traveling and doing various sorts of administrative work for the king and nobility. His wife (Philippa de Roet) worked for the queen. We don’t much about their marriage except (1) it may have been arranged by the king/queen, and (2) they didn’t spend much time together, as a result of their professional duties (for which they were apparently paid very well).
- Chaucer lived in interesting times! Along with living through the Black Death, he was an adult during the high point of the **Hundred Years** against Franc. He also got to witness the **Peasant’s Revolt** of 1381, which saw several nobility killed. This revolt something of a turning point in English history, and many of the problems that caused it (ruthless taxation by nobility and church) would eventually transform England.
- Despite living through all of this (and even serving as a member of Parliament), we don’t know much about Chaucer’s political views, perhaps because Chaucer had very good reason (because of his profession) to keep such views to himself.
- Chaucer’s writings are the earliest-known source of around 2,000 English words, including *accident*, *dishonest*, *galaxy*, *obscure*, *theater*, *twitter*, and *vacation*. While he likely didn’t “invent” all of these words, his use of them shaped the way we use and understand these words today.
- Chaucer writes in **Middle English**, which is an ancestor of today’s **Modern English**. Middle English can be difficult to read, as its grammar/syntax have some (small) differences from our own language. (By contrast, Shakespeare, who writes a few hundred years later, is clearly Modern English, even if his vocabulary can sometimes be challenging).

Over the course of his life, Chaucer became increasingly well-known for his writing, and his original audience likely included both members of the court (women as well as men) and the rising middle class. The popularity and positive reception of his work helped encourage subsequent writers to use English, rather than French or Latin, which had been the norm. His work—especially the *Canterbury Tales*—would be a major influence on the development of literature in the English-speaking world.

THE CANTERBURY TALES

Chaucer’s most well-known work is the *Canterbury Tales*, which is a collection of 24 stories as told by 24 fictional “pilgrims” who are on traveling together on a **pilgrimage** (which functioned as something like the medieval version of a vacation). In terms of both plot and structure, the single biggest influence on the structure/content of the Tales is the Italian **Giovanni Boccacci’s** *Decameron*. However,

Chaucer drew from a huge number of sources, including the Bible, Dante, Ovid, numerous philosophers and theologians, and (of course) lots and lots of observation of the England of his day, and the way people from various social classes interacted. The characters in the Tales come from basically every social “class” in English society except the very bottom (there are no peasants) and the very top (the upper nobility), neither of whom would have gone on a pilgrimage such as this, or would have regularly interacted with these sorts of characters. The pilgrims are, in other words, the sorts of people you might meet “about town” in London on an average day.

A few of the pilgrims include the following:

- **Chaucer himself!** Chaucer appears as a character in the tales, and tells two stories (“Sir Thopas” and “Melibee”). Chaucer presents himself as a terrible story teller, and seems to use “his” tales as opportunities for satirical commentary on popular writing. The other characters interrupt his first tale, calling it a “turd”, and he later responds with one of the longest (and most boring) tales in the collection.
- The **Knight** is a member of the (lower) nobility, and has fought in numerous crusades. He tells the first story, which is something like a traditional “romance” of the sort that dominated French literature of the time, though with more philosophical depth.
- The drunken **Miller** owns a mill (used to grind grains to flour). He answers the knight by telling a (decidedly unromantic) tale of a carpenter John and his wife Alisoun, who cheats on John with a clever university student. Hilarity ensues, in the manner of a bawdy sex comedy, and John ends up with a broken arm.
- The **Reeve** (the general manager for a noble landlord, who does carpentry, among other things) gets mad at the Miller and tells a (decidedly less funny) story about a “cheating” miller whose wife and daughter are raped (there’s some debate about this) by two university students, who then then beat up the Miller. The Reeve delivers it *as if* it has a good “moral” about not cheating people.
- The Knight’s son **The Squire** at some point launches into his own (lengthy, boring) romance before being interrupted by his social inferior, the **Franklin** (a “freeman” from the rising middle class, who seems to aspire to be considered “noble”). The Franklin’s tale, like the Knight’s, merges a romantic story with more complex philosophical/religious ideas.
- The women include the **Wife of Bath** (more on her later), the **Prioress** (the leader of a group of nuns, who tells an anti-semitic story of a Christian child killed by Jews), and the **“Second Nun”** (who tells a story of the martyrdom of St. Cecilia). Both the Prioress and the Second Nun involve “Invocations of Mary” (Chaucer himself seemed to have a strong attachment to Mary).
- The **Friar** and **Summoner** both work for (different parts of) the Church, and tell stories intended to demonstrate the other one’s corruption and unholiness. Chaucer presents both in negative ways.
- The **Physician** and **Pardoner** both tell gruesome stories of people dying because of “sin” (in one case, a girl is beheaded by her father so she isn’t “disgraced” by marrying the wrong man), and it seems pretty clear the two tell them *precisely because they are gory/gruesome*. (Some people liked horror movies, even then, and Chaucer seems to suggest this is tough to square with “Christian” morality.”).
- The final tale is told by the **Parson** (the priest of a small parish), and is basically a long essay on “penitence” and forgiveness. It seems to be meant in earnest, as the Parson is presented as the “purest” of the pilgrims (many of whom are definitely impure!), and there’s little reason to think any of it is meant sarcastically.

THE WIFE OF BATH: PROLOGUE AND TALE

By God, if women had but written stories,
As have these clerks within their oratories,
They would have written of men more wickedness(20)
Than all the race of Adam could redress.
Therefore no woman by a clerk is praised.
A clerk, when he is old and can naught do
Of Venus’ labours worth his worn-out shoe,
Then sits he down and writes, in his dotage,(25)
That women cannot keep vow of marriage!
“But now to tell you, as I started to,
Why I was beaten for a book, pardieu.
Upon a night Jenkin, who was our sire,
Read in his book, as he sat by the fire,(30)
Of Mother Eve who, by her wickedness,

First brought mankind to all his wretchedness
For which Lord Jesus Christ Himself was slain,
Who, with His heart’s blood, saved us thus again.
Lo, here plainly of woman may you find(35)
That woman was the ruin of mankind.
Then read he out how Samson lost his hairs
When sleeping, his mistress cut them with her shears;
And through this treason lost he either eye.
And nothing escaped him of the pain and woe(40)
That Socrates had with his spouses two;”
“Of Clytemnestra, for her lechery,
Who caused her husband’s death by treachery,
He read all thus with greatest zest, I vow (“Prologue to the Wife
of Bath’s Tale”).

The **Wife of Bath’s** prologue and tale is among the more popular and better-known of Chaucer’s tales. There are several reasons for this:

1. Her “prologue” (in which we learn about her character, and she tells us about her life and opinions) is the longest in the Tales, and represents Chaucer’s most-detailed description of any character.
2. She’s interesting! She’s the only “secular” woman among the pilgrims, and she is actively (and intelligently!) critical of the social norms that govern women’s lives. Among other things, she defends her choice to repeatedly remarry after her husbands’ deaths, on the grounds that this is precisely the sort of thing that *men* were allowed to do, and she didn’t see any reason for women to behave differently. Her view of love (based on desire for sex and status) is something that male characters in literature frequently expressed, but was unheard of for a *woman*.
3. Her tale itself (beginning with a rape, and ending with a marriage) is one that invites interpretation and argument. For centuries, people have disagreed over how *Chaucer* wants us to read the Wife of Bath’s story. Is Chaucer *endorsing* the Wife of Bath’s (pretty radical) views about gender and marriage? Is he making fun of these views?

What Happens? Harvard’s excellent Chaucer site (<https://chaucer.fas.harvard.edu/pages/prologue>) provides the following summaries of the prologue and tale:

Prologue: Alisoun, the Wife of Bath, has been married five times and is ready for another husband: Christ never specified how many times a woman should marry. Virginity is fine but wives are not condemned; the Apostle said that my husband would be my debtor, and I have power over his body. Three of my husbands were good and two bad. The first three were old and rich and I picked them clean. One of my old husbands, emboldened with drink, would come home and preach against women; but I got the better of him. My fourth husband was young and he had a mistress. I pretended to be unfaithful and made him burn in his own grease. I already had my eye on young Jankin, pall-bearer for my fourth, and he became my fifth and favorite husband. He beat me. Once when he was reading aloud from his Book of Wicked Wives, I tore a page from his book, and he knocked me down (so hard I am still deaf from it). I pretended to be dying, and when he leaned over to ask forgiveness, I knocked him into the fireplace. We made up, and he gave me full sovereignty in marriage; thereafter I was kind and faithful, and we lived in bliss.

The Tale: In Arthur's day, before the friars drove away the fairies, a lusty bachelor of the king's court raped a young maiden. He is taken and condemned to die (such was the custom then) but the king, in deference to Queen Guenevere's pleas, allows the ladies to judge him. They tell him he can save his life only if a year and a day later he can tell them what it is that women most desire. He wanders long without finding the answer; he is about to return disconsolate when he comes upon an old and remarkably ugly woman. She says that if he swears to do whatever she will next ask him, she will tell him the answer. He agrees and returns with the answer: women most desire to have sovereignty over their husbands. Guenevere and her ladies are amazed; they grant him his life. The old woman then makes her demand: that he marry her. She will accept no less. On their wedding night; he turns away from her. She asks him what is the matter. He answers that she is old and ugly and low born. The old woman demonstrates to him that none of these matter -- especially noble birth, since true gentillesse depends on deeds rather than birth. She offers him the choice: he can have her old and ugly and faithful or young, beautiful, and possibly unchaste. He tells her to choose; he grants her the sovereignty. When he does so she turns into a beautiful maiden, and they live thereafter in perfect joy.]

THEMES AND QUESTIONS FOR “THE WIFE OF BATH”

The “Wife of Bath” has been a popular tale for quite a long time (almost 700 years!) and has generated *a lot* of scholarly debate over the year. In particular, scholars have consistently disagreed on how we should understand what’s going on with this tale and its teller.

The Power of Women? In both the Wife of Bath’s prologue (in which she pushes her husband in the fireplace, prompting him to behave better) and in her tale (in which the rapist is saved first by the Queen Guenevere’s mercy, and then multiple times by the old woman’s assistant), a traditionally masculine “hero” is saved by women’s intervention. In each, the initial “wrong” is a common harm done *against* women (abuse and rape), and the only path to forgiveness/salvation for the man to recognize the power or sovereignty of women. Both the Wife of Bath and her “alter ego” (the old woman) are presented as highly knowledgeable, and regularly reference classic/academic sources (such as Ovid). Some critics have seen this as Chaucer straightforwardly addressing social problems of his day (men treating women badly, both in literature and life) by proposing a complete revisioning of men’s relationship with women. Others have seen it as almost the opposite—if we assume that Chaucer would NOT advocate for radical social change (he seems leery to do in other cases), the conclusion can only be that the Wife of Bath is meant to be farcical (here, the fact that she gets Ovid “wrong” may be suggestive).

An (Anti-) Romance? The Wife of Bath’s tale is clearly set in King Arthur’s “world,” and it structurally resembles many of these stories: e.g., a knight who has made a mistake is sent on a quest by Queen Guenevere, and finds he must win the love of a beautiful woman to succeed in it. The apparent message—of “love conquers all”—is one that fits well with these themes. However, there are also some indications that we shouldn’t take this “romance” at face value. A typical “Arthurian” hero gets in trouble for some sort of illicit kiss with a willing woman; he most certainly does NOT rape a woman he encounters on the road. Moreover, in order to succeed, he is supposed to save a young, pretty woman, who is forever grateful to him. In this story, he is the one who is saved, by an old, ugly woman who he finds

repulsive. So, what are we to make of all of this? Is this meant to be a genuine “Romance” about the power of love, albeit a highly unconventional (and somewhat gritty) one? Or is this meant as an anti-Romance that serves to *criticize* the notions of “love” and “courtly behavior” that fill these stories?

What is Beauty? What is Love? Finally, the Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale touch on more general themes of Love and Beauty, and how these are to be understood. So, for example: How does genuine love relate to the biological phenomenon of sexual desire and social institution of marriage? Much of the Greco-Roman tradition ties love tightly to sexual desire, while the Christian tradition (along with Plato) almost entirely divorces the two (with “love of God” being the purest form of love). The Wife of Bath’s character tale presents some problems for both views. Other questions include: “What is beauty, and how does *it* relate to love?” “Is love different for men and women? If it is, is this because of society, nature, or some combination of the two?” The Wife of Bath’s highly irregular praise of love (Multiple husbands! An ugly old woman as bride! Woman as equal to man!) invites the reader to consider just what sort of things love and beauty are, and how the stories we read have subtly shaped the way we think about these things.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. In many ways, Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* represents the beginning of “modern” English literature, as his popularity and success convinced subsequent writers that good literature could be written in English (and not just French, Italian, or Latin). Why do you think his Tales were so popular/influential? What do you think their value is for modern readers?
2. Let’s define **feminism** to be the belief that men and women are moral equals. Is the Wife of Bath’s Tale a “feminist” one? An “anti-feminist” one? Somewhere in between? Explain and defend your answer using what you’ve learned from the text and lecture.
3. Write a modern “update” on the Wife of Bath’s Tale (using modern characters and events). At the end, say a bit about what the “moral” of your story is (here, you can either be sarcastic or not).
4. Suppose that you were writing a new version of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (many writers have attempted to do this!), and you wanted to include “pilgrims” that represented the major social class/types that make up today’s society. Write detailed descriptions of FIVE of these pilgrims, making sure to explain at least (a) their profession or social position, (b) their “character” (what are their interests? Their bad behaviors? Their saving graces? And (c) how they feel about the other pilgrims.