

GEOFFREY CHAUCER

The Canterbury Tales  
IN MODERN VERSE



Selected and Translated, with an Introduction,  
by Joseph Glaser

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For Carol Ann

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## CONTENTS



INTRODUCTION	1
<i>THE CANTERBURY TALES</i>	19
General Prologue	21
The Knight's Tale (abridged)	43
The Miller's Prologue	70
The Miller's Tale	72
The Reeve's Prologue	90
The Reeve's Tale	92
The Cook's Tale (summary)	103
The Man of Law's Tale (summary)	104
Epilogue to the Man of Law's Tale	106
The Wife of Bath's Prologue	107
Words Between the Summoner and the Friar	128
The Wife of Bath's Tale	129
The Friar's Prologue	141
The Friar's Tale	142
The Summoner's Prologue	152
The Summoner's Tale	153
The Clerk's Prologue	169
The Clerk's Tale (abridged)	170
The Merchant's Prologue	188
The Merchant's Tale	189
The Squire's Prologue	220
The Squire's Tale (abridged)	220

But I began to stir instead.  
 "You've killed me now, false thief," I said,  
 "Robbed and murdered, what a crime!  
 But come and kiss me one last time."

He ventured near and knelt beside me,  
 And said, "No matter what betides me,  
 I'll never buffet you again.

You pushed till I was half insane.  
 Forgive me, dear, that's all I seek."  
 By God, I clubbed him on the cheek!  
 And said, "There, thief, accept your pay!  
 I'm dead. I have no more to say."

But, still, at length with care and tact  
 We found our roles and made a pact.  
 He put the bridle in my hand,

The government of house and land,  
 And of his tongue and his behavior.  
 We burnt his book, as God's my savior.

And when I gathered in to me  
 All the rule and sovereignty,  
 And when he said, "My own true wife,  
 Do as you will throughout your life:  
 Preserve your name and my possessions"—  
 We had no more head-knocking sessions.

As God's my hope, I was as kind  
 As any wife you'll ever find,  
 And true to him, and he to me.

I pray great God in majesty  
 May bathe his soul in heaven's glory.  
 And now, sirs, I will tell my story.

### WORDS BETWEEN THE SUMMONER AND THE FRIAR

The Friar laughed to hear all this.  
 "Good Dame," he said, "upon my bliss,  
 A long preamble to a tale!"  
 The Summoner broke in like a gale:  
 "Lo," he said, "for all God's care,

810

820

830

A friar jumps in anywhere.  
 A fly and a friar, if you wish,  
 Will try their luck in any dish.  
 What do you know of preambulation?  
 Trot, shut up, or go sit down!  
 Don't thrust your nose in others' sport."

The Friar had a hot retort:  
 "Faith," he said, "before I go,  
 I'll tell a comic tale or so  
 To make us laugh at your disgrace."

The Summoner said, "Well, damn your face,  
 And damn your gall, and God damn me,  
 If I don't venture two or three  
 Of friars before Sittingbourne,  
 Each guaranteed to make you mourn.  
 I see that you can't take a joke."

"Peace!" said the Host, "or may you choke!  
 Now let this woman tell her tale.  
 You speak like farm hands drunk on ale.  
 Dame, tell your story, for the best."  
 "I will," said she, "at your behest,  
 If I have license of this Friar."  
 "Tell on," he said, "that's my desire."

840

850

*forty miles from London*

860

### THE WIFE OF BATH'S TALE

Once in good King Arthur's days,  
 Which Britons now revere and praise,  
 Fairies filled our pleasant land.  
 The elf-queen and her gay command  
 Danced on many a vernal mead—  
 Or most men think they did, indeed—  
 Many hundred years ago.  
 But now they're gone, as all men know.  
 For now the great deserts and prayers  
 Of mendicants and other friars  
 Who wander all the fields and streams  
 Like motes that swarm in bright sunbeams,

870

Blessing chambers, halls, and bowers,  
 Cities, boroughs, castles, towers,  
 Towns and barns, stables, dairies,  
 Have routed out those ancient fairies.  
 For everywhere there was an elf,  
 You look and, lo, the friar himself!  
 Going about, he prays and sings  
 His matins and his holy things  
 On his way to beg and bless.  
 But women now are safe, I guess.  
 Behind each bush and every tree,  
 There is no incubus but he,  
 And he will just subvert our virtue.

880

This Arthur I alluded to  
 Retained a lusty bachelor  
 Who went one day along a shore  
 And happened, riding on his own,  
 To meet a maid, like him, alone.  
 He threw her down, with little said,  
 And robbed her of her maidenhead.  
 This villain's work raised such a pother  
 That soon it reached the court and Arthur,  
 Who damned the boorish knight to die.  
 His head must roll—nowhere to fly!  
 Perhaps that's what the statutes said.  
 The queen had other plans instead  
 And asked her husband for the knight,  
 To punish him as she thought right.  
 The courteous king gave up the man  
 To live or die at her command.  
 She thanked the king for what he gave,  
 Then pondered how to treat the knave.  
 "See here," she told him, "how your tricks,  
 Have put you in this wretched fix.  
 Your life is forfeit, sir; it's mine.  
 I send you on a quest to find  
 What one thing women most desire.  
 Fail me, and your fate is dire.  
 I won't demand your answer now.  
 No, I'll have mercy and allow

890

*seductive sprite*

900

• 910

The coming year for you to try  
 To find the single best reply.  
 Come swear to this, and vow to be  
 Back here in time to answer me."

The man was in a sorry plight.  
 His queen was well within her right.  
 He had no reason to protest,  
 And so he undertook the quest.  
 He prayed that God would save his neck,  
 But feared he'd have a pointless trek.

920

He left the court and took his way  
 In hope someone he met might say  
 What every woman most preferred.  
 But nothing that he ever heard  
 Convinced him that his trial was passed.  
 Each one he asked belied the last.  
 Some said that women lived for wealth.  
 Some said honor; some said health.  
 Some lust in bed; some, clothes and goods;  
 Some said frequent widowhoods.  
 Some said that our hearts are eased  
 When we are humored, praised, and pleased.  
 That's close to true, it seems to me,  
 For women thrive on flattery.  
 A sycophant who comes on call  
 Delights most women, great or small.

930

940

Some said we never rest until  
 We're free to do just as we will,  
 And no man dares dispraise our habits,  
 But says we live like pious abbots.  
 That covers most of us indeed,  
 For when men pay unseemly heed  
 To our shortcomings, we will bite.  
 Try if you will. You'll find I'm right.  
 For be what women may within,  
 We won't admit the smallest sin.

950

Still others said our favorite treat  
 Is being held to be discreet,  
 Trustworthy in affairs as well,  
 Aware of things we'll never tell.

Sirs, that thought's hardly worth a flea.  
 No woman honors privacy.  
 Midas' story proves that's so.

The tales of Ovid plainly show  
 That Midas had, beneath his hair,  
 Two ass's ears—an ugly pair 960  
 Of defects that he sought to hide  
 To keep his place and save his pride.<sup>11</sup>  
 Only his wife had seen his ears.  
 He trusted her for all his fears  
 And placed her in his confidence.  
 (This showed his basic lack of sense.)

She swore, "No! Not for all of Greece,  
 Would I destroy my husband's peace  
 And undercut his kingly name!  
 Besides, I'd have to share the shame." 970  
 But nonetheless she almost died  
 Keeping this piece of news inside.  
 The secret swelled and pressed her heart  
 Till she must tell at least a part;  
 And since she couldn't tell a man,  
 Away into a marsh she ran.  
 Her breast burned so it seemed on fire,  
 And, as a bittern dabs in mire, 980  
 Down to the water went her lips.  
 "Don't tell a soul or let this slip,"  
 She said. "Make certain no one hears:  
*My husband has two ass's ears!*  
 If she'd not let her secret out,  
 It would have stifled her, no doubt.  
 You see, we women might delay,  
 But all we know comes out someday.  
 For what became of Midas' ears,  
 Read Ovid, where the tale appears. 990  
 Metamorphoses, xi

Back now to our oafish knight,  
 For all his wandering day and night,

11. Midas was given these ears for preferring Pan's music to Apollo's. In Ovid, however, Midas is betrayed not by his wife, but by a slave. His slave whispers the secret in a hole and covers it up, but reeds grow from the place and announce it to the world.

He couldn't find what women wanted.  
 Conflicting answers had him daunted.  
 He must go home; the time was nigh.  
 The queen awaited his reply.  
 But on the way he chanced to ride  
 Beside a forest where he spied  
 About two dozen lovely maids  
 Dancing in the woodland glades.  
 He made toward the girls to ask  
 If they could help him with his task. 1000  
 But when they saw him riding there,  
 They vanished lightly into air,  
 And on the green, sirs, by my life,  
 There sat an ancient, loathsome wife.  
 A fouler sight you'll never see.  
 She scrambled up beside his knee  
 And cackled, "Sir, there's no path here.  
 But what explains your sorry cheer?  
 Tell me, young man, what you need.  
 Old heads like mine are wise indeed." 1010

"Dearest mother," said the knight,  
 "I have to learn before tonight  
 What women want. I need advice.  
 If you can say, just name your price."  
 "Ah, that I could," she said, "but shan't  
 Unless you swear to me you'll grant  
 The next request I send your way,  
 And you will hear it, lad, today."

"Done, mother," said the knight, "I swear."  
 "Then," she said, "You're in my care. 1020  
 Your life is safe, as you will see.  
 The queen herself must side with me.  
 The proudest wife who wears a gown  
 Cannot deny my answer's sound.  
 They can't dispute what I will say.  
 Let's go and face the court today.  
 She whispered something in his ear,  
 And said, "That's all it is, my dear."

They rode to court, not far away,  
 The knight relieved to keep his day. 1030

He had his answer pat, he said.  
 Full many a wife and many a maid,  
 Full many a widow (for they're wise)  
 Sat with the queen in her assize.  
 They gathered there for his response,  
 While he affected nonchalance.

It soon grew quiet in the court.  
 The knight stood by with his retort—  
 The thing that women love the best—  
 Observing silence like the rest.  
 The high queen beckoned, and he spoke,  
 Standing stoutly, like an oak.

"My lady, most of all," said he,  
 "You women value sovereignty:  
 To rule your husband or your love  
 To do your will. By God above,  
 That's your wish, although you kill me.  
 I'm at your mercy, as you see."

In all the court, no wife or maid  
 Could disapprove of what he said.  
 They all agreed he'd won his life,  
 And on that cue up spoke the wife  
 Whom he had met upon the green.  
 "Mercy," she said, "My lady! Queen!  
 Before you leave, grant me my right.  
 I taught that answer to this knight,  
 And in return at my behest  
 He said he'd grant my next request.  
 He vowed to do it if he could.  
 And now, sir, make your promise good:  
 Take me to you as your wife.  
 For as you know, I saved your life.  
 Is that not so? What do you say?"

But all he said was "Welladay!  
 I know as well as you I promised,  
 But, for God's love, change your request.  
 Take all my goods, but let me go!"

"I won't," she said, "by Scorpio,  
 For though I'm old and foul and poor,  
 Not for all the gold and ore

1040

1050

1060

1070

Beneath the earth or here above  
 Will I forbear to be your love."

"My love!" he said. "No, my damnation!  
 No other man of my relations  
 Has ever tasted such disgrace!"  
 But nothing worked. This was his case:  
 He was well caught; now he must wed  
 And take that old wife to his bed.

Well, some might think it mean of me  
 That I neglect, as you will see,  
 To tell the joy and rich array  
 That dignified their feast that day.  
 But here's my answer, short and plain:  
 There was no joy that day, just pain  
 And heaviness and gnawing sorrow.  
 They wed in secret on the morrow.  
 The knight hid all day like an owl.  
 His life was ruined. She was so foul.

Still greater woe welled in his head  
 That night when she was in his bed.  
 He writhed and wallowed to and fro.  
 His wife lay sweetly smiling though,  
 And said, "Now, benedictity,  
 Is this the way a knight should be?  
 Is this the law of Arthur's house?  
 Are his knights so fastidious?  
 I am your own, your loving wife,  
 The lady, sir, who saved your life.  
 I'm sure I never did you wrong.  
 So, sweetheart, why hold back so long?  
 You're like a man who's lost his wit.  
 If I'm to blame, why, out with it,  
 And I'll amend things right away."

"Amend?" he said, "and how, I pray?  
 By God, I'll never be consoled,  
 You are so loathly and so old!  
 You're low born, too. No family.  
 What else could you expect from me?  
 The heart will burst within my breast!"

"And this," she said, "prompts your unrest?"

1080

1090

*bless us*

1100

1110

"It does," he said, "and so it should."

"Well," she said, "my dear, I could  
Correct all this within three days  
If you adopted kinder ways.

"But do you think that gentleness  
Is just old money, more or less,  
And that's what makes you gentlemen?  
Bah! That conceit's not worth a hen!  
The virtuous man who works each day,  
In town, alone, in every way,  
To do what gentle deeds he can,  
Sir, he's the world's true gentleman.  
A Christian's goodness comes from Christ,  
And not rich elders, duly priced.  
Though they may leave their wealth and fees,  
And old, deep-rooted family trees,  
They can't pass on their virtuous lives,  
The reason that their fame survives,  
And their true value, if we know it.

"Just listen to the princely poet,  
Dante, who has this to say,  
At least his thinking runs this way:  
'Men seldom rise by human virtue;  
Success falls under God's purview.  
To him we owe our gentleness.  
And all true men will say no less.'  
Goods, sir, are all that we inherit,  
And goods may work against our merit.

"You shouldn't have to learn from me  
If virtue flourished naturally  
In families, right down the line,  
You'd never see a large decline  
From goodness and true gentleness.  
Each child would match his parents' best.

"Take fire into the darkest house  
From England to the Caucasus,  
And shut the door and go away.  
The fire will burn on anyway,  
As bright as if a thousand watched,

1120

1130

*Purgatorio 7:121-3*

1140

For fire is fire and won't be scotched—  
No, *can't* be scotched until it dies.

1150

"True gentleness is not a guise,  
Nor does it come with wealth and lands;  
Rich men may shirk its stern demands.  
It's not a fire that always burns.  
No, every generation learns  
A lord's son may do villainy.  
A man who claims nobility  
Because he's from a noble house,  
Whose forebears honored all their vows,  
And yet won't do a gentle deed  
Or pay his own best models heed,  
Why, he's not gentle, duke or earl—  
He's just a rich but common churl.  
Think of this: the glowing fame  
Of your august and ancient name,  
Owes not a blessed thing to you.  
Now, God may make you gentle too,  
But that rides on his will and grace.  
It's not a perquisite of place.

1160

1170

"You'll find a noble in Valerius,  
A countryman called Tullius,  
Who scarcely owed his clan a thing,  
Yet rose from herdsman to be king.  
Read Seneca, Boethius,  
The doctrine they bequeathed to us  
Is 'Gentle is as gentle does.'

*third king of Rome*

A lowborn wife's no curse because  
High God may grant, as birth can't do,  
That she may be both good and true.  
A woman's only gentle when  
She lives in virtue, not in sin.

1180

"You charge me next with poverty.  
Well, Christ, who ransomed you and me,  
Chose to live among the poor;  
And every Christian heretofore  
Has known that Jesus, Heaven's king,  
Would hardly choose a vicious thing.

Of course, glad poverty is best,  
 As men like Seneca attest. 1190  
 A serf content in poverty  
 Is rich, though some might disagree.  
 The man who covets things is poor,  
 For wants spring up around his door.  
 But one with neither things nor wants  
 Is rich for all your lordship's taunts.  
 Welcome poverty is gay.  
 Juvenal has this to say:  
 'Poor men are always free to sing;  
 As safe from thieves as any king,' 1200  
 Poverty is harsh but good;  
 It makes men work as few things could  
 And offers priceless education  
 To those who master resignation.  
 And though it can depress and daunt,  
 A gift that no one else would want,  
 Poverty can be the prod  
 That makes man know himself and God.  
 Then too it is a looking glass  
 Through which you see false friends, alas. 1210  
 You're right. I'm poor. That much is true.  
 But, sir, I'm quite as good as you.  
 "Then too, you jeer because I'm old.  
 The soundest books and thinkers hold  
 That old age should be revered—  
 Certainly not gibed against.  
 Old folks deserve one's veneration.  
 This holds for every time or nation.  
 "You say I'm foul. My lord, that's true.  
 Why then, don't fear I'll cuckold you, 1220  
 For wrinkles and senility  
 Are sovereign guards to chastity.  
 Yet I'll take pity on your plight  
 And cater to your appetite.  
 "Sir, you may have me as you please:  
 Foul and old at all degrees,  
 But yet a true and humble wife,

A trusted stay throughout your life;  
 Or young and fair and doubtless wild,  
 So you must fear you'll be beguiled, 1230  
 And likely will be when I roam  
 Or when you think I'm safe at home.  
 Now which arrangement suits you best?"  
 The knight looked harried and oppressed.  
 Consternation made him say:  
 "You tell me, lady; I'll obey.  
 I'll gladly follow your direction.  
 Choose yourself upon reflection  
 What's advantageous for us both.  
 I won't object, upon my oath. 1240  
 What you think best will do for me."  
 "Ah," she said, "full mastery!  
 I hold the reins, no second guessing?"  
 "Indeed," he said, "and with my blessing."  
 "Kiss me," she said, "and don't be loath,  
 For from today I will be both—  
 That is to say, both good and fair.  
 For may I die in black despair  
 If I don't stay as good and true  
 As any wife you ever knew. 1250  
 And if I'm not as fair of feature  
 This selfsame night as any creature  
 Between the farthest east and west,  
 Why, kill me, dear, at my behest.  
 Draw the curtain, now, and see."  
 He looked at her, and verily  
 She was so young and beauteous,  
 He clasped her in a glad caress.  
 He seemed to hear the heavens chime,  
 He kissed her face a thousand times,  
 And she complied with every measure 1260  
 That might increase his joy and pleasure.  
 They lived in joy throughout their lives.  
 Now, sirs, may Jesus send all wives  
 Meek husbands who are fresh in bed  
 And strength to rule them when we wed.

And may Our Lord cut off men's lives  
 Who won't be governed by their wives.  
 And old and angry married skinflints . . .  
 God curse them all with boils and squints!

1270

Here endeth the Wyves Tale of Bathe.

## THE FRIAR



### THE FRIAR'S PROLOGUE

Our worthy Friar seized his chance.  
 He fired the Summoner a glance,  
 Yet, mindful of our fellowship,  
 He let no open insult slip  
 But turned instead toward the Wife.  
 "Dame," he said, "God bless your life!  
 Defining spouses' roles is hard—  
 Enough to put a clerk on guard—  
 And though I value all you say,  
 It hardly suits the game we play.  
 The tales told here should entertain.  
 Your learned sources tire the brain.  
 Leave preaching to the clergy, do.  
 Now, friends, *I've* got a tale for you:  
 To show how summoners behave!  
 A summoner? The name means *knave*.  
 What's lower than a summoner?  
 Nothing at all unless I err.  
 Summoners snoop. They never rest  
 Till they have sniffed out bawdiness  
 And been whipped out of every town."

10

20

"Here, Friar," said the Host, "slow down.  
 Control yourself. Don't jar and grate.  
 We won't take sides in your debate.  
 Tell on, but let the Summoner be!"

The Summoner said, "Don't speak for me!  
 I promise when I get a turn,  
 This jumped-up Friar's ears will burn.  
 I'll show him up, confound his eyes:  
 A suck-up beggar oozing lies,  
 With twenty other friars' crimes

30