

Geoffrey Chaucer
The Canterbury Tales

Volume II

POETRY

including **The Wife of Bath's Tale • The Clerk's Tale • The Reeve's Tale**

Read by **Philip Madoc • Frances Jeater • Charles Simpson
John Rowe • John Moffatt**

**THE
GREAT TALES**



Cast List

Host: Philip Madoc

Wife of Bath: Frances Jeater

The Clerk: Charles Simpson

The Reeve: John Rowe

The Nun's Priest: John Moffat

1	Prologue to the Wife of Bath's Tale	7:29
2	And tell me also, why there was creation	4:29
3	Now sires, I shall proceed to tell my tale	7:32
4	We love no man that spies or gives us charge	7:32
5	Such words I had always, and brought them forth	5:05
6	And so it happened on a day in Lent	6:40
7	Now I will tell you truly, by St Thomas,	6:38
8	Who would believe, who could indeed suppose	2:42
9	Behold the words between the Summoner and the Friar	2:05
10	Here begins the Tale of the Wife of Bath	7:15
11	This Knight, of whom in chief I tell this tale	5:17
12	Now, some men, it may be, will take offense	11:34

13	The Clerk's Tale	3:43
14	Here begins the Tale of the Clerk from Oxford	7:58
15	Not far from that same stately palace bright,	5:02
16	The thoughtful Marquis spoke then to this maid	8:09
17	It happened, as it would again, indeed This ugly sergeant, in the same rude way	9:09
18	So in this way went by four years or more,	9:56
19	But meanwhile, after all his wickedness,	8:47
20	This great earl from Bologna now is there	5:27
21	And when he saw her stand so patiently	7:24
22	Chaucer's Envoy: Grisilda and her patience both are dead	3:11

23	Prologue to the Reeve's Tale	4:25
24	Here the Reeve's Tale begins	4:37
25	Among the Cambridge students there were two	2:20
26	The Miller smiled at their simplicity.	3:12
27	Like cattle in the rain, wet through and through	5:50
28	Soon after this the wife left of her snoring	3:00
29	Yea, hast thou, lecherous rogue?	3:23
30	Prologue to the Nun's Priest's Tale	3:55
31	Here begins the Nun's Priest's Tale	8:13
	So once it fell, as day began to break,	
32	"Madam," quoth he, "grand merci for your lore	5:16
33	But unto one befell a marvellous thing	5:58
34	Now, when the month in which the world began,	3:39
35	Women's advice is oftentimes ill-fated!	7:02
36	This simple widow and her daughters two	4:21
37	Epilogue to the Nun's Priest's Tale	1:35

Total time: 3:29:51

Geoffrey Chaucer

The Canterbury Tales – Volume II

The Canterbury Tales, written near the end of Chaucer's life and hence towards the close of the fourteenth century, is perhaps the greatest English literary work of the Middle Ages: yet it speaks to us today with almost undimmed clarity and relevance.

Chaucer imagines a group of twenty-nine pilgrims who meet in the Tabard Inn in Southwark, intent on making the traditional journey to the martyr's shrine of St Thomas a Becket in Canterbury. Harry Bailly, landlord of the Tabard, proposes that the company should entertain themselves on the road with a story-telling competition. The teller of the best tale will be rewarded with a supper at the others' expense when the travellers return to London. Chaucer never completed this elaborate scheme – each pilgrim was supposed to tell four tales, but in fact we only have twenty-four altogether – yet, with the pieces of linking narrative and the prologues to each tale, the work as a whole constitutes a marvellously varied evocation of the medieval world which also goes beyond its period to penetrate (humorously, gravely, tolerantly) human nature itself.

Chaucer, as a member of this company of pilgrims, presents himself with mock innocence as the admiring observer of his fellows, depicted in the General Prologue. Many of these are clearly rogues – the coarse, cheating Miller, the repulsive yet compelling Pardoner – yet in each of them Chaucer finds something human, often a sheer vitality or love of life which is irresistible: the Monk may prefer hunting to prayer, but he is after all 'a manly man, to be an abbot able'. Perhaps only the unassuming, devoted Parson and his humbly labouring brother the Ploughman rise entirely above Chaucer's teasing irony; certainly his fellow clergy and religious officers belong to a church riddled with gross corruption. Everyone, it seems, is on the make, in a world still recovering from the ravages of the Black Death.

The first tale is told, quite properly, by the most important pilgrim, the Knight, and his story is devoted to the high ideals of chivalry and romantic love. Then the Miller drunkenly interrupts the Host, Harry Bailly, to impose on the company his splendidly bawdy tale about a cuckolded carpenter. As

the Reeve listens, he (a trained carpenter himself) becomes enraged by what he sees as a slight on his original profession. So the Reeve's Tale which follows is a vigorous attempt at revenge on the Miller. Two Cambridge students plan to outwit the fictional miller, Simkin, who grinds their college's corn and regularly takes a dishonest cut; at first, Simkin gets the better of the undergraduates, but the tale reaches a brilliantly farcical conclusion in which the two young men seduce both the miller's wife and his young daughter and give Simkin a sound beating. The comic world of the tale is unsentimentally concrete and morally ruthless, suggesting that life is little more than a physical and intellectual contest.

The Wife of Bath's Tale is the first of the three told by women in the collection. Her story is commonly regarded as initiating the so-called 'marriage debate' in The Canterbury Tales: marriage is a subject upon which she is clearly an expert, at least if the long life-story she tells in her brilliantly vivid and pungently argued Prologue is anything to go by. She has had no fewer than five husbands – perhaps the Canterbury pilgrimage may yield the sixth. Her tale is a relatively brisk and aggressively feminist

affair, set in Arthurian England: a knight is compelled to seek an answer to the question, 'what do women most desire?' After suitable humiliation, he discovers the correct response.

The Clerk's Tale, which Chaucer knew from versions by Boccaccio and Petrarch, amongst others, appears to continue the marriage debate. The Clerk is, according to the General Prologue, an unworldly Oxford scholar, but the tale he tells is curiously ruthless. With little explicit awareness of its less attractive aspects, the Clerk relates how the humbly-born, 'patient' Griselda has to endure a succession of appalling humiliations before her 'noble' husband finally accepts her unconditionally. It seems, therefore, to be a riposte to the Wife of Bath.

The last tale in this collection is that of the Nun's Priest. Chaucer here draws on the French fable tradition, telling a story which wonderfully mocks boastful pride as the clever fox eventually loses out to the supposedly vain and gullible cock. Packed with ironically-deployed rhetorical devices, the tale may be said to celebrate the ingenuity, variety and folly of human behaviour, allegorised in the form of the animal fable. George Orwell was to do

something similar, if infinitely more sinister, with *Animal Farm* in 1945.

Chaucer derives almost all his tales from known sources, often Italian or French – as may be seen above – but he is brilliantly successful in giving them a tone and feeling which are very English (concrete, ironic) and very much his own. Most of the *Canterbury Tales* are written in heroic couplets – a form of rhyming verse which Chaucer effectively introduced to English literature.

Geoffrey Chaucer, son of a vintner, was born in London in 1340, or thereabouts. He enjoyed a successful and varied career as courtier and diplomat, travelling extensively in France and Italy, where he may have met Boccaccio and Petrarch. In 1374 he was made Controller of Customs in the port of London; in 1386 he represented Kent as knight of the shire, and may have lived there until his death in 1400. He is buried in Westminster Abbey.

Chaucer wrote prolifically and in a variety of styles: other works include the great **Troilus and Criseyde**, **The Book of the Duchess**, and **A Treatise on the Astrolabe**. He also translated **The Romance of the Rose**. His range of subject matter, width of reading and sophistication are remarkable; his most notable qualities are perhaps his deeply sympathetic view of human aspiration and weakness, and (when required) his capacity for close, ironic observation.

Notes by Perry Keenlyside

Modernised version of the *Tales* by Frank Ernest Hill, 1935



Philip Madoc's extensive theatre work includes the roles of Othello and Iago, Faust and Macbeth and recently, with the RSC, The Duke in *Measure for Measure* and Professor Raat in *The Blue Angel*. TV roles include Lloyd George, Magua in *The Last of the Mohicans*, *Brookside* and *A Mind to Kill*. He reads *The Death of Arthur*, *The Canterbury Tales I, II and III*, *Arabian Nights*, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire I and II*, *The Old Testament* and *Romeo and Juliet* for Naxos AudioBooks.



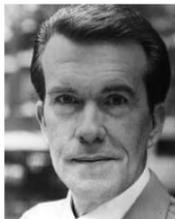
Frances Jeater's theatre work has included Gertrude in *Hamlet*; an American tour of *Much Ado About Nothing*; Middle and Far-East tours of *Harvey*; and *Prisoner of Second Avenue*, Haymarket Theatre, London. Favourite TV: *Gift of the Nile*, filmed in Egypt. Frances has always enjoyed working for BBC Radio Drama and recording audiobooks. She reads Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath* and reads the part of Mrs Eynsford Hill in *Pygmalion* for Naxos AudioBooks.



Charles Simpson won the Carleton Hobbs Radio Award in 1989 and the Best New Actor in Radio – Radio Times Comedy and Drama Awards in 1992. His TV credits include *The Bill*, *Kavanagh QC* and *Soldier Soldier*. His theatre work includes *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Tempest* for the English Shakespeare Company and *The Blue Angel* at the Gielgud Theatre. He also reads the part of Freddie Eynsford Hill in *Pygmalion* for Naxos AudioBooks.



John Rowe trained at Birmingham School of Speech Training and Dramatic Art. His most recent theatre work has included *Our Town* (Shaftesbury Theatre) and *Jenkin's Ear* (Royal Court). His extensive TV credits include *Peak Practice*, *Dangerfield*, *Brother Cadfael*, *Chalkface*, *Bergerac*, *Coriolanus* and *Macbeth*. His film credits include *The English Wife*, *The Fourth Protocol*, *Sakharov* and *Nikolai*.



John Moffatt's distinguished theatre career encompasses two hundred roles across the UK, forty-two major London productions and two Broadway appearances. He played Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* at the Open Air Theatre, Regents Park, appeared in Ingmar Bergman's production of *Hedda Gabler* and in *Married Love*, directed by Joan Plowright. Film credits include *Prick Up Your Ears*, and he has been seen on UK TV in productions as varied as *Love in a Cold Climate* and *Maigret*. He also reads *Great Narrative Poems of the Romantic Age* and appears as Peter Quince in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for Naxos AudioBooks.



John Tydeman played a key role in BBC radio drama for nearly four decades, as producer, Assistant Head and then Head of Radio Drama. During that time he directed most of the major plays in the classical repertory, from Greek drama to Shakespeare, Chekhov and Shaw. He was also active in contemporary theatre, directing works by Osborne, Stoppard, Albee, Pinter and many others. Directing for television and the stage has been a regular feature throughout his busy career. He has worked with Paul Scofield on many occasions, including radio productions of *Macbeth* and *Othello*. For Naxos AudioBooks he has directed *King Lear*, *Just So Stories* and *Pygmalion*.

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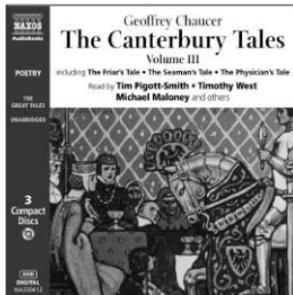
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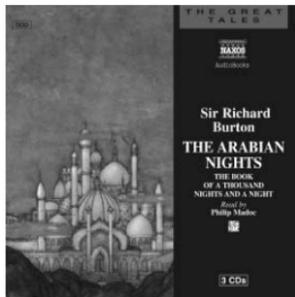
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Volume II

**The Wife of Bath's Tale • The Clerk's Tale
The Reeve's Tale • The Nun's Priest's Tale**

Read by **Philip Madoc • Frances Jeater • Charles Simpson
John Rowe • John Moffatt**

Four more delightful tales from one of the most entertaining storytellers of all time.

Though writing in the 14th century, Chaucer's wit and observation comes down undiminished through the ages, especially in this accessible modern verse translation. The stories vary considerably: the uproarious *Wife of Bath's Tale*, promoting the power of women; the sober account of patient Griselda in the *Clerk's Tale*; the ribald *Reeve's Tale* and the diverting tale of Chanticleer told by the *Nun's Priest*.

"Frances Jeater is on cracking form as the Wife of Bath, life-enhancingly sexy and worldly-wise as she explains her philosophy of love and marriage to her fellow pilgrims. Lively translation from Middle English."

THE SUNDAY TIMES

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