WOLFNOTE SUMMARY OF...

GEOFFREY CHAUCER’S

THE CANTERBURY TALES

CONTEXT

It is April, and the Tabard Inn, Southwark, London is full of Pilgrims preparing for the journey to Canterbury in Kent where they hope to receive the blessings of St. Thomas à Becket, the English martyr.

There are representatives of all the social classes from aristocrats down to the lowliest Christian soul.

The host of the Inn proposes that the Pilgrims should each tell tales in order to make the journey pass more quickly. The best storyteller will receive an excellent meal paid for by the other Pilgrims, and the host will accompany the Pilgrims and be the judge.

Chaucer himself is one of the Pilgrims. They all draw straws to see who will start and so we hear the Knight’s tale first, and as one might expect, his story concerns chivalry, honor and love.

The Monk is due to tell the next tale, but the drunken Miller skips the queue and tells his story concerning a stupid Carpenter.

The Reeve, who had once been a Carpenter, insists he tells his story next in order to get his revenge on the Miller.

The Cook fails to complete his story and so it is the Man of Law who tells the next complete tale.

The host is well pleased at the standard of their tales, although he seems to have forgotten about the Monk, so he turns to the Parson to tell his story. Whether the Parson cannot think of a story at this stage is not clear, but he refuses, and the Shipman breaks in and tells a lively story.

The colorful Wife of Bath who has been married five times begins her story, which is concerned with the success of marriage, which in her view can only occur when the wife governs the husband.

There have already been disagreements among the Pilgrims, and the host is reluctant to allow the Friar to tell his story concerning a Summoner. The Summoner is not concerned, for his tale is about a Friar, and any slight will be repaid in full. However, when the story is told, the Summoner becomes angry and tells a most obscene story concerning all Friars.

Next to tell a story is the Clerk, which concerns the patience of women and is in total contrast to the Wife of Bath’s tale.

Stories are then told by the Merchant, the Squire (unfinished), and the Franklin.

The host keeps control over the Pilgrims and ensures that there is a balance regarding humor, sober matters, happy and sad, and he then calls upon the Physician, and then the Pardoner to tell their tales.

The Pardoner tells a moral story, but is a most immoral man. He tries to sell relics to the Pilgrims at the end of his tale, which infuriates the host. The Knight has to make the peace.

The Prioress tells her story, which seems to calm everybody down, and then it is the turn of the Narrator to tell his story, but Chaucer’s tale about Sir Topas is not well received, as many Pilgrims are tired of rhyme, and request Chaucer tells his story in prose. He, therefore, tells a boring story of Melibee.

At last it is the merry Monk’s turn to tell his story, but to everyone’s surprise he comes up with a tragic tale.

It is then the Narrator to tell his story, but Chaucer’s tale about Sir Topas is not well received, as many Pilgrims are tired of rhyme, and request Chaucer tells his story in prose. He, therefore, tells a boring story of Melibee.

The second Nun provides an historic tale concerning the life of St. Celia.

A Canon and his Yeoman approach the party and the host asks if they have any tales to tell. The Canon is too embarrassed to tell a story, so the servant complies.

The party is nearing Canterbury, and the last two members of the group who wish to tell stories do so – the Manciple and the Parson. The Parson’s story is more like a sermon.

The book ends with comments from Chaucer himself.

THE AUTHOR

Geoffrey Chaucer – c.1340 to 1400

Chaucer was a Medieval English poet whose work was remarkable for the diversity of subjects covering both serious and humorous topics.

He can be regarded as one of the founding figures of the modern English language that we know today.
His father, John, was a wine merchant and perhaps through this, Geoffrey was able to become a page for the Duke of Clarence when he was still just a boy. It is clear that he was very intelligent and this enabled him to advance in the Court of Edward III. He went with his King to take part in the War with France, and was unfortunate to be taken prisoner by the French. His King, however, paid ransom for Geoffrey and he was released in 1360.

Around 1366, he married Philippa who was the sister of John Gaunt’s wife. Gaunt was the fourth son of Edward III and held the Dukedom of Lancaster.

Chaucer held various official positions at the Court of Edward III and in addition to his skill as a poet; he was also a courier, translator and civil servant.

In 1369, he wrote The Boke of the Duchesse, which is full of French influence. This poem was based on a French tradition, which uses a dream as a vehicle for love poetry, and it is believed that Chaucer composed this as a lament on the death of Blanche of Lancaster, John Gaunt’s first wife.

In 1372, his King sent him to Genoa and Florence where it is quite possible he rubbed shoulders with the famous Italian poets, Boccaccio and Petrarch. It is believed that these two poets and also Dante were great influences on Chaucer’s work.

In 1374, Chaucer was appointed Controller of Customs for the port of London and lived in a fine house above Aldgate.

In 1376, he was attached to the Embassies of France and Lombardy. He was rewarded for his faithful service by being made a Knight of Kent and he sat in Parliament from that time.

Chaucer’s first great work was Troilus and Criseyde, which was completed around 1385.

His wife died in 1387, but he still enjoyed the patronage of John of Gaunt throughout his lifetime.

In April 1388, Chaucer embarked on a Pilgrimage to Canterbury to pay homage to the martyr, St. Thomas à Becket, who was Chancellor of England in 1155, and was a close friend of Henry II. Henry made Thomas Archbishop of Canterbury with a view to obtaining more control over the church in England. However, Becket’s loyalty was to the church and he was exiled for six years. When Becket eventually returned, he was still a thorn in the side of King Henry, and four misguided Knights, wishing to ingratiate themselves with the King, murdered Becket in Canterbury Cathedral. Henry did penance for this crime and Becket was acclaimed a martyr, being canonized in 1173.

The experiences Chaucer obtained from his Pilgrimage led to him writing his most famous work, The Canterbury Tales in 1387. This was a huge project, which Chaucer never managed to complete. However, it does give an incredible insight into Medieval England and can be rightly acclaimed as a classic.

The work was written using a dialect, which originates from the London area, and went on to become the basis of modern English.

Around 1390, Chaucer became the Clerk of the King’s Works, and then in 1399 he became Deputy Forrester.

He died in 1400 and was buried in Westminster Abbey – quite an achievement for the lowly son of a vintner.

CHARACTERS / PILGRIMS

THE HOST – HARRY BAILLY
He is the owner of the Tabard Inn and volunteers to accompany the Pilgrims as arbiter over their tales. He has suggested that they have a competition in story telling in order for their Pilgrimage to be more entertaining.

THE KNIGHT
He represents the most distinguished member of the party. He is the epitome of chivalry, truth and honor, and his story reflects this. He has been a true and faithful servant of the King and has carried out numerous feats of courage in distant lands.

It should be noted that all the battles referred to by the Knight are religious wars, and he is a true Knight of Christendom.

THE MILLER
Chaucer describes him as follows:-

"The Miller was a stout carl, for the nones,
full big he was of brawn, and eek of bones
that proved weel, for over-al there he cam,
a wrestling he wolde have alwey the ram.
He was short-sholdred, brood, and thikke knarre,
ther was no dore that he nolde heve of barre,
or breke it, at a renning, with his heed."
'for the nones' – for the occasion
‘eek’ – also
This gives an idea of the way in which Canterbury Tales was written. I have provided some of the meanings.
To sum up, the Miller was a vulgar, drunken man who at least gives the company warning that his tale will be shocking.
THE REEVE
One of the oldest members of the group, he is very cantankerous and is upset by the Miller’s tale, as he was once a Carpenter.
THE MAN OF LAW
He was a gifted lawyer and is sometimes known as the Sergeant of Law. He was renowned for his photographic memory because he could recite every judgment recalling all punctuation and every word. In contrast to the Miller, he was well cultivated and respected.
THE COOK
Roger was the master of his art. He could put together tasty dishes from limited ingredients. The only off-putting feature was the running sore on his face, which oozed pus and happened to be the same color as the sauce on his crude chicken pie.
THE WIFE OF BATH
Alisoun was a colorful member of the group who loved to wear bright scarlet stockings. She was past her best, being short of quite a few teeth and deaf, but she had had five husbands, the last being half her age. She is a rarity in Medieval England, being a woman who enjoys her independence and freedom. Despite her open sexuality, she has been on many Pilgrimages to Jerusalem, Rome, Cologne and others. She clearly loved the company on the road to Canterbury, and she was an expert horsewoman.
THE FRIAR
Hubert was a typical merry Friar who didn’t let his habit stop him enjoying the vices of life. He would often seduce young girls and then arrange marriages for them. He was more at home in taverns and inns rather than in poor-houses or leper colonies. He never seemed to be short of money and was always ready to pardon people once he had received suitable payment.
THE SUMMONER
He was employed by the Church Court to summon sinners for Trial. He was as ugly as his profession, being covered in boils and infected skin. He sported an unkempt beard and seemed to live on a diet of garlic, onions and strong wine. Chaucer also notes that he was acquainted with whores.
THE CLERK
Liked by all the Pilgrims, he was a conscientious student at Oxford University. Any money he obtained he spent on books, and like his horse, he was extremely thin.
THE MERCHANT
As you might expect, this man knows a good bargain when he sees it. He occupies the middle position of the social strata of the Pilgrims, but he is clearly on the way up, and there is no doubt that he will become a wealthy man.
THE SQUIRE
He aspires to be a Knight and is a talented young man, being adept in singing, writing poetry, horse-riding and wooing ladies. He is also somewhat vain and is continually looking after his curly hair.
THE FRANKLIN
The Franklin is another name for a large landowner not of noble birth. He is an amiable man and clearly enjoys the company regardless of social position. He was well liked by the other Pilgrims.
THE SHIPMAN
A large vulgar man who was no doubt skilful at steering a ship and navigating strange waters, he looked ill at ease on his horse.
THE PRIORRESS
Madame Eglantine was a very well educated gentle lady. She wore a gold brooch inscribed in Latin, “Amor vincit omnia” – Love conquers all. She was very meticulous, especially when eating, and her manners were impeccable. She was accompanied by three small dogs. Chaucer tells us that this is a lady who, by accident, is a Nun, but never lets anyone forget that she is a lady first. We suspect that she would prefer a more worldly life.
THE PHYSICIAN
This doctor has a broad knowledge of medicines, potions and drugs, and is also an astrologer. He seems to know more about medical journals than the Bible. He is quite wealthy, and advises that he made his money in the form of gold during the great plague.
THE PARDONER
Most of the characters are quite straightforward, but Chaucer describes the Pardoner as being the most complex of the Pilgrims. He is a Church Official who has authority from Rome to sell Pardons and Indulgences to those charged with sins. Chaucer is making comment regarding the corruption that was rife in the Church. Apparently the Pardoner is fresh returned from Rome with a bag full of Pardons that he will sell at a profit to the ignorant and superstitious.

THE MONK
Again we describe this man as a Monk only very loosely. His occupation was to take charge of properties associated with his Monastery. He owned several horses and seemed to take full advantage of his position, indulging in hunting, eating, and dressing in fine clothes. As you might expect, he resembled Friar Tuck, being fat, jolly and bald. Although Chaucer does not comment directly about any of the characters, we learn that the Monk has violated all of his monastic orders by ignoring his religious vows and living life to the full.

THE NUN'S PRIEST
He accompanies the Nuns and his main task is to hear their confessions.

THE SECOND NUN
In contrast to the other Church representatives, she is very devout and perhaps needs Becket’s blessing less than the rest of the Pilgrims.

THE CANON AND THE YEOMAN
The Yeoman is the servant of the Canon, and boasts that his master has many tales to tell, but the Canon retires, leaving the Yeoman to tell his story.

THE MANCEPLE
He is a Steward for a Law School in London, and he was given the task of purchasing the food. He is a clever man, although not learned like the Lawyers at the school, but he has been able to acquire reasonable wealth.

THE PARSON
Like the Second Nun, he too is a devout and religious person, and provides the final tale of the company in the form of a sermon. He is a true Christian and gives what money he has to the poor.

Other Members of the Group who do not contribute a story
- The Haberdasher
- The Dyer
- The Carpenter
- The Weaver
- The Carpet Maker
- The Ploughman
INTRODUCTION
It was Chaucer's original plan to have all the Pilgrims tell two stories whilst traveling to Canterbury, and two on the way back to the Tabard Inn in Southwark. Due to various factors, including his time-consuming duties for the Court, Chaucer was never able to complete this project.

However, what is provided gives the reader a clear insight into the life of Medieval England. It shows how the different strata of England at this time interact with one another. Chaucer rarely passes judgment on any of the characters or the stories they tell. This is left up to the reader. There can be no doubt that readers during the Middle Ages would have found sections of The Canterbury Tales shocking.

It is important that the reader places each of the Pilgrims in the correct social ranking. The highest rank comprises of the Knight and his household, which includes the Squire. These are representatives of the aristocrats or those who seek nobility. The second highest group includes the Prioress, the Monk and the Friar. The next group is those that specialize in a particular trade, who are craftsmen, and belong to a Guild. These would include the Haberdasher, the Dyer, the Carpenter, etc., none of whom tell a tale. The next class down would comprise of the Cook, who at first sight would appear to be out of place, but he is a master of his trade, together with the Shipman and Physician, the latter being less revered than today. One might also include the Wife of Bath in this section. The next group down would include the Parson and the Ploughman, who occupy this position purely on their Christian virtues. The last group, i.e. those who lead immoral lives, include the vulgar Miller, the Manciple, the Summoner, the Reeve and the Pardoner.

It was the Knight who drew the short straw and we start with his tale.

THE KNIGHT'S TALE
Characters:
Duke Theseus
He is a famous ruler of Ancient Athens who performed many heroic feats, and was well regarded by those he ruled as being noble and just.
Queen Hippolyta
Originally she was the Queen of the powerful Amazons, a society dominated by women. Theseus conquered the Amazons and took Hippolyta as his Queen.
Emely
Theseus’ beautiful sister-in-law who is instrumental in driving the storyline of the Knight’s tale. Two Knights fall in love with her, which causes the break up of their friendship.
Palamon
A Knight who is a member of Creon’s army, conquered by Duke Theseus. Palamon is wounded and taken prisoner and sentenced to life in bondage. He falls in love with the beautiful Emely.
Arcite
A close friend to Palamon, and imprisoned likewise, he too falls in love with Emely.

Summary
A long time ago in Athens, Duke Theseus strove to expand his empire. Among his victims was a tribe of Amazons who lived in Scythia. When Theseus conquered the tribe, he took Queen Hippolyta and her sister, Emely, back to Athens. He made Hippolyta his wife.

On their travels back to Athens, they encountered a group of women weeping and wailing. They told how the cruel tyrant Creon had conquered their city, and that their husbands’ dead bodies lay unburied in dishonor. Sending his Queen and her sister home to Athens, the Duke broke off to march against this evil tyrant. King Creon was soon defeated and slain, and the Duke brought honor back to the city.

After the battle, two wounded Knights were brought before the Duke, Arcite and Palamon. They were of similar appearance because they were sons of two sisters. The Duke spared their lives, but sentenced them to languish in his prison in Athens until their death. The two Knights suffered for several years in jail. One day, Palamon was looking out of his prison cell window and happened to see the beautiful Emely. He cried out in pain, and his friend, Arcite is concerned that some evil has befallen him. The second Knight is also curious and he peers out from the tower window, and he too is stricken with her beauty. The two argue, Palamon saying that he saw the lady first.

Duke Perotheus, a friend of both Duke Theseus and Arcite, visits Athens. He pleads on Arcite’s behalf and Duke Theseus agrees to release him, but he will be banished from the Dukedom, and be beheaded if he returns. Arcite is depressed at this new turn of fate, for he will never be able to glimpse his beloved again, and envies Palamon that he at least will be able to see her from the tower window every day.

Arcite undergoes a great physical change due to his constant lamenting over his love, Emely. He changes his name to Philostrate, and decides to return to Athens hoping that he will not be recognized.
In order to be close to Emely, he joins the Court of Theseus and over the years becomes a trusted friend of the Duke.

Palamon still languishes in the prison tower, but one night he manages to escape and hides in a nearby wooded area.

Arcite coincidentally is walking in the same area, and is thinking out loud. He is feeling smug regarding his subterfuge, and recites his entire history aloud. When Palamon hears this confession, he comes out of hiding.

The two duel.

The Duke comes upon the scene and Palamon explains why they were fighting. Theseus condemns the two Knights to death, but the ladies of the Court, including Emely, intercede on their behalf.

During the year, Theseus builds a magnificent stadium in which the jousting will take place. He builds altars to the gods, Venus the goddess of love, Mars the god of war, and Diana the goddess of chastity.

The year passes, during which time the people have been looking forward to this spectacle. Besides the jousts, there are numerous other entertainments with much feasting, singing and dancing.

On the eve of the battle, Palamon prays at the altar of Venus that he will be united with the fair Emely. Emely prays to Diana hoping that her chastity will be preserved, but if this is not possible, that she will be married to the one who loves her most.

Arcite prays to Mars that he will be victorious in battle.

These prayers cause much confusion in heaven, until Saturn, the god of destiny promises that Palamon will win his love and Arcite would win the battle.

The two Knights face one another at the joust, but the Duke announces that once a Knight is badly wounded, he will be removed from the field of battle. Palamon is badly wounded in the joust and is taken from the field by the marshals. Arcite is triumphant in his victory and parades around the arena, but his horse is frightened and throws Arcite to the ground where he is badly hurt. Physicians are summoned to attend Arcite, but they are unable to aid him and he dies.

Palamon and Emely are married.

Arcite is cremated on a great funeral pyre.

The Duke is in favor of the marriage between Palamon and Emely because it unites the two houses of Thebes and Athens. They live out a life of “love unbroken”.

Interpretation

We obtain a story from the Knight fitting for his station, full of chivalry, battles, splendor and a happy ending where love prevails.

The story is at times longwinded, for the Knight goes to great lengths in describing the preparations for the joust, but in Chaucer’s day the general reading public were intrigued with such matters, as it represented a world removed from their everyday lives.

Unlike tales that are to follow, there is no crudeness or vulgarity in this story, and it concerns a pure love with no hint of lust anywhere. The Knight takes pains to give us a clear characterization of Emely as the focal point of the two Knights’ love. She is a combination of beauty, chastity and servility - the perfect Medieval woman.

The Medieval reader would also be more at home with destiny than the modern reader who perhaps finds it strange that there are so many elements of chance contained in the story e.g. the fact that Emely decides to walk beneath the prison, that a visiting Duke knows one of the imprisoned Knights, that Arcite is able to return to Athens and receive employment in the Court, and that he comes in contact with Palamon and they duel, and so it goes on. However, the superstitious people of Chaucer’s time felt that God controlled everybody’s lives for his own purposes, and there is a strange type of logic in accepting these coincidences.

The modern day reader realizes that jousting was not practiced in Ancient Greece. Chaucer’s point is to amalgamate Athenian life and its clear nobility with that of chivalry and the Knights of Medieval England. So, we have a direct link with the life of Knights in England and the heroes of Ancient Greece.

As part of Chaucer’s characterization of the Knight we see he is a modest man, he does not tell a story concerning his own deeds and the velour he has shown in distant lands, but he provides an entertaining tale emphasizing the importance of honor and love.

The three main characters form a triangle of relationships. The friendship of the two Knights turns into hatred when they both fall in love with the same girl. It is interesting that the prayers of all three are answered – Arcite wins the battle; Palamon wins his love; and Emely marries the one who loves her most.
which is all she could really hope for. Her initial request for her chastity to be preserved is not granted, and it is perhaps a comment regarding the position of women in Medieval England. We will touch on the elements of chastity and life-long virginity in the Wife of Bath's tale. The independence of women in the Middle Ages was by and large non-existent, and Chaucer introduces the idea of a society ruled by women in this story. This abomination cannot be tolerated, and the Duke conquers the society, and he takes the Queen for his wife. What Chaucer is saying here is that women are expected to make themselves attractive to men and depend on them, whilst men are the dominant sex. They rule and maintain order. When Arcite was freed, who do you consider was the most fortunate – Arcite or Palamon?

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The Knight’s story is well received by all the Pilgrims. The host then calls upon the Monk to tell his tale, but the drunken Miller insists that it is his turn. The Miller tells the company that he has a vulgar tale concerning a Carpenter. The Reeve object to this, he was once a Carpenter, but the Miller is insistent. He says it is his duty to tell his story as there is a prize at stake.

THE MILLER’S TALE
Characters
Old John, the Carpenter
He is a wealthy old Carpenter who foolishly marries a young girl full of life.

Alison
She is the passionate young wife of Old John who schemes with a young student to have an affair.

Nicholas
He is a lodger of the Carpenter and lusts after his young wife. He has a deep knowledge of astrology and impresses the Carpenter with his art.

Absalon
He is a young Clerk who falls in love with Alison, but is slightly effeminate. He cannot abide bad odors and crude behavior.

Summary
Old John, the Carpenter is a very jealous man who has married an eighteen year-old girl called Alison. Also residing in the Carpenter’s house is a young student named Nicholas, who rents a room. Nicholas has a reputation for reading the stars and forecasting the advent of rain or drought. He falls in love with the young Alison and soon makes his intentions known by grabbing her. She resists his advances for fear of being discovered by her jealous husband, but the pair conspire together to play a trick on Old John. Alison also has another admirer the effeminate Absalon, who swings the incense burner at church on Sundays, and cannot abide people who fart in public. Nicholas convinces Old John that a flood equal to that suffered by Noah in the Bible will visit the town. In order to survive, they must build and fasten three boats to the rafters and store them with provisions. They must also have an axe ready in order to cut the ropes when the flood approaches. On the eve of the so-called flood, the three climb into the boats and Old John soon falls fast asleep. Alison and Nicholas descend to the bedroom and make love all night.

Absalon has noticed that the Carpenter is not home and decides to serenade Alison at her window. It is pitch black, and the pair of lovers are concerned that Absalon’s noise will wake Old John. Nicholas encourages Alison to get rid of Absalon by granting his request for a kiss. She agrees. However, instead of her mouth she extends her rear out of the window. Absalon fastidiously “kissed her naked arse, most savorsously”, but wonders “a woman hath no beard”. He hears the two laughing and realizes his mistake. He decides to return to obtain revenge and with him now, he has a red-hot poker. He calls again to Alison saying that he has a golden ring for her and she can have it if she gives him one more kiss. This time Nicholas decides to play a trick on Absalon and he sticks his rear out of the window and farts in Absalon’s face. He recovers in time to thrust the red-hot poker up the middle of Nicholas’ arse. Nicholas shouts, “Water. Help. Water. Water.”

Old John wakes and thinking that the flood has come, cuts the ropes with the axe, and the boats crash to the ground. Old John suffers a broken arm and the neighbors stream out from their houses wondering at all the noise. They learn of Old John’s preparations for the flood and laugh at his lunacy.

Interpretation
Arguably, this is Chaucer’s best work of humor and he strikes the right balance between bawdiness and vulgarity.

Again we have a triangle relationship between Old John, his young wife, and the lodger, repeated many times in literature since. Even to this present day, much ridicule is made of old men who marry young girls, and who cannot satisfy their desires.

We get a good impression of how relationships were conducted between the lower classes in Chaucer’s time. Although Nicholas is eloquent in his speech to Alison, he is physically rather crude towards this married woman. His first approach to her is quite physical. He doesn’t hold her hand or caress her face, or even fondle her breasts, but goes straight to her “quiente” (vagina), and holds her sensuously by the “haunche-bone” (groins).

Chaucer shows his skills at forming this joke by providing a careful presentation of Absalon’s character. He is described as being effeminate and used to sweet smells of an exotic and sensuous nature. He no doubt expects to win a sweet kiss from a fragrant Alison, but all he gets is her arse.

The story is very neat. We have Nicholas who can foretell the weather. We have Old John who constructs the boats, no doubt wishing to show off his joinery abilities to his young wife. Although John is a good Carpenter, he is gullible in that Nicholas was able to persuade him about the oncoming flood. He is foolish by thinking that he can keep his young wife happy. He obtains a broken arm for his trouble, and whilst he was asleep his lodger was making love to his wife. The lodger’s penance is a severely burnt arse, and the effeminate incense swinger is violated twice, first kissing Alison’s rear, and then suffering Nicholas’ fart. Will he ever be able to wash it off?

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The whole company laugh at the Miller’s tale except the Reeve, for he was once a Carpenter. He vows to repay the Miller with his story. He stresses the fact that advanced age is not necessarily a disadvantage for man can boast, lie or covet.

The host encourages the Reeve to stop his banter with the Miller, and get on with his story.

THE REEVE’S TALE
Characters
Oswold
He is a corrupt miller who steals from his clients. He is a jealous man and protective of his wife. He also has a young daughter and a new baby.

Molly
She is the chaste daughter of the miller who is seduced by Alan.

John and Alan
They plan to expose the miller’s dishonesty. They are university students and they hatch a plan of revenge.

Summary
There was a miller who lived in Cambridge who was a strong man and bullied those around him. He was adept at using the knife and no-one dared to cross him. He would steal meal brought to his mill for grinding. His wife was well-rounded and had been raised in a nunnery.

They were both proud of their twenty-year-old daughter and six-month-old baby boy.

One of the miller’s main clients was the large College at Cambridge, and like his other clients, he would cheat them. One day, the College Steward was ill and unable to take the corn to the mill. Two students at the College, John and Alan, learnt about the dishonest miller and decided to expose him. However, the miller was not stupid and when the students arrived, he suspected their game. When the students were not looking, he untied their horse and they escaped. When the students discovered this, they went out looking for the horse.

While they were away searching for the horse, the miller emptied half the flour from the sack and gave it to his wife. It was dark by the time John and Alan returned with their horse, and they asked the miller if they could spend the night in the mill. They offered to pay for food and lodging. The miller agreed, but pointed out that they only had one bedroom and that John and Alan would have to share a bed. There was no lighting in the room. The miller and his wife occupied one bed with the baby’s cradle at its foot, and their daughter slept in the third bed.

When everyone was asleep, John and Alan decided to take revenge on the miller. Alan gets up and goes to the daughter’s bed, and they got on just fine.

John was annoyed that he was left alone in his bed. Then he got up and quietly moved the baby’s cradle next to his bed. The miller’s wife got up in order to relieve herself of the large amount of wine she had...
consumed, and feeling her way back to bed, she of course went to the bed where her baby's cot was. John immediately, "on this good wife he laith on sore (hard)". As dawn neared, Alan made his farewells to the daughter who told him where to find the stolen flour. He returns to the bed that does not have the cradle and mistakes the miller for John. He whispers in the miller's ear that he has had the daughter three times in the night. In fury, the miller rises from his bed cursing Alan, only to find his wife in bed with John. The miller's wife thinking she was in bed with her husband, grabbed a club and strikes her husband down. Alan and John leave the mill in a hurry.

Interpretation
This is another good joke arising from the pen of Chaucer, but of course, there is a moral to the story. The reader has no sympathy for the miller due to his dishonest behavior. Millers were important members of the community providing an essential service, and people trusted them to do their job well and honestly. Here we learn that the miller not only charged exorbitant prices for the work he did, but in addition, he stole his clients' flour. We also learn that the miller's wife was the daughter of a clergyman, and the miller married her in order to obtain some respectability, but the students have turned the miller's home into a house of prostitution. The Reeve's tale is in response to the Miller's story concerning the Carpenter, and he is obtaining some degree of revenge. However, it is not as humorous as the Miller's tale and there is a distinct bitterness connected with the story. Although the Reeve's tale is not as vulgar as the Miller's tale, it is full of innuendo. Terms such as 'grinding' and 'grinding corn' were commonly used in the Middle Ages as slang for sexual intercourse. The two tales reflect the characterization of the Miller and the Reeve. The Miller is described as a jolly drunk person, and the Reeve as "old and choleric, and thin".

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Again this joke is well received by the company and in particular the Cook, Roger, who thinks what happened to the Miller, was poetic justice, and was only to be expected when you have such a small house. The host invites him to tell his story, charging him to make it good to make up for the stale pies he has sold them.

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THE COOK'S TALE
Summary
Perkin Reveler was an apprentice Cook working in London. At weddings, he would dance and sing rather than mind the shop. When he wasn't rejoicing, he would be gambling or drinking. He was either full of love, or full of sin. Finally, his Master had had enough of his behavior, considering him a bad influence on the other apprentices, so he dismissed Perkin. The young man decided to act in accordance with the old Proverb "Birds of a feather flock together", and became friends with another young man of similar habits. His friend's wife ran a shop, which was just a cover for her loose, immoral activities.

Interpretation
This is clearly an incomplete work and, no doubt, Chaucer abandoned it, as three jokes in a row were too much.

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The host becomes concerned that the tales are not being told quickly enough, and he asks the Man of Law to fulfill his contract and tell a tale. The Man of Law comments that Chaucer has already written all the good stories in the world. There are none left for him to tell. He eventually agrees to tell his story, but he is not a poet, and the lines will not rhyme.

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THE MAN OF LAW'S TALE
Characters
Constance
She is a devout Christian woman whose faith is constantly tested.
The Sultan of Syria
This young ruler’s life is ruled by the love of a woman, Constance.
King Alla
He is the King of Northumberland who marries Constance.
Donegild
She is the malicious mother of King Alla, who contrives to split up her son’s marriage.

Summary
A group of merchants from Syria travel to Rome to see if there are any opportunities for trade.
During their visit, they hear about Constance, the Emperor’s daughter who is described as the perfect
woman, being full of grace, beauty, goodness and chastity.
When the merchants return to Syria, they tell the young Syrian Sultan about Lady Constance and he
immediately is enthralled by the description of her. He is determined to make her his wife. His counselors
advise that she will not marry a Muslim, so rather than lose Constance, he will be baptized a Christian, and
so will all his subjects.
The marriage is arranged, and Lady Constance makes a sad farewell to her homeland.
The Sultan’s mother will not give up her old Religion for the sake of this foreign girl, and she devises a plan
to thwart her son’s happiness.
Lady Constance is greeted with great ceremony and the wedding is a great celebration with a dazzling array
of visiting dignitaries. During the banquet, the mother’s troops sweep into the banquet hall and kill all the
Christians, including the young Sultan. Lady Constance is spared, but she is set adrift on the sea.
Her ship is at the will of the currents, and after a considerable length of time is beached in Northumberland,
England, a Pagan land. She is found by the Constable and his wife who care for her. Constance still keeps
her faith in Jesus Christ and soon Hermengild, the Constable’s wife, is converted to Christianity, and so too
is the Constable.
One night Satan enters and murders Hermengild, and leaves the murder weapon in Constance’s bed.
Accused of the murder, she is taken by the Constable to King Alla. The King sentences her to death, but
the women of the Court wail, pleading for Constance to be spared.
Satan, disguised as a Knight, accuses Constance of the murder and at that moment he is stricken dead, and
a voice is heard saying that the King has unjustly judged a disciple of Christ. The whole Court is converted
to Christianity, except Donegild, the mother of the King.
The King and Constance fall in love and are married. Whilst the King is away fighting the Scots, Constance
gives birth to a beautiful son. Constance writes to her husband, but Donegild intercepts and changes the
message, saying that the child is disfigured. The King replies that it is God’s will, but again this letter is
intercepted, and Donegild writes that the King wishes the son to be destroyed. Constance leaves in a ship
for home.
King Alla returns and discovers the evil perpetrated by Donegild and has her put to death.
Back in Rome, the Emperor sends an army to Syria to avenge the death of the Christians. On their way
back from Syria, they discover Constance in her small boat, but she has lost her memory, and they do not
recognize her.
Alla decides to make a Pilgrimage to Rome to seek penance for the evil done to Constance by his mother.
He happens to see a child whose face strongly resembles that of Constance. He asks a Senator concerning
the circumstances regarding the child, and he learns where Constance is living. There is a happy reunion
and the Emperor is also glad to have his daughter back.
Alla and Constance return to Northumberland, but unfortunately the King dies a year later. Constance’s son
returns to Rome to become Emperor.

Interpretation
The main theme of this story is Constance’s unshakeable faith in Christianity, hence her name.
The moral is that the good Christian must always be true to his faith. Constance suffers poverty, sorrow,
defeat and also prosperity, happiness and victory, but through all these stages, her faith remains constant.
She epitomizes all the Christian virtues of faith, hope and charity, and the reader is impressed with her
humility.
It is her faith that keeps her going when she is faced with one improbable situation and then another, and
then another.
The actual circumstances in the story seem ridiculous, but they are secondary to the main theme. There is a clear message here for the Medieval Christian – that although their lives may be governed by Lords, Kings and the Clergy; the way in which they lead their lives should be governed by Jesus Christ.

It is also curious why Chaucer has the Man of Law declare that he is not a poet, yet the story is told in seven line stanzas with a clear rhythmic scheme. It is the same scheme adopted by Chaucer in his famous 'Troilus and Criseyde'.

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We have seen earlier that the host is keen for the Pilgrims to tell their stories, but the Wife of Bath indulges herself in a long preamble concerning her five marriages.

She states that her life is governed by the experiences she has had, and not by any authority. She wishes to rebuff the suggestion that she is sinful because she has had five husbands. She is merely taking on the Biblical instruction to increase and multiply. She also likens herself to the morals of Solomon who had many wives, and also quotes from St. Paul, saying that it is better to marry than to burn.

She also advises that sex organs were devised not just for functional purposes, but for pleasure as well. The Wife’s first three husbands were older than her, but good, and rich. She would often scold them whenever they accused her of being extravagant with their money, spending it on fine clothes, gold and jewellery. She knew her husbands were rich, but they always pleaded poverty. They also tried to stop her visiting her numerous women friends. One of her husbands thought she was being unfaithful, but she was always true to her husbands while they were alive. She was frustrated with the fact that just as she obtained mastery over one of her husbands, they would go and die on her.

Her fourth husband was different from the first three, and he had a mistress, which offended her because she was in her prime. She decided to get her revenge by making him think she was being unfaithful. He too died, and her last husband was a young Clerk who was half her age. This marriage was a marriage of love and not for wealth. However, the young Clerk spent all his time reading books and he collected books, which showed women in an unfavorable light.

One night she had had enough of this treatment and she hit him over the head with one of his books and he fell into the fire. He jumped up and hit the Wife of Bath, and she fell to the floor and pretended to be dead. He was so upset that he promised her anything if she would live. This is how she gained control over her last husband.

Interpretation
The prologue to the Wife of Bath’s tale is actually longer than her tale. Chaucer uses it to justify the five marriages that the Wife of Bath entered into.

The clear suggestion is that what women most desire is to have complete control over their husbands. There are also additional comments concerning the chastity of women. It was widely thought in Medieval England that a life of chastity would bring the person closer to God. The Wife of Bath’s reaction to this is that if women remained virgins, there would nobody left to give birth to more virgins.

It is evident that the Wife of Bath enjoyed sex, and another point she is making is that sex should be enjoyed, not tolerated by women.

Chaucer is making quite revolutionary points for these times, hinting that women should not be submissive in sexual matters.

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THE WIFE OF BATH’S TALE

Summary
There was a Knight in King Arthur’s time who raped a fair young maiden. King Arthur sent a decree out that the Knight must be brought to justice. When the Knight is captured, he is condemned to death, but the Queen intercedes on behalf of the Knight and asks the King to allow her to pass judgment on the Knight.

The Queen asks the Knight, “What is the thing that most women desire?” The Knight does not have an answer. The Queen releases the Knight, but commands him to return within one year with an answer. The Knight spent this time roaming from place to place questioning women. Some say they want wealth, others happiness, others to be gratified and flattered. Everywhere he heard different answers. It is time for him to return to the Court and he is depressed for he does not have a good answer.

Outside the castle in the woods, he sees twenty four maidens dancing and singing, but when he approaches they disappear as if by magic, and all that is left is an old hag. The Knight explains the problem to the hag...
and she is wise and may know the answer, but she would require payment for saving his life. The Knight agrees.
The Queen asks the question again, and the Knight responds that women most desire sovereignty over their husbands. All the women of the Court agree that this is a valid answer.
The Knight is acquitted.
The old crone enters saying that she supplied the answer for the Knight and she now requests that he marries her. The Knight, in agony, agrees.
On their wedding night the hag is upset that the Knight doesn't attend to his new bride, but her ugliness and low breeding repulse him. She reminds him that her looks can be an asset because she will be a virtuous wife to him because no other men would desire her. She asks him what he would prefer – an old ugly hag who is loyal, true and humble or a beautiful woman whom he would always have doubts about concerning her faithfulness? The Knight responds by saying that the choice was hers. The hag is pleased. She has won mastery over her husband, and she asks the Knight to kiss her. She says, "You will find me a fair and faithful wife". The Knight turns to look at the hag again, but now finds a young and lovely woman. They live blissfully ever after, the wife being in control.

Interpretation
This tale is not original, but Chaucer embellishes the storyline and makes it one of the most unique of the Canterbury Tales.
Again there is a clear moral to the story and the reader must remember that the narrator is an old hag telling a story about an old hag who dominates her husband.
The Wife of Bath is indeed a colorful character and her long introduction, which provides details of her five marriages, adds substance to her actual tale.
The reader may wonder why she is on a Pilgrimage to Canterbury as she seems to be at odds with most of her fellow travelers and also with the church, but she attempts to justify her position by quoting relevant passages from the Bible, in particular about Solomon having many wives.
She is in stark contrast to many of the subdued Pilgrims. She has suffered hardship in her life and her five marriages have not all been successful, but she is a clear survivor and still enjoys life to the full. This in itself is some justification for the way in which she has led her life, and she stresses the fact that she honored her marriage bed and never was unfaithful to her husbands.
It is hard to appreciate the constraints that women suffered in Medieval times. They were regarded widely as second-class citizens and many of the more extreme churchmen regarded women as vessels of evil, there to corrupt man. The church’s position on marriage was, therefore, that women should be kept under strict control to avoid temptation from the devil.
The Wife of Bath’s tale as written by Chaucer is there to refute this position.
We have a clear message via the Wife of Bath for the emancipation of women in the Middle Ages.
One of the main points of the tale is, however, that a woman’s chastity should not be violated and when this happens, the severest punishment is meted out. That is why the Knight is initially sentenced to death for raping a young girl. Many people in Chaucer’s time might think that death was a better punishment than having a life dominated by a woman, which is the Knight’s final fate, even although she turns out to be a beauty.

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The Friar now offers a tale about a Summoner, but the host disagrees with this because there has already been unpleasantness between members of the party, and he doesn’t want the Friar to upset the Summoner. However, the Summoner gives leave for the Friar to tell his tale, for he knows one about a Friar.

THE FRIAR’S TALE
Summary
This story concerns a Summoner who is paid by a Bishop to summon sinners for Trial before the Church Court.
This particular Summoner has a team of spies and harlots who provide him with information concerning those living in the Parish, and the Summoner gathers this information to be used against them by the Church. The Summoner blackmails the Parishioners to prevent him revealing the information to the Church Court.
One day when the Summoner is making his rounds to collect his money, he meets a young Yeoman. The Yeoman asks the Summoner what his occupation is and he says that he is a Bailiff. The Yeoman responds, "Dear brother, so am I." The Yeoman lives in the north of the country. The two pass the time of day discussing work and they agree that they just receive enough income to cover expenses. They suggest a partnership.

After they have sealed their partnership, the Yeoman reveals that he is a fiend from hell, but this does not unduly concern the Summoner, and will keep to their agreed partnership even although the Yeoman is the Beelzebub himself.

The pair happen upon a farmer whose cart full of hay is stuck fast in the mud. He is whipping the horses, and in exasperation he shouts for the Devil to take it all, cart, horse, hay and all. The Summoner urges his partner to claim the farmer's goods, but the Devil explains that he has no power to do so because the curse was not uttered from the farmer's heart.

The Summoner takes the Devil to a rich widow who has consistently refused to pay the Summoner bribes. She again refuses to pay the 12 pence owed, so the Summoner threatens to take her new frying pan instead. The widow shouts at the Summoner – the Devil take you and the frying pan. The Devil asks her if she really means these words and she replies, yes, unless the Summoner repents, but he refuses. The Summoner finds himself body and soul in hell in a special place in the Devil's kingdom where all theSummoners reside.

The Friar ends his tale with the hope that Summoners can some day repent of their evil doings and become good men.

Interpretation

The reader may perhaps wonder why the Friar has such animosity for a Church official, (this is what a Summoner is), but you need to know the political background in order to appreciate this tale.

Friars are members of a Mendicant Order. They rely on alms and their authority comes not from the Church, but directly from the Pope. This is different from Bishops, Deacons, Priests and Summoners, who are secular clergy and belong to the Church. There is, therefore, conflict between these two factions, hence the telling of this tale. We may suspect, therefore, that Chaucer considers that the Church has too much power and this leads to corruption.

There are also subtle comments made by the Friar in his narration, for he has the Summoner stating that the Devil is his brother. We also observe that the Summoner lies to the Devil about his occupation, but is still happy to go along with the partnership presumably because he thinks there may be profit in it and he will be able to use the Devil’s influence to obtain bribes from his ‘customers’

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On conclusion of the Friar’s tale, the Summoner is shaking with anger, and suggests that the reason he knows so much about the Devil, is because Friars and fiends are good friends.

He mentions the story concerning a vision that a Friar had of hell, and the angel guiding him through hell commented that there were no Friars to be seen, but when Satan lifted up his tail, there were millions of Friars swarming around Satan’s arsehole.

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THE SUMMONER’S TALE

Summary

There was once a Friar who resided in Holderness, Yorkshire, who spent much of his time casting, spells over his Parishioners and then requesting money so that the Brotherhood of Friars could pray for their misfortune.

Although the Friars would promise to make their prayers to God, in most cases they didn’t.

One day, our Friar went to the home of an old man called Thomas who had been confined to bed for many days. The Friar assured Thomas that he has been praying constantly on Thomas’ behalf. Thomas’ wife asks the Friar to pray for her husband so that his anger could be subdued. She complains that her husband is always unpleasant and surly. The wife offers the Friar some dinner, and after he describes his life of poverty and want, he suggests a lavish menu for his dinner to the wife.

After the Friar has finished his meal, he gives the wife a long sermon concerning the virtues of fasting and on the sin of gluttony.

The Friar then turns his attention back to Thomas and gives him a long sermon on excessive wealth, hinting that he should give generously to the Friar with a view to increasing his chances of returning to full health. Thomas responds that he has already given a lot of money to the Friars and it hasn’t helped him much.
Friar responds that he has spread his gifts too widely and that he should concentrate all his giving to the Convent that the Friar is a member of, and he will encourage all his Brothers to pray earnestly for Thomas. Before the Friar leaves, Thomas remembers that he has a special gift for the Friar, but that it must be shared equally amongst all the Friars at the Convent, but the Friar has to swear to share it. He quickly agrees. He tells the Friar to reach down between his buttocks where there is something hidden. When the Friar complies, the old man lets off an enormous fart and the Friar stomps out of the house. He thinks - I will pay him back for this.

The Friar makes his way to a wealthy Lord's house and he is still shaking with anger, so he tells the Lord how the old man has offended him. The Friar is also concerned as to how he will keep his promise by dividing the old man's 'gift' into equal parts. The Lord's valet, hearing this conversation, makes a suggestion. Obtain a 13-spoke wheel and at the end of each spoke, a Friar should kneel. Strap the old man to the hub of the wheel. When he farts, the wheel could be turned, and each Friar could share equally. The Lord and his Lady think the Valet's answer is excellent. All agree except the Friar.

Interpretation
When you see past the vulgarity of this tale, we can see that the message Chaucer is making concerns the hypocrisy of some Friars.
In this tale, the Friar is quick to sermonize to others concerning fasting, gluttony and charity, but he does not practice what he preaches. We suspect that the Friar enjoys in indulging himself whenever he goes on his rounds, and this selfish preoccupation means that he and his Brothers have little time for making supplications to the Lord, which they have been paid to do by their Parishioners. The Middle Ages were perhaps a low point in the history of Friars, and this story is more a tragedy than a comedy. It is clear that the spread of Christianity came about through the hard work of the Friars, but now, in the Middle Ages, they are viewed with disdain as is evident in this story.
The last point is that we have pairs of tales between the Reeve and the Miller, and the Summoner and the Friar, where all the narrators resort to excessive vulgarity in order to insult their counterpart. It is a pity that there is a lack of subtlety in parts of these stories.

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The host turns his attention to the Clerk from Oxford who has been very quiet, and he tells him to cheer up. He asks him to tell us a lively tale, and the Clerk agrees.

THE CLERK'S TALE
Characters
King Walter
This King seeks a wife who will be totally submissive, and never question his authority.
Griselda
She is a young woman who has all the qualities to make Walter a perfect wife.

Summary
There once lived a King named Walter who ruled over Saluzzo in Italy, and his subjects revered him. However, there was one concern and that was the succession to the throne, for the King was unmarried. He had refused marriage because he could not be happy unless his wife was totally subservient. His Lords agreed that they would help him find such a wife.
The King liked to move amongst his subjects in disguise, and one day he came across a poor family comprising of a father, Janicula, and his beautiful chaste daughter, Griselda. After a long period of observation, he decided that he would marry Griselda as she seemed to meet all his requirements. Walter asked Janicula for permission to marry his daughter, and the wedding proceeded. Walter made Griselda promise that she would always obey his will, even if it caused her pain.
More years passed, and Griselda gave birth to a son. Everyone was happy for there was now an heir to the throne. When the boy was two years old, the King decided to test his wife's patience and fidelity again. He told her that she would have to give up her son. She complied without complaint.
When their daughter was twelve years old and their son ten, the King decided to give Griselda one final test. He forged a Papal Decree allowing Walter to marry another woman of higher birth. Griselda took the news with a heavy heart, but showing great humility, she said she would abide by her husband’s decision and return to her father’s house.

Before she departed she was asked to prepare the beautiful young girl for marriage to Walter. The girl was, in fact, her daughter who she did not recognize. Dressed only in a smock, she returned to her father where she remained for a short time.

Walter could not stand his cruelty any longer, and he confessed to Griselda that the beautiful young girl was her daughter, and he introduced their son to her as well.

Walter stopped testing his wife and they lived the rest of their days in complete happiness.

After Walter died, his son succeeded to the throne.

The Clerk concludes his tale saying that all women should follow Griselda’s example, addressing his comments directly at the Wife of Bath.

**Interpretation**

This is, of course, a story in direct contrast to that of the Wife of Bath.

We have a woman who is perhaps too good to be true who is completely submissive to her husband. We see a man, who is totally selfish and almost behaves in a sadistic manner towards his wife, but she puts up with this cruelty and her love for him is undiminished.

The reader must also remember that Walter was revered by his subjects and succumbs to marriage because of the will of his people and his Lords. Many Medieval men would clearly regard Griselda as the perfect wife, but the modern woman will regard her as a ridiculous person.

Chaucer obtained the idea for this tale from a story written by Petrarch, called ‘The Fable of Obedience and Wifely Faith’. Much of Chaucer’s work is inspired by foreign literature and the reader will recall that Chaucer was adept in languages, and translated many works of literature into English. The main message of the story surrounds Griselda and we see that whatever her situation, she remains unaffected and constant to her husband. She remains virtuous whether she is living in poverty or among the riches of royalty.

In the end it is Griselda who is the victor. She passes all the tests set by Walter with distinction and we must assume that she will hold a position of dignity and respect for the rest of her time with her husband.

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The Merchant voices his envy for King Walter, for he has experience of wives of a different sort. He is an elderly man who was recently married and in only two short months of wedlock, he has experienced hell. The host implores the Merchant to tell his tale.

**THE MERCHANT’S TALE**

**Characters**

January
- He is an old Knight who decides to abandon his adventurous behavior and settle down with a young maiden.

May
- She is a beautiful eighteen year-old who marries January, but is not satisfied sexually.

Damian
- He is a young man who falls in love with May.

**Summary**

There once lived a wealthy Knight called January, in the town of Pavia, Lombardy. He was aged sixty and lived a life of debauchery and lust and he now wished to settle down and marry a beautiful young maiden who lived in the city. He had always thought that it was God’s wish that men and women should marry, and he also needed a son to inherit his estates.

The Pilgrims notice that there is a suggestion of sarcasm entwined within the Merchant’s tale. January decides to marry a young girl named May, but before marrying the maid, he consults with his friends concerning a dilemma he has. He wants to ensure that May is the right wife for him because to choose the wrong mate, would mean living a life of hell here on earth.
One of his friends, Justinius, advises against the match, but January proceeds. After the wedding, January becomes impatient with his guests as he wishes to enjoy his wedding bed. After the Priest had blessed the marriage bed, he consummated his marriage.

Now there was a young servant in the household named Damian, who fell in love with May at first sight. He soon became ill over his unrequited love and was taken to bed. January was concerned over his servant’s poor health, and sent his wife and other women of the court to tend to him. Damian took the opportunity to pass a love note to May, and she acknowledged his desires. Suddenly, January was stricken with blindness and consumed with jealousy over his wife, insisted that she remain by his side at all times. Nevertheless, May and Damian arrange to meet in the garden. He would go first and climb up a pear tree.

The Merchant takes us from this earthly scene to heaven where the gods discuss the situation. Pluto is angry at May’s deceit, and decides that he is going to restore January’s sight, but his wife Proserpina decries men for being lecherous and will provide May with an excuse. May and January sit underneath the pear tree, and May offers to climb the tree to get her husband a ripe pear. The love-struck couple are soon locked in an amorous clinch, and just then January’s sight is restored. He bellows with rage at the sight of the couple, but May accuses him of seeing things and asks January to wait until his sight is restored fully. She then jumps down from the tree and clasps January in a fond embrace.

Interpretation

We have yet another instance of an old foolish man being hoodwinked by a young bride. The clear moral of the tale here is that an old man should not marry a young bride unless he can satisfy her. Failure to do this will only make a young bride look elsewhere for satisfaction.

This tale could quite easily have had a tragic ending, but Chaucer chooses to have January continue in his fool’s paradise. The tale reflects the Merchant’s own bad experiences with marriage, and we gather that he too has been deceived by a young wife.

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The host asks if the Squire has a tale of love to tell.
He says no, but he has something else that may be of interest.

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THE SQUIRE’S TALE

Summary

The Squire starts his tale which concerns a Kingdom in the land of Tartary. The King Cambuskan is to be married and he orders a lavish celebration. An unknown Knight appears at the celebrations with gifts from his Lord the King of India and Araby. He has a brass horse that can fly higher than any known creature. He has a mirror which provides the owner with details of what his friends and enemies are thinking. He has another gift in the form of a ring which enables the bearer to understand the languages of creatures. The last gift is a sword that will cut through anything.

The Franklin interrupts the story and insists on telling his own. Although impressed by the Squire’s eloquence, it is clear that he intends to use the tale to impress the company concerning his experience in traveling in these far off places.

Interpretation

All this passage does is infuriate the reader because he never discovers how the tale finishes. The Squire risked boring the listeners with his detailed description of King Cambuskan’s world, much as the Knight did in his tale. Perhaps Chaucer felt he did not have the time to finish such an elaborate tale and give it justice.

THE FRANKLIN’S TALE

Characters

Arveragus
He is a brave Knight who seeks a wife that will enter into a marriage where both parties show patience to each other.

Dorigen
She becomes Arveragus’ wife who is unhappy when her husband is away.

Aurelius
He is a wealthy neighbor who harbors a secret love for Dorigen.

Summary
There was once a Knight named Arveragus in the land of Brittany. He was brave and prosperous and he wished to make his life complete by taking a suitable wife. He decided to marry a fair maiden named Dorigen, provided she would make a vow with him that they would respect each other and practice patience towards each other’s behavior and words.

After they were married, the Knight had to travel to distant lands in order to obtain more wealth. In his absence, his wife Dorigen soon became depressed and mourned her husband’s absence. She felt lonely in her castle on the coast of rocky France and she would spend many an hour contemplating life while gazing at the waves crashing on the rocks at the foot of the cliff. Her wealthy neighbor often invited her to join in the parties that he hosted, but she always refused until one day in May she was persuaded to attend a picnic.

Aurelius, the neighbor, decided he would confess his love for Dorigen, but she repelled his advances. However, he was persistent and in a joke, she said should would agree to his advances if he could remove all the rocks from the coast of Brittany. Despondent, Aurelius prayed to Apollo to send a flood to cover the rocks. Eventually, Arveragus returned home and husband and wife were happy again in each other’s company.

Meanwhile, Aurelius’ brother new of a man who had deciphered a book of magic and on payment of £1,000 would cast a spell that would clear the coast of rocks. The deed was performed and Aurelius asked Dorigen to keep her promise. She was much grieved at this outcome and confided in her husband what had happened. The noble Knight told his wife that she must keep her promise even though it was made in jest, and this would deeply grieve and wound him. However, Aurelius, hearing of the sacrifice and nobility of Arveragus could not force himself to take Dorigen, and he sent the woman back to her husband.

The Franklin poses the question at the end – Who was the finest gentleman in the story?

Interpretation
We again have the repeating theme of a three-way love affair in this story, mirroring those that have gone before as in the Knight’s Tale and the Miller’s Tale.

Chaucer now seems to provide a mid course between what the Wife of Bath advocated, where a woman has complete sovereignty over a man, and the Clerk’s Tale where a woman should be completely subservient. Unlike these two tales, the Franklin’s Tale has a thread of nobility running through it and all the characters portrayed.

Here we have the wife refusing to be unfaithful whilst the husband is away, but she feels duty bound to keep a promise even though it was spoken in jest. Her husband insists that she should keep her promise, and then finally the neighbor refuses to hold Dorigen to the oath that she made.

So, in conclusion, everybody has been respectful and honest to everybody else.
The moral of the tale therefore, is that one noble deed performed will lead to another, and then another. In this way, good overcomes evil.

THE PHYSICIAN’S TALE
Characters
Virginia
She is the beautiful daughter of Virginius whose innocence attracts the evil intentions of Appius.

Virginius
He is a wealth, courageous Knight who has a beautiful daughter.

Appius
He is a corrupt judge who is besotted with Virginia’s beauty.

Claudius
He is Appius’ co-conspirator who will help in the kidnap of Virginia.
Summary
There was once a rich courageous Knight named Virginius who had a beautiful fourteen year-old daughter. Her beauty was matched by her kindness and modesty.
In the town was a judge named Appius who was obsessed with having this beautiful girl. He obtains the services of a criminal named Claudius in order to kidnap Virginia. Claudius accuses the Knight of having stolen a servant girl from his house and pretending that she was his daughter. Appius, the judge, rules against the Knight and takes the child as a Ward of Court. When Virginius returns home and tells his daughter what has happened she is distraught. The only course of action is for his daughter to accept death rather than face the shame of being at the mercy of Appius and Claudius.

The Knight cuts off his daughter’s head with his sword and holding it by the hair takes it to the judge. The judge orders that the Knight be hanged for murder, but the people of the town intercede, being aroused to the judge’s treachery. The judge is thrown into prison and the mob wish to hang Claudius for his evil work.

The Knight intercedes, suggesting he should be exiled, which was carried out.
The Physician finishes his tale with the moral that “the wages of sin is death” and all should confess their sins.

Interpretation
Chaucer has taken this tale from Titus Livius, a Roman historian, but it has been greatly embellished by Chaucer. This is because he has given more characterization to Virginius and his daughter, whereas the original story focused on the corrupt judge and his passion for the young girl.
The Physician certainly dramatizes the situation by having the father cut off his daughter’s head for the sake of the honor of his family. The Knight clearly does not wish to have the blood of Claudius on his hands as well as his daughter’s hence the suggestion that he be exiled rather than hanged.

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The host was upset by the Physician’s tale, in particular the treacherous behavior of the judge. He turns to the Pardoner requesting that he tells a more agreeable story. The Pardoner, before commencing his tale, gives information to the Pilgrims concerning the methods he uses in preaching. He will use as his text “Radix malorum est cupidatis” which is “love of money is the root of all evil”. He carries with him a variety of relics which are available for sale to all, but in particular bad sinners. He encourages the Pilgrims to be unselfish and have only good intentions in order to stay clear of sin. He then confesses that he is a worldly man and likes money, rich food and fine living.

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THE PARDONER’S TALE
Summary
This story concerns three young men who spend much of their time in revelry.
The tale is set in Flanders, and the Pardoner during the telling of the tale, tends to drift from the plot and sermonize to the Pilgrims.
On this particular day as the three men indulge in gambling and drunkenness, they hear a funeral passing outside the Inn. They ask a servant who has died. He responds by saying that it is a friend of the three men who was stabbed in the back by a thief called Death. He has killed many in the neighborhood recently. The three drunken men decide to seek this thief out, and they travel to the next town in pursuit.
On the way they meet an extremely old man dressed in rags. He explains that he has been cursed to wander the earth until he can find a youth who will change places with him. He goes on to say that not even Death will take his life. The three men ask the old man if he has seen Death, and he responds that he was last seen under the tree at the end of the lane.
The three men go and find bags of gold beneath the tree and they decide to keep this for themselves. It would be too dangerous to move the gold in daytime so they will wait for nightfall. They draw straws to see who will go into town to obtain food, and the youngest is given this task. When he has gone, the two that are left decide that they will murder him when he returns and keep the gold for themselves. The youngest of the three decides to poison the food he brings to the other two and keep the gold for himself. The youngest is stabbed, and the other two are poisoned.
Interpretation
Along with the Wife of Bath, the Pardoner is the other interesting Pilgrim in the company. He is clearly a complex man as revealed in the prologue to his tale. He finds it easy to sermonize to the other Pilgrims emphasizing his text that the love of money is the root of all evil, and gives advice as to how people should live their lives in order to avoid sin. At the same time he confesses that he readily succumbs to temptation and likes to indulge himself with rich food and fine living. The money he obtains to support his lifestyle comes from the sale of relics which are mainly purchased by bad sinners.

At the end of his tale he again takes the opportunity to make some money indicating that the Host is perhaps the most sinful of those present, but the Host responds that the Pardoner is not a complete man. It was only the intervention of the Knight that restored peace between the Host and the Pardoner.

Again Chaucer takes the opportunity to highlight the hypocrisy of the Medieval Church in his portrayal of the Pardoner. It is the old story of the Pardoner not practicing what he preaches. You will recall that the Pardoner tells the Host that his Pardons and Indulgences are not valid, and it is no coincidence that Chaucer depicts him as probably the most evil of the Pilgrims. This is perhaps what makes this character so intriguing and this is shared by the tale that he tells.

There has been some ambiguity about this story, but I am convinced that the old man is in fact Death or the Devil, and he is very familiar with the frailties of man and what these three will do when they find the gold that he has left under the tree. He has another three souls to add to his kingdom!

The old man mirrors the hypocrisy of the Narrator himself in the way he deceives the three men. The Pardoner’s work is also based on deceit, selling relics to the unwary.

The message is, therefore, that you cannot covet money without coveting death itself.

THE SHIPMAN’S TALE
Summary
This story is set in St. Denis, France, where there was once a rich Merchant whose wife was of unparalleled beauty. They lived in a sumptuous house which was always filled with guests. On one occasion, they had as one of their guests a handsome young Monk who enjoyed the Merchant’s hospitality. Through conversation the Merchant and the Monk discovered that they were born in the same town so they must be related and be cousins. The Merchant was thrilled at this prospect and they called one another brother.

It was necessary for the Merchant to leave on business to Brussels, but before he left he locked himself up in his counting room in order to review his financial situation. The Monk was taken with the Merchant’s wife’s beauty and took the opportunity, in the Merchant’s absence, to get to know her better. The Monk noticed that she looked pale and wondered if perhaps her husband had kept her awake all night at play. The wife protested and said that relations with her husband were not good, and she was close to taking her own life. The Monk encouraged the wife to confide in him and she agreed to tell him concerning the marital neglect she suffered provided he kept it a secret. The Monk takes the opportunity to tell the wife that he doesn’t regard himself as related to her husband. The wife goes on to say that her husband does not give her any money and forces her to lead a frugal life. She begs the Monk to loan her some money so that she can buy some necessities for herself. The Monk agrees to do this and then he kisses the wife passionately.

Before the Merchant departs to Brussels, the Monk asks for a loan from the Merchant of 100 francs. The Merchant gladly agrees.

When the Merchant has gone, the Monk calls on the wife and gives her the money in exchange for a night in bed.

On the Merchant’s return home, he stops at the Monk’s Abbey to see how he fares, not to collect the loan. The Monk advises the Merchant that he repaid the money to his wife a few days after the Merchant had left for Brussels.

On returning home, the Merchant scolds his wife for not having told him that the loan had been repaid. He notices that she has bought some fine clothes and forgives her the extravagance.

Interpretation
Chaucer launches another attack against the Ecclesiastical community by having the Shipman portray a Monk in a most unsavory light. The Monk breaks his vows with God and he shows himself as a manipulator by falsely claiming that he is related to the Merchant. Not content with taking advantage of the wife’s desperate position regarding money, he betrays her confidence, and his actions risk her unfaithfulness being revealed. He seems to profit from his liaison with the Merchant and his wife, and the joke is on them.
There is a theory that Chaucer constructed the Tales first and then assigned them to the characters later. If we look at lines 11 – 19, these relate to a woman’s point of view, “the unfortunate, husband at any rate, he must paye! he must us clothe and he must us arraye all for his owne worship, richly – in which array we dance jollily!”

In other words, husbands want their wives to be hardy, wise and good in bed.

Scholars suggest that this tale was originally allocated to the Wife of Bath, but then Chaucer changed his mind and decided that the Shipman (Pirate) should tell the tale, and forgot to eliminate these lines which are inconsistent.

The reader may wonder why the rich Merchant was quite happy to lend money to the Monk, but kept his wife short of money. The Monk actually holds a high position of power at this time, and is in fact Knighted, and called Sir John. Therefore, the Merchant was clearly honored, firstly to be a relative, and then to be asked for a loan.

In contrast, the Merchant views his wife almost as a glorified servant, and sees no return in lavishing money on her to spend on frivolous behavior.

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The Host calls upon the Prioress to tell a tale, and she starts by singing the praises of the Virgin Mary.

"O Lord, our Lord, thy name how marvelous is in this large world widespread, for not only thy praise precious performed is by men of dignitee, but by the mouth of children thy bountee performed is: for on the breast suckinge sometime shewn they thine heryinge (praise).”

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THE PRIORESS’ TALE

Summary

In a Christian town in Asia, lived a community of Jews who were somewhat exploited by the Christians. In order for the Christian children to attend school, they had to pass through the Jewish ghetto, but they were free to do so.

One of the younger pupils was not yet acquainted with Latin, but he was determined to learn a song that the older children sang, “O Alma Redemptoris” - The young boy soon learnt the song, but did not know its meaning, and he continually sang this out loud on his way to school. He discovered that the song was in praise of the Virgin Mary.

Serpent Satan whispered to the Jews that this song was a direct insult to their Holy Laws, and it must be stopped. A few Jews hired a murderer who was to grasp the child and thrown his body into a cesspool. The child’s mother went searching for the boy when he did not return from school, and she made enquiries at the houses of the Jews, but they said that they knew nothing. As if guided by Jesus, she found herself in the alley where her son had been murdered and placed in the pit, and she found his body. The boy was still singing the song and the Christian people gathered round in amazement.

The Jews were rounded up and drawn by wild horses and hanged.

Still singing, the child was taken to the Abbey. Although he was dead, having had his throat slit, he still sang. When his body was brought into the Abbey, he told the Abbots that Jesus had commanded him to sing until he was buried, and that the Virgin Mary had laid a grain upon his tongue. He will continue to sing until the grain is taken away from his tongue. This the Monks did, and the child gave up the ghost and was laid to rest.

A splendid marble tomb was erected as a memorial to the boy.

Interpretation

This whole episode is dedicated to the Virgin Mary and the Prioress was attached to a Convent whose order relied on the patronage of the Virgin Mary.

The Prioress’ prologue is a hymn of praise sung for the Virgin.

The reader needs to understand some history of Medieval England and the position of Jews at that time. There was great animosity between Christians and Jews, and as indicated in the Tale, the Jews lived in ghettos in major concentrations of population. Persecution was widespread and the deaths of Jews were
numerous. There were particular atrocities carried out in York where in fact Jews had to obtain sanctuary inside Christian churches to avoid death. Tension between the Jewish and Christian communities came to a climax in 1290 when Jews were expelled from England. Chaucer is retelling a tale used as propaganda to incite hatred against the Jewish community. Unfortunately, this prejudice is still prevalent today.

Much of the prejudice against the Jewish communities in Medieval England is founded on jealousy. Circumstances forced the Jews to live in tight-knit communities, but they helped one another and seemed to be adept in business matters and were thus able to accumulate wealth. There are reports that many Christian leaders used Jewish finance in order to fund various campaigns. The prejudice is also not helped by the use of Jews in certain characterizations in literature such as Shylock in Shakespeare’s ‘The Merchant of Venice’, Rebecca in Sir Walter Scott’s ‘Ivanhoe’, and Fagin in Dickens’s ‘Oliver Twist’.

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A solemn atmosphere descended on the Pilgrims after the Prioress’ tale, and the Host asks Chaucer to tell his tale to liven up the group. Chaucer responds that he only knows one story which he heard a long time ago.

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CHAUCER’S TALE OF SIR TOPAS

Summary

Sir Topas was a handsome young man who was a skilled hunter, archer and wrestler, but he was not interested in women, which caused disappointment to many a maiden. One night in the forest, he fell asleep and dreamed of an Elf Queen who joined him under his cloak. When he awoke he was determined to search the earth for the Elf Queen. The Host interrupts the tale, for he is tired with such ‘illiterate rhymes’, so Chaucer tells the Tale of Melibee. This is a tedious story concerning Dame Prudence who is the wife of Melibee. Whilst they were away, the Melibee’s home is burgled by three thieves, and their daughter Sophia, who was still at home, was grievously injured by the burglars. The burglars are captured, but after taking advice to the surprise of those present, Dame Prudence wishes to have a peaceful settlement with the burglars. Melibee decided to punish the burglars with a fine, but Prudence blocked this, so the burglars left after they were given a lengthy sermon. It is not known what happened to the daughter Sophia.

Interpretation

We can only assume that it is through modesty that Chaucer assigns two uneventful stories to his name. The Tale of Melibee has almost no plot, but it goes on for 1,885 lines, and perhaps its only function is to demonstrate Chaucer’s art in poetry. The question that the tale poses is whether we should avenge like with like, violence with violence. It is clear that Melibee and Dame Prudence adopt the view that we should turn the other cheek.

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The Host was pleased with Chaucer’s tale of Dame Prudence and Sir Topas. He wished that his wife had been here to have witnessed the story. He blames his wife for driving him to commit acts of dishonesty. He then turns to the Monk and asks for a merry tale, but the Monk responds by providing a series of tragic tales.

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THE MONK’S TALE

Summary

The Monk’s Tale is almost a lecture concerning tragic figures of the past. He starts with Adam and Lucifer’s fall from grace, leading on to the story of Samson and Delilah. Next he provides brief histories concerning Hercules, Nebuchadnezzar, and Balthasar who refused to abandon the ways of the wicked despite warnings from God. This led to the loss of his kingdom. The Monk then provides details of a Persian woman, Zenobia. Not only was she beautiful, but she was a great warrior and feared neither man nor beast. She fell in love with Prince Idenathus and they had two sons. The courageous Prince conquered many lands and they soon ruled over a vast area. When the
Prince died, her sons continued to show no mercy for the nations they had captured. Then they were invaded by the Roman Empire, and they were taken to Rome, mother and sons, as slaves to be jeered at. Further tragic tales follow concerning Nero the Roman Emperor, King Peter of Spain who was betrayed and slain by his own brother, and Julius Caesar who was assassinated. The Monk would have continued if it had not been for the intervention of the Knight, pleading for a merry tale, but he did not comply.

**Interpretation**

It is not clear what Chaucer’s intentions were in writing this tale for the Monk. Maybe he wished to impress the reader with his knowledge of world literature and stories from far-off lands, some of which he perhaps translated into English. However, the tales are not told in chronological order, and there seems to be no organization in this work. It may be that these were ideas for stories that the Pilgrims would tell on their return journey to London.

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The Host agrees with the Knight that the stories were too grim, and boring, and that he almost fell asleep. The Host turns to the Nun’s Priest and asks if he knows a merry tale.

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THE NUN’S PRIEST’S TALE

**Summary**

This story takes place in the farmyard of a widow and her two daughters. Here lives a cock called Chaunticleer who was a magnificent beast and was renowned for his crowing – no other cock could match him. He watched over seven hens, the leader of which was a gracious hen named Lady Pertelote. Chaunticleer and the Lady were in love. One day, the Lady noticed that Chaunticleer was not his usual self. He tells her that he has had a terrible dream, that some kind of beast came into the yard and seized him. His color was similar to a fox. The Lady scolds him for being cowardly and that dreams are nothing to be afraid of. He probably ate too many worms – that is what causes bad dreams.

The Lady quotes Cato who said that dreams have no consequence, but Chaunticleer thinks differently. He has heard that dreams can foretell the future. Now there was a fox named Daun Russel who had been hiding near the farmyard, and suddenly Chaunticleer notices the fox and immediately begins to run around, but the fox calls out saying don’t be afraid, I have only come to hear your beautiful voice. He believes that Chaunticleer’s voice is even better than his father, and he was a good crower. The vain cock shuts his eyes and bursts into song, demonstrating his prowess to the fox. The fox grasps him about the neck and makes off into the countryside.

The hens, seeing what has happened, make a terrible din that arouses the entire household. The widow and her two daughters, plus all the farmyard animals, dogs, geese, ducks and even the bees, chase the fox. Chaunticleer says to the fox, “Why don’t you turn round and throw them a few insults?” The fox thinks this is a good idea and as soon as he opens his mouth Chaunticleer escapes and flies into the trees.

**Interpretation**

Arguably one of the best-composed tales in this set, it still has the capacity to delight today as it did when it was first written. Stories concerning animals have always been popular, and here we have all the ingredients of a good story with humor, tension and excitement. What makes this stand out is the way in which Chaucer humanizes the animals, and how he provides them with human characteristics, but you never forget that the characters are a cock, a hen and a fox.

It is appropriate that the Priest tells this tale, for like Chaunticleer who looks after seven hens, he is the confessor to a group of Nuns.

In Medieval England, wise men were always depicted as wearing a beard, and the Lady refers to Chaunticleer’s beard indicating that he is wise cock who lets his wisdom be eclipsed by his vanity. However, unlike other fowl, he does not panic when he is in the grip of the fox, and uses his intelligence to escape. We also have the absurd and humorous situation where Chaunticleer’s dilemma is compared with Hector’s plight in Homer’s ‘Odyssey’.

Chaucer even has this songbird quoting Latin, although his translation is not as good as it should be.
THE SECOND NUN'S TALE

Summary

There was once a young woman of Rome who valued her chastity so much that she wanted to remain a virgin forever. However, she was given to a young man named Valerian in marriage. The woman prayed to God to keep her chaste, and on her wedding night, she told her husband that she has a guardian angel that would slay anyone who violated her. Valerian did not believe her and the woman named Cecilia, tells him that he must go and be baptized by Holy Urban.

Urban was pleased to greet Valerian and rejoiced in the power that Cecilia had to send the young man to be baptized.

Valerian saw a vision of an old man and believing this to be an important portent, agreed to be baptized. When he returned to Cecilia, he saw her with an angel holding a crown of lilies and a crown of roses. The angel said that the crowns had come from heaven, and only those that are chaste and hate evil can see them. The angel has the power to grant Valerian a wish and he requests that his brother should know the Truth and be baptized as well.

However, his brother objects. He doesn't want to be an outcast like Pope Urban, but Cecilia explains that it is not this life that is important, but the next, and so he agrees to be baptized. There is a purge against the Christians and they are rounded up and sentenced to death, including Cecilia, Valerian and his brother Tiburce. During their imprisonment, they are able to convert others to Christianity.

When Cecilia is brought before the court, she answers all the questions cleverly and profoundly, insulting the pagan gods of their captors. She is sentenced to death by being placed in boiling water, but this fails, and then she is to be decapitated, but after three blows from the sword, she is still alive as the executioner was unable to sever her head. She lived for three more days, and many more were converted to Christianity.

Later, Pope Urban buried her body and proclaimed her a Saint.

Interpretation

Chaucer has merely translated this old legend from Latin to English. Little is actually known concerning Cecilia. Her martyrdom is attributed to the reign of Severus around A.D. 230.

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A Canon and his servant join the Pilgrims and the Host asks if they have any tales to tell. The Yeoman says that his master knows many stories concerning far off lands and distant shores. The Canon is clearly embarrassed by his servant and slips away, leaving the Yeoman to tell his story.

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THE CANON'S YEOMAN'S TALE

Summary

This tale is basically a confidence trick involving a Canon and a Priest.

The Canon practices alchemy, but was short of money and borrowed 1 mark from a wealthy Priest. The Priest did not expect to see his money again, but was pleased to see its return three days later. The Canon was very grateful to the Priest and offered to reveal some of his discoveries. He showed the Priest several tricks such as throwing a hollow branch filled with silver, but sealed at both ends, onto a fire so that it appeared that when the branch burnt, it actually turned into silver, which so impressed the Priest that he offered to pay the Canon £40 for the secret. The Canon disappeared soon after with the money.

Interpretation

There were many alchemists working in Medieval times, and their man task was trying to convert base metals into precious materials such as gold and silver.

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The party are now approaching Canterbury and some of the Pilgrims are showing signs of fatigue. The Cook can hardly stay on his horse due to his drunkenness, but the Host thinks there is still time for a few more stories and turns to the Manciple.

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THE MANCIPLE'S TALE
Summary
There was once a great warrior called, Phoebus, who was also a skilled musician and loved his wife more than himself. However, he had one fault and that was extreme jealousy. He possessed a white-feathered crow that was a great mimic and could repeat words he had only heard once.
His wife had a secret lover and she carelessly made love to him in the presence of the crow. When Phoebus returned to the house the crow told him what he had heard and seen.
Phoebus killed his wife and then plucked the crow so it was bald. The white feathers never appeared again as they were replaced by black ones.
Before throwing the crow out, he removed the crow’s ability to sing and speak.
The Manciple ends his tale by telling people they should restrain their tongues.

Interpretation
The moral of the tale is that repeating a scandal is a dangerous occupation.

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There remains one of the company to tell a story and that is the Parson. He tells the party that he is no rhyme master and he knows of no story that would entertain or amuse. However, he does have a sermon, which would be more appropriate if they were on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

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THE PARSON'S SERMON
Summary
The Parson advises that it is God’s desire that all men should travel to the celestial city and not perish in the fires of hell. There are many ways in which to travel to paradise. One way is through penitence, lamenting for sin and sinning no more. He then details some of the sins man should avoid, such as envy, sloth, gluttony, and lechery, all of which have appeared in the tales told by the Pilgrims. He urges that those present should confess their sins freely and obtain satisfaction and God’s grace by the giving of alms to the poor, doing penance for sins committed, and fasting.

Interpretation
It is clear that Chaucer is trying to make amends for the way in which he has represented the church through some of the Pilgrims present. It is also clear that the tales told by the Pilgrims concerning the church indicate that in Medieval times there was much corruption evident within the Ecclesiastical system. The final tale, from the Parson, provides a high moral tone, and shows that at least some members of the church do actually carry out God’s work and are not in it for their own purposes. The Sermon was actually the work of two 13th Century Dominican Friars, and is not Chaucer’s own work.

CONCLUSION
Chaucer makes some retractions, and many scholars wish he had not added this section to his Tales. Like an artist, he should know when the work is complete and not tinker with it at a later date. It is clear that the Tales were written when Chaucer was at his peak, and he has let his misguided conscience construct this retraction.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND IDEAS FOR ANSWERS

Q: What does Chaucer’s ‘Canterbury Tales’ have to say about life in Medieval England?

Ideas:
Religion: Unlike today, religion had much more influence over the everyday lives of people throughout Europe. Over the centuries, politics has replaced religion and today it is the political leaders and officials that are criticized, but in Chaucer’s time the Church had much more power, and their officials were the butt of jokes. A high proportion of the Pilgrims worked for the Church. In Chaucer’s time, a good living could be obtained by doing ‘God’s work’. No doubt there were many pious Church officials who unselfishly dedicated their lives in pursuing God’s will, but likewise there were many who used the Church as a means of
furthering their own position. These latter figures brought the Church into disrepute and were symbols of the corruption that was to be found at all levels of Ecclesiastical life. The Church used the fear of eternal damnation and purgatory as a means for ensnaring the lower classes into the fold of the Church. Likewise, richer members of society could be relieved of part of their wealth in order to secure a place in paradise. There seemed to be more officials in the Church in Chaucer’s time. In addition to Bishops, Priests, Monks and Friars, we have Pardoners, Summoners and their assistants. Some worked for the Church in England or for particular Monasteries, and others worked directly from Rome. Most of the services were conducted in Latin and the majority of the congregation were ignorant of this language, and thus were denied hearing God’s word in their own tongue.

Women: The majority of women in Chaucer’s time seemed to have a subservient role to men, or were subservient to God. There are exceptions best illustrated by the Wife of Bath, so there is evidence that women could break loose from the shackles they wore in a male dominated society. Although they were subservient, their chastity was honored and to violate a woman was perhaps a bigger crime than now. Many of the tales revolve round the chastity of women, and the consequences faced by men who encroached on this. The attitude of men towards women seemed shallow and more store was set on a woman’s good looks than on her character. The ideal woman had to be beautiful, loyal and a poor third is intelligent. Women had little opportunity to obtain an education - even less than men and it is really only in the higher social groups that they obtained an education.

Social structure: Although Medieval England was far less sophisticated than life today, we can see that people got on quite well with one another, and there was perhaps more interaction between people in Chaucer’s time than today. Perhaps the pilgrimage is a false setting, but it is clearly not outlandish to have all representatives of society traveling together, communing with one another with the same goal of reaching Canterbury and Beckett’s tomb. The Pilgrims show the same interaction with one another as we might expect today if a similar pilgrimage were to be carried out. We have the various rivalries between certain members of the party, the Miller and the Reeve for example, and although insults are hurled between members of the group, the feeling is that in true Christian spirit they are able to forgive one another the insults, for no-one leaves the party and they all carry on together in the company. One gets the feeling that there are less barriers between the social strata in Medieval England, and that perhaps the Church representatives are more down to earth than their counterparts are today. Maybe this is because life was a bit more basic in the 14th Century than it is today.

Q: How would you rate Chaucer as a writer?

Ideas:
‘The Canterbury Tales’ represents a major milestone of literary history. They are a stepping-stone between all that has gone before and a benchmark for what has been composed subsequently. We still get a taste of how stories were told in the Early and Middle Ages. Most stories were in the form of songs where the content was sometimes just as important as the rhyming song. Virtually the whole work is in the form of poems and the various tales differ regarding their content, but in most instances there is a strict adherence to keeping the rhyme and the rhythm flowing. It is perhaps hard to appreciate the difficulty in achieving this, but clearly Chaucer was adept at this type of work. Imagine trying to tell any of the major works of literature in the form of a rhyming song! It is important that the reader tries to at least review some of the tales in their original format and look beyond the fact that some of the words will be unfamiliar. The way in which Chaucer has constructed the poetry is exceptional. He also uses rhyming in order to reinforce certain important points in some of the tales so that the listener not only marvels at the poetry, but at the content as well.

Chaucer is quite rightly regarded as the father of narrative poetry and he provided a great service to the English-speaking world of his time by translating many tales from around the world into the common English tongue. We see from his life that he had many irons in the fire, and it is a pity that he never completed this immense project.

Q: Most of the tales have a moral or a particular message. Please give examples.

Ideas:
The Knight’s Tale: The rules of honor must be adhered to and people should conduct themselves in a proper manner. The Knight’s Tale is filled with chivalry, adventure, love and honor.
The Miller’s Tale: Old men should not marry young girls!
The Reeve’s Tale: Cheats never prosper!
The Man of Law’s Tale: Loyalty is a virtue, as exemplified by the main character, Constance who was endowed with great patience.

The Wife of Bath’s Tale: The thing that most women desire is complete sovereignty over their husbands. What are the rest? Remember that some of the tales are linked i.e. the Friar and the Summoner.