

Chaucer's  
**Canterbury  
Tales**



**Aquila Theatre Company**

On a warm spring morning in April, sometime in the 1380s, a group of travelers gathers at the Tabard Inn in the London borough of Southwark to embark on a sacred pilgrimage. Their destination is Canterbury Cathedral, the resting-place of the martyr St. Thomas Becket. These medieval pilgrims come from all walks of life and classes of society—women and men, young and old, clergy and lay people. To pass the time during their journey, they tell each other stories.

This is the framework for Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, one of the earliest literary classics written in the English language. The 24 stories recounted by Chaucer's travelers (which include Chaucer himself) are remarkably varied in theme, style, and structure. Some are serious and deeply religious, while others feature what today we would call "gross-out" humor. Some are written in poetic form, using different rhyme schemes and meters, and two are in prose. While some of the stories are original, many are based on characters and themes from a wide variety of sources, including Greek and Roman poetry and medieval literature.



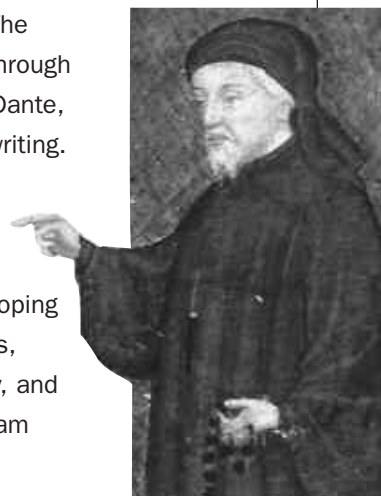
## Did You Know...?

Chaucer never finished *The Canterbury Tales*. The prologue says that each pilgrim will tell two tales on the way to Canterbury and two on the way back—120 tales in all. Chaucer wrote only 24 tales.

### Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1343-1400)

We don't know many of the specifics about Chaucer's life. He was born into a middle-class London family and is believed to have been fluent in several languages, including French, Italian, and Latin. Though we know him today as a writer, he earned his living mainly in government service, holding positions such as customs officer, diplomat, and military envoy. Chaucer's duties took him to France, Italy, Flanders, and Spain. The people he met and literature that he was exposed to through these travels (including the works of authors such as Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio) show up quite clearly in his writing.

In an age when Latin and French were considered the appropriate languages for poetry and stories, Chaucer was one of the first writers to create great literature in English, which in his time was still a developing language. He freely borrowed characters, plots, themes, and structures from a wide variety of historical, literary, and legendary sources—just as his fellow-Englishman William Shakespeare would do more than 200 years later.



### Questions to Explore:

- What is a pilgrimage, and why do people undertake them? What kinds of pilgrimages did Christians make in the Middle Ages? Who goes on pilgrimages today? If you decided to go on a pilgrimage, where would you go? Why?
- Why would a person make the 60-mile pilgrimage from London to Canterbury in the company of total strangers?
- Who was Thomas Becket? Why was he declared a saint?
- Why might Chaucer have chosen to write *The Canterbury Tales* in English, which was not an accepted literary language at that time?
- It's often been said that there's no such thing as an original story. Do you agree? Why do we keep telling the same basic stories over and over again?

Aquila Theatre Company's stage adaptation of *The Canterbury Tales* presents seven tales from Geoffrey Chaucer's celebrated collection of stories. The company has taken the original work, written in the closing years of the 14th century, and created a theater piece for audiences in the 21st century. Robert Richmond, the show's co-director, answers some questions about the show:

**Q: What made you decide to put this work onstage when it was not originally written to be performed as a play?**

**A:** *The Canterbury Tales* is a huge milestone in the development of the English language and full of social commentary on the Middle Ages. It seemed an ideal choice for Aquila, whose mission is to take "great works to the greatest number." As an epic poem it would have been recited—perhaps by Chaucer himself—in a performance setting. We have taken this one step further and physicalized the characters for an audience.

**Q: Why did you use only seven of the stories in your play?**

**A:** On a visit to the destination of the *Canterbury pilgrims*—the tomb of St. Thomas Becket in *Canterbury Cathedral*—I discovered a tile mosaic depicting the seven deadly sins defined by the Catholic Church. With this as our inspiration, we came up with the idea of selecting seven of the tales, each illustrating one of the sins. This device provides a framework that links the tales. By the way... If we included all the stories, our play would be about eight hours long!

**THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS**

- ☠ Lust
- ☠ Gluttony
- ☠ Greed
- ☠ Sloth
- ☠ Wrath
- ☠ Envy
- ☠ Pride

**Q: I tried to read *The Canterbury Tales* and had a hard time understanding Chaucer's language. Will I be able to understand the show?**

**A:** Absolutely. We're using a script that was adapted by our Artistic Director, Peter Meineck, from Chaucer's own words. Peter spent many months listening to the original Middle English language. He then changed some of the words and the word order to make them sound more like the way we speak today, but leaving the rhythm and rhyme of Chaucer's words intact. He also cut some lines that were not necessary to tell the story so that we could keep our play about two hours long.



Robert Richmond

## Before, During, & After

**BEFORE THE SHOW:**

- Working in a small group, find a modern translation of one of the stories Aquila used from *The Canterbury Tales*. Using this as your script, act out the story for the rest of the class. What are some of the challenges Aquila faces in turning this tale into a drama?

**DURING THE SHOW:**

- Can find the connection between the seven tales and the seven deadly sins?

**AFTER THE SHOW:**

- Write a review of the performance. Be sure to talk about all the elements of the show, including the adaptation, directing, visual and sound design, and the performances. What was the most surprising thing about the performance? Do you think it was faithful to the spirit of Chaucer's original work?

## *The Knight's Tale*

The Knight tells a story of **courtly love** set in the world of ancient Greece. Arcite and Palamon, two knights and close friends, are imprisoned by Theseus, the king of Athens. From their prison window they catch sight of Emily, Theseus' sister-in-law. They both instantly fall in love with Emily and begin to quarrel bitterly over her.

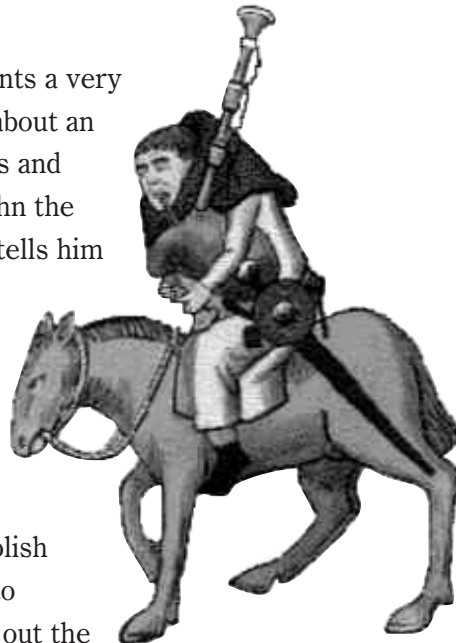
Arcite is eventually released from prison but banished from Athens, never to see Emily again. Palamon, though still a prisoner, is able to gaze upon his beloved. After many years and twists and turns of fate, these two knights face each other in a grand tournament to battle for the hand of the woman they love.



## *The Miller's Tale*

Following the Knight's tale, the Miller presents a very different sort of love story. His naughty tale is about an affair between a college student named Nicholas and Alison, the sexy young wife of an older man, John the carpenter. To get John out of the way, Nicholas tells him that the stars are predicting a terrible flood. He instructs John to hang three big tubs from the rafters; they can sleep there, safe from the rising waters. After the carpenter falls asleep in his tub, Nicholas steals away to spend the night in bed with Alison.

While Nicholas and Alison are together, a foolish man named Absolon stands below the window to declare his love for Alison. He begs her to lean out the window and give him a kiss. Alison plays a cruel trick on Absolon. He returns a short time later to get his revenge, with disastrous and hilarious results.



**COURTLY LOVE** - an idealized set of rules about love observed by members of the nobility during the Middle Ages and Renaissance

**PARDONER** - a man who sold "indulgences"—pardon for sins—on behalf of the Roman Catholic Church

**FLANDERS** - a region in Europe that ranged over parts of modern-day Belgium, France, and the Netherlands

## *The Pardoner's Tale*

The **Pardoner** takes his turn, telling a story about three drunken hooligans from **Flanders**. (The young men are called simply rioter 1, rioter 2, and rioter 3.) One night in a tavern they see the body of an old friend being carried past. Angry at losing their friend, the drunkards resolve to seek out Death and kill him.

On their journey they meet an old man, who tells them they will find Death under a certain tree. Instead of Death, they find a treasure of gold. The rioters quickly forget about their quest to murder Death, and work out a plan to keep their treasure safe. They draw lots and send one man to the town to buy wine and food. While he is away the other two plot to murder him and split his share of the gold. When the third man returns, they immediately kill him. The two celebrate by drinking the wine, not realizing that the third man has poisoned it. In the end, all three of the rioters find Death under the tree.



## *The Wife of Bath's Tale*

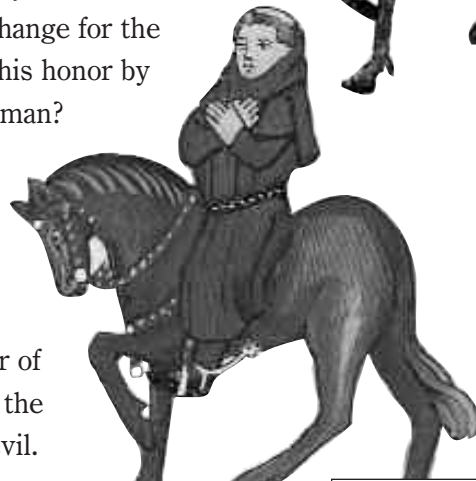
Married five times, the Wife of **Bath** shocks the pilgrims with her straightforward talk about human sexuality. In the prologue to her tale, she raises the question of marriage from a woman's perspective and dares to tell the assembly of Pilgrims exactly what a woman needs to lead a happy life.

The tale she tells illustrates her point with a vivid account of a quest by a knight of the court of King Arthur. The knight has raped a young woman, a crime punishable by death. Queen Guenevere decides that his life will be spared only if he can discover what it is that women most desire. After a fruitless search, he finally learns the secret from an old woman, whom he has promised to marry in exchange for the answer to the riddle. The knight faces a quandary; will he give up his honor by going back on his word? Can he bring himself to marry this old woman?



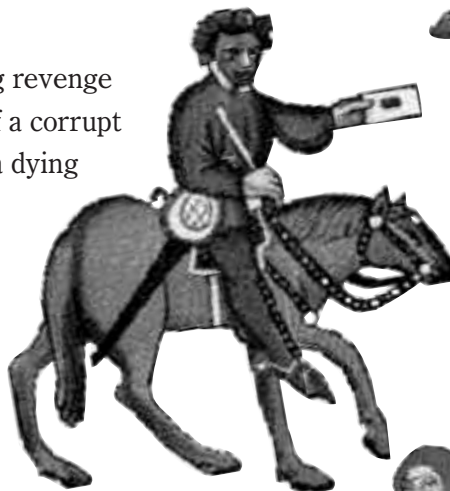
## *The Friar's Tale*

The **Friar** tells a tale of an evil **summoner**, who is sent out by a corrupt archbishop to extort unjust fines from the local populace. On his rounds the summoner meets a **yeoman**, who reveals he is actually the devil in disguise. Drawn to the evil power of the devil, the summoner proposes that they become partners. But the summoner soon learns that it is unwise to make a deal with the devil.



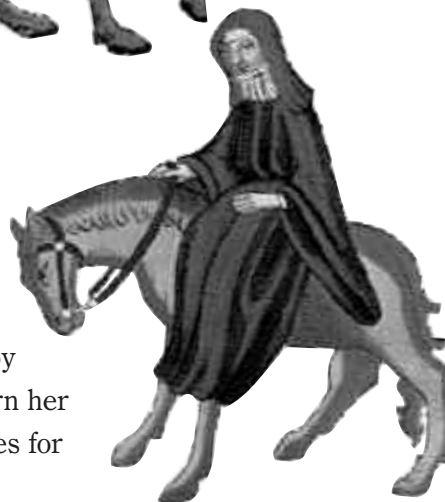
## *The Summoner's Tale*

The Summoner gets his story-telling revenge on the Friar by telling a hilarious tale of a corrupt Friar who is offered a special gift from a dying man. Instructed to reach under his backside, the man lets loose a tremendous fart, forcing the disgusted and offended Friar out of his house. The Friar takes the issue to the local judge, who comes up with a plan for sharing the fart equally among the twelve friars of the **abbey**.



## *The Second Nun's Tale*

Stories of the lives of the saints were one of the most popular literary genres during the Middle Ages. The Second Nun tells of the unyielding faith of St. Cecilia in the face of Roman oppression. Refusing to worship the Roman gods, she is condemned to death by the Roman prefect Almachius. Despite attempts to burn her alive and then behead her, Cecilia miraculously survives for three days.



**BATH** - a city in England

**FRIAR** - a member of a Roman Catholic group that supports itself by soliciting charitable donations from the community

**SUMMONER** - an official in the court system of the Roman Catholic Church who summoned people to appear for trial

**YEOMAN** - a farmer who was a free man and cultivated his own land; also a rank in the military

**ABBAY** - a residence for monks or nuns in the Catholic Church

Character illustrations taken from the *Ellsmere Manuscript* (c.1400), one of the earliest surviving manuscripts of *The Canterbury Tales*.

In taking Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* from the page to the stage, Aquila Theatre's creative team had to adapt the material—make changes in the text, setting, characters, etc. to make the story work as a stage play. Robert Richmond comments on some of the choices the company made in bringing their vision of *The Canterbury Tales* to life.

- **UPDATING** - Aquila Theater has given Chaucer's medieval tales a modern-day setting to make the stories more immediate and understandable.

*We looked for modern versions of the characters in Chaucer who might be unfamiliar to today's audience. For example, you might hear the word "summoner" and have absolutely no idea what that is. In the Middle Ages, the summoner worked for the church, bringing people accused of committing a sin to stand trial before the ecclesiastical court. Summoners were notorious for bribery and corruption. We decided the closest equivalent to this character today would be a "crooked cop." So we have the actor playing the summoner dressed as a state trooper. It's hard to miss what he represents, even if you've never heard the word "summoner" before.*

- **DOUBLING** - There are six actors in this production, though there are many more characters than that in the play. Aquila's solution is to have the actors "double"—take on more than one role. For example, the actress who plays the Nun also plays Emily in the Knight's Tale, Allison in the Miller's Tale, a Rioter in the Pardoner's Tale, the Crone in the Wife of Bath's Tale, and the Squire in the Summoner's Tale.

*Doubling challenges the actors to come up with a distinctive way of moving and speaking for each of their characters so the audience does not get confused. And often, it challenges them to play against type and even gender.*

- **MUSIC** - A recorded musical score, written especially for this production, helps create the world of the play. There are also several songs for the actors to sing. *We wanted the music to reflect both the ancient and modern. Our composer, Anthony Cochrane, created a score that takes us on a roller-coaster ride of musical themes that carry us from one point to another with just the right amount of suggestion as to where each tale is located and what the emotional idea behind it should be.*

## After the Show

- **With two or three classmates, choose a story from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* that wasn't included in the play. Discuss among you: If you wanted to add this tale to Aquila's play, how would you update the characters; who would they be in the present day? Sketch costume designs for the characters or clip wardrobe ideas from magazines. Present your choices to the rest of the class and see if they agree with you.**
- **Did you notice the actors who played more than one role? How did they use their voices and bodies to create the different characters? Did the costumes help you distinguish one character from another?**

## The Cast



Kenn Sabberton



Louis Butelli



Lindsay Rae Taylor



Andrew Schwartz



Basienka Blake



Jonathan Brathwaite

## Courtly Love

Love is a greater law, I understand,  
Than may be given to any earthly man.  
—Arcite, “The Knight’s Tale”

In ancient Europe, the concept of romantic love did not exist. Women were considered property—first of their fathers, then their husbands—and marriages were arranged purely for political or financial advantage. Passionate love was regarded either as a form of madness, an animal instinct, or as sinful.

Then, in the Middle Ages, a code of “courtly love” sprang up in the songs and poetry of the troubadours (lyric poets) who performed in the courts of the nobility in southern France. The code defined the ideal forms of love, virtue, manhood, and femininity, and established formal rituals of behavior between men and women. By the middle of the 13th century, courtly love had caught on throughout the courts of Europe. It is the source of many of our modern ideas about romantic love.



## Astrology & Astronomy

I have discovered by my astrology,  
As I looked in the moon bright,  
That now, a Monday next, at nine at night,  
Shall fall such wild and furious rain  
That Noah’s flood will come again.  
—Nicholas, “The Miller’s Tale”

If you’ve ever checked your horoscope in the newspaper or asked someone’s sign, you’ve dabbled in astrology. Astrology is based on the belief that the position and movement of the constellations and planets has an effect on personality, health, the weather, and even the outcome of events. Interest in astronomy and astrology was widespread in the Middle Ages, even among scientists and members of the Catholic church. Chaucer himself wrote an unfinished reference work on astronomy, *Treatise of the Astrolabe*. There are hundreds of references to astronomy and astrology in *The Canterbury Tales*.



## Exploring the Themes

### COURTLY LOVE:

- Research courtly love in the Middle Ages. How did it get started? Who practiced it? What were its guiding rules and principles?
- How long did the ideas of courtly love last? Do any of them still exist today?
- Compare the different views of love presented in the Knight’s Tale and the Miller’s Tale. Which is closest your own ideas about love and romance?
- Look at examples of love poetry from at least three different centuries: from Chaucer’s day up to the present. Based on the poems, how have ideas about love changed over time? How have they remained the same? Which era seems to be the most “romantic”?

### ASTROLOGY & ASTRONOMY:

- Do you believe in astrology? Why do you think so many people still believe in it, despite the lack of scientific evidence to support it?
- Research the various theories regarding the position and movement of the stars and planets during Chaucer’s lifetime. Working with your class, choreograph a dance illustrating the position and movement of the planets and stars according to these theories. Add music and perform your astronomy dance for the rest of the class.

At the very beginning of the play, a nun opens up a copy of *The Canterbury Tales* and begins reading aloud from the prologue (introduction). She reads Chaucer's words in their original Middle English. As the stories come to life, the actors switch to a modern version of the text that is easier for the audience to understand.

Here's the prologue, both as Chaucer wrote it and in modern English.

<p>NUN                  Whan that Aprille with his shoures sote                  The droghte of Marche hath perced to the roote                  And bathed every veyne in swich licour                  Of which vertu engendred is the flour                  When Zephirus eek with his swete breeth                  Inspired hath in every holt and heath                  The tender croppes and the yonge sonne                  Hath in the Ram his halfe cours y-ronne                  And smale fowles maken melodye                  That slepen al the night with open yē                  So priketh hem nature in hir corages                  Than longen folk to goon pilgrimages                  And specially from every shires ende                  Of Engelond, to Caunterbury they wende.</p>	<p>NUN                  When April with its sweet-smelling showers                  Has pierced the drought of March to the root,                  And bathed every root in such liquid                  By which power the flower grows,                  When Zephyrus also with his sweet breath                  In every wood and field has breathed life into                  The tender new leaves; and the young sun                  Has run half of his course in the Ram                  And small birds make melody,                  Those that sleep all the night with open eyes                  (So nature urges their hearts),                  Then folk long to go on pilgrimages,                  And specially from every shire's end                  Of England, to Canterbury they travel.</p>	<p><i>Zephyrus</i> - god of the west wind   <i>sun...Ram</i> - The ram (Aries) is a region of the sky in the 12 areas of the zodiac. If the sun has passed through Aries, it means that it is late April.   <i>shire</i> - county</p>
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## Canterbury Tales Glossary

- archdeacon** - a church official
- arraign** - win the rights to (someone or something)
- bailliff** - an officer of the court who can make arrests
- bereft** - deprived of something
- betide** - to happen to; to take place
- bum** - (British slang) buttocks
- casement window** - a hinged window that opens outward
- certes** - certainly; truly
- chamberlain** - a person who manages a nobleman's household
- chapter** - the members of a religious residence
- chaste** - pure, virtuous; abstaining from sexual intercourse
- churl** - a crude, ill-mannered person
- crone** - an ugly, withered old woman
- cuckold** - the husband of an unfaithful wife
- dame** - a woman in charge of a household; the Virgin Mary
- degree** - social rank or position
- extortion** - illegal use of power and position to obtain money, favors, etc.
- farthing** - a British coin worth one-fourth of a penny
- feign** - pretend; fake
- felicity** - happiness; good fortune
- Feminy** - land of the Amazons, a race of female warriors
- florin** - a gold coin
- fornication** - sexual intercourse between people who are not married to each other
- fray** - a battle or fight
- ire** - anger
- jape** - practical joke; trick; jest
- kneading trough** - a tub or tray for kneading bread dough
- lecher** - a man who is preoccupied with sex
- magistrate** - a judge
- maidenhood/maidenhead** - virginity
- order** - a society of monks
- parsimonious** - stingy
- peradventure** - perhaps; maybe
- pestilence** - a deadly plague
- prefect** - a Roman commander
- purgatory** - a place where the souls of repentant sinners are punished before they go to heaven
- recompense** - repayment for a debt or injury
- shire** - county
- sundry** - various; assorted; mixed
- vacillation** - wavering; indecisiveness
- visage** - face

Why would anyone want to see a play based on stories written more than 600 years ago in a language that nobody speaks anymore? Actor Louis Butelli, a member of the Aquila Theatre cast, talks about getting past his own preconceptions about *The Canterbury Tales* and discovering just how entertaining these stories can be.



**Q: Were you excited to be acting in a production of *The Canterbury Tales*?**

**A:** Before I came to work on *The Canterbury Tales* as an actor, I had never read Chaucer before. I was slightly intimidated because it is a “great work of literature,” and—to be honest—I thought it would be some boring old Medieval nonsense. What I found, though, is that *The Canterbury Tales* is full of all kinds of very bawdy and sophomoric humor, which is exactly the sort of thing I love. There are tricks, deceptions, humiliations, bodily functions, and lots of obscenity. Growing up, I was a big fan of Monty Python. In reading *The Canterbury Tales*, I came to realize that without Chaucer, there would be no Monty Python. And also no Shakespeare.

**Q: But what does a medieval story about religious pilgrims have to do with people today?**

**A:** I would argue that we are all familiar with the idea of pilgrimage in one form or another. Some families take an annual vacation to Disneyland, which you could call a pilgrimage celebrating the modern ideals of consumerism and escape. Other families gather from all four corners of the country to be together for the holidays, making a “pilgrimage” to celebrate family traditions. As a New Yorker after 9/11, I certainly noticed people from all over the world coming to visit Ground Zero. To me, this seemed very much like a pilgrimage.

**Q: What do you hope student audiences will get from your production of *The Canterbury Tales*?**

**A:** I hope they’ll come away from the show convinced that *The Canterbury Tales* is not some dull collection of old stories that no one can understand. I hope they’ll appreciate how bravely Chaucer spoke the truth about his society and how effectively he used dark humor to point a finger at hypocrisy. And, of course, I hope they’ll enjoy the fart jokes.



Louis Butelli as Feste in Aquila Theatre’s *Twelfth Night*



How Was It?

Did Aquila Theatre do an effective job of making *The Canterbury Tales* understandable and entertaining? Email the company with your opinions, questions and suggestions. They’d love to hear from you!

[aquila@aquilatheatre.com](mailto:aquila@aquilatheatre.com)

## Storytelling Slam!

Geoffrey Chaucer's 14th-century pilgrims help pass the time on their journey to Canterbury by holding a storytelling contest: the person who tells the most entertaining story wins dinner at the local tavern, courtesy of the other travelers. The pilgrims come from all walks of life; their tales reflect the diversity of their age, class, gender, and occupations.

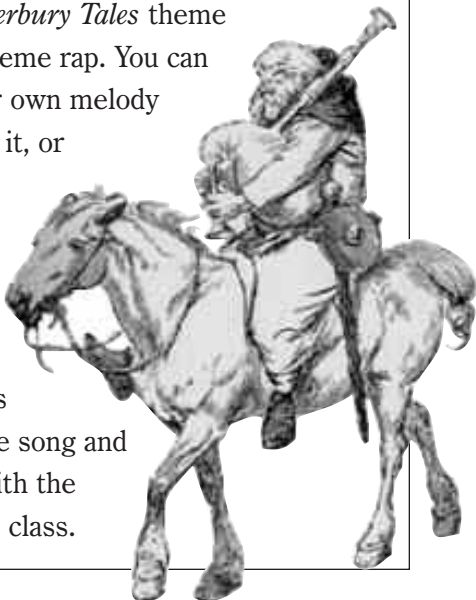
Working as a class, create a contemporary version of *The Canterbury Tales*. Here's how:

1. **Create a fictional scenario in which a group of diverse people find themselves traveling together for several days toward a common destination. (For example, a cross-country bus trip to attend an awards ceremony at the White House.)**
2. **Decide on a theme or context for your storytelling competition. (For example, the people on the bus tell each other the story of how they came to know the person receiving an award.)**
3. **Each person in your class has to create his or her own character and rhyming story. If you want to get really creative, put together a costume for your character!**
4. **Ask another class and/or group of teachers and school staff to act as audience and judge. Read your stories aloud to the audience and let them select the winner. They can award points for: originality, use of meter and rhyme, content, costume, performance, etc. (Although Chaucer got away with it, points should be deducted for content judged inappropriate or offensive.)**
5. **As in the original contest, whoever tells the most entertaining story wins dinner. Students in the competition can each contribute \$2 toward the winner's prize, or ask a local restaurant to donate a gift certificate.**



## Theme from *The Canterbury Tales*

Working with a partner, make up lyrics for a *Canterbury Tales* theme song or theme rap. You can write your own melody to go with it, or use an existing tune. Make a tape of yourselves singing the song and share it with the rest of the class.



## Read All About It!

Design a medieval newspaper depicting the characters and events in *The Canterbury Tales*. In addition to news stories, include advertisements, want ads, personal ads, advice columns, cartoons, etc.



In a small group, make a list of the things you and your friends like to do to pass the time. Ask yourselves: Do these activities have anything in common with storytelling? How would you entertain yourselves if you had no access to modern tools—radio, TV, iPod, computer, phone, etc.? Think about the people of New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina, gathered together in the Superdome. How do you think they passed the time and got to know one another?

## Step 1: Know Your Part.

As a member of the audience, you are a crucial part of the performance. Before you arrive at the theater, make sure you know your role!

- When you enter the theater, follow an usher to your seat.
- Once the house lights (the lights in the part of the theater where the audience is sitting) go down, focus all your attention on the stage.
- Attending a live theater performance is not the same as watching television at home. At the theater, talking, eating, or moving around disturbs the performers and other members of the audience. So watch and listen carefully to the performance. And please no food or beverages!
- Don't bring cameras, camcorders, tape recorders, or any other recording equipment to the performance. You will not be allowed to use them.
- If something in the play is funny, go ahead and laugh. And of course, please applaud at the end of the performance if you liked what you saw!
- After the performers are finished taking their bows, stay in your seat until your group gets the signal to leave the theater.

**Phone Off!**



**No Talking!**



**No Photos!**



## Step 2: Learn More.

### BOOKS:

*Chaucer A to Z: The Essential Reference to His Life and Works*, by Rosalyn Rossignol. Facts on File, 1999

*Chaucer: The Life and Times of the First English Poet*, by Richard West. 2001

*Daily Life in Chaucer's England*, by Jeffrey L. Singman and Will McLean. Greenwood Press, 1995

### WEBSITES:

Aquila Theatre Company  
[www.aquilatheatre.com](http://www.aquilatheatre.com)

A Basic Chaucer Glossary  
<http://pages.towson.edu/duncan/glossary.html>

The Chaucer Pedagogy Page: Online Assistance for Teachers and Students of Chaucer and the Later Middle Ages  
[www.kankedort.net/LBW\\_9\\_SCD.htm](http://www.kankedort.net/LBW_9_SCD.htm)

Geoffrey Chaucer Website  
<http://www.courses.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer>

Pilgrims Passing To and Fro - The Lives & Times of the *Canterbury Tales* Pilgrims  
[www.godecooking.com/pilgrims/pilgrims.htm](http://www.godecooking.com/pilgrims/pilgrims.htm)

### AUDIO:

*Canterbury Tales*, by Geoffrey Chaucer. Naxos Audiobooks. Multi-CD series available in Middle English and modern English versions.

*The Rap Canterbury Tales*, by Baba Brinkman. Purchase or download at [www.babasword.com/index/audio.html](http://www.babasword.com/index/audio.html)

## key notes

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