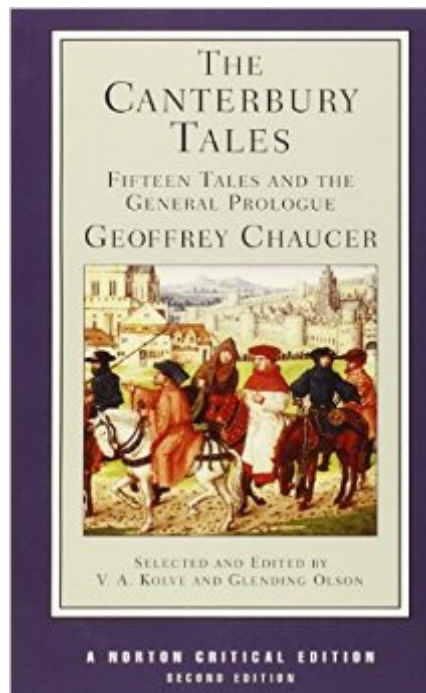


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# The Canterbury Tales: Fifteen Tales And The General Prologue (Norton Critical Editions)



## Synopsis

This Norton Critical Edition includes the most admired of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. Each is presented in the original language, with normalized spelling and substantial annotations for modern readers. Among the new added to the Second Edition are the much-requested "Merchant's Tale" and the "Tale of Sir Thopas." "Sources and Backgrounds" are included for the General Prologue and for most of the tales, enabling students to understand The Canterbury Tales in light of relevant medieval ideas and attitudes and inviting comparison between Chaucer's work and his sources. "Criticism" includes nine essays, four of them new to this edition, by leading Chaucerians, among them F. R. H. DuBoulay, E. Talbot Donaldson, Barbara Nolan, and Lee Patterson. A Chronology and Selected Bibliography are also included.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Why the Norton edition -- which preserves these tales in their original Middle English dialect -- over the modernised versions of Chaucer's classic stories? Because it's only in their original form that they retain the poetry and power of Chaucer's intent. I read these stories with a professor who could passably read Middle English and it was a revelation. Before, with translated versions, I had never quite understood why Chaucer was considered so great, so necessary to the canon. Hearing them in the original form, I suddenly understood. The tales are funny, dirty, odd stories (like an English version of "The Decameron") told in striking, blood-stirring rhyme and rhythm. Hearing them read aloud was like music to the ear. Which makes the smoothed-over versions feel flat and dead to the

ear. Buy this edition. Try to learn enough Middle English to get along. Discover for yourself the power of Chaucer's poetry.

Writing a "review" of *The Canterbury Tales* is difficult, not because the book/collection isn't worthy of a review, but because it is so widely variant and has so many nuances to be discussed. For those who don't know, *The Canterbury Tales* is a book containing a bunch of stories told by individuals traveling together on a pilgrimage to Canterbury. The book is written in the late 1300s with the pilgrimage set in the same basic time. It begins with a "General Prologue" providing a description of each of the characters in the group as well as the "game" they'll be playing (that of telling stories on the way to Canterbury). Each pilgrim tells a different tale (well, not "all" of them...the work is "unfinished" in the sense that we're missing tales from some pilgrims). Some tales are set in their contemporary England while others are set in exotic lands, romantic settings, or ancient cultures. So what do you say in a brief review of *The Canterbury Tales*? To start with, I would suggest you try reading it in the original Middle English. The language/spelling/pronunciation can be a problem, so be sure you get an edition that's glossed (unless you're proficient in Middle English). During the semester, I found a "children's" edition of the tales at my local library. It included Modern English "translations" of a couple of the tales along with some illustrations. It was kind of fun to read, but it lost some of the rhythm and drive of the tales by having them in a modern format. Secondly, there are some bits that can be skipped, but it's difficult to identify which ones. For example, some might suggest that the entire Pardoner's Prologue (and much of his tale) can be ignored altogether and that you should just focus on the actual "tale" part of his tale. While his tale is entertaining and the reading would be much shorter if that's all you read, you would miss a TON of social and religious commentary which is very interesting. Similarly, the Wife of Bath has lengthy rambling passages in her Prologue and the Merchant includes numerous lengthy lists that have little bearing on the plot. It's difficult to create a good synopsis of what can safely be skipped, because it depends in a large extent on what you want to get out of it. Worse still, if you're reading in the unfamiliar Middle English, it's harder to quickly scan the text and get a feel for when the narrative has gotten back to the 'heart of the matter.' The writing is fun and clever (once you get through the 'translation' issues with the Middle English). For a common reference, it's like reading Shakespeare, only more archaic by a couple hundred years. The language of the narrative varies depending on the narrator of the particular prologue/tale, but with Chaucer at the helm behind the scenes, the writing is generally very good, descriptive, layered, humorous, inspiring, etc. (except for when he's trying to illustrate 'bad writing', and then it's good in that it's so bad). The messages presented are widely varied as

well. The Knight's Tale was an intriguing tale of romance and chivalry with lots of courtly intrigue...but at times it felt a little dry. The Miller and the Reeve were hilarious tales and introduced me to a new (to me) genre in the fabliau. The Wife of Bath had an interesting prologue and a fun tale, again with a semi-romantic style and an interesting moral. The Nun's Priest gave us a fun little animal fable. The Prioress presented a strange little tale about miracles or anti-semitism or devout love or something else? Overall, I would definitely recommend having a copy of The Canterbury Tales on your shelf. Some tales are easier to read than others. Some tales are more fun while others are more thought provoking (as stated in one of the prologues, a tale has one of two purposes, to educate or to entertain...and there are examples of each). Once you get your teeth into the language (probably the biggest hurdle) I suspect you'll enjoy these. \*\*\*\*\*5 stars

I'm not going to waste time reviewing the content of the original Canterbury stories, I mean it's friggin' Chaucer, there is more than 600 years worth of reviews and criticism far more incisive and informative than anything I could ever write. I'm just going to briefly talk about this edition. Norton has always done an excellent job with their collections and anthologies, especially their critical editions, several of which I personally own, like their critical editions for Heart of Darkness and The Turn of the Screw. Their critical edition for The Canterbury Tales is no exception. It has very helpful footnotes and side notes to help you get acquainted with Chaucer's original language for those who want to take on the challenge of reading Old English over an abridged edition, and it has tons of essays, contexts, and backgrounds in case you feel like digging deeper into Geoffrey Chaucer's most renown master work. If you're just getting started with Chaucer, this is an excellent place to start. I only have a few complaints: First, the paper is thin and a little cheap, so if you're like me and you like to highlight things or write notes in your books, please use a pencil to underline and write, don't use a highlighter or a pen, it will bleed through. Second, they've only included 15 of the 24 stories written for the Canterbury tales, I'm not exactly sure why. Still, for what there is, it's excellent, and there's tons of value for the price.

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