

The Canterbury Tales

GEOFFREY CHAUCER

Level 3

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Pearson Education Limited

Edinburgh Gate, Harlow,
Essex CM20 2JE, England

and Associated Companies throughout the world.

ISBN: 978-1-4058-6232-5

First published by Penguin Books 2000

This edition published 2008

3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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Illustrations by Victor Ambrus

Opening illustration by David Guzik (Penguin Illustration)

Typeset by Graphicraft Ltd, Hong Kong

Set in 11/14pt Bembo

Printed in China

SWTC/02

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Introduction

'As you know, it's a long way to Canterbury. You need to stay happy on the journey. I've got an idea. You must all tell a story on the way. We'll give a free dinner to the person who tells the best story. Now, put up your hands if you agree.'

The pilgrims all held up their hands and cried out, 'Yes!'

A group of pilgrims are travelling together for five days from London to Canterbury. On the way, each pilgrim has to tell a story. Some stories are happy, and some are sad. But they all have a message, and we can learn from them.

The writer of these tales, Geoffrey Chaucer, was born in London in about 1342. We do not know exactly when he was born. His father, John, and his grandfather, Robert, worked in the wine business. They probably also worked for King Edward III. The family earned quite a lot of money and had a comfortable life.

When he was a young boy, Chaucer went to school in London. He then worked for an important lady in the king's family. It was a very good job and he met some very interesting people.

In 1359 Chaucer was sent abroad as a soldier. He was fighting for the king against France in part of the Hundred Years' War. He was taken prisoner by the French near Rheims, but after a year the king paid money for his return.

When he returned to England, Chaucer worked for the king, his family and friends. In about 1367 he married Philippa de Roet, a lady who worked for the queen.

Chaucer was a great reader and he had an excellent memory. He learned to read in Latin, French, Anglo-Norman and Italian. He knew a lot about literature, history and science.

The king often sent him to other countries on important business for him. On two of these journeys Chaucer went to Italy; first to Genoa, in 1372, and then to Milan, in 1378. People think that Chaucer became interested in Italian story-tellers on these journeys. He probably met the Italian writer, Boccaccio, when he was in Italy. We can be sure that he read Boccaccio's book, the *Decameron* (1348–58).

Chaucer became a rich man during this time, but in December 1386 he lost his job. John of Gaunt, the king's son and Chaucer's friend, left England to fight in Spain. The Duke of Gloucester took his place and he didn't like Chaucer. He gave Chaucer's job to his friends. So Chaucer had more time for writing, and he began work on *The Canterbury Tales*.

In 1389 John of Gaunt returned to England and gave Chaucer an important job again. Chaucer was growing old. He felt that his writing was getting worse. He died on 25 October, 1400, and his body was put in Westminster Abbey.

We do not know exactly when Chaucer started writing poems. It was probably when he returned from the war in France.

Chaucer wrote a lot of poems, and some of his great books are *The Book of the Duchess* (1369–70), *The House of Fame*, *The Parliament of Fowls* (between 1372 and 1382), and *Troilus and Criseyde* (between 1380 and 1385). His most famous work is *The Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer worked on this from 1386 or 1387, but he never finished the book.

Printing was introduced in Germany in about 1450. In 1477 Caxton made the first machine which could print in England. He printed *The Canterbury Tales* in 1478.

The Canterbury Tales was not the first book of short stories. Chaucer's idea – a group of people who each tell a story – wasn't a new idea either. In Boccaccio's *Decameron*, ten people escape to

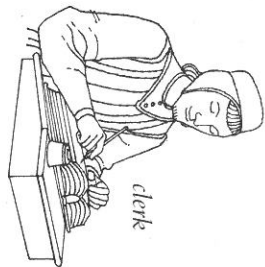
the country from a terrible illness in Florence. Each person tells a story to pass the time.

In *The Canterbury Tales*, the story-tellers are pilgrims. Their stories are interesting, but the pilgrims also seem very real to us. We feel we know them personally by the end of their stories. They are ordinary people – rich and poor, intelligent and stupid, young and old, from the town and from the country. They do not do the same jobs as we do today. But we all know people like them. The pilgrims' stories help us to understand English life in Chaucer's time.

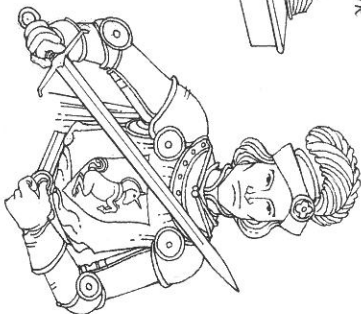
The pilgrims' stories are all completely different, and they come from all over Europe. Some of the stories even come from countries in the East. At that time, people in Europe loved stories which taught them something – stories with a message about life or a new idea.

The stories in *The Canterbury Tales* are told like poems, and they are written in Chaucer's English. For this Penguin Reader we have chosen seven of the pilgrims' stories, and we have written them in modern English.

Some of the People in this Book



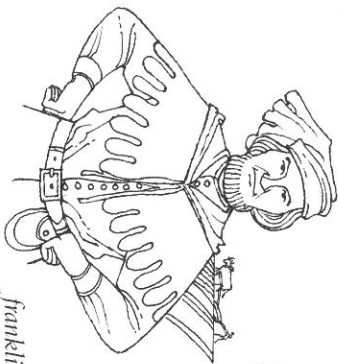
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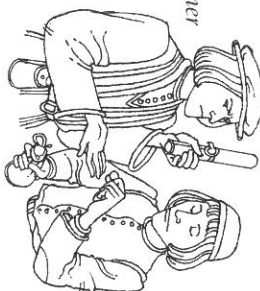
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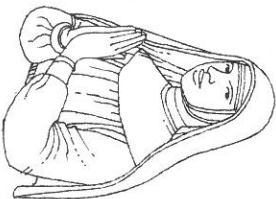
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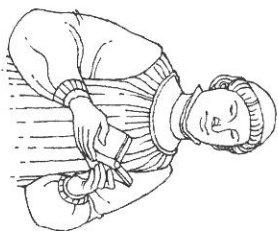
pardoner



friar



nun



priest

The Prologue

At the Tabard Inn

Pilgrims are people who travel to special places because they want to please God. Their journeys are often to places where a saint lived or died. Thomas à Becket was a saint. He was killed in Canterbury, in a great old church. Years ago, pilgrims went to Canterbury to visit this church.

This book tells the story of some pilgrims who travelled from London to Canterbury together. On the journey each person had to tell a story – a tale.

The pilgrims met at a place called the Tabard Inn in London. The fat owner of the inn was always happy. He told amusing stories which made the pilgrims laugh. They had a good meal at his inn, with a lot of excellent food and drink.

After the meal, the fat man stood up and said, 'Friends, I'm very pleased to meet you. As you know, it's a long way to Canterbury. You need to stay happy on the journey. I've got an idea. You must all tell a story on the way. We'll give a free dinner to the person who tells the best story. Now, put up your hands if you agree.'

The pilgrims all held up their hands and cried out, 'Yes! Yes! That's a good idea. And *you* can decide which story is best.'

The next morning they all got up very early and started on their journey. After a time, they stopped and gave their horses water. Then the fat man said, 'Now, who's going to tell the first story? Sir Knight, will you?'

The knight was travelling to Canterbury for a special reason. He wanted to thank God because he was safe after a dangerous war.

'Yes, all right,' he said. 'I'll begin.'
And he started to tell his story.

The Knight's Tale

Palamon and Arcite

Many years ago in Greece, there was a great soldier called Duke Theseus. He and his wife, Queen Hippolyta, were the most important people in Athens. The queen's beautiful younger sister, Emily, lived with them.

One day, a soldier brought the duke some bad news.

'Creon has begun a war against you, Duke Theseus. And he has won Thebes already.'

When he heard this, Theseus and his knights rode to Thebes. There they fought Creon and killed him.

Two rich young knights in Thebes fought for Creon. Their names were Palamon and Arcite and they were hurt in the fighting. They were taken to see Theseus at the end of the war.

'Your families will pay a lot of gold if I free you,' the duke said to them. 'But you're my enemies. You fought against me, and you'll never be free again.'

The two knights were locked in a high tower in Athens. Then the duke rode home to Queen Hippolyta and her sister, Emily.



Palamon and Arcite were prisoners in the tower for many years.

One morning, Palamon got up early and looked out of the window at the duke's garden. There he saw the queen's beautiful sister, Emily. She was walking in the garden with flowers in her hair.

When Palamon saw her, he cried out. She was so beautiful.

'Dear Palamon, what's the matter?' asked Arcite in a worried voice. 'Your face has gone white! Why did you cry out?'

'I've just seen the most beautiful lady in the world,' Palamon



The next morning they all got up very early and started on their journey.

answered. 'Please God, get me out of this prison. If I can't make her my wife, then I want to die!'

Arcite jumped up quickly and looked out of the window. When he saw Emily he also fell in love with her.

'If she can't love me, I don't want to live,' he cried.

Palamon was very angry when he heard this. 'But you can't steal my lady like that! I fell in love with her first, and I'll love her for ever. You must help me to win her.'

'You saw her first, but I love her as much as you do!' answered Arcite angrily. 'And how can you or I win her? We're prisoners in this terrible tower.'

'Perhaps we'll be free one day, and then the best man will marry her,' said Palamon sadly. Life seemed very hard to both the young men.



Duke Theseus had a good friend in Athens called Duke Perotheus. Perotheus knew the young knight, Arcite, and liked him very much. When he heard that Arcite was a prisoner in the tower, he said to Theseus, 'I'm very sorry that Arcite's your prisoner. He's not like Creon, you know. He's a good young man. Dear friend, please free him so he can live in the real world again.'

Duke Theseus thought hard and then answered, 'Perotheus, you're my good friend, so I'll free Arcite for you. But he must leave Athens, and never return. If he does return, I'll cut off his head!'



Before Arcite left the tower, he talked to Palamon. 'I must leave Athens, but you can stay here and look at my beautiful lady in the garden. You're luckier than me.'

But Palamon was as sad as Arcite. 'You'll be free. Perhaps you'll return to Athens with soldiers one day and fight Theseus. And if you win, my beautiful lady will be yours.'

Then the two knights said goodbye and Arcite left the tower.

The young knight went back to Thebes, but he was very sad without his beautiful Emily. He thought about her every day and every night, and soon he became very ill.

One night, the god Mercury visited him in his sleep and said, 'Go back to Athens, Arcite. Then you'll be happy again.'

Arcite jumped out of bed and cried, 'Yes, I'll go back immediately! If the duke catches me, he'll cut off my head. But I'm not afraid of death if I can see my beautiful lady again.'

Then he looked at his face in the mirror. He looked very different because of his illness.

'Nobody will know me now,' he thought. 'I can go to Athens safely.'

So Arcite went back to Athens. Nobody knew who he was. He became one of Emily's servants – he got her water, cut wood, and worked very hard for her. He stayed in Emily's house for seven years and he was soon very popular. Even Duke Theseus began to notice him.



All this time, poor Palamon was a prisoner in the tower. He was very unhappy but he couldn't escape. A man watched him all day and all night.

One day, one of Palamon's friends had an idea. He put some poison into this man's drink. The man fell asleep and Palamon took his key, opened the great door, and was free at last!

'I'll return to Thebes now,' he thought. 'But I'll come back to Athens soon with a lot of soldiers and kill Theseus. Then I'll marry Emily.'

He ran away from the tower as fast as he could. He planned to walk all night and hide during the day. When the sun came up, he rested in a wood.

That morning, Arcite was riding in the wood, singing in the sunshine. He didn't know that Palamon was hiding there.

'Emily still doesn't know me,' he said to himself sadly. 'I'm only her servant. She's got no idea who I really am. What can I do to win her love?'

Palamon was hiding behind a tree near Arcite. When he heard this, his face went as white as death. 'Arcite!' he shouted. 'I'm going to kill you! You were like a brother to me once, but you still love my lady. You or I must die!'

Arcite was very surprised to see Palamon. But he answered quietly, 'Love is free, isn't it? I'll always love Emily, but let's fight for her tomorrow. I'll meet you here. If you win, the lady will be yours.'

'Good! I'll see you here tomorrow!' answered Palamon, walking away angrily.



The next morning, Palamon and Arcite met again and the great fight began. Duke Theseus, Queen Hippolyta and Emily were riding in the wood and heard the sound of fighting. Soon they saw the two knights.

'Stop!' shouted Theseus. 'Why are you fighting like this?'

'Sir, we're two unhappy men,' answered Arcite in a tired voice.

'You're our lord. Kill me first. Then kill my friend.'

'This is Arcite,' Palamon said. 'Do you remember him? He works in Princess Emily's house. But he isn't really a servant. He's worked in her house all these years because he loves her. And I am Palamon. I escaped from your tower. I love Emily too. I'm happy to die now at her feet. Kill me, but kill Arcite too.'

The duke was very angry. He wanted to kill them both.

'Yes! You must both die!' he shouted.

But the queen, Emily and all their ladies began to cry. 'No! No! These two fine young men mustn't die!'

Then the ladies all fell on their knees in front of the duke.

'Oh, sir! Please don't kill Palamon and Arcite!'

'All right,' Theseus said. 'You can live. But you must promise me that you'll never make war on my land. You must always be my friends.'

'We promise, sir,' the knights said. 'We'll always be your friends.' 'Emily can't marry both of you,' continued the duke, 'but I've got a plan. Go home to Thebes and come back in one year. Each of you must bring a hundred knights, ready to fight for you. Emily will marry the winner. Do you agree?'

Palamon and Arcite both looked at Emily on her horse. They fell on their knees and thanked Theseus again and again. Then they went home to Thebes and began to get ready for the great fight.



Duke Theseus was busy too. He built a place outside Athens for the fight. It had stone walls, with white gates on the east and west sides. The duke built three temples – a temple of Venus, the goddess of love; a temple of Diana, the goddess of the moon; and a temple of Mars, the god of war.

There were beautiful pictures in the temple of Venus, and a garden full of flowers. The temple of Diana had a picture of the moon. The temple of Mars was very different. It was an unhappy place with pictures of wars and burning towns. In the middle was a picture of Mars with a fire in front of him.



After a year, Palamon and Arcite returned to Athens, and each of them had his hundred knights. When they heard about the temples, they both wanted to visit them.

Palamon thought, 'I'm going to the temple of Venus. She'll help me. I'll ask her for a quick death if I lose.'

So he went to Venus's temple and the goddess seemed to move her head.



Palamon and Arcite both looked at Emily on her horse.

When Palamon saw this, he cried out, 'Oh, I'm so happy. Venus has moved her head. That means she's going to help me!'

Arcite went to the temple of Mars, the god of war.

'Mars, please help me to win,' he said in the temple.

Suddenly the temple doors began to move and the fire in front of Mars burned strongly. Then a low voice said, 'You *will* win, Arcite!'

Arcite was very happy when he heard this. 'Mars is going to help me! I'm going to win!'



Now, pilgrims, you're going to hear how Mars and Venus kept their promises.

The next morning everyone in Athens went to see the great fight. There were lords and knights in fine clothes, and beautiful ladies in wonderful dresses. Duke Theseus, Queen Hippolyta and Emily sat and watched it all.

When everyone was quiet, a soldier cried out, 'Duke Theseus doesn't want anyone to die today. If you are hurt, you will become a prisoner. If Palamon or Arcite become prisoners, then the fighting will end. Now, let's begin!'

Arcite then came onto the field through the west gate, near the temple of Mars. His clothes were all red. Palamon came through the east gate, near the temple of Venus. His clothes were all white.

Pilgrims, I can't tell you everything about the great fight. Horses fell to the ground, brave men were hurt, servants brought food and drink to the fighters. Then, at the end of the day, Palamon was hurt and the fighting stopped.

'Arcite can marry Emily now,' said the duke. 'He's won her in this long day's fight!'

'Arcite's the winner!' shouted the people. 'Arcite! Arcite!'

There was loud music and Arcite rode proudly across the field towards Emily. She looked down at him and thought, 'He's so brave and handsome! I'm sure I can love him!'

But suddenly something frightened Arcite's horse. The horse fell to the ground and Arcite was thrown off. People ran to him and carried him carefully to Theseus's house. They put him on a bed and waited for the doctor.

'He's very ill,' said the doctor when he came. 'I'm afraid he's going to die.'

Arcite sent for Palamon and Emily. 'I've loved you so much, Emily,' he said sadly. 'I've been unhappy and ill because of you. And now I'm going to die for you. If you want a husband, marry Palamon. It will make me happy when I'm dead.'

Then he closed his eyes. Just before he died he looked up at Emily. He said her name.

When they heard the news, the people of Athens felt very sad. They cried for many days.



Months passed. Time makes most things better. The people of Athens were tired of all the fighting and they wanted to be friends with the people of Thebes. So Duke Theseus decided to send for Palamon.

When Palamon arrived in Athens, he was wearing black clothes for his lost friend, Arcite. 'Don't be sad,' the duke said to him. 'You'll never forget your dear friend but you can still be happy. Remember what Arcite said to Emily: "If you want a husband, marry Palamon." Does that make you feel happier?'

Then the duke called for Emily and took her hand. 'Emily, all my people want to be friends with the people of Thebes. If you agree to marry Palamon, then we'll stop being enemies. Take good Palamon, Emily, and marry him. He's loved you for a long time.'

Then he turned to Palamon, 'Sir, take this lady by the hand. She'll be your dear wife.'

So Palamon and Emily were married and lived happily together. And the people of Athens and Thebes were never enemies again.



At the end of the story, all the pilgrims said, 'That was a beautiful story, Knight!'

Some of the other pilgrims told their stories. Then the fat man turned to the Clerk of Oxford. 'You haven't said a word since we started our journey, Clerk. Perhaps you're thinking about your books. Well, now think about us. Have you got a good story to tell us?'

The Clerk of Oxford was very poor and his clothes were old. He and his horse never had enough food. But he loved books and he loved teaching people. He was happy to begin his story.

The Clerk's Tale

Patient Griselda

'My story is about a patient wife,' the clerk said. All the pilgrims listened carefully as he began his tale.



Walter, a great lord, lived in a beautiful part of Italy. He was young, strong and handsome, and kind to all his people.

Walter wasn't married and this made his people very sad. One day, they went to see him. They asked him to listen to them. A wise old man spoke for all of them.

'Sir, we've come to talk to you because you're a good man. We want to tell you what's in our hearts. Don't be angry with us. Please get married, then we'll be happy. Your wife will love you and look after you, and you'll have children. We'll find a wife for you if you want. She'll be beautiful and rich!'

Walter laughed at the old man's words, but he was pleased.

'You know, my dear people, I like being free,' he answered. 'I don't want a wife, but perhaps I need one. So, yes, I *will* get married very soon. But *I'll* choose my wife! And when I marry her, I want you all to talk to her like a princess. You must do this for me.'

Walter's people were very happy. 'Yes, of course we'll do that, sir,' they all said. And they went back to their homes and waited for the wedding day.



A very poor man lived near Walter's house. His name was Janicula. He had a beautiful daughter called Griselda. She was a

kind girl and she looked after her old father well. She worked hard in their little house, and in the fields with their animals. She worked outside in the wind and the rain. Walter often saw her when he was riding in the country.

'She's the most beautiful girl I've ever seen,' he thought to himself. 'I'd like to marry *her*.' But he didn't tell anyone about Griselda and his love for her.

The day of the wedding arrived. Walter's great house was full of people. Everything was ready for the big day.

'Follow me,' Walter said to all the lords and ladies.

He went out to the fields where some of his people lived. The lords and ladies followed him. 'What's he going to do?' they asked in surprise.



That morning, Griselda finished her work early because she wanted to see Walter's new wife. She thought, 'I'll stand with the other girls and watch Sir Walter with his beautiful lady. But first I must help my dear father to sit in the sun.'

She opened the door of the little house from inside — and there was Walter! He was standing outside in his rich clothes, like a king.

'Griselda,' he said, 'where's your father?'

The old man came slowly out of the house and Walter took his hand.

'Janicula, I must tell you what's in my heart. I love your daughter, Griselda. I want to marry her if you'll agree.'

The old man was too surprised to speak at first. After some minutes he answered, 'Yes, sir, of course. If Griselda agrees, she can be your wife.'

'I'd like to speak to her in your house, please,' Walter said quietly. 'I'll ask her to be my wife. But she must promise me something. She must always do what I ask.'

The people outside waited. They couldn't understand what was happening!

Inside the house, Walter spoke softly to Griselda.

'My dear Griselda, your father says that we can get married. Please take me as your husband. But first I must ask you this. Will you promise to do what I tell you - always?'

'My lord,' Griselda answered, 'I'll marry you if I can look after my father in my new life. And I'll always do everything you tell me to do.'

'Thank you, my dear Griselda,' said Walter.

He asked some of the ladies to come inside and dress Griselda in beautiful clothes. Then he kissed her hand and took her outside.

'This is my new wife, everybody,' he said proudly.

When Griselda came out of the house, the people cried out, 'She's the most beautiful girl we've ever seen!'

Walter was very happy. They were married that day and there was music and dancing all night.



For a long time all Walter's people lived happily. Griselda helped poor and sick people and everyone loved her. People said, 'Our great lord did a wise thing when he married Griselda.'

Then Walter and Griselda had a little girl and everyone said, 'One day this little girl will be as kind and as beautiful as her mother.'

But from that time things started to go very wrong.

Every day Walter watched his wife with her baby and thought, 'My wife will change now because she's got a child. If I ask her to do something difficult for me, she won't do it.'

Then Walter did something very bad. He came to see Griselda one day with a hard look on his face.

'Griselda, when I married you, my people were unhappy,' he lied. 'You were a poor man's daughter. Now you've got a child, and it's even worse for them. I'm going to ask someone to take

this child away from you. You must give her to him. Remember your words on your wedding day!'

Griselda was very sad, but she said, 'My child is yours, my lord. You can do what you want with her.'

Walter was happy when he heard this. He quickly sent a man to take the child away. When Griselda saw the man, she said quietly, 'I must kiss my daughter before she goes.'

Then she took her child in her arms and said, 'Goodbye, my dear daughter. I'll never see you again but God will look after you.'

Then the man took Griselda's daughter away.

'Please put her little body in the ground,' she called out to him. 'Then it will be safe from all the animals and birds.'

The man carried the child to Walter. 'Take her to my sister in Bologna,' he said. 'Tell her to look after her well. But don't tell her that she's my child.'



Walter watched Griselda closely after this. She seemed to love him in the same way, but she was very quiet and her face often looked sad.

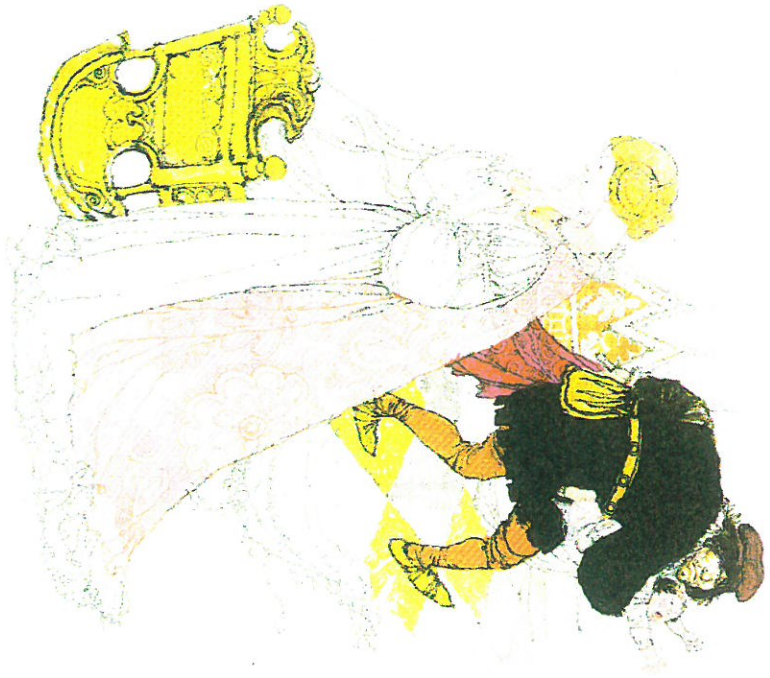
After some months a little boy was born. Walter's people were very happy. 'One day this child will be our prince. One day we shall be his people,' they said.

But after two years Walter had another plan. He wanted to be sure that his wife loved him. So he decided to test her again.

He went to Griselda and said, 'Griselda, my people don't want Janicula's grandson to be their prince. Once again, you must give your child to my man.'

'My lord,' she answered, 'I'll always do everything that you want. Take our son. And if you'll be happier without me too, please tell me. I'll die if it will please you. I only want to keep your love.'

Nothing could change the feelings in Walter's heart. He



Then the man took Griselda's daughter away.

sent the same man to take away her little boy. Again, she kissed her child before he left her for ever. And again she said to the man, 'Put his little body in the ground. Then no animal or bird can hurt him.' Walter sent the little boy to Bologna to live with his sister.

Walter watched his wife carefully again. He saw that her patience and love for him never changed. But his people were angry with him. They talked about him all over the country.

'He's killed his two children!' they said. 'He didn't want Lady Griselda to love them. She must only love *him!* And she never changes. She still loves him and looks after all of us.'



One day, Walter had another idea. He decided to send Griselda away and get a new wife. When Griselda heard about this, she thought, 'This is the worst thing that's ever happened to me. I love my husband more than anything in the world. How can I ever live without him?' She felt very sad.

First, Walter wrote a letter to his sister in Bologna. It said:

Please bring the two children to me. Tell everyone, 'This little girl's going to be Walter's new wife.' But don't tell anyone who sent the children to you years ago.

When she received this letter, his sister left Bologna with the two children. The little boy and girl were very beautiful. They were dressed in rich clothes and rode on fine horses.

Walter then called for Griselda and, in a room full of people, said to her, 'Griselda, you've been a good wife to me. But now I must change my way of life. My people want me to send you away and marry a new wife – a girl from a rich family. She's on her way here now.'

Griselda's answer moved the hearts of all the people who

heard her. But it didn't move the hard heart of her husband.

'I'm not good enough for you, my lord,' she said sadly. 'I've always known that. Thank you for the beautiful home that I've lived in for so long. I'll gladly go back to my father now if you and your people want me to do that. I'll always love you and I'll never marry again. I thought you loved me too. But the old words are very true: "As men grow old, love grows cold." I must leave everything behind me here. I'll just take my old clothes.'

Then she put on her poorest clothes and began the long walk home. Many people followed her with tears in their eyes. They were very sad that Griselda was leaving like this. When her father saw her, he ran out of his house. He took his poor daughter in his arms.



For a time Griselda lived quietly with her father. It was like the old days. She worked in the little house and looked after the animals in the fields. But one day Walter sent for her.

'Griselda,' he said, 'I want to make my new wife as happy as possible. You must help me. You know my house and you looked after me well. You must leave your home and work for my new wife. Start now and make everything ready for her.'

'My lord, I'll be happy to help you and your new wife,' Griselda answered. And she began work immediately. She cleaned all the gold and silver, made the beds and washed the floors. She told the servants in the house to work hard. She worked harder than everyone.

Later that day, many people came to Walter's house to see his new wife. Griselda met them and led them to their places. Then Walter brought in a beautiful young girl. He turned to Griselda and asked her, 'Do you like my new young wife?'

'I've never seen anyone who is more beautiful,' she answered. 'I hope you'll be very happy together. I only ask one thing — be

kind to her. I was poor when I came here. But she's a lady and it will be harder for her. She'll be very unhappy if you're unkind to her.'

Walter finally realized that Griselda really loved him. He said to himself, 'I've been very bad. I've hurt Griselda but she still loves me.'

He turned to her and cried, 'Griselda! Griselda! Please forgive me! I'll never hurt you again or make you sad. Now I know that you'll always be true to me.' And he took her in his arms and kissed her again and again.

Walter told Griselda everything and then he brought the children to her. 'This is your daughter, my dear. I'm not really going to marry her. And this is our son. I sent them both to Bologna, to live with my sister. She looked after them well, and they've been safe and happy all these years.'

When Griselda saw her children, she cried with happiness. She put her arms round them and kissed them.

'Oh, thank you, my lord!' she said to Walter, with tears in her eyes. 'I can die happily now. I have both my children and your love!'

Then her ladies took her to her rooms, took off her old clothes, and dressed her in her beautiful rich clothes. She was Walter's wife again.



Walter and Griselda lived happily together for many years. Janicula, Griselda's old father, came to live with them. Their daughter married a rich, handsome man. And when Walter died, their son became a lord and was loved by all his people.



'Well, that's the end of my story,' said the clerk. 'But in my opinion, Griselda was *too* patient. Husbands, don't test the

patience of your wives like Walter did. I'm sure they won't all be as patient as poor Griselda!

'And I want to say something to the wives too. Don't be afraid of your husband. Your words will always win a fight, even against a big, strong man!'

The Wife of Bath's Tale

What Do Women Want Most?

Most of the pilgrims on their way to Canterbury were men. There were only a few women. One of them was the Wife of Bath. She was a large woman with a red face. She wore a big hat, and she rode on a very fat horse. She was rich and all her five husbands were dead!

The Wife of Bath was a happy woman and she loved to talk. This is her story about a knight at the time of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table.



Long ago, there was a young knight who did a very bad thing. He broke the law that all the knights had to live by. When King Arthur heard this, he was very angry.

'This knight must die!' he shouted.

But the queen and her ladies were sad because they liked the young knight very much.

'Please, please,' they cried to King Arthur, 'don't end this young man's life. He'll never make the same mistake again.'

The king turned to the queen and said, 'All right, do what you like with him, my dear. But we must punish him because he's broken the law.'

The queen thought for a short time, and then she said to the knight, 'You can live if you tell me the answer to this question: What does a woman want most in all the world? I'll give you a year and a day to find the answer. If you can't find the answer, then you'll die.'

The knight thanked the queen, but he rode away very sadly.

'The queen has asked me a very difficult question. How can I find the answer?' he thought to himself.

◆

As he rode through the country, the knight asked a lot of people the queen's question. He was given many different answers.

One man said, 'Ah, that's easy. Women like money more than anything.'

A woman answered, 'What do women want most in all the world? They want to be happy, of course.'

Another woman replied, 'Fine clothes. That's what they want.'

Then the knight asked some children the same question.

A little girl said, 'My mother's happy when she's cooking good food for us.'

And a little boy replied, 'My mother likes having a new baby in the family.'

'Our mother's happy when she sees our father come home at night,' said two or three children.

Many of the answers seemed good, but they were all different. 'Nobody agrees,' thought the knight sadly. 'How can I find the right answer to the queen's question?'

◆

After a year, the knight had to return to the queen and give her the answer to her question.

'What can I say?' he thought. 'I've tried so hard to find the right answer! But I know I'm going to die.'

But then he came to a great wood. In the trees he saw twenty-four beautiful ladies! They were all laughing and singing and dancing on the green grass.

'I've got enough time to ask these ladies the question,' he said to himself.

He turned his horse towards the ladies ... but where were

they? He could only see one very ugly, old woman! When he came near her, she stood up. She smiled at him.

'Sir Knight, are you looking for something?' she asked. 'Tell me what it is. Perhaps I can help you. We old people are wise and we know many things.'

'You're right – perhaps you *can* help me,' answered the knight.

'I have to find the answer to a question or I'll die. The question is: What does a woman want most in all the world? If you can tell me, I'll give you a lot of money.'

'Give me your hand, sir,' replied the old woman. 'I'll tell you the right answer if you promise me something. You have to do the first thing that I ask you.'

That sounded easy to the knight. 'I promise,' he answered in an excited voice. Perhaps the old woman could *really* help him!

'Good, then your life's safe,' said the old woman. 'Nobody – not even the queen – will say that your answer is wrong.'

Then she spoke very quietly into the knight's ear. 'That's the answer to your question,' she said with a smile.

The knight smiled back at the old woman and thanked her with all his heart. Then they went together to meet the queen and all the lords and ladies.

◆

Everyone heard that the young knight was coming. They were very excited, but a lot of people were worried about his answer.

'It was a very difficult question,' they said. 'It will be terrible if he can't give the queen the right answer. He will die!'

The queen and her lords and ladies met the knight. The queen started to speak and everyone listened carefully.

'Now, Sir Knight, can you answer my question? What does a woman want most in all the world?' she asked in a clear voice.

The knight came up to the queen and fell on his knees in front of her. All the people around them heard his words.

'My lady, I know the right answer to your question. All women want to be the head of their house. They want their husbands to do what they say!'

When they heard this, everyone laughed and shouted, 'He must live! He must live! That's the right answer!'

The queen smiled at the knight. She was very pleased with his answer.

'You will be free, Sir Knight,' she said. 'You can live!'

But suddenly the ugly old woman walked towards the queen and said, 'Be good to me too, my lady, I said to this knight, "I'll tell you the right answer. But you must promise me something. You have to do the first thing that I ask you." And you agreed, didn't you?' she said, turning to the knight.

'Yes, madam,' said the young knight. 'That's what I promised.'

'Well, I want you to marry me!' said the old woman. Her face looked very ugly when she said these terrible words.

The knight replied unhappily, 'I made a promise to you, it's true. But I can't marry you!'

'I'm old, ugly and poor but I want to be your wife,' cried the old woman. 'I want to win your love!'

'My love!' laughed the knight. 'You can't really hope for that!'

The queen and all the people around her were laughing.

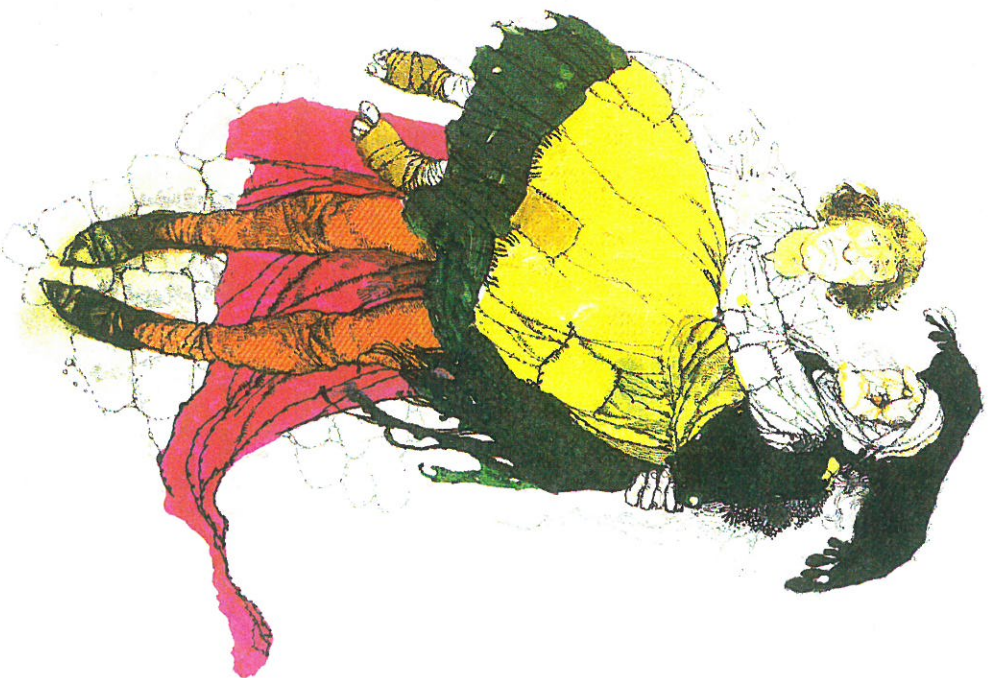
'The knight wants to die now!' they shouted. 'He doesn't want to marry this ugly old woman!'

But the queen looked at the knight and said, 'You must marry her, Sir Knight. You promised.'

'Yes, I know,' answered the knight unhappily. 'I can't break my promise.'



There was no dancing or singing at the wedding. There were no fine clothes or good food. At the end of the day, the knight sadly carried away his new wife.



At the end of the day, the knight sadly carried away his new wife.

That night, the ugly old woman turned to the knight and said,
'Come here, my dear husband. Why are you looking so
unhappy? What have I done wrong? Tell me, and I'll try to do
better. I'll make you happy.'

'Do better? You can't become a young woman and you can't
make yourself beautiful!' answered the knight.

'Is that the only problem?' she asked with a smile on her face.

'That's enough!' he answered.

'I'm not beautiful,' said the old woman, 'but that's only on the
outside. Faces become old but hearts are always young. A person
with a good heart is better than someone who does bad things.'

Then the woman talked quietly to her husband for a long
time. He was very surprised when he heard her words.

'You're very wise and good,' he said at last. 'You've taught me
a lot about men and women, and about good and bad.'

'Is it better to have a beautiful wife who makes you unhappy?'
she asked. 'Or an old and ugly wife who is kind to you?'

'My lady, my love, and my dear wife,' said the knight softly,
'you're right. I'll always do what you tell me.'

She laughed. 'Remember the answer to the question! Can I
be the head of our home?'

'Yes, my love, of course you can,' said the knight.

Then she kissed him and said, 'Don't be angry. I'll be a good
wife to you. And I'll be as beautiful as a queen!'

The knight started to kiss his wife, but he suddenly jumped
back in surprise! There, in front of him, stood the most beautiful
girl in the world! His wife wasn't really an ugly old woman. She
was a fairy!

'I wanted to be sure that you are a true knight,' she said. 'Now
I know that you're a good person. Now I don't have to be an
ugly old woman!'

The knight kissed his beautiful young wife and then they
went to see the queen. Everybody was very surprised when they

saw the young woman. They all danced and sang when they
heard the story.

The knight and his wife lived happily together all their lives.
And they always remembered the answer to the queen's question.



'That's the end of my story,' said the Wife of Bath to the other
pilgrims. 'Please God, send us husbands who are young and
loving! Men, do what your wives tell you to do! And give them a
lot of money to spend!'