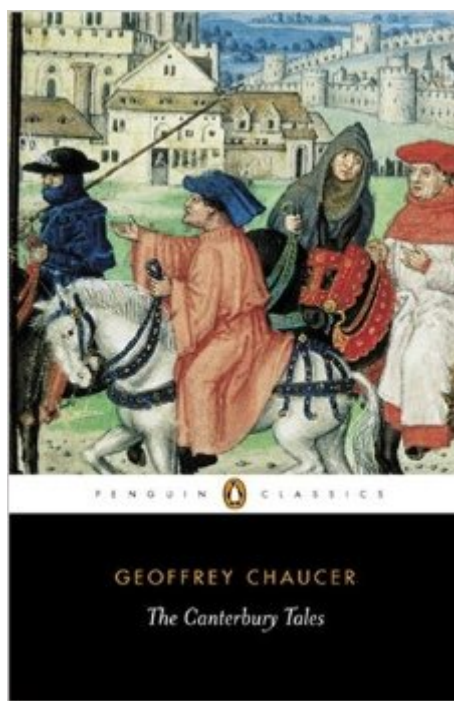


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# The Canterbury Tales



## Synopsis

Nevill Coghill's masterly and vivid modern English verse translation with all the vigor and poetry of Chaucer's fourteenth-century Middle English. *The Canterbury Tales*—Chaucer created one of the great touchstones of English literature, a masterly collection of chivalric romances, moral allegories and low farce. A story-telling competition between a group of pilgrims from all walks of life is the occasion for a series of tales that range from the Knight's account of courtly love and the ebullient Wife of Bath's Arthurian legend, to the ribald anecdotes of the Miller and the Cook. Rich and diverse, *The Canterbury Tales* offer us an unrivalled glimpse into the life and mind of medieval England. For more than sixty-five years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,500 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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## Customer Reviews

Over some period I have read several translations of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. My first experience, selections in a high school text, was not promising. (Perhaps, I was not yet ready for Chaucer.) Translating poetry from one language to another is difficult and often unsuccessful. Translating Chaucer from Middle English is not much easier. English has changed dramatically in the last 600 years, to the point that Middle English is nearly indecipherable. For example, we read

Chaucer's description of the Knight's appearance: Of fustian he wored a gipoun (Of coarse cloth he wore a doublet) All bismotered with his habergeoun (All rust-spotted by his coat-of-mail) A glossary, diligence, and time are required for reading the original Chaucer. If you choose to do so, the Riverside Chaucer edition (edited by L. Benson) and the Norton Critical Edition (edited by Olson and Kolve) are highly recommended. The Signet Classic paperback edited by D. R. Howard modernizes the spelling a bit, but largely adheres to the original Chaucer and is an easier introduction to Middle English. Although in most cases the instructor assigns a particular version of Canterbury Tales, it can be exceedingly helpful to pick-up an additional version or two. A slightly different translation may entirely surprise you, even resonate with you, making Chaucer much more enjoyable. I suggest that you look for these versions: Selected Canterbury Tales, Dover Thrift edition - provides a poetic, rather than literal interpretation, and is quite readable. The collection of tales is fairly small, however. Canterbury Tales, Penguin edition, translated by Nevill Coghill, is an excellent poetic translation. It is a complete collection, arranged by Group A thru H, and also includes The Parson's Prologue, The Parson's Tale in synopsis, and Chaucer's Retractions. Coghill's translation remains my favorite. The Canterbury Tales, Bantam Classic paperback edited by Hieatt, uses the "facing page" format with the original Chaucer on the left and a modern literal translation on the right page. I found the literal translation a little wooden, but this edition can be quite helpful if you need some help with Middle English. (A guide to phonetics, grammar, spellings, and a glossary is provided.) Chaucer's Canterbury Tales (Barrons Educational Series) uses an "Interlinear Translation" format in which each line of Middle English is followed by a modern translation (literal to make the comparison easier). I rather like this approach. Canterbury Tales, John Murray Publishers, London is hard to find, but provides a partial translation to modern English, maintaining as much as possible of the Middle English. This rather clever approach is somewhat risky, but the translator H. L. Hitchins pulls it off. With some effort I could follow the text without continually referring to a glossary and in a limited way I was "reading Middle English". Canterbury Tales, Pocket Books, prose translation by R. M. Lumiansky, is easy to read, but while this prose format adheres to the storyline, it is only a shadow of the poetic Chaucer. It might prove useful if you are not comfortable with poetry. Good luck. Reading Chaucer is really worth the extra effort.

The question is not whether to read the Canterbury Tales, but whether to read them in this translation -- or whether to go for the Middle English with all its difficulties. I'm a purist. As a Chaucer teacher myself, I'd say read the tales in the Riverside Chaucer or in the Norton Critical edition with lots of footnotes. But, yes, that is harder, and I'd rather see readers get some experience than

none. So, if you are going to compromise, Nevill Coghill's poetic translation is really as good a place to go as any. You will get the basic sense of Chaucer's verse; you'll get the basic rhymes and rhythms too. This is the translation that's used in most high school classes, and in many college survey classes that don't read the text in the original. It's really a fine compromise -- not only a good place to start, but also a decent trot if you are struggling with the Middle English. You can find some closer translations of some of the tales online if you look up Michael Murphy's websites. But for all their virtues, they don't have the smoothness of Coghill's renditions; Murphy's translations are not the complete Tales; and it's clunky to print them out. This economical edition is probably still the best place to start with Chaucer, father of English poetry and the originator of comedy in the English language.

The biggest hurdle in reading Chaucer is the language. Trying to read his work in Middle English is impossible without really good footnotes, and some of the "translations" are even worse--they're written in a high-blown, pompous style that takes all the fun out of the stories. All this being so, I was delighted to find the Puffin Classics version retold by Geraldine McCaughrean! The tales are told in an easy-to-read, flowing style that captures the bawdy humor of the originals, without being over-crass (this is a children's book, after all.) I found myself often laughing out loud, and wishing I'd found this version much sooner, because it makes Chaucer fun to read! I highly recommend it for anyone who wants to try Chaucer but feels intimidated by the scholarly-looking versions available in the "Literature and Classics" sections. You won't become expert in reading Middle English, but you WILL see why The Canterbury Tales has such a wonderful reputation!

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