

Geoffrey Chaucer
**The General Prologue
& The Physician's Tale**

THE
COMPLETE
TEXT

UNABRIDGED

POETRY

from *The Canterbury Tales*

in Middle English & in modern verse translation

Read by **Richard Bebb • Philip Madoc • Michael Maloney**



The Canterbury Tales – The Prologue (Middle English) 2:46		
2	A knight ther was, and that a worthy man...	2:16
3	With hym ther was his sone, a yong squire...	2:17
4	A yeman hadde he and servantz namo...	1:07
5	Ther was also a none, a prioresse...	3:07
6	A monk ther was, a fair for the maistrie	2:51
7	A frere ther was, a wantowne and a merye...	3:59
8	A marchant was ther with a forked berd...	0:58
9	A clerk ther was of oxenford also...	1:37
10	A sergeant of the lawe, war and wys...	1:25
11	A frankeleyn was in his compaignye...	1:56
12	An haberdasshere and a carpenter...	1:07
13	A cook they hadde with hem for the nones...	0:37
14	A shipman was ther, wonynge fer by weste...	1:31
15	With us ther was a doctour of phisik...	2:09
16	A good wif was ther of biside bathe...	2:09
17	A good man was ther of religioun...	3:24
18	With hym ther was a plowman, was his brother...	0:51
19	Ther was also a reve, and a millere...	1:40
20	A gentil maunciple was ther of a temple...	1:17

21	The reve was a sclendre colerik man...	2:26
22	A somonour was ther with us in that place...	3:01
23	With hym ther rood a gentil pardoner...	3:05
24	Now have I toold you soothly, in a clause...	4:28
25	Oure conseil was nat longe for to seche...	5:01
26	The Physician's Tale (Middle English)	1:55
27	This mayde of age twelf yeer was and tweye...	4:47
28	This mayde, of which I wol this tale express...	4:35
29	The luge answered, 'of this, in his absence...	4:07
30	'O mercy, dere fader,' quod this mayde...	4:21
31	The Canterbury Tales – The Prologue	3:00
32	A Knight there was, and that a noble man...	1:46
33	With him there went a Squire, that was his son...	1:11
34	He had a Yeoman there, and none beside...	0:52
35	Also there was a nun, a Prioress...	2:21
36	A Monk there was, as fair as ever was born...	2:12
37	There was a Friar, a wanton and a merry...	3:09
38	Next, all in motley garbed, a Merchant came...	0:47
39	There was a Student out of Oxford town...	1:08
40	A Serjeant of the Law, wise and discreet...	1:05

41	A Franklin in this company appeared...	1:27
42	A Haberdasher and a Carpenter, a Weaver, Dyer and Upholsterer...	0:51
43	They brought a Cook for this occasion, who...	0:27
44	There was a Seaman hailing from the West...	1:07
45	A Doctor of Physic there was with us, too...	1:35
46	A Good Wife was there dwelling near the city...	1:34
47	There was a Parson too, that had his cure...	2:35
48	With him his brother, a simple Plowman rode...	0:40
49	A Miller and a Reeve were also there...	1:19
50	There was a Manciple from an inn of court...	0:55
51	Slender and choleric the Reeve appeared...	1:50
52	There was a Summoner with us in that place...	2:18
53	The Summoner brought a noble Pardoner...	2:19
54	Now in a few words I have rehearsed for you...	3:16
55	Agreement took us little time to reach...	4:14
56	The Physician's Tale	2:26
57	Twelve years and two this maiden grew to be...	4:06
58	This maid of whom I tell...	3:32
59	On this and he not here...	3:45
60	O mercy, O dear father...	4:08

Total time: 2:18:29

Geoffrey Chaucer

The General Prologue & The Physician's Tale

in Middle English & in modern verse translation

How do we know what Chaucer's English sounded like?

The simplest way for the present reader to learn what Chaucer's pronunciation sounded like is to listen to Richard Bebb's superb reading of the current recording of *The General Prologue* of *The Canterbury Tales*. The knowledge it represents has been built up by the work of many scholars over centuries, which is now available in many competent studies and editions of Chaucer's poems, briefly summarised as follows.

The evidence comes from comparing the spellings which have represented the sounds of words in many different texts from Old English (often called Anglo-Saxon, recorded from about the eighth century), onwards. Old English developed into what is known as Middle English from the twelfth century up to roughly 1500, which then developed into Modern English. Chaucer (c.1340 - 1400) wrote and spoke what is now technically called Middle English, though for him it was naturally just 'English'. Besides the evidence from older

spellings we can also learn from the sounds of Modern English, with all its dialectal variants, when we compare these sounds with former and current spellings. Scholars have also learned from the sounds and spellings of related European languages.

The spelling of Old English was adapted from the ancient Latin alphabet which is close to the modern alphabet, and it is clear from documents written in Old English that by the eleventh century a fairly regularised spelling had developed. That this had deviated to some extent from the various spoken dialects is clear from the spelling of French trained scribes after the Norman Conquest in 1066 who did not know the traditional English standard and spelt English words according to their own conventions. As just one example they wrote *quene* for Old English *cwene*. As the standard as well as the dominance of English had been destroyed, all sorts of spellings then reflected many dialectal variants as well as an increasing number of French words. The alphabet remained much the same. The words themselves are often

recognisable but differently spelt and often with somewhat different meanings. Some Old English words were lost, some remained and many new words came in. The basic English nature of the language survived especially for the necessities of life, such as *live, die, love, eat* and so forth, many of which have continued to the present day in slightly different spellings, revealing changing but related sounds. Over the centuries following the Norman Conquest English slowly became the dominant language again, even if altered. To take the very first line of *The Canterbury Tales*, probably written in the late 1380s as an example, all the words are found in Old English and only the word *soote* is significantly different from modern English. It derives from the older English form *swote* meaning 'sweet' in the sense of 'fresh', 'pure'. Chaucer usually seems to differentiate this from the other form *sweete* and uses that to describe what is scented, like the breeze, or in other places 'sweet' in the sense of 'sugary'. The spelling in each case indicates a different pronunciation, and the rhyme with *roote* proves Chaucer's use of *soote*. In later English the two forms fell together and *sweet* became normal. Its modern spelling with two 'e's' suggests its pronunciation with a long vowel.

The evidence of many different spellings and rhymes at different periods shows that the sounds of the consonants remained much the same from Old English times, though in Chaucer's language the 'r' was trilled and all the consonants at the beginning of a word like the sound represented by 'k' in '*kniht*' were sounded. The awkwardness of such pronunciations led to their abandonment in more recent English. In this as with many other changes, too many to note here, English might be called, in terms of pronunciation, a 'lazy' language, as in this case, and also in dropping the endings of words once having grammatical significance, called inflections, of which the plural '(e)s' is almost the only survivor.

The vowels in English (conventionally represented in brief by the letters *a, e, i* (sometimes *y*), *o, u*) have a different story. They could be pronounced either 'long' or 'short' and over centuries varied considerably. The important historical change which affects our recognition of Chaucer's pronunciation took place mainly in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries and is called The Great English Vowel Shift. Why it took place is not known but it arose from a different placing of the tongue in the mouth. Its effect was to cause long vowels in stressed positions in the word to

tend to become two vowels in close proximity, i.e. diphthongs. This can easily be heard if a native speaker artificially prolongs the pronunciation of the long vowel in such a word as 'time'. It comes out something like 'ah-ee'. Most modern English long vowels, whoever the speaker, are diphthongs. This accounts for much of the difference that will immediately be noticed when Chaucer's *Prologue* to *The Canterbury Tales* is first listened to in the present recording. The Great English Vowel Shift took place after Chaucer, though happily before Shakespeare. Thus if Shakespeare's own pronunciation is now re-created, as scholars can, while it sounds like a curious mixture of modern dialects it is not on the whole fundamentally different in pronunciation from modern English, which is thus perfectly acceptable in speaking Shakespeare's words. In contrast, vowels, in Chaucer's English, whether long or short, remained 'pure', that is without diphthongisation, much like those in modern European languages. Pronounce Chaucer's vowels like a French, Dutch, Italian, German, etc., speaker, and you will be historically fairly accurate. Another important difference, often only to be discovered by study, is the difference between the close or open forms of the vowels written as 'e' and 'o'. The 'open e'

is rather like modern 'eh', the 'close e' like the first part of the diphthong in 'may'. Thus in *The General Prologue* 'breeth' has a long open vowel as suggested by the modern pronunciation but *sweete* has a close 'e' as the central vowel. The later spellings, respectively 'ea' or 'ae' give us clues in such matters, though English spellings, rather arbitrarily selected mainly by sixteenth century printers, are only partial guides to pronunciation. It is difficult for modern English speakers to avoid the diphthong but when the vowels are 'pure' the result is a sweeter clearer sound of English than is heard in modern pronunciation.

With the sounds indicated by the letter 'o', 'open o' is like the central vowel in 'lord', the 'close o' like the first part of the diphthong in modern 'boat'. Again, modern spellings give us some clues. In the Modern English word, 'sun', the central vowel is often represented in Chaucer's English by the letter 'o'. The reason is due to Middle English script. The letter 'u' could be represented by two 'minims', which were written by single strokes like the modern English 'i' without the dot above it. But the letter 'n' could be similarly represented by two minims. This is confusing to the eye, so the sound formerly and again nowadays represented by the

letter 'u' was often represented by an 'o'. But in the case of such a word as 'lond' the 'o' represents the different vowel which has survived in modern English in the same word, 'land'.

The most important way of appreciating the beauty, power and subtlety of Chaucer's poetry is a proper grasp of the metre. Its basic rhythm in *The General Prologue* of a regular but variable five-stress line was largely obscured in the fifteenth century because of the carelessness of Chaucer's scribes and the lack of a standard spelling, so that his verse looked and sounded clumsy and rough until recovery began in the eighteenth century. Modern scholarly editions present a text whose spelling is to some extent tidied up, and the regular stress can be sensed, but even here there are uncertainties for the unpractised reader. The essential question is whether or not to sound the final 'e' written in many words. Final 'e' is often the residue of an earlier fuller inflection in Old English, and thus should be lightly sounded, but it was also often added meaninglessly by scribes, and as in modern English was not sounded. Sometimes Chaucer himself skips it. The reader's ear must be the guide in the verse. The underlying beat is regular but variable. Final 'e' may or may not be needed for the metre in the course of a line, but final 'e' at

the end of a line is usually sounded. The proof of this is given in *The General Prologue* itself, where the rhyme for *Rome* is 'to me' which proves the pronunciation here of the final 'e' in '*Rome*'. But elsewhere, as in '*Rome*' the final 'e' may be disregarded, according to the need of the regular but not mechanical stress pattern of the line.

Notes by Derek Brewer

The Canterbury Tales, written near the end of Chaucer's life and hence towards the close of the fourteenth century, is perhaps the greatest English literary work of the Middle Ages: yet it speaks to us today with almost undimmed clarity and relevance.

Chaucer imagines a group of twenty-nine pilgrims who meet in the Tabard Inn in Southwark, intent on making the traditional journey to the martyr's shrine of St Thomas a Becket in Canterbury. Harry Bailly, landlord of the Tabard, proposes that the company should entertain themselves on the road with a storytelling competition. The teller of the best tale will be rewarded with a supper at the others' expense when the travellers return to London. Chaucer never completed this elaborate scheme – each pilgrim was supposed to tell four tales, but in fact we have twenty-four but not all are complete – yet, with the pieces of linking narrative and the prologues to each tale, the work as a whole constitutes a marvellously varied evocation of the medieval world which also goes beyond its period to penetrate (humorously, gravely, tolerantly) human nature itself.

Chaucer, as a member of this company of pilgrims, presents himself with mock innocence as the admiring observer of his fellows, depicted in the General Prologue. Many of these are clearly rogues – the

coarse, cheating Miller, the repulsive yet compelling Pardoner – yet in each of them Chaucer finds something human, often a sheer vitality or love of life which is irresistible: the Monk may prefer hunting to prayer, but he is after all 'a manly man, to be an abbot able'. Only the knight, clerk, parson and the parson's brother the ploughman rise entirely above Chaucer's teasing irony; certainly the Parson's fellow clergy and religious officers belong to a Church riddled with gross corruption. Everyone, it seems, is on the make, in a world still recovering from the ravages of the Black Death.

The **Physician's Tale** has nothing to do with his character. It is in origin a primitive folk tale about an 'honour killing' that Chaucer found in Livy and elsewhere and enhanced. The wicked judge Apius wishes to abduct and rape the beautiful and virtuous Virginia, aged fourteen. Her father cannot save her. Rather than be dishonoured she allows him to his utter grief to behead her. But the people rise up against the cruel and wicked judge who is imprisoned where he hangs himself and his servant is banished. The rather strange moral drawn is that your sin will always find you out. After the end of the tale the Host expresses the general pity and horror and the irony that it was Virginia's beauty that

caused her death. (See Derek Brewer *A New Introduction to Chaucer*, 1998.)

Son of a vintner, Geoffrey Chaucer was born in London in 1340 or thereabouts. He enjoyed a successful and varied career as courtier and diplomat, travelling extensively in France and Italy, where Boccaccio and Petrarch were still living. In 1374 he was made Controller of Customs in the Port of London; in 1386 he represented Kent as Knight of the Shire, and may have lived there until his death in 1400. He is buried in Westminster Abbey.

Chaucer derives almost all his tales from known sources, classical, French or Italian, but he is brilliantly successful in giving them a tone and feeling which are very English (concrete, ironic) and very much his own. He wrote prolifically and in a number of styles: other works include the great *Troilus and Criseyde*, *The Book of the Duchess* and *A Treatise on the Astrolabe*. He also translated a fragment of *The Romance of the Rose*. His range of subject matter, width of reading and sophistication are remarkable; his most notable qualities are perhaps his deeply sympathetic view of human aspiration and weakness, and (when required) his capacity for close, ironic observation.

Notes by Perry Keenlyside



Born in London in 1927, **Richard Bebb** was educated at Highgate School and Trinity College, Cambridge. He became an actor in 1947 in Michael Redgrave's *Macbeth* and then spent two years in repertory at Buxton and Croydon, where he met his future wife, the late Gwen Watford. They married in 1952 and had two sons.

From 1950 he worked regularly in all the theatrical media. He has appeared in a handful of West End plays, made over a thousand broadcasts, including sharing the narration with Richard Burton in the BBC recording of Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood* and also appeared in almost 200 television plays, including Alan Bennett's *A Question of Attribution*; among other television appearances were *Barchester Towers* and Agatha Christie's *A Murder Has Been Announced*. His one important film appearance was as the successful cricketer in Terence Rattigan's *The Final Test*.

He owns the largest collection of historic 78s of opera singers in England and has lectured at Yale, Harvard, Princeton and the Smithsonian on theatrical and musical subjects. He discovered the unknown cylinder recordings of Sir Henry Irving.



Philip Madoc's extensive theatre work includes the roles of Othello and Iago, Faust and Macbeth and, with the RSC, The Duke in *Measure for Measure* and Professor Raat in *The Blue Angel*. TV roles include Lloyd George, Magua in *The Last of the Mohicans*, *Brookside* and *A Mind to Kill*. He reads *The Death of Arthur*, *The Canterbury Tales* and the part of Host in *Canterbury Tales II*, *Arabian Nights*, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, *The Old Testament* and *Romeo and Juliet* for Naxos AudioBooks.



Michael Maloney's many Shakespearean roles on the London stage include Edgar in *King Lear*, the title roles in *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet*, Prince Hal in *Henry IV Parts 1 & 2*; on film he has appeared in Branagh's productions of *Hamlet* and *Henry V*, as well as in Parker's *Othello*. Other notable films include Minghella's *Truly, Madly, Deeply*. He frequently performs on radio and TV. He has been involved in other Naxos AudioBooks' productions including *King Richard III*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Poets of the Great War*. He has also played the part of George Tesman in *Hedda Gabler* and read *Selections from The Diary of Samuel Pepys* and *The Physician's Tale* from *The Canterbury Tales III* and *House on the Strand* for Naxos AudioBooks.

The music on this CD is taken from the Naxos Catalogue

CHOMINCIAMENTO DI GIOIA

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Music programmed by Sarah Butcher

Modern Verse translation by Frank Ernest Hill

Cover picture: Canterbury pilgrims portrait - with manuscript Geoffrey
Chaucer connection. Courtesy Lebrecht Music & Arts

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Read by **Richard Bebb, Philip Madoc** and **Michael Maloney**

The Canterbury Tales are widely read and studied. The Middle English in which they were first written differs sufficiently from modern English, in vocabulary and usage, that most of us require a contemporary translation. On this recording *The General Prologue* and *The Physician's Tale* are read in Middle English by Richard Bebb, under the direction of a leading Chaucerian scholar, Professor Derek Brewer. It is an authoritative performance that brilliantly evokes the fourteenth-century world, both for the general reader and the student alike. This is followed by a witty modern verse translation, and provides a fascinating contrast with the original.

CD ISBN:

978-962-634-400-2

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Produced by Nicolas Soames
Recorded at RIBB Talking Book Studios, London
and Motivation Sound Studios, London.
Edited by Sarah Butcher

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Total time
2:18:29