

# **THE CANTERBURY TALES**

Adapted from Geoffrey Chaucer's poem

by Craig Sodaro

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## STORY OF THE PLAY

Geoffrey Chaucer introduces us to a group of pilgrims staying at an inn south of London preparing for their journey to Canterbury the next day. He proposes that each of the pilgrims tells a story going to and from the shrine, but the group is so anxious to hear the stories they begin immediately.

The Physician begins with the tale of Alison, who falls in love with Nicholas, a court scribe for the wicked Judge Appius. Appius, however, desires Alison for himself and devises a trick to force Alison to become his wife. Will Nicholas save Alison from this unwanted marriage?

The Pardoner tells the next tale. Three thieves find out a friend has been slain by Death, so they plan to find Death and kill him. Their greed leads them directly to him.

The Nun tells the story of Chanticleer the rooster, who has the most beautiful singing voice in the barnyard, and the Fox who would make him his dinner.

The second act contains the final and longest story: The Knight's Tale. King Theseus locks two prisoners of war in the tower overlooking the palace gardens. The two young men fall madly in love with Emily, Theseus's sister. The two escape and profess their love, but are caught by Theseus. At Emily's behest, he agrees to allow one of them to marry Emily – the one who at the end of a year's time brings her the finest present.

The timeless appeal of Chaucer, combined with easy staging, flexible casting, and special optional passages, make this show appealing for audiences of all ages.

## SETTING

The Tabard Inn south of London, 1380s, and in the imaginations of the players and the audience. There is a series of platforms or boxes upstage so that some players can climb to a height above the others. A sign reading "Tabard Inn" hangs upstage, and perhaps an old diamond-glass window or two. One or two small, rough-hewn tables sit on stage, with equally rough-hewn benches for the patrons. These tables and benches become the furniture used in all the tales. A trunk, right or left, holds the necessary props.

**CAST OF CHARACTERS**

(22 female, 17 male, 8 either, doubling possible)

**In the Tabard Inn:**

GEOFFREY CHAUCER: a pilgrim heading to Canterbury  
INNKEEPER: owner of the Tabard Inn  
NUN: another pilgrim  
PHYSICIAN: another  
PARDONER: another  
KNIGHT: another  
PLAYERS: ONE-TWELVE (dressed as pilgrims, they will  
play characters in other segments)  
WORKMAN

**In the Physician's Tale:**

SIR ROBERT: a famous knight  
LADY AGNES: his wife  
ALISON: their daughter  
NICHOLAS: a court scribe  
JUDGE APPIUS: cruel man who desires Alison  
JANE WEEKS: a poor old peasant  
MOTHER: of Judge Appius  
GUARDS  
SHERIFF

**In the Pardoner's Tale:**

WAITRESS: at the inn  
THIEF ONE  
THIEF TWO  
THIEF THREE  
OLD MAN  
APOTHECARY: provides a poison

**In the Nun's Tale:**

WIDOW  
BEULAH: her cow  
OSWALD: her donkey  
MOLLY: her sheep  
CHICK ONE: a wife of Chanticleer  
CHICK TWO: another  
CHICK THREE: another  
CHANTICLEER: a rooster with a beautiful singing voice  
PARTLET: Chanticleer's favorite wife  
FOX: a wiley animal ready for Chanticleer as his dinner

**In the Knight's Tale:**

THESEUS: King of Athens  
HIPPOLYTA: Queen of the Amazons, Theseus's wife  
WOMAN ONE  
WOMAN TWO  
WOMAN THREE  
CREON: conqueror of Thebes  
ARCITE: defender of Creon  
PALAMON: defender of Creon  
EMILY: Theseus's sister  
SERVANT ONE  
SERVANT TWO  
GUARD ONE  
GUARD TWO  
CHILD  
MOTHER  
DOCTOR: in Thebes  
JENNY: a young bride

\*See additional notes at the end of the script.

**ACT I**  
**Scene 1**

(*AT RISE: CHAUCER enters through curtains, standing before them, or is lit by spot separately with the rest of the stage in darkness.*)

CHAUCER: When April with its gentle showers has pierced the March drought to the root and bathed every plant in moisture to hasten flowering, folks long to go on pilgrimages to visit foreign shores and distant shrines. And from every shire's end of England, they go to Canterbury to seek the blessed martyr who helped them when they were sick.

(*The curtain opens, revealing the PLAYERS standing about, frozen. They are dressed in various medieval costumes, some rich, some poor. We see a table, several benches, a tree in the background, and a trunk full of props.*)

CHAUCER: (*Continued.*) One day in that season, I stopped at the Tabard Inn in Southwark, and met up with a group of pilgrims who were headed for Canterbury. (*CHAUCER moves through the crowd of frozen PLAYERS.*) They were men and women of various ranks who had come together by chance. A knight, a nun, a pardoner, a physician, a miller, a reeve, a lawyer, a monk, a merchant, a wife, a sailor. Unfortunately, a terrible storm the night before had washed out a bridge two miles hence, and no travelers could leave. So our host, the innkeeper, tried to make all merry and comfortable.

(*PLAYERS come to life, laughing and talking. INNKEEPER stands atop the bench.*)

INNKEEPER: The workmen have told me it won't be long before the bridge is fixed.

NUN: Saints be praised!

PHYSICIAN: But long is a highly relative term. What is long to a fly is very short to a turtle.

KNIGHT: The Physician speaks true!

PARDONER: I did not bargain for any such delay! There must be an alternate route!

(*Grumbles from the PLAYERS.*)

CHAUCER: I assure you, good people, there is not.

KNIGHT: And what, sir, do you know about it?

CHAUCER: I've ridden to Canterbury on business many times. (*Disbelief and more grumbling from PLAYERS.*) Allow me to make a proposal to lighten our wait and our trip. Each of us will tell a tale going to Canterbury and each will tell a tale coming back.

NUN: Praise be! A noble thought.

PHYSICIAN: Tales from which we may learn about life.

PARDONER: And the wages of sin!

KNIGHT: Of course, I shall have the finest tale, for my adventures are the boldest and most exciting.

INNKEEPER: Indeed my appetite is whetted for a good story, Master Chaucer.

NUN: Let us begin our tales tonight. Right now.

PHYSICIAN: They will wile away our wait.

PARDONER: And we may profit from our listening.

CHAUCER: (*To audience.*) So it was determined that the Physician should tell the first tale. For he was a learned man, who knew medicine, surgery, and most importantly, astrology.

PHYSICIAN: I thank you, Master Chaucer, and here begins my tale. There once was a knight whose name was Sir Robert.

(*ROBERT steps to center.*)

PHYSICIAN: (*Continued.*) He was as brave and courageous a knight as the realm ever knew. (*ROBERT flexes.*) He was married to a beautiful lady named Lady Agnes.

(AGNES steps to the center, smiling coyly.)

PHYSICIAN: (*Continued.*) She was graced with household wisdom and skilled in needlepoint. (AGNES holds up a sampler that reads "Bless This Castle.") And their union was blessed with one child. But what a child! Their daughter Alison was the most beautiful girl in the entire kingdom.

(ALISON steps to center and holds up a mirror, fixing her hair.)

PHYSICIAN: (*Continued.*) Pygmalion himself, not if he had chipped, beaten, or coaxed his marble, could have fashioned a more beautiful face. Word had it that the goddess Venus was jealous of Alison's beauty, but that would be another story. (ROBERT and AGNES step US. ALISON picks up basket of flowers.) One day, as Alison was picking flowers in a field near her house, a young man named Nicholas almost ran into her.

(NICHOLAS runs to center, almost hitting ALISON, who drops basket and flowers.)

NICHOLAS: Oh, I beg your pardon!

ALISON: My flowers!

(NICHOLAS and ALISON look at one another. We hear chimes tinkling.)

PHYSICIAN: It was love at first sight.

NICHOLAS: Your beauty is right excellent. (*Alternate:* Wow! I've never seen a slicker chick than thee!)

ALISON: You, too, are wondrous fair. (*Alternate:* And you're just plain hunkamonka!)

NICHOLAS: Do you have a name?

ALISON: I'm Alison, daughter of Sir Robert and Lady Agnes.

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