

Geoffrey Chaucer

Geoffrey Chaucer was the son of a wine-merchant of London. In 1357 he served as a page¹ Lionel, Duke of Clarence, one of the sons of King Edward III, and then as a soldier in the Hundred Years' War (1359). After he married a lady of noble origins (1366), he obtained the social rank of esquire² and was employed on important diplomatic missions abroad. He was sent to Italy, where he had the opportunity to read **Dante's**, **Boccaccio's** and **Petrarch's** works.

In 1374 Chaucer became Controller of Customs in the port of London and then was Member of Parliament for Kent, Justice of Peace and responsible for the building and repairs on the royal properties. Chaucer was buried in the south transept of **Westminster Abbey** in London, now known as the Poets' Corner.

The Canterbury Tales

The Canterbury Tales is a collection of 24 stories that Chaucer planned in about 1387, but never completed. His original intention was, indeed, to write 120 tales. The **framework story** is that of a group of pilgrims travelling from London to Canterbury to pray on the shrine of St. Thomas à Becket, in a journey of about four days. In order to entertain themselves during the ride, they agree on a storytelling contest: the best storyteller will win a free dinner back to London. With the use of this narrative device, the author gives a portrait of characters with different social background and covers a wide range of themes: love, marriage, chivalry, corruption, hypocrisy, justice.

The pilgrims, described in the *Prologue* to the tales, are portrayed with **fine psychological insight** and represent the **changing society** of the 14th century. They come from different social classes – military, clergy, middle classes and traders – but neither the aristocracy nor the poorest ranks are included. Chaucer describes them with comic yet gentle satire. Each tale is introduced by a prologue in which the pilgrim describes him/herself physically and morally including qualities and weaknesses. This makes them extremely real and vital.

The Canterbury Tales are considered the **first great work in Middle English** and one of the greatest works ever written in English.

The following excerpt is dedicated to the character of the Wife³ of Bath, one of only three women on the pilgrimage. She is a cloth-maker and belongs to the rich rising middle class of Bath.

The Wife of Bath

From *The Canterbury Tales*, sixth novel, adapted version

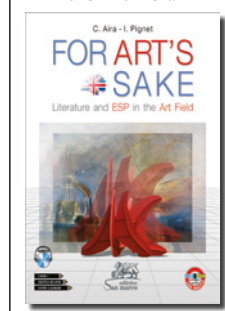
A good wife was there from near Bath city,
But she was somewhat deaf,¹ and that was a pity.
In making cloth she showed such a haunt²
She surpassed those of Ypres and of Gaunt.³

GLOSSARY

- 1** a court servant
- 2** a title of respect accorded to men of higher social rank
- 3** woman in Medieval English

GLOSSARY

- 1** a little poor of hearing (in the prologue to her tale, she explains that her deafness is the consequence of her fifth husband's beating)
- 2** skill
- 3** Ghent and Ypres were Flemish towns famous for their wool fabrics



- 5 In all the parish not a dame would stir⁴
To do the mass offering⁵ before her
And if they did, certainly so angry was she
That she was put out of all charity.⁶
Her coverchiefs⁷ full fine were of ground;⁸
- 10 I could swear they weighed ten pound⁹
That on a Sunday were upon her head.
Her stockings were of fine scarlet red
Laced tightly,¹⁰ her shoes full soft and new.
Bold was her face and fair and red of hue.¹¹
- 15 She was a worthy woman all her life.
Husbands at church door¹² she had had five,
Not to mention other company in youth,
But there's no need to speak of it as nouth.¹³

GLOSSARY

4 move 5 people went to the altar steps and did their offering in order of rank 6 patience 7 head
scarves 8 weaving, fabric 9 were ten pounds heavy (about five kilos) 10 cord of shoes fastened firmly 11
colour 12 until the 16th century marriages were celebrated in the porch for all to see 13 right now

ACTIVITIES

Reading comprehension

- 1 Read the paragraph *The Canterbury Tales* again then divide it into sections. Give the appropriate title to each section, choosing among the ones listed below.

- | | |
|----------------|----------------|
| 1 The language | 3 The project |
| 2 The 24 tales | 4 The pilgrims |

Text comprehension

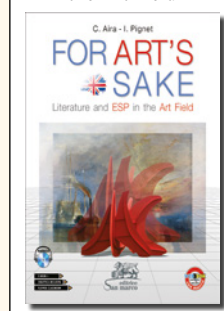
- 2 Read *The Wife of Bath* and choose the correct answer.

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1 Where does the woman come from? | 3 Is she proud of her ability? |
| A It is not specified | A es |
| B She is from Bath | B No |
| C She comes from Ypres | C It is not specified |
| 2 What is her job? | 4 What are her clothes like? |
| A She doesn't work | A They are ordinary and insignificant |
| B She is a merchant | B They look stylish and rich |
| C She is a cloth-maker | C They are modest and cheap |

Vocabulary & style

- 3 Focus on the excerpt and do the following activities.

- Determine the rhyme scheme of the text.
- Can you find any examples of Chaucer's use of irony and humour? Highlight them.
- Underline the character's physical description and the moral one with different colours.
- Which features of the Wife can be considered religious and which ones profane?



4 *How would you describe this portrayal? Choose from among the following adjectives and give reasons for your choice.*

moralistic – cruel – ironic – critical – tragic – funny – respectful

Speaking

5 *Working in pairs discuss the following points.*

- What Chaucer originally planned concerning *The Canterbury Tales* and what he completed before his death.
- What themes are covered.
- Who the pilgrims are and how they are described.
- The structure of the work and the language used.
- Why Chaucer insists on the cloth-making ability of the Wife of Bath.
- The author's attitude towards the Wife of Bath.

Listening comprehension

6 *Listen to the recording and fill in the blanks with the missing words.*

THE MERCHANTS OF THE STAPLE

In the Middle Ages 1 was the main source of England's commercial prosperity as it provided about four

2 of the money value of all English 3

Originally the wool and cloth trade was run by foreign merchants from Italy, Germany and the

4 From the 13th century, English merchants, the Merchants of the Staple, started

5 with them and gradually gained control of the wool export market

6 the Netherlands. From 1364 the Staple, or wool depot, was located in Calais, a good 7 to the Low Countries and to the 8 districts in France (Arras).

Writing

7 *Write a short paragraph about Chaucer's life. Do not forget to include: birth and death dates, his social status, his trip to Italy.*

8 *Chaucer is buried in Westminster Abbey, in London. Who are other famous people resting there? Make a list of at least five people.*