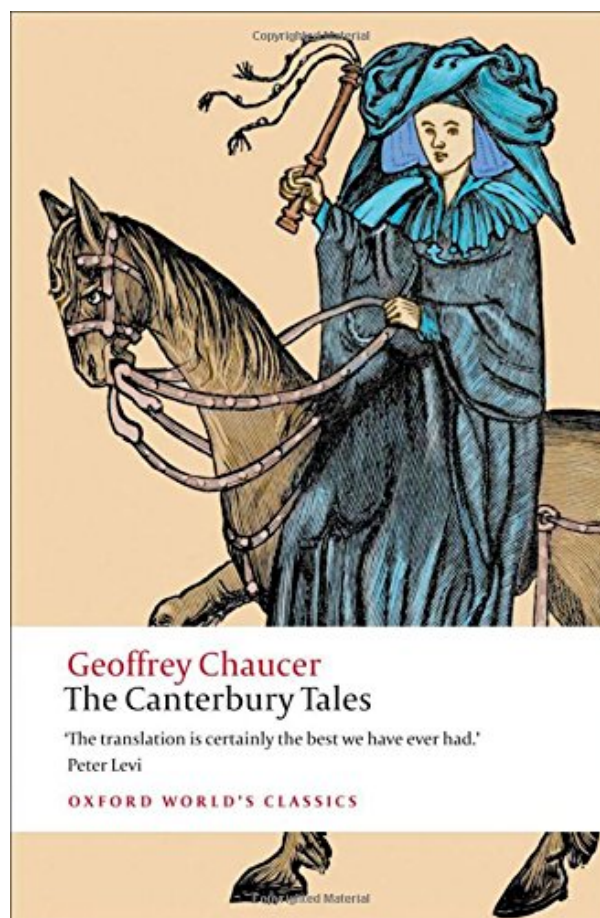
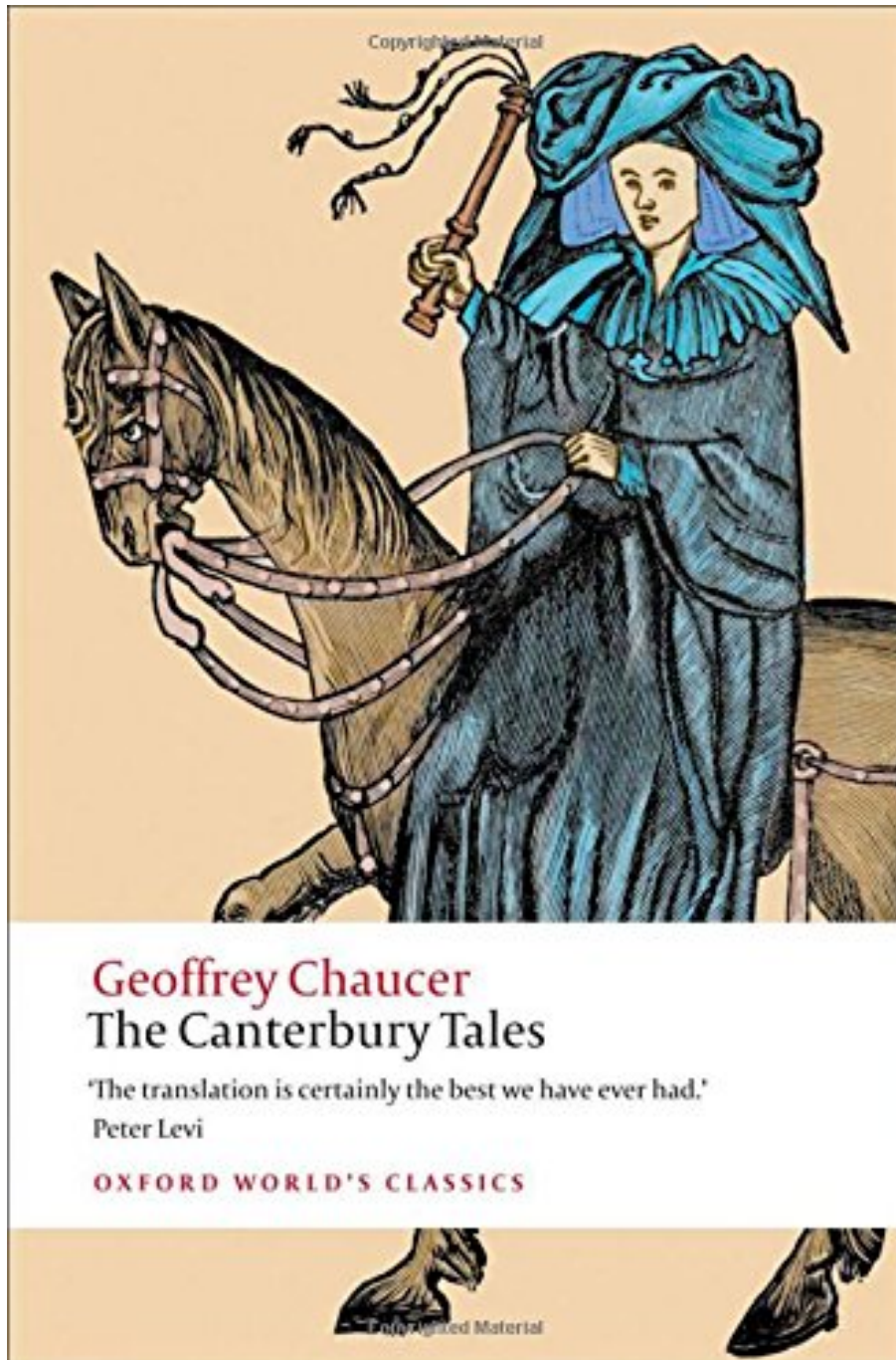


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From School Library Journal

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Beyond all doubt the greatest work of English literature before Shakespeare, Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* brings together an unforgettable group of pilgrims on their way to Canterbury, pilgrims who came from all ranks of society, from the crusading Knight and burly Miller to the worldly Monk and the famously lusty Wife of Bath. Their tales are as various as the tellers, including romance, bawdy comedy, beast fable, learned debate, parable, and Eastern adventure. The resulting collection gives us a set of characters so vivid that they have often been taken as portraits from real life, and a series of stories as hilarious in their comedy as they are affecting in their tragedy. Even after 600 years, their account of the human condition is fresh and true. David Wright's verse translation has long been admired for its brilliance and fidelity. This new edition adds representative passages from the important but overlooked prose tales, *Melibee* and the *Parson's Tale*, in new translations by Christopher Cannon, who also provides a new critical introduction and invaluable notes.

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Most helpful customer reviews

397 of 406 people found the following review helpful.

Canterbury Tales - Which Version is Best For You?

By Michael Wischmeyer

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. Hitchens 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.

184 of 192 people found the following review helpful.

One degree of separation...

By Wanda B. Red

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.

167 of 185 people found the following review helpful.

One of the major influences of modern literature.

By R. D. Allison (dallison@biochem.med.ufl.edu)

The version of this classic I read was a translation into modern English by Nevill Coghill. As you can see above, I awarded Chaucer (and the translation) five stars; but I do have a criticism. This translation (and many other publications of Chaucer) do not contain the two prose tales ("The Tale of Melibee" and "The Parson's Tale"). These are rarely read and I understand the publisher's and the translator's desire to keep the

book to a manageable size. Still, that should be the readers decision and no one else's. I had to go to the University library and get a complete copy in order to read those sections. As I mentioned, this copy is a translation into modern English. However, I do recommend that readers take a look at the Middle English version, at least of the Prologue. Many years ago, when I was in high school, my teacher had the entire class memorize the first part of the Prologue in the original Middle English. Almost forty years later, I still know it. I am always stunned at how beautiful, fluid, and melodic the poetry is, even if you don't understand the words. Twenty-nine pilgrims meet in the Tabard Inn in Southwark on their way to Canterbury. The host suggests that the pilgrims tell four stories each in order to shorten the trip (the work is incomplete in that only twenty-four stories are told). The tales are linked by narrative exchanges and each tale is presented in the manner and style of the character providing the story. This book was a major influence on literature. In fact, the development of the "short story" format owes much to these tales. All of the elements needed in a successful short story are present: flow of diction and freedom from artifice, faultless technical details and lightness of touch, and a graphic style which propels the story. In poetry, Chaucer introduced into English what will become known as rime royal (seven-line stanza riming ababbcc), the eight-line stanza (riming ababbcbc), and the heroic couplet. His poetry is noted for being melodious and fluid and has influenced a great many later poets. He has a remarkable talent for imagery and description. With respect to humor, which often receives the most negative responses from a certain group of readers (as witnessed by some of the comments below), there are at least three types: good humor which produces a laugh and is unexpected and unpredictable (for example, the description of the Prioress in the Prologue), satire (for example, the Wife of Bath's confession in the Prologue to her tale), and course humor, which is always meant to keep with the salty character of the teller of the tale or with the gross character of the tale itself. I am really stunned at the comments of the reviewer from London (of June 21, 1999). He/she clearly has no idea of the influence of the work nor on the reasons why Chaucer chose to present the humor the way he has. T. Keene of May 17 gave the work only three stars, presumably because it was once banned in Lake City, Florida. (Does that mean it would get fewer stars if it hadn't been banned?) Perhaps our London reviewer will be more comfortable moving to Lake City! Another reviewer suggested that "The Canterbury Tales" was only a classic because it had been around a long time. No! Chaucer's own contemporaries (for example, Gower, Lydgate, and Hoccleve) acknowledged his genius. My goodness, even science fiction books acknowledge the Tales (for example, Dan Simmons' "Hyperion," which won the 1990 Hugo Award for best science fiction novel of the year, is based on the Tales). These brief entries are too short to review all of the tales. Let me just describe the first two. Other readers might consider reviewing the other tales in later responses. In "The Knight's Tale," the Theban cousins Palamon and Arcite, while prisoners of the King of Athens (Theseus), fall in love with Emelyn, sister of Hippolyta and sister-in-law to Theseus. Their rivalry for Emelyn destroys their friendship. They compete for her in a tournament with different Greek gods supporting the two combatants. Arcite, supported by Mars, wins but soon dies from a fall from his horse (due to the intervention of Venus and Saturn). Both Palamon and Emelyn mourn Arcite, after which they are united. It is the basis of "The Two Noble Kinsmen" by Fletcher and Shakespeare. "The Miller's Tale" is a ribald tale about a husband, the carpenter John, who is deceived by the scholar Nicholas and the carpenter's wife Alison that a second flood is due. In this tale, a prospective lover is deceived into kissing a lady in an unusual location. And, recalling the response from our reviewer from London, apparently this Tale should not be read by people from London (or Lake City)!

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