

2025 Symposium Seminar

A Short Guide to The Canterbury Tales

With so many characters and story lines, here is a quick summary of the tales to help you keep track. We have renumbered the fragments into our recommended order (known in Chaucer criticism as the Bradshaw shift, for more information click

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/314236798_Chaucer's_The_Canterbury_Tales_The_Position_of_Fragment_VII). In parenthesis after each fragment heading is a Roman numeral showing the traditional order (taken from the Ellesmere and Hengwrt manuscripts) and a letter showing the order suggested by the Chaucer Society, based mostly on location and temporal clues from the text. More on all that in the seminar.

Fragment 1 (I.A)

1. The General Prologue

2. The Knight's Tale - Palamon and Arcite are imprisoned by Theseus, and spy Emily out their window and fall in love with her. They escape only to be recaptured by Theseus, who sets up a tournament to award Emily to the winner. **Romance/Epic** Principal source: Boccaccio's // *Teseida delle nozze d'Emelia* (1339-41).

3. The Miller's Tale - John, a carpenter, has a pretty wife, Alison, and a student/boarder, Nicholas. Nicholas dallies with Alison, and convinces John that the biblical flood is coming to get him out of the way and allow for more dallying. A parish clerk, Absalom, also has designs on Alison. **Fabliaux** No clear source, familiar medieval elements.

4. The Reeve's Tale - Simon, a miller, rips off two students, John and Alan. But they end up having to stay the night with his family. **Fabliaux** No clear source, but similarities to several French tales have been noted.

5. The Cook's Tale - Perkin is a roustabout. **Unfinished Fabliaux**

Fragment 2 (II. B1)

6. The Man of Law's Tale - Constance is the emperor of Rome's daughter. She is given in marriage to a Sultan who converts to Christianity, but his mother kills him for this and sets Constance adrift in a boat. She is found by a castle warden and his wife, Hermengild. Constance marries the king, Alla, and bears a son while he is away. Alla's mother intercepts her messages to Alla and falsely reports the child was a monster, and Constance is again set adrift. **Saint's Tale** Principal source: an Anglo-Norman chronicle of history by Friar Nicholas Trevet (1334).

Fragment 3 (VII. B2)

7. The Shipman's Tale - A rich merchant has a beautiful wife and many friends, including a monk Sir John who courts the wife. She says she will go with him for a hundred francs, so Sir

John borrows the money from the merchant and completes the transaction. **Fabliaux** Similar to Boccaccio's *Decameron*, day 8 story 1.

8. The Prioress's Tale - Jews kill a young Christian boy who was learning to sing a holy song to the Virgin Mary. The boy continues to sing after death, enabling his mother to find his body and for the Jews to be punished. **Mary Miracle Tale** Common medieval folktale.

9. Sir Topaz / Tropas - Tale by Chaucer himself, an abbreviated satire of romance stories.
Romance

10. The Tale of Melibee - A rich man named Melibee's house is attacked, his daughter mortally wounded. He and his wife, Prudence, debate the taking of vengeance. **Ethics polemic** A translation of *Livre de Melibee et de Dame Prudence* by Renaud de Louens (after 1336).

11. The Monk's Tale - 17 examples from both Classic and current times of the mighty falling.
Biographic Tragedies General plan from Boccaccio's *De casibus virorum illustrium* (1373).

12. The Nun's Priest's Tale - Chanticleer the rooster and his wife Pertelote argue over the meaning of dreams. A fox comes around, and tricks the vain Chanticleer to sing, then grabs him. **Fable** From several fables including *Del cok e del gupil* by Marie de France (late 12th c.).

Fragment 4 (III, D)

13. The Wife of Bath's Tale - A knight in Arthur's time rapes a woman, and is charged with the crime. The queen at his judgement tasks him to find "what do women most desire?" Questing to find this, he meets a old hag who gives him the answer on condition he take her as his wife.
Romance Source unknown, but similarities to a story type known as "the loathly lady."

14. The Friar's Tale - A summoner meets a bailiff who is the devil. They ride. **Mystery Tale** Old folktale type known as "the heartfelt curse."

15. The Summoner's Tale - A friar begging alms stops at the house of a sick man, Thomas, and tries to guilt trip him into giving more for his health. **Fabliaux** No clear source.

Fragment 5 (IV, E)

16. The Clerk's Tale - Walter, a marquis, takes the virtuous commoner Griselda as his wife. He decides to test her obedience to him by acting as if he is taking her children from her and killing them to see if she would reject him. **Folk Tale** Principal source: *De obedientia ac fide uxoria mythologia* by Petrarch (1373).

17. The Merchant's Tale - An aged knight named January takes a young wife named May. A young squire named Damian falls for May, and after January becomes blind she consents to Damian's advances. They arrange to meet in January's secret garden as the god Pluto and his wife Proserpina look on. **Fabliaux** Possible influence of *Decameron* day 2 story 10 and day 7

story 9.

Fragment 6 (V. F)

18. The Squire's Tale - King Cambukan has a feast when a knight appears with 4 gifts: a horse that can fly anywhere, a mirror that shows the origins of adversity, a ring that lets the wearer understand bird language, and a sword that can cut anything. **Romance** No clear source.

19. The Franklin's Tale - A knight, Arveragus, is happily married to Dorigan. When he goes off to war, Dorigan is heartbroken and despairs about the rocks on the shore that threaten Arveragus' return. A young squire, Aurelius, falls for Dorigan and seeks her, but she puts him off by tasking him to remove all the rocks from the shore. He finds a magician who can create the trick of hiding the rocks. **Folk Tale** Folk story type known as "the rash promise."

Fragment 7 (VI. C)

20. The Physician's Tale - A knight, Virginius, has a beautiful daughter, Virginia, who catches the eye of Appius, a corrupt judge. Appius rigs a court case to gain custody of Virginia. **Romance** Principal source: a brief account of Virginia in *Roman de la rose* (13th c.).

21. The Pardoner's Tale - After a discourse on the tavern sins of drunkenness, swearing, and gambling, the tale involves three revelers who learn Death is stalking the land and set off to kill him. **Sermon** Old folk tale with many analogues, including ancient Buddhist and other Oriental texts.

Fragment 8 (VIII. G)

22. The Second Nun's Tale - Cecilia, a noble Roman maiden, keeps her chastity when married off to a young pagan named Valerian by encouraging his conversion through a meeting with the ghost of Pope Urban I. Valerian is converted along with his brother Tiburce, but the judge, Almachius, finds out and orders all to worship the pagan idols. Cecilia refuses and is sentenced to burn to death. She miraculously survives and teaches for three days in spite of the burning. **Saint's Tale** From *Legenda aurea* by Jean de Vignay (late 13th c.) with a section from *The Paradiso* by Dante (1320).

23. The Canon Yeoman's Tale - A canon and his yeoman catch up to the pilgrims riding hard. The yeoman boasts of his master, but after questioning admits they have accomplished nothing as alchemists. The canon, embarrassed, rides off, leaving the yeoman to complain of his life in general and alchemy in particular. He tells the story of another alchemist, not his master, who performs an elaborate swindle of a priest. **Morality Tale** No clear source.

Fragment 9 (IX. H)

24. The Manciple's Tale - Phoebus (Apollo, the sun) lived in the world with a white crow trained in human speech, and a wife he loved very much. However, the bird witnessed his wife's infidelity and told Phoebus who then killed his wife, then tore out the crow's white feathers making him black and forbade the crow to talk or sing. **Classical Myth** Derived from

Metamorphoses by Ovid.

Fragment 10 (X, I)

25 The Parson's Tale - The seven deadly sins and how to not give in. **Sermon** Principle sources: *Summa de poenitentia* by St. Raymond of Pennaforte (1225) and *Summa vitiorum* by William Peraldus (1255-1265).

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