

The Canterbury Tales



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Adapted from *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer
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The Canterbury Tales

CLASSIC COMEDY. This family-friendly adaptation of Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* contains five of his most famous tales, additional roles for females, and all the hilarity that made the original tales classics. A group of pilgrims on their way to Canterbury stop off at the Tabard Inn and partake in a storytelling contest. The Miller starts off the contest by telling the story of how a gullible carpenter is duped into thinking a great flood is coming. The Nun tells the fable of how a proud rooster falls victim to flattery. The Pardoner humorously goes on to tell the story of how three revelers foolishly set out to kill Death. Next, the Wife of Bath, who has been married five times, tells the tale of how a knight discovers what all women want most. Finally, the Reeve ends the riotous night of storytelling with his tale about a thieving miller who tries to cheat a young couple and winds up getting his just desserts. Easy to stage with minimal props, this play offers two possible endings including one that allows the audience to vote for the winning storyteller. (Includes "The Miller's Tale," "The Nun's Priest's Tale," "The Pardoner's Tale," "The Wife of Bath's Tale," and "The Reeve's Tale.")

Performance Time: Approximately 120 minutes.



Portrait of Geoffrey Chaucer

About the Story

Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-1400) is often referred to as the father of English literature and is best known for his 14th-century masterpiece *The Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer was the son of a wine merchant and worked as a diplomat and civil servant under Kings Edward III and Richard II. Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales* in Middle English at a time when most books were written in either Latin or Italian. *The Canterbury Tales* is a collection of stories told by 29 fictional pilgrims while on a journey to visit Saint Thomas Becket's shrine at Canterbury Cathedral. The tales are told within the framework of a storytelling contest, which was a common form of entertainment in England at that time. Most of the tales are comical, written in verse, and offer ironic, satiric portraits of medieval society. Some of Chaucer's other major works include *The Book of the Duchess*, *The House of Fame*, *The Parliament of Fowles*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, and *The Legend of Good Women*.

Characters

(14 M, 19 F, 7 flexible, extras)

(Doubling, tripling possible. Flexible cast: 59+)

HOSTESS HARRIET BAILEY: Leader of a group of pilgrims traveling to the shrine of martyr Saint Thomas Becket in Canterbury; large, loud, merry woman who hosts the pilgrims' storytelling contest.

MILLER: Drunken, boisterous, jolly pilgrim who tells the tale of John the carpenter; stout and muscular with a red beard and a hairy mole on the tip of his nose; wears a sheathed sword.

JOHN: Old, wealthy, gullible carpenter who has a young, attractive daughter; wears a dirty tool apron.

ALISON: John's attractive daughter who is in love with Nicholas; wears an embroidered dress and laced boots.

NICHOLAS: Poor but handsome astronomy student who is one of John's boarders and is in love with Alison.

ABSOLON: Vain, buffoonish parish clerk who is in love with Alison; extremely neat in appearance with curly hair.

ASSISTANT: Absolon's assistant; non-speaking; flexible.

BARMAIDS 1, 3: Appear in "The Miller's Tale"; non-speaking.

BARMAID 2: Tavern server; female.

PROPER WOMEN 1, 2: Appears in "The Miller's Tale"; non-speaking.

BLACKSMITH: Appears in "The Miller's Tale"; non-speaking; flexible.

NUN: Cheerful, stately pilgrim who tells the fable of Chanticleer the rooster; wears an elegant cloak and carries a rosary.

CHANTICLEER: Proud, attractive rooster who has the most impressive crow in the barnyard; loves the beautiful hen Pertelote; has a red comb, a black beak, and burnished gold feathers.

PERTELOTE: Beautiful hen and Chanticleer's favorite "wife"; female. (Note: "Pertelote" rhymes with "throat.")

FOX: Hungry fox who uses flattery and cleverness to trick Chanticleer; flexible.

HENS 1-6: Chanticleer's other "wives"; non-speaking; female. (Note: There can be fewer depending upon cast size.)

PARDONER: Greedy, hypocritical pilgrim who tells the tale of three revelers who set out to kill Death; carries a bag of fake saints' relics that he sells in exchange for penance; thin with a high voice, long greasy yellow hair, and no beard; male.

ADAM: Drunken reveler who sets out to kill Death.

BUDD: Adam's drunken brother who sets out to kill Death.

CURLY: Adam and Budd's tomboyish sister who joins them on their quest to kill Death; wears men's clothing.

OLD MAN/OLD WOMAN: Very old and wears clothing that covers his entire body except for his wrinkled face; flexible.

APOTHECARY: Sells Curly poison; flexible.

WIFE OF BATH: Pilgrim who has been married five times and tells the story of how a knight discovered what all women want; hard of hearing and wears a huge hat and spurs.

MAID: Pretty maid who is dishonored by the Knight.

KNIGHT: One of King Arthur's knights; young and carries a sword.

KING ARTHUR: Sentences the Knight to death but then allows the Queen to ultimately decide the Knight's fate.

QUEEN: Sends the Knight on a quest to find out what all women want most and if he returns with the correct answer, his life will be spared.

LADY 1: Lady of the court.

LADY 2-5: Ladies of the court; non-speaking.

UGLY WOMAN: Reveals to the Knight the answer to what all women want; wears a hood and cape that completely covers her body and wears the mask of an ugly old hag; when she

removes the mask and cape, she reveals that she is actually young, beautiful, and well dressed.

WOMAN 1-5: Knight asks them what women most want but they all respond with a different answer; flexible. (Note: Can be played by 10 actors depending upon cast needs and some may be played by men dressed as women for comic effect.)

REEVE: Pilgrim who tells the tale of a thieving miller; he takes personal offense at the Miller's tale because he was once a carpenter; old, skinny, clean-shaven, and bad-tempered; wears a rusty sword.

SIMON: Greedy, proud, thieving miller; carries a sword at his side in a sheath, a dagger in a pouch, and a knife hidden in a sheath on his leg.

WIFE: Simon's proud, aloof wife and partner in crime.

MOLLY: 20, Simon's good-hearted daughter; wears a nightgown.

WARDEN: Warns John and Alice of Simon's reputation as a dishonest miller; flexible.

JOHN: Young, poor Cambridge scholar.

ALICE: John's young wife.

HORSE (Optional): John and Alice's horse; non-speaking; flexible. (Note: May be played by one or two actors in a horse costume or a large sawhorse on wheels with a head and reins can be used.)

PATRON 1: Tabard Inn patron who is annoyed with the Pardoner's hypocrisy; flexible.

PATRON 2: Tabard Inn patron; flexible.

PATRON 3: Tabard Inn patron who heckles the Reeve; male.

ENTERTAINER: Plays a stringed instrument of the period; flexible.

EXTRAS (Optional): As Stagehands and additional Barmaids, Proper Women, Ladies of the Court, Farm Animals, Women, and Hens.

NOTE: For flexible roles, change the script accordingly.

Setting

1388, the Tabard Inn, a tavern in near London.

Sets

Interior of the Tabard Inn. There are tables, chairs, and benches. These items may be moved about to create the settings for each of the tales. Other items like flowers, a tree, beds, a cradle, etc. can be brought on.

Carpenter's house. There is a door and window. The window has a pair of shutters that open and close.

Synopsis of Scenes

ACT I: Tabard Inn.

Intermission

ACT II: Tabard Inn, a short time later.

Props

Plates of food and eating utensils	Bucket of water
Mugs of ale and wine	Twigs
Serving trays	8 Bags of gold (only a few gold coins are seen)
Dice	3 Bottles of wine
String instrument of the period	Loaf of bread
Rosary beads	3 Twigs, one short
Five pieces of straw, one short	Small box for Apothecary's poison
Steins	Bag with legal papers inside
Carpentry tools, assorted	2 Daggers
Books	Pouch with coins inside
Papers	Sword with sheath
Pens	Sheath or pouch for dagger
Small bag of coins	Knife and sheath
Fiddle and bow	2 Large sacks of grain
Guitar	Horse (A sawhorse on wheels with a horse head and reins attached or can be played by actor(s) in a horse costume)
Mug	Carpetbag or tote
Basket of bread or a jug of water	Horse harness
Lit lantern	2 Bags of flour
Bag	Baby doll
Large comb	Cradle
Licorice	Mop or broom
Cinnamon	Staff or hoe
Leaf of spearmint	Large cake on a plate
Mop	
Iron bar painted red on one end to represent "red hot"	

Special Effects

Knock at a door	Slide whistle or another
Several bars of fiddle dance music	sound that signals falling
Fiddle music (or Absolon may play the fiddle)	Crash
Knocking on wooden window shutters	Fake blood
“Ssssss,” humorous sound of burning flesh	Funeral bell
Smoke	Music for a dance (live or recorded)
Chopping or whacking sound as if cutting a rope	Horse snorting
	Horse whinnying
	Baby crying

*Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour:
Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heath
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his halve cours yronne,
And smale fowles maken melodye,
That slepen al the nyght with open ye
(So priketh hem nature in hir corages),
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages.*

*—General Prologue,
The Canterbury Tales*

ACT I

(AT RISE: 1388, the Tabard Inn, a tavern near London. The open stage is in low light as the audience enters. The Patrons are already onstage. They come and go, miming discussions, drinking, playing dice, serving food and drink, etc. The Miller, Reeve, Pardoner, Wife of Bath, and Nun sit at one table miming conversations. The Hostess moves among the crowd, smiling and chatting, and ending up at the table of the five above. At the appointed time, the auditorium lights fade to black, the onstage lights fade up, and the play begins. Conversations become boisterous and an Entertainer sings a rousing tune accompanied by a string instrument of the period. Following the song, Hostess goes CS.)

HOSTESS: (To Patrons.) Lords, ladies...please. Please! (They quiet down.) Truly, you are to me right welcome heartily. For, by my troth, I have not seen this year so merry a company as now in this tavern. The wine pleases you?

(Patrons adlib approval.)

MILLER: (Slightly inebriated, shouts.) It's strong!
REEVE: (To Hostess.) It pleases us to drink it.

(Reeve and the Miller drink.)

HOSTESS: The food?

PARDONER: Delightful.

WIFE OF BATH: (Hard of hearing. To Nun, indicating Hostess.)
What did she say?

NUN: (Points to her plate. Loudly.) The food.

WIFE OF BATH: Yes, I know that's food. But what did she say?

HOSTESS: (To Patrons.) I have just now thought of a way to provide you some merriment...and it shall cost you naught.

The Canterbury Tales

13

MILLER: Tell us, oh, Hostess thou.

HOSTESS: You go to Canterbury?

NUN: Yes. A pilgrimage to visit the shrine.

HOSTESS: And may the blissful martyr reward your deed.

PARDONER: I know nothing of these others, but I shall be amply rewarded. Assuredly.

HOSTESS: *(To Patrons.)* As you will be staying the night here in the Tabard Inn, make plans to share some tales, for truly, there is no pleasure or merriment to sit as dumb as a stone.

WIFE OF BATH: *(To Nun.)* Did she just call us dumb?

NUN: No, dear.

WIFE OF BATH: It sounded like she called us dumb.

HOSTESS: *(To Patrons.)* And, therefore, I will suggest a game so that we might have some fun. *(Four laugh and orally agree. The Wife of Bath is confused.)* If it pleases you to abide by my judgment, hold up your hands.

(Miller, Nun, Pardoner, and Reeve raise their hands. Other Patrons have quieted and turned their attention to this table.)

WIFE OF BATH: *(To Nun.)* What did she say?

NUN: Just hold up your hand, dear.

(Nun raises the Wife of Bath's hand and her own.)

HOSTESS: Excellent. *(They lower their hands.)* Now, lords and ladies, listen well, but do not take it wrong. Each of you, to shorten the day, shall tell a tale about some adventure of your knowledge.

MILLER: That should be easy. I have many tales.

REEVE: None so interesting as mine, I warrant.

PARDONER: As a preacher, I can no doubt out-tell the lot of you. And, afterwards, I will pass the hat as my reward.

HOSTESS: Nay. Whoever tells the tale of the best wisdom and pleasure shall have a supper on the rest of you here in this place tomorrow before you begin your travels.

The Canterbury Tales

14

NUN: Please, be our governor and of our tales judge.

REEVE: I second that.

WIFE OF BATH: I third that. (*Others look at her. She pauses.*)
Whatever it is we may be discussing.

HOSTESS: I accept. When all is said, I shall choose the
winner. Let's see now who shall tell the first tale.

(*Miller stands.*)

MILLER: (*Shouts.*) Mine are best. I should lead. (*Staggers back
into his seat.*)

REEVE: (*To Hostess.*) I'm told my tales exceed the pleasures of
any audience.

PARDONER: (*To Hostess.*) I am regularly paid for my simple
sermons.

HOSTESS: (*Produces five pieces of straw.*) We shall draw lots.
He who hath the shortest shall begin. (*To Nun.*) Sister, you
draw first. (*Nun draws. To Wife of Bath.*) You're the Wife of
Bath?

WIFE OF BATH: Certainly not. I had a bath within the
month.

HOSTESS: Choose a lot.

WIFE OF BATH: What?

NUN: Here.

(*Nun picks a piece of straw and hands it to the Wife of Bath.*)

WIFE OF BATH: What am I supposed to do with a piece of
straw? I'm not a horse.

(*Nun pats Wife of Bath's hand to calm her.*)

HOSTESS: Reeve?

(*Reeve draws a piece of straw.*)

The Canterbury Tales

15

REEVE: A fine carpenter I am.

HOSTESS: I doubt you not. Miller?

(Miller draws a piece of straw.)

MILLER: Mine is short. What does that mean?

HOSTESS: And Pardoner?

(Pardoner draws a piece of straw.)

PARDONER: Long.

HOSTESS: The good Miller wins.

MILLER: Wins what?

HOSTESS: The honor of leading the tales. Many of my faithful patrons are ready to help in your storytelling.

(Patrons applaud and yell their approval.)

MILLER: Oh. I'm first. That is as it should be. *(With a stein of ale in hand, he stumbles forward, drinks, and hiccups.)* I know a noble tale for this occasion.

(Reeve stands.)

REEVE: You're drunk on ale. Some better man shall tell us the first tale.

HOSTESS: True. *(To Miller.)* Wait for another time.

MILLER: *(Angrily.)* That I will not. I will speak, or...or...or else go my way.

HOSTESS: *(Gives up.)* Tell on. What the devil.

REEVE: *(To Miller.)* You are a fool.

MILLER: *(To Patrons.)* Now hark, all and some. But, first, I protest that I am drunk. So, if I misspeak, blame it on the ale of this fine inn. *(Clears his throat.)* I will tell a legend about a carpenter and how a simple student and the carpenter's daughter made a fool of him.

The Canterbury Tales

16

REEVE: Shut your mouth. Even with your drunken rudeness, it is a sin to defame any man or woman. You may say enough of other things.

MILLER: You have no wife nor daughter, so your objection means nothing. But I know of which I speak. *(To Hostess.)* May I continue?

HOSTESS: Please.

(Defeated, Reeve sits.)

MILLER: *(To Patrons.)* The carpenter's yard and house with a door and window. *(Crew arranges the furniture accordingly, while the Actors for this story prepare for their roles in full view of the audience. The "window" is a pair of shutters that open and close.)* There was an old and wealthy carpenter named John who lived near Oxford University.

(John, a crotchety old man with some carpentry tools, appears inside the house.)

JOHN: Curses, curses, and more curses! *(Stops and thinks.)* I've forgotten what I was cursing. *(Pause.)* Matters not. Curses, curses, and more curses!

MILLER: He had a fair and graceful daughter by the name of Alison.

(Miller steps aside. Alison enters with a big smile.)

ALISON: Father, I thought I would—

JOHN: You won't.

ALISON: But I was—

JOHN: Don't.

ALISON: But, Father—

JOHN: Never! I know what you're up to. You want to leave the house so you can flirt with the young college boys.

The Canterbury Tales

17

ALISON: (*Innocently.*) Oh, Father, what could possibly make you think that?

JOHN: I know young girls...and I know my daughter. It's my solemn duty to shield you from yourself... (*Steps in front of her as if to protect her.*) ...and from all manner of man.

(*Alison steps to John's side.*)

ALISON: But I'm eighteen. It's time I was wed.

JOHN: Don't say that! (*Shoves her behind him and again appears to protect her.*) No daughter of mine shall ever marry a man.

(*Alison steps to John's side.*)

ALISON: Then what shall I wed? A goat? A pig? A horse? I think I prefer a man.

JOHN: No! That will never happen. (*To himself.*) This must be what I was cursing. Curses, curses, and more curses!

ALISON: What?

JOHN: Quiet. I'm cursing.

ALISON: Again?

JOHN: I will be in my shop. While I'm there, you are to remain in the house.

ALISON: Yes, Father.

(*John takes several steps away from her and stops.*)

JOHN: Do not go outside.

ALISON: No, Father.

(*John moves a few more steps away from her and stops.*)

JOHN: Not a single step out that door.

ALISON: Yes, Father.

JOHN: What?

ALISON: I mean, no, Father.

The Canterbury Tales

18

(John moves yet a few more steps and stops.)

JOHN: An obedient daughter is...obedient...to her father in all things. *(Exits. Alison turns in the opposite direction and tiptoes two steps. Offstage, shouts.)* Stay away from that door!

(Startled, Alison pauses.)

ALISON: *(To herself.)* Curses, curses, and more curses!

(Alison pauses. Miller steps forward and burps.)

MILLER: *(To Patrons.)* Pardon. But Alison had no need to leave the house, for a young scholar had leased a room in this very building. *(Nicholas enters, carrying an armload of books. Nicholas eyes Alison. She flutters her eyelashes at him and smiles.)* When the father is away, the young ones will drink and play.

(Helped by the Hostess, Miller steps aside.)

NICHOLAS: Alison! *(Tosses all his books aside.)*

ALISON: *(Excitedly.)* Nicholas!

NICHOLAS: Alison!

(Nicholas rushes to Alison.)

ALISON: You dropped your books.

NICHOLAS: From my studies of astrology. But, Alison, I don't need astrology to tell me that you are as pretty as a primrose, as a cuckooflower, and your mouth is as sweet as honeyed ale. Kiss me at once, or I shall die.

ALISON: Really?

NICHOLAS: Well, perhaps I overstate it. But I love you, and I want to kiss you and kiss you and kiss you. Mmmmm!

The Canterbury Tales

19

(Nicholas takes her arms and pulls her to him. He puckers up and leans in for a kiss, but she ducks under his arms and away from him.)

ALISON: Nicholas, I will not kiss you, by my faith. Let me be Truly.

NICHOLAS: What?

(Nicholas reaches for her again. Alison pulls away.)

ALISON: If you do not cease at once, I may have to scream...
(“Help” screams are spoken in a tiny voice.) ...“help, help, heeeeelp.”

NICHOLAS: Oh!

ALISON: And maybe even exclaim “alas” and “alack”...whatever they mean.

NICHOLAS: But I love you. And I know you love me.

ALISON: Well, yes, it’s true. I do love you as you love me. Still, we can’t let Father see us together.

NICHOLAS: Why not?

ALISON: Because he’ll, you know, curse.

NICHOLAS: He curses anyway.

ALISON: I know. But he’ll curse even more.

NICHOLAS: Not possible.

ALISON: All right, listen. We’ll have to be very discreet. We’ll have to love only in secret.

NICHOLAS: Nonsense, Alison. I’m a scholar, an astrologist. I’m quite capable of devising a plan so devious that your father will wish us to be together.

ALISON: Seriously?

NICHOLAS: *(Unsure.)* Well, I can hope.

(Alison and Nicholas exit. The Miller has fallen asleep. He snores loudly. Hostess nudges Miller.)

HOSTESS: *(To Miller.)* Wake up.

MILLER: *(Awakening.)* Huh? What?

The Canterbury Tales

20

HOSTESS: Continue your tale.

MILLER: Oh, yes. (*Stands.*) Uh, where was I?

HOSTESS: Nicholas and Alison just declared their love for each other.

MILLER: They did? (*Pause.*) I mean, oh, yes, of course they did. Well... (*Clears his throat.*) ...nearby was the parish church where the clerk Absolon worked tirelessly...

(Crew sets up a tall or regular desk or table and stool in the church. On the desk are papers and pens. Absolon enters and sits at the desk. In dress and carriage he is a perfect buffoon. He scribbles notes on several sheets and gives each to his Assistant, who has followed him onstage.)

ABSOLON: Ahhh, Assistant, I work tirelessly...

MILLER: (*To Patrons.*) Maintaining records, filing deed claims, and exacting certain fees.

ABSOLON: Maintaining records, filing deed claims, and exacting certain...fees. (*Holds out his hand. Assistant gives Absolon a small bag of coins. He smiles as he weighs the bag in his hand.*) There are certain benefits to working tirelessly.

MILLER: (*To Patrons.*) He was a fanciful dancer... (*Absolon grabs the Assistant as his partner, and they dance a few fashionable steps of the period. He accompanies himself by humming or music may be played in the background.*) And a fine fiddle player. (*Assistant quickly hands Absolon a fiddle and bow, and he plays a brief fast piece. Note: The music may be recorded, or he may simply run the bow across the strings several times making no real melody.*) He sang... (*Absolon gives the fiddle and bow to the Assistant and sings "la-la" lyrics in a high-pitched, squeaky voice.*) ...in a manner of speaking. And often strummed the guitar. (*Assistant hands Absolon a guitar on which he plays several discordant sounds.*) Which his neighbors cursed. (*Everyone onstage responds negatively to the sounds and yells at him. Absolon reacts and returns the instrument to the Assistant.*) Almost every day he visited a different tavern

The Canterbury Tales

21

drinking... (*Barmaid 1 crosses to Absolon, flirts, and gives him a mug of wine or ale. He drinks.*) ...heavily... (*Absolon takes another drink and staggers.*) ...very heavily... (*Absolon slurps the last of his drink, burps loudly, and wipes his mouth with his sleeve.*) ...while eyeing the ladies lustily. (*Absolon watches as Barmaids 2, 3 cross in front of him. Barmaid 1 takes his stein.*) Then on one holy day as he was observing the many feminine forms approaching the church... (*Absolon moves to a different location as Proper Women 1, 2 walk by. He stares at them and gurgles with pleasure.*) ...the lovely carpenter's daughter, Alison, approached. (*Alison enters and poses flirtatiously. Assistant plays a single, emphatic chord on the guitar as Absolon's eyes focus on her and nearly jump out of his head. Absolon makes ridiculous cooing noises. Alison turns away.*) I daresay, if she had been a mouse and he a cat, he would have pounced on her!

(Miller steps aside. Absolon wiggles his brows toward Alison.)

ABSOLON: (*To Assistant, indicating guitar.*) Give me that. (*Snatches the guitar away from the Assistant.*) I think I may need it this evening. Woo-hoo! (*Assistant exits. Absolon surreptitiously follows Alison for a distance as if being led by a rope around his neck. She pauses before the door to her house. He hides. She turns and smiles. She enters the house.*) She smiled at me! She did. She smiled at me. I saw it...a great big juicy grin. (*Makes a slurping sound. Pause.*) Wait. She couldn't have been smiling at me. I'm hidden. (*Looks around.*) Maybe she was smiling at that cow over there. (*Pause.*) No. Why would she smile at a cow? I don't know. Maybe they're good friends. No. I'm certain she smiled at me. (*Big revelation.*) She likes me! We haven't yet met, but there's no doubt she likes me. It's probably my alluring smile. (*Pause.*) No. Couldn't be. I don't smile. I hate smiling. It requires so much energy. Still, she smiled...at me. So I only need to wait until dark. (*Sits and instantly begins to snore. Lights quickly dim to represent darkness.*)

He is startled awake.) That was quick. (Absolon stands, licks his hands, slicks back his hair, straightens his clothes, picks up his guitar, and approaches the window. He clears his throat three times, the last time ending in a cough. He tests his squeaky soprano/falsetto voice.) Me-me-me, doh-doh-doh, ray-ray-ray. (Plucks incorrect chords while making up a tune to the following. Sings.)

"I saw you at the church earlier today

Flirting with me in that fanciful way

Quite risqué

I would say

So I've come to offer myself to you."

(Pause. To himself, spoken.) What? No response? Well, then...another verse. *(Sings.)*

"I followed you home all this way

So we could have a fling in the hay

Hear me bray

'Let me stay'

I've come to offer myself to you."

(Pause. To himself, spoken.) Still nothing? I must return home and devise tributes to my beloved that she cannot ignore.

(Absolon moves back to his desk and is met by his Assistant. Miller stumbles forward and slurs his words.)

MILLER: So poor, rejected Absolon returned to his post and for days and weeks sent to beautiful Alison gifts to soften her heart.

ABSOLON: *(To Assistant.)* As I ordered, you presented her with my best spiced wine...that was spiced with...spices? *(Assistant nods.)* Gave her hot wafer cakes that were...hot...wafers? *(Assistant nods.)* Bestowed upon her money from my accounts? Lots of money? *(Assistant nods.)* So much money I don't have any money left? *(Assistant shrugs.)* Alas! Alas! I won't give up! I shall never give up! Never. *(Starts to exit.)* Never, never, never!

The Canterbury Tales

23

(Absolon exits. Assistant follows him off. Crew removes desk and stool. Miller steps forward.)

MILLER: Alison was much too deeply in love with Nicholas to give any thought to Absolon's entreaties. And her love was reciprocated by the astronomer, who lodged a mere two doors from her room.

(Miller is helped aside by the Hostess. Alison appear, carrying a basket of bread or a jug of water. Nicholas sees Alison and warily approaches her.)

NICHOLAS: Your father?

ALISON: Oh, sweet Nicholas! I've missed you so.

NICHOLAS: Where is your father?

ALISON: In his shop.

NICHOLAS: Good.

ALISON: Where have you been these last few days?

NICHOLAS: In my room. I've devised a plot, dear Alison, a clever ploy whereby we may yet be wed.

ALISON: Father will never hear of it.

NICHOLAS: You may hear great moans and wailings coming from my room. Fear not. They are only part of my plan.

ALISON: Are you ill?

NICHOLAS: No, dear one. I'm not ill.

ALISON: There is someone else in there who is ill?

NICHOLAS: No, no. Just bear with me...please. If your father asks about me, you must tell him you don't know where I am.

ALISON: Why? Where will you be?

NICHOLAS: In my room

ALISON: But then I will know where you are.

NICHOLAS: Pretend, sweet Alison. Pretend you don't know where I am.

ALISON: If I must.

The Canterbury Tales

24

NICHOLAS: You must. And soon we will be together...forever.

(Nicholas kisses her lightly on the cheek and exits.)

ALISON: *(Delighted.)* Together forever. I could never wish for more.

(Alison turns away. John enters, wearing a dirty apron and carrying a tool.)

JOHN: Ho, Daughter. I would have lunch.

ALISON: Yes, Father. *(Turns to exit.)*

NICHOLAS: *(Offstage, moans loudly.)* Ohhhhhh! Ohhh!
Ohhhhhhhhhhhh!

JOHN: What noise is that?

ALISON: Noise? I hear nothing.

JOHN: It's coming from that student's room.

ALISON: Oh...that noise.

NICHOLAS: *(Offstage, a moan different from the first.)* Ohhhh,
myyyy! Awwwwwww!

JOHN: It sounds like he's dying. I hope he's not dying. If he dies, he probably won't pay his rent. I'm going to see what ails him. *(Followed by Alison, he crosses to the side of the stage and knocks on an imaginary door. Sound effects for the knocking are heard a few seconds after his knocks. Reacts.)* Nicholas? Are you well, Master Nicholas?

NICHOLAS: *(Offstage.)* Owwwwwwww!

JOHN: *(To Alison.)* He doesn't sound well. I'll try the door. *(Tries the door. He grunts as he tries the door a second time.)* Unnh! *(Pause.)* Wait. Here's a crack between the boards. *(Peers into the room.)* There he is. I see him.

ALISON: What's he doing?

JOHN: Staring at the stars.

ALISON: There are stars in his room?

JOHN: Well, there are holes in the roof.

NICHOLAS: Ohhhhh!

JOHN: *(To Alison.)* He moans again. I knew it, I knew it. He studies astronomy—the moon, the stars, the heavens. But man was not meant to know these things. He is being punished by some malady, some madness.

ALISON: Perhaps we should see to him.

JOHN: And how do we get into his room? I knocked, but he failed to come out.

ALISON: Then go in.

JOHN: How should I do that?

ALISON: By opening the door... *(Mimes opening the door.)*
...and stepping inside.

(Pause. John looks at Alison, and then at the door, and then at her again.)

JOHN: Oh. A decent idea. *(Exits.)*

ALISON: He seems to be in a daze or a trance of some sort.

JOHN: *(Offstage.)* I've got him. Come along, Master Nicholas. Come.

ALISON: At least he can walk.

(John enters with Nicholas in hand.)

JOHN: Yes...but can he talk?

NICHOLAS: *(As if in a daze.)* Alas! Shall the world be lost so soon now?

ALISON: *(Happily. To John.)* Yes. He talks.

JOHN: But what is it he says?

NICHOLAS: *(Feigning a trance.)* There are things I must tell you, John, my generous host...but only in private. It's a secret.

JOHN: *(Anxious to hear.)* A secret. Yes. I understand. I won't tell a soul. Cross my heart.

NICHOLAS: *(Points.)* But...Alison.

JOHN: She's just a girl. She doesn't understand anything.

The Canterbury Tales

26

ALISON: (*Playing along.*) I don't understand anything at all.

JOHN: (*To Nicholas.*) You see? So please speak freely.

NICHOLAS: Very well. John, in my study of astronomy the last several nights, I have learned a momentous thing.

JOHN: Right. Momentous. A momentous thing. (*Pause.*)

What does "momentous" mean?

NICHOLAS: Big.

JOHN: Oh...big.

NICHOLAS: Very big.

JOHN: Very big. Ohhh.

NICHOLAS: Next Monday...

ALISON: Today is Monday.

NICHOLAS: Tonight, then. There is going to be a furious storm with rain and thunder and lightning. The rain will be so great that the world will drown in less than an hour.

JOHN: That's too bad. Where will this take place?

NICHOLAS: The world, John...the entire world.

JOHN: Here, too?

NICHOLAS: And everybody in it.

JOHN: Oh, no. This could be serious.

NICHOLAS: Quite serious.

JOHN: Is there anything I can do? I mean, other than drown?

NICHOLAS: Fortunately, yes, there is. What I tell you may seem strange, but it's in the stars, and it's the only way that we may be saved.

JOHN: Tell me.

NICHOLAS: Sadly, I am able to save no one but us three—you, your daughter Alison, and myself. It is ordained.

JOHN: Tell me what the stars say.

NICHOLAS: Find three small tubs in which we might float individually.

JOHN: Uh, why not one big tub for all three of us?

NICHOLAS: John, John, John! Don't you remember the problems Noah had with his wife and the ark? He wished to heaven she had been in a separate boat. It would be the same here. A flood even greater than the one Noah saw will

The Canterbury Tales

27

inundate us this very night...unless we have a tub for each of us.

JOHN: Very well. I'll go get them. (*Starts to exit.*)

NICHOLAS: There's more.

JOHN: Oh. (*Halts.*)

NICHOLAS: Fill each tub with provisions...

JOHN: Fill them with provisions. Yes. (*Starts to exit.*)

NICHOLAS: There's more.

JOHN: More still? (*Halts.*)

NICHOLAS: By a rope, suspend them from the roof...

JOHN: Suspend them from the roof...

NICHOLAS: And bring an ax...

JOHN: Wait a minute. Suspend them from the roof?

NICHOLAS: So no one can see them.

JOHN: Oh. And bring an ax?

NICHOLAS: To cut the ropes when the water rises.

JOHN: Ahhh.

NICHOLAS: And to chop through the roof so we can escape.

JOHN: Right away. (*Starts to exit.*)

NICHOLAS: John. (*John halts.*) We must spend the night in the tubs.

JOHN: Yes.

NICHOLAS: And sleep.

JOHN: Yes.

NICHOLAS: With our eyes closed.

JOHN: Yes. (*Pause. Realizes.*) Wait. I always sleep with my eyes closed.

NICHOLAS: And when you hear me call "Water!" cut the rope.

JOHN: When you call "water."

NICHOLAS: Cut the rope.

JOHN: Yes. I've got it.

NICHOLAS: Then go.

JOHN: Yes! (*Starts to exit and stops.*) Is there anything else?

NICHOLAS: That is all.

The Canterbury Tales

28

JOHN: Yes, right. I see. Tubs. Hang them from the roof.

And...and...yes. I go now. *(Exits.)*

NICHOLAS: It worked, Alison, my love. Now we can be together.

ALISON: But I don't want to drown.

NICHOLAS: Oh, Alison, fear not. There will be no rain and no flood. That was my plot to get your father out of the way so we could have a little privacy.

ALISON: Oh, Nicholas, you are so clever!

(Alison throws her arms around Nicholas.)

NICHOLAS: I daresay I am.

ALISON: Kiss me, my beloved.

NICHOLAS: I daresay I will.

(Nicholas and Alison kiss and then exit into the offstage "house" together. Lights dim to indicate night. Giggling and dancing, Absolon enters carrying a lit lantern, a bag of items slung over his shoulder, and his guitar.)

ABSOLON: *(Aside.)* Tonight is the night I will be with my adored one, my sweet honeycombed Alison. *(Places his gear on the ground.)* First, some modest primping. My attire must be perfect. *(Adjusts his clothing and then glances down at it.)* Which it is. My hair must be appealing. *(Runs a giant comb through his hair.)* How could one be more appealing than I? *(Licks the fingers on both hands and rubs the sides of his head with them.)* There. All done. Oops. Not quite. For fresh smelling breath, a bit of licorice. *(Takes some licorice from his bag and puts it into his mouth.)* And maybe a taste of cinnamon. *(Tosses some cinnamon into his mouth.)* And finally, a spearmint leaf under the tongue. *(Puts a small leaf under this tongue.)* There. A more excellent specimen cannot be found in all of England. I think we can do with a little less light. *(Turns out his lantern. Lights dim.)* It's more

romantic this way. (*Picks up his guitar, moves to the window, and strums non-existent chords and sings with no discernable melody.*)

"I saw you at the church earlier today

Flirting with me in that fanciful way

Quite risqué

I would say

So I've come to offer myself to you."

(*Knocks on the window. The proper sound effects come after the knocking. Reacts.*) Hello, dear Alison, my fair bird, my sweet

cinnamon. Awaken and let me speak to you. Hello?

(*Knocks again.*) Are you there? I love you so much that I

sweat when I think about you. I sweat and sweat and

sweat—perspiration cascading down my brow, pouring from

my underarms, and soaking the spaces between each of my

toes—all for the love of you, sweetheart, all in anticipation of

a kiss from your soft lips. (*Knocks on the window again.*)

Hello?

ALISON: (*From inside.*) Absolon, is that you?

ABSOLON: (*Aside.*) Aww, she recognizes my melodious

voice. (*To Alison.*) Yes, love, it is I.

ALISON: Then get away from my window before I open it—

ABSOLON: Oh, yes, do. Please open the window.

ALISON: And throw a chair at you.

ABSOLON: (*Confused.*) A chair? I don't need a chair. I'm

perfectly comfortable standing.

ALISON: I mean to knock you down with the chair!

ABSOLON: (*Aside.*) Well, that's a strange way for a lady to

show her love.

ALISON: I love another, Absolon. Not you. Another.

ABSOLON: What? How could you love another when I, your

devoted servant, am clearly available?

ALISON: Away! Go away!

ABSOLON: (*Aside.*) Oh! I am so depressed. She loves

another. (*To Alison.*) Alas! Yes, all right. As soon as you

give me a tender kiss.

The Canterbury Tales

30

(Slight pause.)

ALISON: Will you then go away?

ABSOLON: Yes, I will...sadly.

ALISON: Is it still dark out there?

ABSOLON: So dark I can't see the nose on my face.

ALISON: Good. Then prepare for your kiss. *(Nicholas and Alison laugh. To Nicholas.)* Shhh!

NICHOLAS: *(Stage whisper.)* What are you doing?

ALISON: *(Stage whisper.)* Preparing my own plot.

(Nicholas and Alison laugh.)

ABSOLON: Were you chuckling, my sweet bird?

ALISON: I was preparing my lips for this encounter.

ABSOLON: *(Aside.)* She can't wait! *(To Alison.)* I hope this will be the first of many.

ALISON: *(Swings open the window shutters.)* Come then. Kiss me quickly or the neighbors may see us.

NICHOLAS: *(Stage whisper.)* But that's a mop.

ALISON: *(Stage whisper.)* Nicholas, shhh.

(Absolon makes a big show of wiping his lips with his sleeve and exercising his lips.)

ABSOLON: Are you ready, my love?

ALISON: I'm here. *(Holds a mop partially out the window.)*

ABSOLON: It's so dark I can't see you.

ALISON: You wanted to kiss me. So kiss me.

ABSOLON: Very well. *(Moves in and kisses the mop. Surprised, he backs away.)*

ALISON: Did you kiss me?

ABSOLON: I guess I did.

ALISON: That's it then.

(Alison slams the window shut. Stunned, Absolon wipes his lips.)

ABSOLON: What?! Alison, sweetest, may I suggest that you wash your hair? It tasted like a dirty floor, like it was full of mites and mice droppings. Like it was a...a mop. (*Realizes. Aside.*) Wait! It was a mop! A dirty mop at that. (*Coughs, spits, and vigorously wipes his lips.*) Alison! Those were not the soft lips of a young girl that I kissed.

(*Nicholas and Alison laugh.*)

NICHOLAS: (*To Alison, stage whisper.*) I think he's on to you, Alison.

ALISON: (*Stage whisper.*) He's an old fool. He'll never know the difference.

NICHOLAS: (*Laughs loudly.*) Your plots are more clever than mine.

ABSOLON: (*Overhears.*) What? (*Creeps back to the window and places his ear against it. Aside.*) Is that a man's voice?

ALISON: (*Laughs. To Nicholas.*) I think he will never want another kiss from me.

ABSOLON: (*Aside.*) No. That's a woman.

NICHOLAS: (*To Alison.*) Truly said.

ABSOLON: (*Aside.*) With a low voice.

ALISON: He'll not return, Nicholas, my love.

ABSOLON: (*Aside.*) And back to her high voice. (*Pause.*) Wait. She called the low voice "Nicholas." (*Realizes.*) There are two of them, and they have played me for a fool! I must avenge this disservice, this plot, this low, dirty trick. I shall. (*Pause.*) How shall I? How shall I take my revenge? How shall I display my displeasure, my horror, my anger? (*Gets an idea.*) Aha! I will go to the blacksmith... (*Goes to the side. To Blacksmith.*) That iron in the forge there. Is it hot? (*Blacksmith shows him the red hot end of it.*) I said hot. (*Touches it with his finger. The humorous sound of burning flesh, "sssss." Screams in pain.*) Yeeei!!!! (*Puts his finger in his mouth to cool it. Then he retracts it.*) That's hot. (*Blacksmith starts to take it back.*) I'll take it...if you will lend it to me for an hour. I'll

return it forthwith. (*Blacksmith nods and exits. Absolon admires the bar.*) Hot, hot, hot. (*Sucks on his burned finger.*) Yes. Yes, this will do admirably. Now it's back to the carpenter's house. (*Moves across the stage to the house. There, he primps for a few seconds and then knocks on the window.*) Knock, knock.

ALISON: (*From inside.*) Who's there? Are you a thief?

ABSOLON: Only in the sense that I would like to steal another kiss.

ALISON: Absolon? I thought you left.

ABSOLON: I returned.

ALISON: Why?

ABSOLON: I have brought you a...uh...a ring. It was my, uh, mother's treasure, but she gave it to me, and tonight I give it to you...for one more little kiss.

ALISON: Another kiss?

NICHOLAS: (*Laughs. To Alison, stage whisper.*) Let me handle him this time.

ALISON: Go to it.

NICHOLAS: (*To Absolon, imitating Alison's voice.*) Is it still dark outside?

ABSOLON: Truly. And I left my lantern aside. (*Aside.*) I'm not fooled by his voice.

ALISON: Stand aside, Absolon, and I will open the window.

ABSOLON: (*Aside.*) But I am a fool for *that* voice.

NICHOLAS: (*Stage whisper.*) Watch this, Alison.

ALISON: (*Stage whisper.*) What are you doing?

NICHOLAS: (*Stage whisper.*) I'm giving him something big to kiss...my backside!

(*Nicholas and Alison giggle as she opens the window. Nicholas pokes his fully clothed butt out of the window.*)

ABSOLON: You made me a fool before, sir, but this time you are the fool!

The Canterbury Tales

33

(Absolon presses the hot end of the iron bar against Nicholas's behind. We hear the "sssss" as the bar burns Nicholas.)

NICHOLAS: *(Screams loudly.)* Yeeei!!!

ABSOLON: There! Revenge is mine! *(Aside.)* And now I shall make a quick retreat, lest he choose to avenge my revenge!

(Absolon picks up his gear and rushes off. Still screaming in pain, Nicholas bounds from the house holding his smoking behind. Alison follows.)

NICHOLAS: *(To Alison.)* He burned me with something! I'm scalded! I'm singed, I'm charred...I'm cremated! *(Gasps loudly in pain.)* Ahhhh! Owwww! Ahhhh-owwww!

ALISON: What can I do to help? Tell me, please.

[END OF FREEVIEW]