

3. The Canterbury Tales

Geoffrey Chaucer

***The Canterbury Tales* (1387 onwards)**

Prologue 6

The opening lines of the General Prologue of *The Canterbury Tales* recall a series of literary references that were familiar to the learned reader of the time.

In fact, the description of Spring is a convention in love lyrics and in dream visions of earthly love. Yet, the elevated, allegorical tone is soon replaced by a realistic description of a mundane 14th-century London.

When April with his showers sweet with fruit
 The drought of March has pierced¹ unto the root
 And bathed each vein with liquor² that has power
 To generate therein and sire³ the flower;
 5 When Zephyr also has, with his sweet breath,
 Quickened again, in every holt and heath⁴,
 The tender shoots and buds⁵, and the young sun
 Into the Ram⁶ one half his course has run,
 And many little birds make melody
 10 That sleep through all the night with open eye
 (So Nature pricks them on to ramp and rage)⁷
 Then do folk long to⁸ go on pilgrimage,
 And palmers to go seeking out strange strands⁹,
 To distant shrines¹⁰ well known in sundry lands¹¹.
 15 And specially from every shire's end
 Of England they to Canterbury wend¹²,
 The holy blessed martyr there to seek
 Who helped them when they lay so ill and weak.

Befell that¹³, in that season, on a day
 20 In Southwark, at the Tabard, as I lay

Ready to start upon my pilgrimage
 To Canterbury, full of devout homage,
 There came at nightfall to that hostelry
 Some nine and twenty in a company
 25 Of sundry persons who had chanced to fall
 In fellowship, and pilgrims were they all
 That toward Canterbury town would ride.

1. **The drought of March has pierced:**
it. *È penetrato nel terreno arido di marzo*
2. **bathed each vein with liquor:** it. *ha bagnato ogni vena di liquido*
3. **sire:** it. *genera*
4. **Quickened again, in every holt and heath:**
it. *Risveglia in ogni collina boscosa e brughiera*
5. **shoots and buds:** it. *germoglio e bocciolo*
6. **Ram:** it. *Ariete*
7. **pricks them on to ramp and rage:** it. *li stimola ad accoppiarsi*
8. **long to:** it. *desiderano*
9. **strands:** it. *lidi*
10. **shrines:** it. *spoglie*
11. **sundry lands:** it. *terre diverse*
12. **wend:** it. *si dirigono*
13. **Befell that:** it. *Accadde che*

The rooms and stables spacious were and wide,
And well we there were eased, and of the best.
30 And briefly, when the sun had gone to rest,
So had I spoken with them, every one,
That I was of their fellowship anon¹⁴,
And made agreement that we'd early rise
To take the road, as you I will apprise¹⁵.
35 But none the less, whilst I have time and space,
Before yet farther in this tale I pace,
It seems to me accordant with reason
To inform you of the state of every one
Of all of these, as it appeared to me,
40 And who they were, and what was their degree¹⁶,
And even how arrayed¹⁷ there at the inn;
And with a knight thus will I first begin.

14. **I was of their fellowship anon:** it. *fui subito uno della compagnia*

15. **as you I will apprise:** it. *come apprenderete*

16. **degree:** it. *condizione sociale*

17. **arrayed:** it. *vestiti/disposti*

T. S. Eliot, *Waste Land* (1922)

APRIL is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.

- 5 Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers.

D. Lodge, *Small World* (1984)

‘April is the cruellest month,’ Persse McGarrigle quoted silently to himself, gazing through the grimy windowpanes at the unseasonable snow crusting the lawns and flowerbeds of the Rummidge campus. He had recently completed a Master’s dissertation on the poetry of T. S. Eliot, but the opening words of *The Waste Land* might, with equal probability, have been passing through the head of any one of the fifty-odd men and women, of varying ages, who sat or slumped in the raked rows of seats in the same lecture-room. For they were all well acquainted with that poem, being University Teachers of English Language and Literature, gathered together here, in the English Midlands for their annual conference, and few of

10 them were enjoying themselves.

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The Canterbury Tales (1387 onwards)

The Wife of Bath 7

This is one of the most famous portraits of The Canterbury Tales, that of a woman who loves life in all its aspects.

- A good Wife was there, from near Bath.
 She was somewhat deaf, which was a shame.
 She had such a talent for making cloth
 that she surpassed the weavers of Ypres and Ghent¹.
- 5 In all the parish there was no wife
 entitled to make her offering before her,
 and if one did, certainly she was so angry
 that she was out of all charity.
 Her kerchiefs² were of very fine fabric:
- 10 I dare say that the ones that were on her head of
 a Sunday must have weighed ten pounds.
 Her hose³ were of fine scarlet red,
 Laced⁴ tightly, and her shoes very new and supple⁵.
 Her face was bold and handsome and ruddy⁶.
- 15 She had been a worthy woman all her life;
 she had had five husbands at the church door,
 aside from other company in youth;
 but of that there is no need I speak now.
 And three times had she been at Jerusalem;
- 20 she had crossed many a strange river;
 she had been at Rome and at Boulogne,
 in Galicia at the shrine⁷ of Saint James, and at Cologne.
 She knew much about wandering by the way.
 She was gap-toothed⁸ to tell the truth.
- 25 On an ambling horse⁹ she sat easily,
 well wimpled¹⁰ and on her head was a hat
 as broad as a buckler or a shield¹¹;
 a footmantle was about her ample hips,
 and on her feet a pair of sharp spurs.
- 30 In company she could laugh and gossip well.
 She knew of the remedies of love, as it happened,
 for she knew that art's old dance.

1. **weavers of Ypres and Ghent:** well-known cloth-manufacturers from Flanders
2. **kerchiefs:** headscarves
3. **hose:** stockings. The red ones were expensive and appealing
4. **Laced:** it. *Con pizzi*
5. **supple:** flexible
6. **ruddy:** reddish, showing good health
7. **shrine:** tomb of a saint
8. **gap-toothed:** some of her teeth were missing. According to physiognomics this suggested sexual appetite
9. **ambling horse:** trotting calmly
10. **well-wimpled:** veiled elegantly
11. **buckler or a shield:** it. *scudo (rotondo) o scudo gigante*

