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Canterbury Tales General Prologue Translation

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Bridging Centuries: The Art and Importance of a Canterbury Tales General Prologue Translation

Few works in English literature cast a longer shadow than Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. Written in the late 14th century, this collection of stories told by a group of pilgrims on their way to the shrine of Thomas Becket in Canterbury remains a cornerstone of the literary canon. Yet for the modern reader, the very language that makes Chaucer so vivid also presents the greatest barrier. The original text is composed in Middle English, a vibrant but now archaic form of the language that can seem almost foreign to contemporary eyes. This is where a **Canterbury Tales General Prologue translation** becomes not just helpful but essential. The General Prologue, in particular, serves as the brilliant introduction to the entire work, introducing the pilgrims with sharp wit, subtle satire, and unforgettable detail. A good translation unlocks this world, making it accessible while preserving the spirit of Chaucer's masterpiece.

This article explores the significance of the General Prologue, the challenges of translating it, and how to choose a version that brings Chaucer's pilgrims to life. Whether you are a student, a casual reader, or a lover of classic literature, understanding the nuances of a Canterbury Tales General Prologue translation will deepen your appreciation of this timeless work.

The General Prologue: A Literary Mirror of Medieval Society

Before delving into translation, it is important to understand why the General Prologue demands such care. The Prologue is not merely a list of characters; it is a carefully constructed social portrait of 14th-century England. Chaucer assembles a diverse group of pilgrims representing nearly every level of society, from the noble Knight and the worldly Prioress to the corrupt Pardoner and the earthy Miller. Through their descriptions, Chaucer offers a subtle critique of the church, the aristocracy, and the emerging middle class. The humor, irony, and moral commentary are woven into the very fabric of the verse, which is written in rhyming couplets of iambic pentameter. This meter, known as the "heroic couplet," was Chaucer's innovation and has influenced English poetry for centuries.

A literal, word-for-word Canterbury Tales General Prologue translation might capture the basic meaning but would lose the poetry, the rhythm, and the witty double meanings. Conversely, a free translation might convey the humor but stray too far from the original's texture. The best translations achieve a delicate balance, providing modern readers with both the narrative content and a sense of Chaucer's artistic voice.

Why Translation Matters: From Middle English to Modern English

Middle English, the language Chaucer used, is difficult for most modern speakers. Consider the famous

opening lines:

*Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,*

Read aloud, the words feel familiar yet distorted. “Whan” is “when,” “shoures” is “showers,” “soote” means “sweet.” In a faithful modern version, these lines might become:

*When April with his showers sweet with fruit
The drought of March has pierced unto the root,*

This is from Nevill Coghill’s celebrated translation, which has introduced generations of readers to the Tales. Coghill chose to keep the rhyme and metre, producing a version that reads like poetry while remaining intelligible. Other translators, such as David Wright, have favoured a prose version that prioritizes clarity over poetics. Both approaches are valid, but they serve different audiences. For students encountering the work for the first time, a Canterbury Tales General Prologue translation in verse can preserve the original’s buoyant energy. For scholars seeking precision, a prose translation might be more useful for close analysis.

Key Challenges in Translating Chaucer’s General Prologue

Every translator of the General Prologue faces several daunting challenges. The first is linguistic obsolescence. Many Middle English words have shifted in meaning or disappeared entirely. For instance, “gentil” in Chaucer’s time meant “noble” or “well-born,” not necessarily “kind” — though the modern connotation often creeps in. Similarly, “pitee” carried a stronger sense of compassion and duty than today’s “pity.” A skilled translator must navigate these false friends carefully.

A second challenge is Chaucer’s use of rhyme and metre. The original couplets are tightly packed; a line like *“And smale foweles maken melodye”* rolls off the tongue. But translating while preserving the rhyme often forces the translator to add or omit words. For example, the couplet about the Knight:

He was a verray, parfit gentil knyght.

This line is deceptively simple. “Verray” means “true” and “parfit” means “perfect.” A literal translation would be “He was a true, perfect gentle knight.” But Coghill translates it as “He was a true, a perfect gentle-knight.” The addition of the article “a” and the hyphen helps the metre but slightly changes the emphasis. The translator must constantly decide: fidelity to meaning or fidelity to music?

Third is the challenge of cultural and topical references. Chaucer alludes to people, places, and practices that are obscure today. The Prioress’s brooch bears the inscription *“Amor vincit omnia”* (Love conquers all), which is a Latin phrase but also a pun on her ambiguous vow of chastity. A good translation will keep the Latin or explain it in a note. The Cook is described as having a “normal” sore on his shin — an inside medical joke about a condition called “Mormal.” Modern readers need help to catch such nuances.

Selecting a Canterbury Tales General Prologue Translation

With dozens of translations available, how does a reader choose? The following factors are worth considering:

- Verse vs. Prose: Verse translations (such as those by Nevill Coghill, Burton Raffel, or J.U. Nicolson) aim to preserve the original’s rhythm and rhyme. Prose translations (like David Wright’s or A.S. Kline’s online version) offer greater literal accuracy. For pure enjoyment, verse is often more engaging; for study, prose may be clearer.
- Modernization Level: Some translations use contemporary language and idiom; others retain a formal, archaic tone to hint at the original period. Coghill’s language is slightly elevated but still readable; Raffel’s is more colloquial.
- Annotations: A good translation should include footnotes and an introduction that explain historical context, obscure references, and Chaucer’s wordplay. The Penguin Classics edition (translated by Coghill) and the Oxford World’s Classics edition (translated by David Wright) are both well-regarded for their apparatus.

- Bilingual Editions: For those interested in comparing the original Middle English directly, a facing-page edition is invaluable. The Riverside Chaucer (the standard scholarly edition) offers the original text with glosses, but no full translation alongside. However, some popular editions, like the one by Simon Armitage, present the original and translation side by side.

Online resources also provide excellent translations. The website **Harvard's Chaucer Page** offers a literal prose translation of the General Prologue with links to the original, while the **Chaucer in the Twenty-First Century**project provides modern adaptations. For a quick taste, reading the first 18 lines in both original and translation can instantly reveal the power of a well-crafted modern version.

Sample Passage: Original and Translation Compared

Let us examine a more complex passage: Chaucer's description of the Wife of Bath, one of the most memorable pilgrims.

Original Middle English (lines 445–452):
A good wif was ther of biside Bathe,
But she was somdel deef, and that was scathe.
Of clooth-makyng she hadde swich an haunt,
She passed hem of Ypres and of Gaunt.
In al the parisshe wif ne was ther noon
That to the offrynge bifore hire sholde goon;
And if ther dide, certeyn so wrooth was she,
That she was out of alle charitee.

Nevill Coghill's translation:
A good Wife was there from beside Bath City,
But she was somewhat deaf, and that was a pity.
In cloth-making she had a special art,
She surpassed those of Ypres and of Ghent.
In all the parish there was no woman
Who dared to go before her in the offering;
And if any did, she would be so furious,
That she would be out of all charity.

Coghill preserves the rhyme and metre, though he occasionally stretches a line (e.g., "Bath City" for "Bathe" to maintain rhyme with "pity"). The phrase "out of alle charitee" becomes the modern "out of all charity," which captures the idiomatic meaning. The translation conveys the Wife's vanity and competitiveness without being overly literal.

A more literal prose version might read: "There was a good wife from near Bath, but she was somewhat deaf, and that was a shame. She had such a skill in cloth-making that she surpassed those of Ypres and Ghent. In all the parish there was no wife who could go before her at the offering; and if one did, certainly she was so angry that she was out of all charity." This is accurate but lacks the poetic flair. Both have merit, but for most readers, the verse version better captures Chaucer's playful tone.

The General Prologue as Social Satire: A Window Through Translation

One of the greatest gifts of a fine Canterbury Tales General Prologue translation is that it opens a window onto medieval English society. Chaucer was a master of estates satire—a genre that critiques each social class by presenting its typical representative. The Knight embodies the ideal of chivalry; the Squire represents youthful romance; the Yeoman is a skilled forester. But Chaucer subverts expectations: the Monk, who should be cloistered, loves hunting; the Friar is a seducer and a con artist; the Summoner is corrupt and lecherous. The

translation must preserve these ironies. A phrase like “a manly man, to been an abbot able” (describing the Monk) is a sarcastic jab: he is fit to be an abbot precisely because he is worldly and vigorous. A literal translation might miss the sardonic edge.

Similarly, the Prioress is described as “smyling with a ful simple and coy,” which Coghill translates as “She used to smile, and it was simple and coy.” The original “coy” meant “quiet, modest,” but also carried a hint of affectation. A modern reader might interpret “coy” as playful or shy, but Chaucer intended a critique of her overly refined, almost theatrical manners. The translator must navigate these semantic shifts to maintain the satire.

Modern Adaptations and Creative Translations

In recent years, several poets have offered fresh translations that reinterpret the General Prologue for contemporary audiences. Simon Armitage, the British Poet Laureate, produced a version in 2009 that uses a modern northern English

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