

# Reference: Manuscripts of the Canterbury Tales

## Manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales*

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### Medieval Books

The word “manuscript” is not one that Chaucer himself ever used. *Manus* is Latin for hand; *scriptus* is Latin for script, writing. Manuscript means “books made by hand,” as distinct from books printed on a press or your own laser-jet printer. But Chaucer died in 1400, more than 50 years before the printing press was invented; in his day, *all* books were made by scribes rather than by machines. There were no books that weren’t manuscripts.

Chaucer’s word for a hand-copied book is simply “boke.” He uses it the way other speakers of Middle English did, to mean all sorts of manuscripts large and small. He falls asleep on top of one such “boke” at the start of his dream in *The Book of the Duchess*, and his late-night reading of a tatty old book “totorn” triggers another dream in *The Parliament of Fowls*. As the *Legend of Good Women* begins, the God of Love reminds the narrator, Chaucer, that he has sixty books in a chest in his bedroom. They are full of stories about virtuous women, and their owner therefore has no excuse for writing such misogynist poems as his *Troilus and Criseyde*. A manuscript in the Middle Ages was just a “boke,” and according to Chaucer, it was a familiar sort of medieval object, the sort you kept under your pillow or in a box at the foot of your bed (BD 272-5, PF 110, LGW 273).

Chaucer’s depiction of the ordinariness of medieval books matters, because it contradicts the popular belief that printing revolutionized medieval society by making books suddenly widely available where they had never been before. The truth about medieval manuscripts is more complex and also more interesting. The European printing press was not exactly new. It was cobbled together from a variety of pre-existing technologies. Seals were used to print property marks in ancient Mesopotamia 6,000 years before Chaucer was born. They were still in use in his England, and some of them were mass-produced by seal presses, which were wooden frames with screw and lever mechanisms that pressed metal “dies” into warm discs of wax. When the wax hardened, these seals were threaded with silk and strung onto documents to authenticate them.

The printing press was an advance on this seal press technology, and on the technique of wooden block printing which was current in China, Korea, and Tibet for six hundred years before it

reached Western Europe. In 1450, Johannes Gutenberg, a German goldsmith, discovered that he could ink small pieces of metal that he had cast, like seals, with letters on them, and lock them into a wooden frame as blocks of text. The whole frame could then be pressed down repeatedly onto sheets of paper. (Paper was another invention that reached Europe from China, in this case via North Africa and Islamic Spain.) Once Gutenberg had enough pages, he could unlock his frame, rearrange the type, and reuse it to print another block of text on more pages. (On the global history of the book, see Eliot and Rose).

Gutenberg borrowed and recombined technologies in order to speed up the slow process of copying documents and books; to make lots more of them; and hopefully to sell them for profit. However, at no point did he endeavour to make something *new* with his newish machine. The first objects he printed were a Bible and a letter of pardon (a Christian instrument for the forgiveness of sins). When William Caxton set up the first printing press in England in 1476, he too found something familiar to print: Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. It's likely that Chaucer's famous *Tales* were attractive to England's first printer because, like a Bible or a letter of pardon, they were an established favourite among potential book buyers. But that brings us to the surprising part of this brief history. Weren't the Middle Ages a time of ignorance and illiteracy? Wasn't it the case that, as one journalist gushes in *The Guardian*, "[t]he book was bright at the beginning of the middle ages because all around it was darkness. . . . [S]tarved of education, short of information, medieval Europe made a cult of the book" (Jones)? How could a book be in so much demand in these starved "Dark Ages" that Gutenberg or Caxton would want to use a new technology to produce hundreds and hundreds of them?

The answer is actually simple: rumors of the booklessness of the Middle Ages are greatly exaggerated. The world's most highly literate cultures lay outside of Europe in this period to be sure. And medieval book making really was hard work. In Chaucer's time, scribes had to use goose quill pens and iron and oak gall inks to hand copy texts, typically onto specially prepared animal skins (rather than that new invention, paper). But the energy required to hand make a manuscript did not preclude the manufacture of lots of them. Art historian Nigel Morgan shows that during Chaucer's lifetime, scribes and decorators made tens of thousands of new service books for England's parish churches. Even if those books were too large and too shiny for the average parishioner to do much more than gawp at, it does not follow that they spent the rest of their time staggering around in illiterate darkness. As early as the twelfth-century, people from all walks of English life had to keep important legal records, from rental agreements to employment contracts (see Clanchy; Firth Green). As a result, alongside treasure books in medieval England were other manuscripts including scrappy rolls, single leaves, pamphlets, and cheap second-hand books, made and sold and used to meet the needs of an increasingly written culture.

The key point here is that by the time that Chaucer wrote the *Canterbury Tales* there were plenty of books in England. There were also plenty of people able to read them. Historians debate medieval literacy levels, but even if you accept the most conservative estimates—that only 10% of the male population was functionally literate—with a population of two million or so in the late 1300s, England had 200,000 readers. Notably, with the exception of the lowly Plowman, who never tells a tale in the version of the *Canterbury Tales* that survives, *all* of Chaucer's pilgrims are or at least could have been literate. The Guildsmen, the Man of Law, the Knight,

Squire, Franklin, the Shipman, Merchant, the Manciple, the Prioress, her attendants, and the other religious on their way to Canterbury—all of these people hold positions that demand that they work with written record, if only so they can manage accounts or use their prayerbooks. The Wife of Bath can say she is “nat textueel” (ParsP 57)—meaning not learned rather than entirely illiterate—in part because she lives in such a textual world. Chaucer’s pilgrims are potentially readers, as well as tellers, of tales.

## Chaucer’s Books

There is, moreover, a bookish cast to the “realism” of the *Tales*—that is, to the sense that, even though they are types borrowed from literary sources, many of his characters inhabit an observably real medieval world. Books and other writing technologies thicken up Chaucer’s depictions of contemporary medieval life, and sharpen his satire.

Consider for example the alchemist in the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale*, who gains nothing from his reading, “[t]hough he sitte at his book bothe day and nyght / In lernyng of this elvysshe nyce loore [“silly magical lore”]” (CYT 841-42). The Merchant in the *Shipman’s Tale* likewise sits at “his countyng-bord” with “his tresor and his hord, / For which ful faste his countour-dore he shette,” and which he fastens further in “[h]is bookes and his bagges many oon” (ShipT 83-5, 82). All is to no avail. His wife is running up debts as fast as he can write down earnings, and these debts include one to a monk who borrows the merchant’s own money in order to lend it to the wife in exchange for sex. We moderns live at a time when the demise of the book’s end is feared and mourned (and like those rumours about the illiterate dark ages, exaggerated; see Ehrenreich). In our culture, a large book collection is a sign of a certain kind of nerdy virtue. But there is nothing inherently good about books in Chaucer’s *Tales*. The Clerk would rather have twenty of them, “clad in blak or reed / Of Aristotle and his philosophie / Than robes riche” (GP 294-6). This seems a worthy substitution of wisdom for material comforts, until you notice the Clerk’s particular preference for books “clad in blak or reed.” Wax, inks, and leather used in bookbinding were typically dyed with black and red pigments in the period. In whichever of these materials the Clerk likes his texts “clad,” he appears to give their outward form, their “robes riche,” precedence over their inner “philosophie.” You can judge *this* reader by his love of covers.

Anti-book satire is even more pointed in the *Summoner’s Tale*. His is a story of a greedy and deceitful friar. He and his “felawe” use a pair of wax tablets to record the names of those they get money from, ostensibly in exchange for their prayers. But they do so “[a]scaunc[e]” – that is, falsely. In this mutable realm nothing is permanent, but eternal heaven awaits the faithful, or so the friar tells a grieving father. Then he proves his own point about the worldly corruption and mutability as he “plan[es]” off the wax and changes the names “[t]hat he biforn had writen in his tables; / He served hem with nyfles and with fables” (SumT 1745, 1758-60).

A modern English speaker would not use the word “book” to describe the friar’s instrument here, and yet the word’s history is embedded in objects like his “tables.” “Book” comes from Old English “bec,” beech tree. Beech wood was used in Roman Britain to make tablets; small boards were hollowed out, filled with black, red, or green wax, folded together, and tied shut to protect the text inscribed into the wax. Two hundred years after Roman occupiers left the British Isles,

Roman Christian missionaries came back to convert the population, which was then living under the rule of Germanic “Anglo-Saxon” invaders. The missionaries brought the Christian scriptures with them, in codices that were made from animal skins, written with ink, and stitched together between covers that were sometimes leather, but often wood. Probably because these looked like sets of wooden tablets, “boke” became the English word for a codex and especially for the Bible, the Book of the Christian faith (see the entry for “book” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*).

This association still lingers in Chaucer’s work hundreds of years later. Chaucer’s anti-book satire is not unqualified: he can imagine the divine “Book” alongside human books. An angel appears in the Second Nun’s Tale:

An oold man, clad in white clothes cleere,  
That hadde a book with lettre of gold in honde,  
.....  
And on his book right thus he gan to rede:  
“Oh Lord, o feith, o God, withouten mo,  
O Cristendom, and Fader of alle also,  
Aboven alle and over alle everywhere.” (SNT 201-2, 206-9)

The last line is a Middle English version of Ephesians 4:6, and the golden text it bears remembers the golden inks used in some of the oldest, largest, and most gorgeous Biblical codices (De Hamel). The gilding of these books was designed to remind the onlooker that God is light; that his word—*fiat lux* (Genesis 1:3)—brings light; that through his son, Christ, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us; and that this word lives on and illuminates “over alle everywhere” through Christian scripture. The angel voices this basic Christian message. He also embodies it: he is “clad in white clothes cleere” like the pages that he holds, his golden script indelible, his shining words the antithesis of the grubby red- and black-robed ones so appealing to the Clerk.

However, unlike the twenty books the Clerk covets, and has (or at least, can imagine) at his bedhead, the book the angel bears is a miraculous glimpse of the divine. It is out of reach, a vision rather than a possession. In the *Canterbury Tales*, books that are closer to hand are much more problematically *human* artifacts—even those that serve as vehicles for Christian doctrine. Consider the case of the little Christian boy in the *Prioress’s Tale*. He sits in his school in Syria with a “litel book” (PrT 516). The book is a kind of *abecedarium*, a basic primer of letters and prayers copied onto a wooden board or the pages of a small booklet. However, when the little boy is murdered, it is not his learning that brings the Virgin Mary from heaven to save him, but the song he is singing, a hymn in Mary’s own praise:

This litel child, his litel book lernynge,  
As he sat in the scole at his prymer,  
He Alma redemptoris herde synge,  
As children lerned hire antiphoner;  
And as he dorste, he drough hym ner and ner,  
And herkned ay the wordes and the noote,  
Til he the firste vers koude al by rote.

Noght wiste he what this Latyn was to seye,  
For he so yong and tendre was of age. (PrT 516-24)

He learned this song without reading it. He does not understand its Latin words; he sings it by “rote,” just as he heard it sung, rather than read as it was by the other children. Innocence is not learned from the book in this tale. It is preliterate and even precognitive. It belongs to a child who partakes of God’s grace because he is himself God’s creation, *before* he has grasped any bookish imitation of the divine.

Contemporary depictions of medieval children at school show them not at desks, but sitting before a master (Orme 153). If they have books, they hold these in their laps. Chaucer’s portrait of the Pardoner in the *General Prologue* conjures a similar image, and it deepens the association of manuscripts and worldly imperfection. The Pardoner has “[h]is walet, biforn hym in his lappe / Bretful of pardoun comen from Rome al hoot” (686-87). The idiom “al hoot” is used elsewhere in Middle English to describe of pies and cakes fresh from the oven, especially those hawked by street vendors. The Pardoner says that he obtained his letters of pardon “by the popes hond” (PardT 922). This is not just unlikely, it is false: his manuscripts are fakes, like his relics and his performances of piety. They are like hotcakes in the sense that they appear fresh and desirable. But they are the antithesis of real instruments of salvation, such as they words of Scripture, or the bread cakes given, as the body of Christ, to the faithful during Christian church services. They are also “hot” in the medieval sense of dangerous, a prop in the Pardoner’s deceitful games (see the entry for “hot” in *Middle English Dictionary*). Any buyer had better beware.

Notice also the close connection that Chaucer establishes between the Pardoner’s wallet full of manuscript pardons and the corruption of his own flesh. “Wallet” is a word first found written down in Chaucer’s *Tales*. It serves as a substitute for two more frequently used Middle English words, “purs” and “bagge,” both of which were medieval euphemisms for scrotum (see the entries for these words in *Middle English Dictionary*). This makes the image of the Pardoner carrying a small bag of manuscripts “hoot” in his lap, right where “real” men carry their testicles, an extension of Chaucer’s most famous statement about this pilgrim—“I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare [“a castrated or female horse”]” (GP 691). The Narrator believes—“I trowe”—that the Pardoner has no testicles and that this makes him less than human.

That is no surprise; medieval Christians were taught to reject anyone whose gender or sexuality fell outside of sanctioned, patriarchal norms. The Pardoner is the only pilgrim to whose tale the Host responds violently:

I wolde I hadde thy coillons in myn hond  
In stide of relikes or of seintuarie.  
Lat kutte hem of, I wol thee helpe hem carie. (PardT 952-4)

On the one hand, this is because the Pardoner alone tries to use his tale to defraud the pilgrims themselves. On the other hand, the Host’s threat is inflected by vicious hatred for the Pardoner’s otherness: he wants to cut out his testicles, not turn him over to the Church authorities.

But what does this have to do with writing and books? Why does Chaucer establish a connection at the start of the *Tales* between “hoot” manuscripts and the Pardoner’s missing and then threatened manhood? One answer emerges in the gap between the idealized, golden and God-given Book in the *Second Nun’s Tale*, and the many ordinary books used and abused elsewhere in their tales. In the framework of medieval Christian thought, the latter, human books, are like all other products of human labour. They are imperfect signs of the sinful nature of human beings and of Adam and Eve’s original disobedience. The first man and woman simply *heard* the Word of God; it wasn’t copied down for them by a scribe or read aloud by a priest or learned from a little primer. There were no books in Eden. It was only after the fall, because God cast them out of paradise, that people had to work for their physical and spiritual nourishment—to plow the fields and to read and write. This is one reason that the pen is often described as a plow in early medieval texts, and the parchment a field on which the scribe digs furrows (Curtius 314).

In this paradigm, manuscripts are at once vehicles for God’s truths *and* signs of original sin, and they are intimately connected by that first sin to medieval thinking about sexuality and gender. It held that Eve was the temptress in Eden, and women and their flesh a distraction from contemplation of the divine, according to the writings of such Church Fathers as St Jerome. Christ, God’s Word made flesh, was a virgin born of a virgin; Mary was herself the result of immaculate conception rather than sexual intercourse. Medieval Christianity established a complex of ideas about books, words, bodies, desire, and transgression, and in the *Canterbury Tales* this complexity is figured by pilgrims like the Pardoner, whose books are not only corrupt copies of Christian doctrine but actual fakes, and whose body and desires are not only sinful, but loathed perversions of an already imperfect norm.

The Pardoner has a fellow traveller in the Wife of Bath, and she fits into much the same figurative scheme in the *Tales*. She may not be “textual,” but a great deal of what she says, and much of what she claims to have done—including nagging (or worse) her husbands to death so she can inherit their wealth and marry her lover—is taken by Chaucer directly from medieval misogynist texts (Carruthers).

Like the Pardoner, then, the Wife is a bookish nightmare come vividly to life. She knows all about learned clerks who read manuscripts and “glosen”—annotate or interpret—them (WBP 26). Her last husband, Jankyn, is just such a clerk. He likes to spend his evenings reading aloud to her from a book about wicked wives. Most modern readers cheer the Wife on when she decides she has enough of this, grabs his manuscript, and rips out some of its detestable pages. His book embodies a tradition that condemns her just because she is female; it seems quite right that she should use her body to destroy its hateful message *about* her body.

And yet the Wife is no saint; she is materialistic, avaricious, an adulterer, a liar, and very possibly a murderer. She is the very epitome of the wicked wives Jankyn is reading about, and Chaucer emphasises this conflation of her being and his book. She damages the manuscript, silencing it. Jankyn strikes her in return, partly deafening her. If she is corruption embodied, then this scene suggests that the manuscripts that bring her into existence are implicated in that corruption, as are all books. Think about how easy it is for a Pardoner to use the technology of writing to fake the words of the Pope himself. Notice how readily the Wife can make Jankyn “brenne his book anon right tho” (WBP 816). His texts are certainly informed by his era’s

particular and violent prejudices, but Chaucer also seems to suggest that *nothing* is reliable or lasting in a fallen world. Manuscripts can bear lies; written truths can be burned. Flesh is frail, whether it is male, female, or indeterminately other—whether it is human or animal, flayed and dried and stretched into the pages of a book.

### **Books of *The Canterbury Tales***

Chaucer's most famous short poem is his complaint to "Adam Scriveyn." There he makes the connection between human failings and the copying of manuscripts explicit:

Adam Scriveyn, if ever it thee bifalle  
Boece or Troylus for to wryten newe,  
Under thy long lokkes thou most have the scalle,  
But after my making thow wryte more trewe;  
So ofte adaye I mot thy werk renewe,  
It to correcte and eke to rubbe and scrape,  
And al is thorough thy negligence and rape. (1-7)

The problem has a practical cast here: Adam the scribe's "negligence" (failure to attend to details or responsibilities) and "rape" (haste) give Chaucer a whole heap of trouble. He has to redo the man's work, scrape errors off the surface of the parchment page "ofte adaye." If Adam ever happens to copy out one of the poet's own works—*Troilus* or *Boece* for example—Chaucer hopes he will either do a better job, or develop a nasty case of scaly scalp as a punishment for his mistakes.

The poem has other implications. By naming a scribe called Adam, using that word "bifalle," and referring to his own writing as "making," Chaucer invokes some of the same ideas about Adam's disobedience and human degradation of God's creation that are at work in the *Tales*. The problem is not just this scribe, or this author-scribe relationship: it is that in the post-Edenic world, human "werk" is endless, because perfection is forever unattainable.

Chaucer's little poem to his scribe is often used to introduce discussions of manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales*. That is because the usual story about these manuscripts is that—as a result of the failings of medieval scribes and books—they are decidedly imperfect. The basic situation is as follows. There are 55 medieval manuscripts in existence that put together some version of the *Canterbury Tales*. There are also some manuscript fragments, cases where a leaf or two remains from a book otherwise lost. A few manuscripts contain one or two of the tales as separate works, without any of the framing pilgrimage narrative—for example, the *Tale of Melibee* or the *Monk's Tale*, copied in manuscripts alongside other poems not from the *Tales*. All of these manuscripts were made, as were Caxton's two printed editions of 1476 and 1483, between 1400 and 1500. After 1500, very few copies of the *Tales* are made by hand, and they and all printed editions are derived from earlier fifteenth-century copies. (On the fifteenth-century copies, see Mosser.)

As that narrative suggests, none of the copies of the *Canterbury Tales* come from Chaucer's own lifetime. That means that no surviving copy is "authoritative"; none certainly represent the author's intentions for his text. And all of the manuscripts, even the 55 that collect up most of the

tales, are in some sense fragmentary. They present their contents in various different sequences. For example, in some manuscripts, the *Man of Law's Tale* follows the unfinished *Cook's Tale*. In others, it is the Wife of Bath who speaks after the Cook. In some copies, because the Cook does not finish his first tale, he is allocated a second, the *Tale of Gamelyn*, a text that Chaucer himself did not write. Other spurious texts show up in manuscripts and printed editions. The Plowman gets to tell a tale in praise of the Virgin in one manuscript (a poem in fact by the medieval author Thomas Hoccleve, whom Chaucer knew). In some sixteenth-century editions, a Plowman's tale is added, but it is a piece of virulent anti-Church satire. (On these additions, see Higl.)

To put it plainly, the manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales* are a mess. The usual explanation for this is that Chaucer died before he could finish his work. He left some of his tales grouped together—the *Reeve's Tale* was joined to the *Cook's Tale*, for example—but scribes had to invent a way to arrange and link the rest. This is probably right, and it is why the poem “Adam Sciveyn” seems so relevant when you are studying the *Tales*. Chaucer left his greatest work in the hands of his scribes, and they made hash of things, just as he feared they would.

But we have argued here that Chaucer also writes in more complex ways about books. He associates them with human frailty not just because medieval scribes are inadequate copyists, or because hand copying anything is hard work that is prone to error, but because to fail is to be human, rather than divine. Books embody ideas imperfectly in the same way that bodies register the corruption of the flesh. That is simply the condition of postlapsarian existence (that is, life after the Fall). And this way of thinking about books shapes not just the depictions of books *within* the *Tales*, but the bookish shape of the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole.

Chaucer is sometimes ascribed “firsts” that he does not deserve: he was not the first to write decent poetry in English, for example. But he *was* the first English vernacular author to do what Giovanni Boccaccio does in his *Decameron*, and what the authors of *One Thousand and One Nights* do; he imposed a narrative structure on an otherwise miscellaneous collection of stories. Chaucer's scribes make a muddle of manuscripts of the *Tales* because Chaucer gives them an impossible task. They have to find a way to keep these texts together and in order, or risk disturbing the structuring illusion that these are tales told by pilgrims on their way to Canterbury. And Chaucer goes further than his Italian and Arabic sources: he turns some fragments—texts he has written over the years—into an always-already imperfect sort of book. His narrative takes place on horseback over several days; many of the pilgrims are drinking heavily; they come from different walks of life; some are natural rivals; and the Host has put them in contest with one another. What could possibly go wrong? Tales such as the Cook's are unfinished because scribes only had manuscript fragments to go by. But others are unfinished because Chaucer *designed* the *Tales* for disruption. “‘Hoo! . . . good sire, namoore of this!’” (NPT 2767) cries the Knight, and prevents the Monk from continuing his dreary tale. When scribes introduce spurious texts such as *Gamelyn*, they merely follow the “making” of Chaucer himself, he who introduces the Canon and his Yeoman so unexpectedly, or has the Miller interrupt the Host and disorder the *Tales* as soon as they have begun.

So it is not just *Canterbury Tales* manuscripts that are a mess; in Chaucer's depiction of it, life itself is inherently messy. Our discussion frames his account of that messiness with medieval Christian ideas about worldly imperfection and bodily and textual corruption. But like most



readers, we find Chaucer's stories to be exuberant, even celebratory representations of an imaginary medieval world, warts and all. There is something hopeful, too, about the gamble that Chaucer takes when he orders his story collection as a disorderly pilgrimage. That gamble is the one that any writer takes, knowing that scribes might make mistakes, and readers might not get the point. It is the risk all of us take, when we try to make ourselves intelligible to others in a world in which it is not always possible to tell real pardons—or real news stories—from fake ones. Manuscripts were the platform available for communication over distances and over time when Chaucer created the *Tales*. They have been supplanted, not just by printing but by far more transformative and powerful digital technologies. In this context, the question about books that Chaucer asks in *The Canterbury Tales*—what truths can we tell, when there is no stable medium for any of them?—is one that should interest us still.

### **Suggestions for Further Reading:**

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