1380

CANTERBURY TALES

THE SQUIRE'S TALE

Geoffrey Chaucer

Chaucer, Geoffrey (1343-1400) - English poet, known as the most important writer of Middle English. His Canterbury Tales (~1380) are told by traveling pilgrims who meet at a tavern and have a storytelling contest to pass the time. Each tale is preceded by an introductory prologue. The Squire's Tale - The tale, left unfinished, of King Cambuscan and his daughter Canacee and the magical gifts they receive from a mysterious knight.

THE SQUIRE'S TALE

At Sarai, in the land of Tartary,
There dwelt a king who warred on Russia, he,
Whereby there died full many a doughty man.
This noble king was known as Cambinskan,
Who in his time was of so great renown
That there was nowhere in the wide world known
So excellent a lord in everything;
He lacked in naught belonging to a king.
As for the faith to which he had been born,
He kept its law to which he had been sworn;
And therewith he was hardy, rich, and wise,
And merciful and just in all men's eyes,
True to his word, benign and honourable,
And in his heart like any center stable;
Young, fresh, and strong, in warfare ambitious
As any bachelor knight of all his house.
Of handsome person, he was fortunate,
And kept always so well his royal state
That there was nowhere such another man.

This noble king, this Tartar Cambinskan
Had got two sons on Elpheta, his wife,
Of whom the elder's name was Algarsyf,
And that same second son was Cambalo.
A daughter had this worthy king, also,
Who was the youngest, and called Canace.
But to describe to you all her beauty,
It lies not in my tongue nor my knowing;
I dare not undertake so high a thing.
My English is quite insufficient for
What must require a finished orator
Who knew the colours needful to that art
If he were to describe her every part.
I am none such, I must speak as I can.
And so befell that, when this Cambinskan
Had twenty winters worn his diadem,
As he was wont from year to year, I deem,
He let the feast of his nativity
Be cried throughout all Sarai, his city,
The last Idus of March, as 'twas that year.
Phoebus the sun right festive was, and clear;
For he was near his exaltation grown

In face of Mars, and in his mansion known
In Aries, the choleric hot sign.
Right pleasant was the weather, and benign,
For which the wild birds in the sun’s gold sheen,
What of the season and the springing green,
Full loudly sang their love and their affection;
It seemed that they had got themselves protection
Against the sword of winter keen and cold.
This Cambinskan, of whom I have you told,
High in the palace, mounted on his throne
With crown and royal vestments sat alone,
And held his feast, so splendid and so rich
That in this world its like was not, of which,
If I should tell you all of the array,
Then would it occupy a summer’s day.
Besides, it needs not here that I apprise
Of every course the order of service.
I will not tell you of their each strange sauce,
Nor of their swans, nor of their heronshaws.
Moreover, in that land, as tell knights old,
There are some foods which they for dainties hold.
Of which in this land the esteem is small;

There is no man that can report them all.
I will not so delay you, for it’s prime,
And all the fruit of this were loss of time;
Unto my first theme I will have recourse.
And so befell that, after the third course,
While this great king sat in his state that day,
Hearing his minstrels on their instruments play
Before him at the board, deliciously,
In at the hall door, and all suddenly,
There came a knight upon a steed of brass,
Holding in hand a mirror broad of glass.
Upon his thumb he had a golden ring,
And by his side a naked sword hanging;
And up he rode right to the highest board.
In all the hall there was not spoken word
For marvel of this knight; him to behold,
They stared and stretched and craned, both young and old.
This stranger knight, who came thus suddenly,
Armed at all points, except his head, richly,
Saluted king and queen and those lords all,
In order of rank, as they sat there in hall,
Showing such humble courtesy to each

In manner of behaviour and in speech,
That Gawain, with his old-time courtesy,
Though he were come again from Faery,
Could not have bettered him in any word.
And after this, before the king’s high board,
He with a manly voice said his message,
After the form in use in his language,
Without mistake in syllable or letter;
And, that his tale should seem to all the better,
According to his language was his cheer,
As men teach art of speech both there and here;
Albeit that I cannot ape his style,
Nor can I climb across so high a stile,
Yet sky I this, as to his broad intent,
To this amounts the whole of what he meant,
If so be that I have it yet in mind.
He said: “The king of Araby and Ind,
My liege-lord, on this great and festive day
Salutes you as he now best can and may,
And sends to you, in honour of your feast,
By me, that am prepared for your behest,
This steed of brass, that easily and well

Can, in one natural day (‘tis truth I tell),
That is to say, in four and twenty hours,
Where’er you please, in drought or else in showers,
Bear you in body unto every place
To which your heart wills that you go apace,
Without least hurt to you, through foul or fair;
Or, if you please to fly as high in air
As does an eagle when he wills to soar,
This self-same steed will bear you evermore
Without least harm, till you have gained your quest,
Although you sleep upon his back, or rest;
And he’ll return, by twisting of a pin.
He that made this could make full many a gin;
He waited, watching many a constellation
Before he did contrive this operation;
And he knew many a magic seal and band.
“This mirror, too, which I have in my hand,
Has power such that in it men may see
When there shall happen any adversity
Unto your realm, and to yourself also;
And openly who is your friend or foe.
More than all this, if any lady bright

Has set her heart on any kind of wight,
If he be false she shall his treason see,
His newer love and all his subtlety
So openly that nothing can he hide.
Wherefore, upon this pleasant summertide,
This mirror and this ring, which you may see,
He has sent to my Lady Canace,
Your most surpassing daughter, who is here.
“The virtue of the ring, if you will hear,
Is this: that if she pleases it to wear
Upon her thumb, or in her purse to bear,
There is no bird that flies beneath the heaven
But she shall understand his language, even
To know his meaning openly and plain,
And answer him in his own words again.
And every herb that grows upon a root
She shall know, too, and whom ‘twill heal, to boot,
Although his wounds be never so deep and wide.
“This naked sword that’s hanging by my side
Such virtue has that any man you smite,
Right through his armour will it carve and bite,
Were it as thick as is a branching oak;

And that man who is wounded by its stroke
Shall never be whole until you please, of grace,
To strike him with the flat in that same place
Where he is hurt; which is to say, ‘tis plain,
That you may with the flat sword blade again
Strike him upon the wound and it will close;
This is the truth, I seek not to impose,
For it shall fail not while it’s in your hold."
And when this knight had thus his message told,
He rode out of the hall and did alight.
His steed, which shone as sun does, and as bright,
Stood in the courtyard, still as any stone.
This knight was to a chamber led anon,
And was unarmed, and there at meat sat down.
The gifts were brought and royally were shown.
That is to say, the sword and glass of power,
And borne anon into the donjon tower
By certain officers detailed thereto;
The ring to Canace was borne also
With ceremony, where she sat at table.
But certainly, it is no lie or fable,
The horse of brass could no way be removed;

It stood as it were glued to ground. ‘Twas proved
There was no man could lead it out or drive
With any windlass that he might contrive.
And why? Because they hadn’t craft to heave it.
And therefore in that place they had to leave it
Until the knight had taught them the manner
Of moving it, as you’ll hereafter hear.
Great was the press of people to and fro
Swarming to see this horse that stood there so;
For it so high was, and so broad and long,
So well proportioned as to be most strong,
Just as it were a steed of Lombardy;
Therewith as horselike and as quick of eye
As if a gentle Apulian courser ‘twere.
For truly, from his tail unto his ear
Nature nor art could better nor amend
In any wise, as people did contend.
But evermore their greatest wonder was,
How it could go, being made all of brass;
It was of Faery, as to people seemed.
And divers folk diversely of it deemed;
So many heads, so many wits, one sees.

They buzzed and murmured like a swarm of bees,
And played about it with their fantasy,
Recalling what they'd learned from poetry;
Like Pegasus it was that mounted high,
That horse which had great wings and so could fly;
Or else it was the horse of Greek Sinon
Who brought Troy to destruction, years agone.
As men in these old histories may read.
"My heart," said one, "is evermore in dread;
I think some men-at-arms are hid therein
Who have in mind this capital to win.
It were right well that of such things we know."
Another whispered to his fellow, low,
And said: "He lies, for it is rather like
Some conjured up appearance of magic,
Which jugglers practise at these banquets great."
Of sundry doubts like these they all did treat,
As vulgar people chatter commonly
Of all things that are made more cunningly
Than they San in their ignorance comprehend;
They gladly judge they're made for some base end.
And some much wondered on the mirror's power,

That had been borne up to the donjon tower,
And how men in it such strange things could see.
Another answered, saying it might be
Quite natural, by angles oddly spaced
And sly reflections thus within it placed,
And said, at Rome was such a one, men know.
They spoke of Alhazen and Vitello
And Aristotle, who wrote, in their lives,
On mirrors strange and on perspectives,
As all they know who've read their published word.
And other folk did wonder on the sword
That had the power to pierce through anything;
And so they spoke of Telephus the king,
And of Achilles with his magic spear,
Wherewith he healed and hurt too, 'twould appear,
Even as a man might do with this new sword
Of which, but now, I've told and you have heard.
They spoke of tempering metal sundry wise,
And medicines therewith, which men devise,
And. how and when such steel should hardened be;
Which, nevertheless, is all unknown to me.
Then spoke they of fair Canace's gold ring,

And all men said that such a wondrous thing
They'd ne'er heard of as being in ring-craft done,
Except that Moses and King Solomon
Had each a name for cunning in such art.
Thus spoke the people and then drew apart,
But notwithstanding, some said that it was
Wondrous to make fern-ashes into glass,
Since glass is nothing like the ash of fern;
But since long since of this thing men did learn,
Therefore they ceased their gabble and their wonder,
As sorely wonder some on cause of thunder,
Of ebb, of flood, of gossamer, of mist,
And each thing, till they know what cause exist.
Thus did they chatter and judge and thus surmise
Until the king did from the board arise.
Phoebus had left the angle meridional,
And yet ascending was that beast royal,
The noble Lion, with his Aldiran,
When that this Tartar king, this Cambinskan
Rose from his board where he had sat full high.
Before him went the sounding minstrelsy,
Into a room hung with rich ornaments,

Wherein they sounded divers instruments
Till it was like a heavenly thing to hear.
And now danced merry Venus' children dear,
For in the Fish their lady sat on high
And looked upon them with a friendly eye.
This noble king sat high upon his throne.
And this strange knight was brought to him anon,
And then to dance he went with Canace.
Here was such revel and such jollity
As no dull man is able to surmise;
He must have known and served love's high emprise,
And be a festive man as fresh as May
Who could for you describe such an array.
Who could tell you the figures of the dances,
So odd and strange and the blithe countenances,
The subtle glances and dissimulation
For fear of jealous persons' observation?
No man but Launcelot, and he is dead!
I therefore pass the joyous life they led
And saw no more, but in this jolliness
I leave them till to supper all did press.
The steward bade them serve the spices, aye,

And the rich wine through all this melody.
The ushers and the squires got them gone;
The spices and the wine were come anon.
They ate and drank, and when this had an end,
Unto the temple, as was right, did wend.
The service done, they supped while yet ‘twas day.
What needs it that I tell all their array?
Each man knows well that at a kingly feast
There’s plenty for the greatest and the least,
And dainties more than are in my knowing.
Then, after supper, went this noble king
To see the horse of brass, with all the rout
Of lords and ladies thronging him about.
Such wondering was there on this horse of brass
That, since the siege of Troy did overpass,
When once a horse seemed marvellous to men.
Was there such wondering as happened then.
But finally the king asked of this knight
The virtue of this courser, and the might,
And prayed him tell the means of governance.
This horse anon began to trip and dance
When this strange knight laid hand upon the rein

And said: “Sire, there’s no more I need explain
Than, when you wish to journey anywhere,
You must but twirl a peg within his ear,
Which I will show you when alone with you.
You must direct him to what place also,
Or to what country you may please to ride.
And when you come to where you would abide,
Bid him descend, and twirl another pin,
For therein lies the secret of the gin,
And he will then descend and do your will;
And there he’ll stand, obedient and still.
Though all the world the contrary had sworn,
He shall not thence be drawn nor thence be borne.
Or, if you wish to bid him thence be gone,
Twirl but this pin and he’ll depart anon
And vanish utterly from all men’s sight,
And then return to you, by day or night,
When you shall please to call him back again
In such a fashion as I will explain
When we two are alone, and that full soon.
Ride when you choose, there’s no more to be done."
Instructed when the king was by that knight,

And when he’d stablished in his mind aright
The method and the form of all this thing,
Then glad and blithe this noble doughty king
Repaired unto his revels as before.
The bridle to the donjon tower they bore,
And placed among his jewels rich and dear.
How I know not, the horse did disappear
Out of their sight; you get no more of me.
But thus I leave, in joy and jollity,
This Cambinskan with all his lords feasting
Well nigh until the day began to spring.

Explicit prima pars.
Sequitur pars secunda.

The nurse of good digestion, natural sleep,
Caused them to nod, and bade them they take keep
That labour and much drinking must have rest;
And with a gaping mouth all these he pressed,
And said that it was time they laid them down,
For blood was in the ascendant, as was shown,
And nature’s friend, the blood, must honoured be.

They thanked him, gaping all, by two, by three,
And every one began to go to rest,
As sleep them bade; they took it for the best.
But here their dreams shall not by me be said;
The fumes of wine had filled each person’s head,
Which cause senseless dreams at any time.
They slept next morning till the hour of prime,
That is, the others, but not Canace;
She was right temperate, as women be.
For of her father had she taken leave,
To go to rest, soon after it was eve;
For neither pale nor languid would she be,
Nor wear a weary look for men to see;
But slept her first deep sleep and then awoke.
For so much joy upon her heart there broke
When she looked on the mirror and the ring
That twenty times she flushed, and sleep did bring-
So strong an impress had the mirror made-
A vision of it to the slumbering maid.
Wherefore, ere up the sun began to glide,
She called her mistress, sleeping there beside,
And said to her that she was pleased to rise.

Old women like this governess are wise,
Or often so, and she replied anon,
And said: “My lady, where will you be gone
Thus early? For the folk are all at rest."
“I will,” said she, “arise, for I’ve no zest
For longer sleep, and I will walk about."
Her mistress called of women a great rout,
And they rose up, a dozen more or less,
And up rose lovely Canace to dress,
As ruddy and bright as is the warm young sun
That in the Ram now four degrees has run;
He was no higher when she all ready was;
And forth she sauntered at an easy pace,
Arrayed according to the season sweet,
Lightly, to play and walk on maiden feet;
With five or six girls of her company
All down an alley, through the park, went she.
The morning mists that rose from the damp earth
Reddened the sun and broadened it in girth;
Nevertheless it was so fair a sight
That it made all their hearts dance for delight,
What of the season and the fair morning,

And all the myriad birds that she heard sing;
For when she heard, she knew well what they meant,
Just by their songs, and learned all their intent.
The point of every story, why it’s told,
If it’s delayed till interest grow cold
In those who have, perchance, heard it before,
The savour passes from it more and more,
For fulsomeness of its prolixity.
And for this reason, as it seems to me,
I should to my tale’s major point descend
And make of these girls’ walking a swift end.
Amidst a dry, dead tree, as white as chalk,
As Canace was playing in her walk,
There sat a falcon overhead full high,
That in a pitiful voice began to cry,
rill all the wood resounded mournfully.
For she had beaten herself so pitiably
With both her wings that the red glistening blood
Ran down the tree trunk whereupon she stood.
And ever in one same way she cried and shrieked,
And with her beak her body she so pricked
That there’s no tiger, nor a cruel beast

That dwells in open wood or deep forest,
Would not have wept, if ever weep he could,
For pity of her, she shrieked alway so loud.
For never yet has been a man alive-
If but description I could well contrive-
That heard of such a falcon for fairness,
As well of plumage as of nobleness
Of shape, and all that reckoned up might be.
A falcon peregrine she was, and she
Seemed from a foreign land; and as she stood
She fainted now and then for loss of blood,
Till almost she had fallen from the tree.
This king's fair daughter, Princess Canace,
Who on her finger bore the magic ring
Whereby she understood well everything
That any bird might in his language say,
And in such language could reply straightway,
She understood well what this falcon said,
And of her pity well-nigh was she dead.
So to the tree she went right hastily,
And on this falcon looked she pitifully,
And held her lap up wide, for she knew now

The falcon must come falling from the bough
When next it swooned away from loss of blood.
A long while waiting there the princess stood,
Till at the last she spoke, in her voice clear,
Unto the hawk, as you'll hereafter hear.
"What is the cause, if it be one to tell,
That you are in this furious pain of hell?"
Said Canace unto this hawk above.
"Is this for sorrow of death or loss of love?
For, as I think, these are the causes two
That torture gentle heart with greatest woe;
Of other ills there is no need to speak,
Because such harm upon yourself you wreak;
Which proves right well that either love or dread
Must be the reason for your cruel deed,
Since I can see no one that gives you chase.
For love of God, come, do yourself some grace,
Or say what thing may help; for west nor east
Have I before now seen a bird or beast
That ever treated self so wretchedly.
You slay me with your sorrow, verily,
Such great compassion in my heart has grown.

For God’s dear love, come from the dry tree down;
And, as I am a monarch’s daughter true,
If I but verily the real cause knew
Of your distress, if it lay in my might,
I would make you amends before the night,
As truly help me God of human kind!
And even now will I look out and find
Some herbs to heal your hurts with, speedily."
Then shrieked this falcon the more piteously
Than ever, and to ground fell down anon,
And lay there, swooning, deathlike as a stone,
Till Canace within her lap did take
And hold the bird till she began to wake.
And when from out her fainting fit she made,
All in her own hawk’s language thus she said:
“That pity wells up soon in gentle heart,
Feeling its likeness in all pains that smart,
Is proved, and day by day, as men may see,
As well by deeds as by authority;
For gentle heart can spy out gentleness.
I see well that you have on my distress
Compassion, my fair Princess Canace,

Of truly womanly benignity
That nature in your character has set.
Not that I hope much good therefrom to get,
But to obey the word of your heart free,
And so that others may be warned by me,
As by the whelp instructed is the lion,
Just for that cause and reason shall I fly on,
While yet I have the leisure and the space,
The story of my wrongs to you I’ll trace."
And ever, while the one her sorrow said,
The other wept, as she to water’d fled,
Until the falcon bade her to be still;
And with a sigh, right thus she said her will.
“Where I was born (alas, that cruel day!)
And fostered on a rock of marble grey
So tenderly that nothing troubled me,
I knew not what it was, adversity,
Till I could soar on high under the sky.
There dwelt a handsome tercelet there, hard by,
Who seemed the dwell of every nobleness;
Though he was full of treason and falseness,
It was so hidden under humble bearing,

And under hues of truth which he was wearing,
And under kindness, never used in vain,
That no one could have dreamed that he could feign,
So deeply ingrained were his colours dyed.
But just as serpent under flower will hide
Until he sees the time has come to bite,
Just so this god of love, this hypocrite
With false humility for ever served
And seemed a wooer who the rites observed
That so become the gentleness of love.
As of a tomb the fairness is above,
While under is the corpse, such as you know,
So was this hypocrite, cold and hot also;
And in this wise he served his foul intent
That (save the Fiend) no one knew what he meant,
Till he so long had wept and had complained,
And many a year his service to me feigned,
That my poor heart, a pitiful sacrifice,
All ignorant of his supreme malice,
Fearing he'd die, as it then seemed to me,
Because of his great oaths and surety,
Granted him love, on this condition known,

That evermore my honour and renown
Were saved, both private fame and fame overt;
That is to say, that, after his desert
I gave him all my heart and all my thought-
God knows, and he, that more I gave him naught-
And took his heart in change for mine, for aye.
But true it is, and has been many a day,
A true man and a thief think not at one.
And when he saw the thing so far was gone
That I had fully granted him my love,
In such a way as I've explained above,
And given him my faithful heart, as free
As he swore he had given his to me,
Anon this tiger, full of doubleness,
Fell on his knees, devout in humbleness,
With so high reverence, and, by his face,
So like a lover in his gentle grace,
So ravished, as it seemed, for very joy,
That never Jason nor Paris of Troy-
Jason? Nay, truly, nor another man
Since Lamech lived, who was the first began
To love two women (those that write have sworn),

Not ever, since the primal man was born,
Could any man, by twenty-thousandth part,
Enact the tricks of this deceiver’s art;
Nor were he worthy to unlace his shoe,
Where double-dealing or deceit were due,
Nor could so thank a person as he me!
His manner was most heavenly to see,
For any woman, were she ever so wise;
So painted he, and combed, at point-device,
His manner, all in all, and every word.
And so much by his bearing was I stirred
And for the truth I thought was in his heart,
That, if aught troubled him and made him smart,
Though ever so little bit, and I knew this,
It seemed to me I felt death’s cruel kiss.
And briefly, so far all these matters went,
My will became his own will’s instrument;
That is to say, my will obeyed his will
In everything in reason, good or ill,
Keeping within the bounds of honour ever.
Never had I a thing so dear- ah, never!-
As him, God knows! nor ever shall anew.

“This lasted longer than a year or two
While I supposed of him no thing but good.
But finally, thus at the last it stood,
That Fortune did decree that he must win
Out of that place, that home, that I was in.
Whether I felt woe, there’s no question, none;
I can’t describe my feelings, no, not one;
But one thing dare I tell, and that boldly,
I came to know the pain of death thereby;
Such grief I felt for him, none might believe.
So on a day of me he took his leave,
So sorrowfully, too, I thought truly
That he felt even as deep a woe as I,
When I had heard him speak and saw his hue.
Nevertheless, I thought he was so true,
And that to me he would come back again
Within a little while, let me explain;
And ‘twas quite reasonable that he must go
For honour’s sake, for oft it happens so,
That I made virtue of necessity,
And took it well, because it had to be.
A look of cheer I felt not I put on,

And took his hand, I swear it by Saint John.
And said to him: ‘Behold, I’m yours in all;
Be you to me as I have been, and shall.’
What he replied it needs not I rehearse,
Who can say better than he, who can do worse?
When he had well said, all his good was done.
‘It well behooves him take a lengthy spoon
Who eats with devils,’ so I’ve heard folk say.
So at the last he must be on his way,
And forth he flew to where it pleased him best
When it became his purpose he should rest,
I think he must have had this text in mind,
That ‘Everything, returning to its kind,
Gladdens itself’; thus men say, as I guess;
Men love, and naturally, newfangledness,
As do these birds that men in cages feed.
For though you night and day take of them heed,
And fairly strew their cage as soft as silk,
And give them sugar, honey, bread, and milk,
Yet on the instant when the door is up,
They with their feet will spurn their feeding cup,
And to the wood will fly and worms will eat;

So are they all newfangled of their meat,
And love all novelties of their own kind;
Nor nobleness of blood may ever bind.
So fared this tercelet, oh, alas the day!
Though he was gently born, and fresh and gay,
And handsome, and well-mannered, aye and free,
He saw a kite fly, and it proved a she,
And suddenly he loved this she-kite so
That all his love for me did quickly go,
And all his truth turned falsehood in this wise;
Thus has this kite my love in her service,
And I am love-lorn without remedy."
And with that word the hawk began to cry,
And after, swooned on Canace’s fair arm.
Great was the sorrow for the falcon’s harm
That Canace and all her women made;
They knew not how they might this falcon aid.
But Canace home bore her in her lap,
And softly her in poultices did wrap
Where she with her own beak had hurt herself.
Now Canace dug herbs more rich than pelf
Out of the ground, and made up ointments new

Of precious herbs, all beautiful of hue,
Wherewith to heal this hawk; from day to night
She nursed her carefully with all her might.
And by her bed's head she contrived a mew
And lined the cage with velvets all of blue,
Symbol of truth that is in women seen.
And all without, the mew was painted green,
And there were painted all these treacherous fowls
As are these titmice, tercelets, and these owls,
While for despite were painted there beside
Magpies, that they might cry at them and chide.
Thus leave I Canace her hawk keeping,
I will no more, just now, speak of her ring,
Till I come back with purpose to explain
How this poor falcon got her love again
Repentant, as the story tells to us,
By mediation of that Cambalus,
The king's son, of whom I've already told.
But henceforth I a straightened course will hold
Great battles and adventures to relate,
Whereof were never heard such marvels great.
First will I tell you of King Cambinskan

Who won so many a town and many a man;
And after will I speak of Algarsyf,
How he won Theodora for his wife,
For whom full oft in peril great he was,
Had he been helped not by the steed of brass;
And after that I'll speak of Cambalo,
Who in the lists fought with the brothers two
For Canace, before he could her win.
And where I left off, I'll again begin.

Explicit secunda pars.
Incipit pars tercia.

Apollo in his chariot whirled so high
That in the God Mercurius' house, the sly—

(unfinished)