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A group of pilgrims bound for Canterbury Cathedral agree to pass the weary miles by taking turns at storytelling. The travelers ? noble, coarse, jolly, and pious ? offer a vibrant portrait of fourteenth-century English life. Their narratives form English literature's greatest collection of chivalric romances, bawdy tales, fables, legends, and other stories.

The Canterbury Tales reflects a society in transition, as a middle class began to emerge from England's feudal system. Craftsmen and laborers ride side by side with the gentry on the road to the shrine of St. Thomas à Becket, and their discussions and arguments about ethical issues mirror their changing world. The pilgrims' conversations and stories also reveal their individual personalities, and Chaucer's vivid, realistic characterizations assured the Tales an instant and enduring success. Each pilgrim's story can be read separately and appreciated in its own right; all appear here in a lucid translation into modern English verse by J. U. Nicolson