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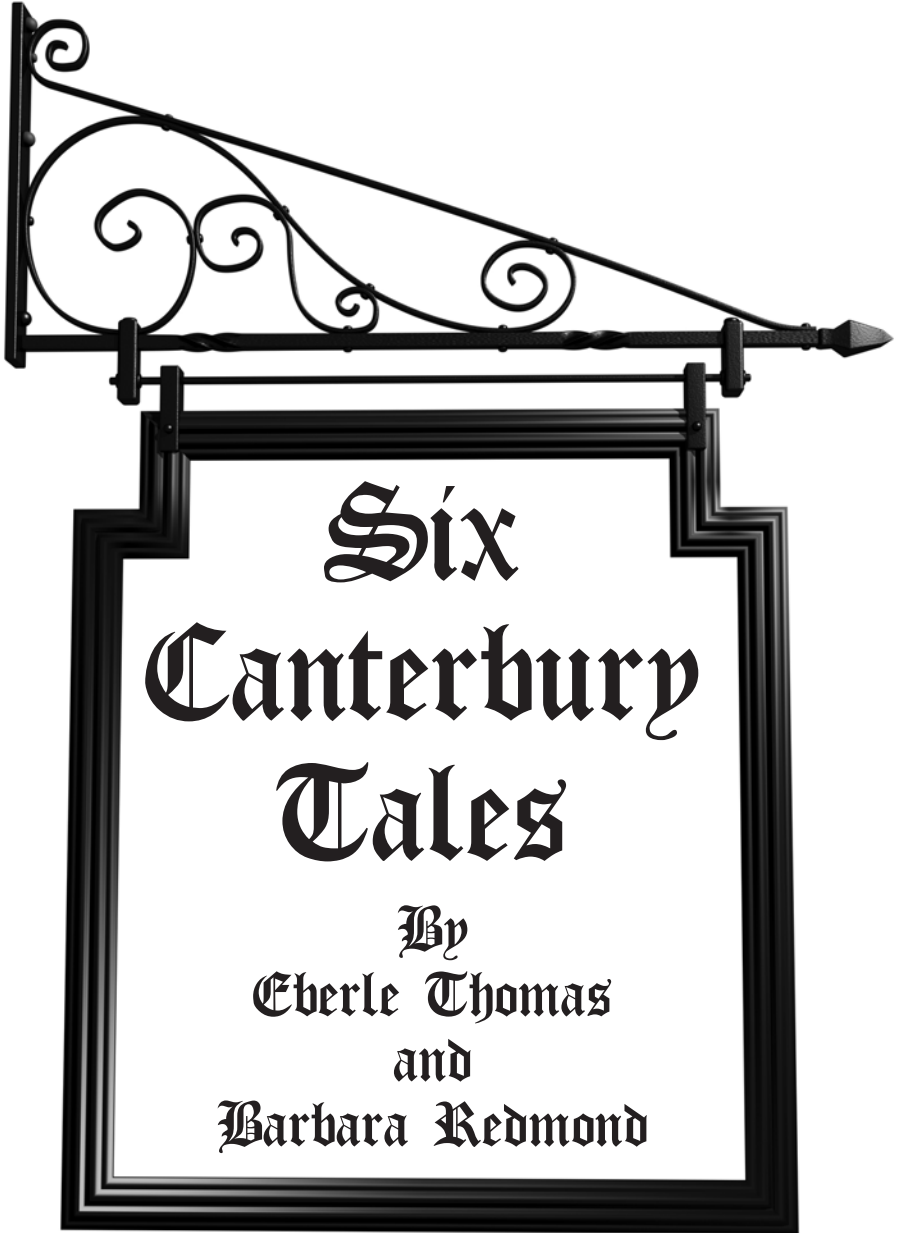
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Family Plays



Six
Canterbury
Tales

By
Eberle Thomas
and
Barbara Redmond

Six Canterbury Tales

Originally commissioned by Florida's
Asolo Touring Theatre for high-school performances.

Comedy. By Eberle Thomas and Barbara Redmond. Freely adapted from the work of Geoffrey Chaucer. Cast: 4m., 2w. Here is a lively comic adventure in which the characters tell and perform freely adapted versions of Chaucer's beloved *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, *The Clerk's Tale*, *The Friar's Tale*, *The Manciple's Tale*, *The Franklin's Tale* and *The Pardoner's Tale*. Four pilgrims on their way to Canterbury have arrived at the Tabard Inn on a rainy evening in April 1385. They are a wife of bath, a nun, a knight and Geoffrey Chaucer. They are joined by two new arrivals who introduce themselves as a miller and a plowman. Over supper, the wife of bath suggests that they should entertain one other by telling their favorite stories. They proceed to do so, and the results are by turn amusing, moving and revealing of the six characters ... so revealing that the two latecomers are exposed as thieves. One of the lawbreakers is driven from the inn. The other is offered a measure of forgiveness and accepted as a pilgrim. This play is a favorite with high-school actors and audiences. *Production notes are available in the script containing details on set and characterization. Simple int. set. Costumes: rendered from the 14th century. Approximate running time: 75 minutes. Code: SU9.*

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Six Canterbury Tales

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Adapted from Chaucer's work by

EBERLE THOMAS & BARBARA REDMOND

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**This play was commissioned by
THE ASOLO TOURING THEATRE
for production during its 1982-1983 season.**

Foreword

I always have a moment of trepidation when the first draft of a newly commissioned script arrives in the mail. After months of phone conversations and correspondence with the playwright about what the script might be, suddenly, there it is.

However, after reading only a few pages of *Six Canterbury Tales*, my fears vanished as I became absorbed in the story of two thieves hiding out among a small band of pilgrims spending the night at a 14th century inn. This frame device for the *Tales* also proved to work wonderfully for our often boisterous school audiences.

I will never forget the morning we performed the play in a huge, barn-like auditorium packed with 1,200 wisecracking high school students in a "prove it to me" mood. As the lights dimmed, all 1,200 took advantage of the darkness to create a din equaled only, I'm sure, by the roar of the Vandal hordes at the gates of Rome. As the two thieves entered, disrupting the pious devotions of Sister Emily and the studious absorption of Chaucer in his book, and proceeded to barter with the Innkeeper, to hide their booty in the rafters, and to insinuate themselves into the tiny band of Pilgrims, the raucous audience became, at first, curious, then amused, and, at last, actually interested in the proceedings. Before they knew it, they were caught up in the high-spirited hilarity of "The Wife of Bath's Tale," and they stayed with us through the heroics of Sister Emily at the conclusion of the play. The variety in the selection of the tales told, amidst the growing suspicions of the Pilgrims about their new recruits, kept them enraptured, and they greeted the actors with a standing ovation at the curtain call.

Although the audience's turn-around was not always quite so dramatic, the response of the students, and their teachers, was enthusiastic throughout our tour. Teachers were especially appreciative of the fact that students, after having seen the play, became interested in reading the original tales.

Not only was the production popular with our audiences, but with our actors as well. The six tales are quite distinct in content and emotional

quality, and each develops its own style of presentation, based on the personality of the teller. Actors relish the opportunity to portray a wide range of characters, transforming into each with a few deft touches in full view of the audience.

I heartily recommend *Six Canterbury Tales* to other directors and their companies. It's fun to work on, fun to perform. And it works like "Gangbusters" for both high school and adult audiences.

Robert G. Miller
Artistic Director
Asolo Touring Theatre
December, 1990

Characters

GEOFFREY CHAUCER

A NUN

THE FIRST THIEF (Chester, The Miller)

THE SECOND THIEF (Harry, The Plowman)

THE WIFE OF BATH

THE KNIGHT

THE HOST (doubled by The Knight)

[4 men, 2 women]

The Scene

England. A country inn called "The Tabard," about twenty miles north of Canterbury.

Two tables. The larger one is up center, with a long bench upstage of it, as well as chairs at its right and left. The smaller table is near a window down right and has two chairs flanking it. In the same wall as the window, upstage of it, is the main door of the inn. In the wall above the larger table is an alcove which gives access to the remainder of the inn by means of a passageway up left. On the room's left wall is a large fireplace, in which a low fire is burning. At the downstage side of the fireplace is a log bin and a stool.

April 18, 1385. A rainy evening, around eight o'clock. The action of the play is continuous.

A Note on the Setting

The place, though it may be presented in a fragmentary or impressionistic manner, is assumed to be quite real. Only alterations of lighting and a few strains of music should be needed to revise the atmosphere for a particular tale. Imaginative use of carefully selected properties and other elements logically found in the tavern—chairs, benches, and the fireplace—should be all that is needed to permit each story to come to life. The setting throughout, however, is a single, confined and limited, space—The Tabard Inn.

Assignments of Roles in the Tales

The Wife of Bath's Tale: "What a Woman Wants Most"

QUEEN GUINEVERE	The Wife of Bath
KERWIN	The Knight
THE OLD WOMAN	The Nun

The Miller's Tale: "Patient Griselda"

WALTER	The Plowman
GRISELDA	The Wife of Bath
JANICULA	Chaucer
MESSENGER	The Knight

The Plowman's Tale: "The Man Who Rode with the Devil"

BLOODY JACK	The Miller
THE STRANGER	The Knight
THE OLD WOMAN	The Wife of Bath
THE OLD MAN	Chaucer

The Nun's Tale: "The Crow"

A MONOLOGUE	The Nun
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The Knight's Tale: "Who Was the Most Generous?"

ARVIRAGUS	Chaucer
DORIGEN	The Nun
AURELIUS	The Plowman
THE SCHOLAR	The Miller

Chaucer's Tale: "Thieves' Gold"

THE FIRST THIEF	First Thief
THE SECOND THIEF	Second Thief
THE THIRD THIEF	The Knight
THE BARMAID	The Nun
THE OLD WOMAN	The Wife of Bath

On the Transformations of the Characters

Through the audience may not, and perhaps should not, be aware of it, the scheme by which the six major characters assume roles within the tales has been intentionally chosen, rather than randomly selected.

In some instances, the basis for choice is no more than the simple judgment that a certain person is fit for the part.

In other cases, the roles are closer to home. In the final tale, for example, the First and Second Thieves are required by Chaucer to play themselves. A variation on this theme may be seen in the case of the tale told by the Knight, a character who tells his own story, while distancing himself from it, by casting another of the pilgrims in the role of Aurelius.

At various times, we have placed each of the six in a role outside the bounds of type casting in order to disclose an otherwise hidden aspect of his or her personality.

It is desirable that each tale should develop its own manner of handling the transformation of characters-to-roles, as well as its own distinctive style. Variety, contrast, and surprise are to be preferred to mere consistency.

At the beginning of the play, certain costume pieces are removed by actors (or have already been removed by them) and placed "in storage" in the room. These include cloaks, hats, shawls, and luggage. It is assumed that each character's costume pieces and personal props will "travel" to other characters in order to provide them with a minimal, but highly suggestive, form of costuming for the tales.

SCENE ONE

Strangers Meet

(As LIGHTS come up, we hear the sound of light, persistent RAIN. [From time to time, the regular rhythm of the rain will be broken by a sudden gust of WIND and a momentary pelting of RAINDROPS on the windowpane.]

Seated at a table down right, CHAUCER is discovered, reading a book. On a stool facing the fireplace, her face invisible to us, is the NUN, who "tells" her rosary. Standing upstage, his back to us, is the HOST of the inn. HE finishes setting out utensils for a light supper for a party of four and then exits into the passageway at left. The DOOR opens. Enter two men, bustling in to escape the rain: the FIRST THIEF, Chester, and, following sheepishly, the SECOND THIEF, Harry. THEY leave the door ajar. CHAUCER briefly glances up at the dubious-looking newcomers before politely returning to his book. The NUN shows no sign of noticing the intrusion)

FIRST THIEF: *(To Chaucer)* Beg pardon. You the host here?

CHAUCER: No.

FIRST THIEF: Where's he at?

CHAUCER: I suspect he's in the . . .

(The HOST re-enters with a kettle of soup and moves to the fireplace with it, ignoring the presence of the newcomers)

FIRST THIEF: That him?

HOST: *(Noticing them)* Close the door, will you?

(The SECOND THIEF closes the door and removes his hat)

HOST: Well, what is it?

FIRST THIEF: Me and my friend here are just passing through. We saw your sign, and we was wondering if you've got spare lodgings for the night and a bit of food.

HOST: *(HE looks at them, then silently moves to hang the kettle inside the fireplace to keep warm)* Excuse me, sister. *(Over his shoulder to the thieves, as HE hangs up the kettle)* Maybe I can accommodate you. Maybe I can't. I'll have to turn it over in my mind. *(Turns to them and looks them over keenly)* I can tell you one thing right now, though. I don't run no charitable institution. It's a cash business I got here, and it'll cost you one crown for the two of you for the night. That's for a bed and whatever's left over after the other guests eat. I've done cooking for the day. One crown. Take it or leave it.

FIRST THIEF: My good man. Money is no object. *(Withdraws a gold piece from a large sack and hands it to the Host)* Where's the room, then?

HOST: Under the stairs. You'll have to wait a bit till I can straighten it up.

FIRST THIEF: Oh, we don't mind. We'll wait right here working up an appetite for our leftovers.

HOST: I'll call you. *(HE exits)*

FIRST THIEF: Sit down, Harry.

(The SECOND THIEF moves to the table up center and sits on the bench. The FIRST THIEF moves to Chaucer)

FIRST THIEF: Hope you don't object to a bit of company.

CHAUCER: Believe me, I'll hardly notice you. *(HE returns to his book)*

FIRST THIEF: *(Moving to the Nun)* And don't you worry about us either, ma'am. We'll just be like little mice. As quiet and harmless as you please. Ain't that right, Harry? *(He hits the Second Thief with his hat)*

SECOND THIEF: That's right.

FIRST THIEF: *(Stowing his sack carefully up right)* This here room'll be silent as a tomb. *(HE sits in a chair near the Second Thief)*

WIFE OF BATH: *(Entering from the alcove)* Whatever it is, I do hope it tastes better then it smells. *(Noticing the two thieves)* Well, well. Our numbers, I see, have swollen by an additional twofold lump. Are you guests here, or someone's misplaced menials?

FIRST THIEF: We're your sort, ma'am.

WIFE OF BATH: What, pilgrims?

SECOND THIEF: Pilgrims?

WIFE OF BATH: We're on our way to Canterbury, to visit the shrine of Saint Thomas Beckett. But I wouldn't imagine that's on your itinerary.

SECOND THIEF: No, ma'am, we're just . . .

FIRST THIEF: Don't be so modest, Harry. *(Rises)* Of course, I'm just a poor working man, madam. A miller, you know. But I help to make the world go round. And Harry here, he's nothing but a plowman, never had a penny to bless himself with. But we did think we'd try this once to make the pilgrimage to dear old Canterbury. For the sake of our sins, you know. So, if that's where your lot is going, perhaps we'll just tag along with you.

WIFE OF BATH: Well, I'm sure I don't know . . .

NUN: We shall be pleased to have your company. All wanderers in search of salvation are welcome in the sight of God.

FIRST THIEF: That's a lovely sentiment, sister. Ain't it, Harry? Just nod your head, Harry. He's speechless with gratitude, ma'am.

WIFE OF BATH: So be it. No doubt you will prove fascinating additions to our traveling menagerie. Permit me to do the honors. Sister Emily is the humble lady of the cloth you've been addressing. And over here, so eager to return to his book, is Mister Geoffrey Chaucer, a government official . . .

CHAUCER: A minor one.

WIFE OF BATH: . . . who dabbles, he tells me, in the writing of verses.

CHAUCER: Also minor ones.

WIFE OF BATH: I am merely a lady from Bath. A widow. Five times a widow, in fact. As many husbands as there are fingers on this hand. All different: some disgusting, some delightful. At present, I'm thinking of setting out to match the other hand as well.

FIRST THIEF: You don't say.

WIFE OF BATH: Husbands, you see, come in all shapes and sizes. I have a fancy to try one of each. It's a little weakness of mine, you might say. In fact, it's because of this weakness—and the many sins I've committed in indulging it—that I've had to turn myself into a regular full-time pilgrim. I go from one to the next, you know: Jerusalem, Cologne, all the shrines here in England, of course. Sometimes I go to repent crimes I'm only giving serious consideration to. So. There. You've met us all.

NUN: Not quite.

WIFE OF BATH: Not . . . ? Oh, for heaven's sake, I've forgotten the Knight. The fact is, he's so quiet one doesn't notice whether he's here or not. It's a pity, too, because he's a handsome devil, even if he is no more entertaining than a good-sized stone.

(Enter the KNIGHT, moving directly to his chair at the table)

Ah, we were just speaking about you, Sir William. Permit me to introduce these two fine fellows. They want to come along with us to Canterbury.

FIRST THIEF: I'm Chester the miller, sir. This here's my chum, a poor plowman named Harry. We'd crave to follow in your footsteps, sir, for the good of our miserable souls.

WIFE OF BATH: Let's eat. I'm starved.

(As SHE sits and makes for the food, the NUN loudly clears her throat)

WIFE OF BATH: Oh. Sister Emily, perhaps you'll put us in the proper frame of mind by saying grace.

NUN: Lord, may we be humble enough to accept graciously what is set before us and bold enough to grasp what is not set before us, amen. Pass the bread, please.

(THEY eat bread and cheese, drink water or wine. CHAUCER serves soup. The THIEVES watch at first. Later THEY will move in and help themselves)

FIRST THIEF: Well, there's little enough to eat, ain't there?

CHAUCER: A simple pilgrim's repast is always meager, you know.

FIRST THIEF; Simple is fine, but this here's pathetic.

CHAUCER: Starve the body to feed the soul.

WIFE OF BATH: Good heavens, let's not talk of starving. Didn't we all agree to pitch in to make the time pass more agreeably?

FIRST THIEF: How do you aim to do that, ma'am?

WIFE OF BATH: By telling tales. It was my idea, you see. The plan is for each one in turn to entertain the rest with a story this evening. What do you think? Will you and your friend join in?

FIRST THIEF: Kind lady, I'd be cheerful to. But I'm not sure I know no tales as can be repeated to a nun.

CHAUCER: Perhaps you could make a few alterations. You know, leave out the parts you fear might give offense.

WIFE OF BATH: Good heavens, no! Leave nothing out. The object, after all, is to amuse us, not bore us.

CHAUCER: I am merely suggesting a compromise on behalf of the sister here.

WIFE OF BATH: Oh, Sister Emily will be able to outlive our lapses of taste, I dare say. One goes on a pilgrimage to gain wisdom through experience. Isn't that right, Sister Emily?

NUN: I believe so, yes.

WIFE OF BATH: Good. *(To the First Thief)* And what about your friend?

FIRST THIEF: Oh, he'll do his part, ma'am, don't you worry. You'd never guess how comical Harry can be once he gets going.

WIFE OF BATH: I look forward to the unveiling of his talents with keen anticipation. Well. That's settled. Assuming there are no objections, I shall take it upon myself to begin.

SCENE TWO

The Wife Of Bath's Tale: What a Woman Wants Most

WIFE OF BATH: The story I shall tell takes place in an ancient time, when King Arthur ruled our land. In those days, of course, spirits and fairies and elves could be found in every forest.

FIRST THIEF: And dragons?

WIFE OF BATH: I beg your pardon?

FIRST THIEF: What about ghosts and goblins and giants? Got any of them in your tale?

WIFE OF BATH: Do you mind?

FIRST THIEF: Mind what?

WIFE OF BATH: May I go on?

FIRST THIEF: By all means, press on.

WIFE OF BATH: In Arthur's court, there was an unruly knight, Kerwin the Willful he was called. As soon as a rule was established, he'd set out to break it. More times than anyone cared to recall, he stepped beyond the bounds of law. But, because of his charming manner and his repeated promises to change his ways, his faults were always overlooked. However. One day Kerwin went too far. He committed a crime that was held in his country to be as horrible as murder. He abducted a beautiful young woman. And to speak the truth bluntly, he raped her.

FIRST THIEF: Well, well! This is to be a saucy story, is it?

WIFE OF BATH: You'll never know what it's to be if you don't listen.

FIRST THIEF: What's the matter? Can't you take a little levity?

WIFE OF BATH: The question is: can you take a little seriousness?

FIRST THIEF: Oh, good heavens, yes. I tell you what. I'll just keep my old snappers shut. Ramble on. I won't say another word.

WIFE OF BATH: That will be delightful.

CHAUCER: . . . to all of us, I'm sure. (*To Wife of Bath*) Please.

WIFE OF BATH: For his outrageous crime, Sir Kerwin was placed under arrest and brought before the Court. The King declared that in this case deliberation was not required: Sir Kerwin must be put to death at once. But before the knights could second the verdict by shouting, "Aye!", the Queen rose; and the hall fell silent. She said: (*As QUEEN GUINEVERE*) "My liege. The punishment you propose is just. Yet death is a poor teacher. I suggest that this unruly knight deserves one final opportunity to break the bonds of ignorance that bind him."

(SHE pulls the Knight forth, indicating that HE should kneel. HE obeys. From this point, the KNIGHT becomes SIR KERWIN)

"My liege. With your permission, I shall ask Sir Kerwin one question. If he can answer in a manner which is approved by the ladies of the Court, he shall have his life. If not, your judgment, sire, shall fall upon him." *(As HERSELF)* The King consented, and all the Court stood hushed. As the Queen stared intently at the prisoner, a moment passed that seemed an eternity. The next words she spoke were these: "What is it that a woman most desires?"

SIR KERWIN: Your Highness, in my most humble opinion . . .

WIFE OF BATH: *(As GUINEVERE)* "Wait! We desire you to learn, sir, not to guess! Exactly one year from today, this Court shall reconvene to hear your answer and deliver judgment. Till then, Sir Kerwin the Willful, do as you will." *(As HERSELF)* The situation was serious. And for once, this unruly knight did a wise thing. He took it seriously. *(Looks at First Thief)* In the following months, Sir Kerwin traveled far. He sought out many women of every age and type. To each of them he posed his question. But, as often happens in this odd whirligig of a world, the answers he received were seldom the same. When he asked what a woman wanted most, some said . . .

SECOND THIEF: "Money."

WIFE OF BATH: Some said . . .

CHAUCER: "Children."

WIFE OF BATH: And a few, of course, said, "Beauty." But some said . . .

NUN: "Contentment."

WIFE OF BATH: Some said, "A handsome man." Some merely said, "A man." Three hundred and sixty-four days later, the Knight, weary and utterly confused, made his way back to keep his fateful appointment with the Court. He paused to rest in one of those enchanted forests I mentioned earlier. *(To First Thief)* You do recall, I trust?

(He nods, smiling broadly)

WIFE OF BATH: All hope had vanished from his heart. He had resigned himself to die the following day . . . when, out of nowhere, he began to notice strange and beautiful music of a sort he had never heard before. At the same time, he was amazed to behold precisely twenty-four maidens—he counted them—dancing in the glade before him. As he rose to get a better look, they suddenly disappeared? He rubbed his eyes and looked again; but, sure enough, they were gone. He turned back toward the trees, and there he saw a woman.

(SHE grabs the Second Thief's shawl and tosses it to the NUN, who, understanding what she is to do, slowly wraps the shawl over her head and shoulders and sits, becoming the OLD WOMAN)

She was very old and dressed in rags, and she was far from pretty. *(Takes Chaucer's glasses and places them on the Nun's nose)* In fact, in the eyes of Sir Kerwin, the unruly knight, she was as ugly as a toad. But when he moved away from her . . .

OLD WOMAN: What is it, fair sir? One can easily see you're weary and you're sad. Perhaps I can help you if you'll only tell me the cause.

KERWIN: If only you could. But it's impossible.