

Canterbury Tales is first major literary work developed as an app

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University of Saskatchewan researcher Peter Robinson leads the team that has developed the first web and mobile phone app of Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* featuring new audio performance, late Monty Python star Terry Jones' translation from Middle English and new UCL research findings. Credit: Dave Stobbe for the University of Saskatchewan.

A University of Saskatchewan-led international team has produced the first web and mobile phone app of Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*—the first major literary work augmented by new scholarship, in any language, presented in an app.

"We want the public, not just academics, to see the manuscript as Chaucer would have likely thought of it—as a performance that mixed drama and humor," said University of Saskatchewan (USask) English professor Peter Robinson, leader of the project.

"We have become convinced, over many years, that the best way to read the *Tales* is to hear it performed—just as we imagine that Chaucer himself might have performed it at the court of Richard II."

The free app is the first edition in a planned series. The app features a 45-minute audio performance of the *General Prologue* of the *Tales*—the masterpiece work by the most important English writer before Shakespeare—along with the digitized original manuscript. While listening to the reading, users have access to supporting content such as a translation in modern English, commentary, notes and vocabulary explaining Middle English words used by Chaucer.

The app, an offshoot of Robinson's 25-year work to digitize the *Canterbury Tales*, contains key new research work. This includes a new edited text of the *Prologue* created by USask sessional lecturer Barbara Bordalejo, a new reading of the *Tales* by former USask student Colin Gibbings, and new findings about the *Tales* by UCL (University College London) medievalist professor Richard North. The National Library of Wales offered its digitized version of the *Prologue's* original manuscript for the app.

The late Monty Python star Terry Jones, who was a medievalist with two influential books on Chaucer, was also instrumental in developing the

content of the app. His translation of *The General Prologue* and his books feature in the introduction and notes. This work on the app is thought to have been the last major academic project that Jones worked on before his passing on January 21.

The app was released on Android and Apple iOS just after Jones' birthday on February 1st, in celebration of Jones' academic work.

"We were so pleased that Terry was able to see and hear this app in the last weeks of his life. His work and his passion for Chaucer was an inspiration to us," said Robinson, whose work on the *Tales* has been supported by USask and by the federal Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). "We talked a lot about Chaucer and it was his idea that the *Tales* would be turned into a performance."



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Because Chaucer left the *Tales* unfinished at his death, there is no single text of the *Tales*, and scholars have to re-construct the text from over 80 distinct manuscripts, mostly written by hand before 1500.

"While the app has material which should be of interest to every Chaucer scholar, it is particularly designed to be useful to people reading Chaucer for the first time. These include not only bachelor of arts university students and school children but also members of the public who have their own interest in Chaucer and his works," said UCL's North.

Robinson's *Canterbury Tales* project, based at USask since 2010, includes several students who are transcribing all 30,000 pages of the manuscripts into the computer to discover how they are related to each other and to Chaucer's lost original.

"The app is important for people who do not know the history behind the production of the *Canterbury Tales*, and to understand how the modern concept of author didn't exist back then," said Robinson. "We have many manuscripts copied by hand over time, and the *Canterbury Tales* Project hopes to establish where they come from, how they were created and who produced them as part of that history."

Robinson said that the team has ready materials to develop at least two

more apps, in particular *Miller's Tale*, the second story in the *Canterbury Tales*.

The *General Prologue* app was built around the Hengwrt manuscript of the *Tales*, commonly regarded as the best source for Chaucer's text and held at The National Library of Wales. The specialist preservation and digitization work undertaken at The National Library of Wales enabled the images of the original manuscript to be presented with supporting content for readers via the app.

North's academic research on the project includes several new discoveries. For instance, he has found evidence suggesting that Chaucer's Knight, one of the main characters of the *Tales*, is at the siege of Algeciras near Gibraltar, in the south of Spain, in 1369 instead of the commonly assumed date 1342-44.

North believes that putting the Knight at this siege puts his age nearer to 50 years old when the reader encounters him with the other pilgrims in the Tabard in the *General Prologue*—about the age of Chaucer himself.

More information: The app can be found by searching "General Prologue" in PlayStore or in the App Store. It can also be accessed online: www.sd-editions.com/CantApp/GP

Provided by University of Saskatchewan

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