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Autor: Mann Jill

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One of the greatest and most ambitious works in English literature, The Canterbury Tales depicts a storytelling competition between pilgrims drawn from all ranks of society.

The tales are as various as the pilgrims themselves, encompassing comedy, pathos, tragedy, and cynicism. The Miller and the Reeve express their mutual antagonism in a pair of comic stories combining sex and trickery; in "The Shipman's Tale," a wife sells her favors to a monk. Others draw on courtly romance and fantasy: the Knight tells of rivals competing for the love of the same woman, and the Squire describes a princess who can speak to birds. In these twenty-four tales, Chaucer displays a dazzling range of literary styles and conjures up a wonderfully vivid picture of medieval life.