

The Belles of Canterbury eBook

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Page 1

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THE BELLES OF CANTERBURY

A CHAUCER TALE OUT OF SCHOOL

=A Play In One Act for Eleven Girls=

BY ANNA BIRD STEWART, A.M.

DEDICATED TO MISS DOROTHY CONREY

1912

* * * * *

=Price 25 cents=

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=*The Belles of Canterbury*=

PERSONS IN THE PLAY.

Freshman }
sophomore }
Junior } *Pupils at a girls' school*
Senior }



CHARACTERS FROM THE CANTERBURY TALES.

<i>Wife of Bath</i>	<i>From the Prologue</i>	<i>prioress</i>	"	"	"
<i>First nun</i>	"	"	"		
<i>Second nun</i>	"	"	"		
<i>Emily</i>	<i>From the Knight's Tale</i>	<i>hippolyta</i>	"	"	"
<i>Griselda</i>	"	"	<i>Clerk's</i>	"	

COSTUMES.

The simplicity of the costuming as well as of the stage setting makes the play an easy one for amateurs to produce.

The dress of the four school girls should be as modern as possible. Their hair should be elaborately arranged.

Hippolyta should wear the dress of an Amazon, armor if possible, or a short skirt, sandals laced high with crossed strings, waist to match the skirt, a crown, and a shield on the left arm. The shield can be made by gilding or covering a barrel-head with silver paper.

Emily wears a long gown of pale dull green cheese cloth, falling straight from the shoulders and girded in at the waist by a curtain cord. She must have fair hair which should be braided down her back.

Griselda should wear a similar costume of pale gray and lavender, with a tall headdress of wire covered with white gauze and tinsel.

The *wife of Bath* wears a short skirted costume of very bright colors, red stockings, very broad shoes, a straw hat with a broad brim and no trimming, if possible one of the sun hats worn by farmers.



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The *prioress* and her *nuns* wear black skirts and white waists. Over this they wear black scholastic gowns such as are worn by graduates of academies and colleges, girded in with a leather strap. A yard of white cloth cut down one side for about ten inches, and then a circle cut out of the center, makes the white *guimpe* for the *nun*, the curved part being put under the chin and the two cut ends fastened on top of the head. A second piece of white cloth is bound across the forehead for a *bandeau*. Two yards of black material make the veil which falls on either side of the face and down the back.

=*The Belles of Canterbury*=

Scene:—A school room or in the room of one of the girls if preferred. If possible, a piano is included in the furnishings, which may be as elaborate or as simple as desired. Two entrances must be provided, one covered by a square framework supposed to represent a bookcase. Books are across the top. In front of it hangs a full curtain.

It will be very effective to have the frame-work representing the bookcase directly in the center of the stage at back, so that it is in full view of the audience. A table with books, etc., can be placed at one side of the stage. A few chairs can be set around the room but not in a way to hide the bookcase.

As the Curtain Rises sophomore and freshman are seated at the table.

Sophomore. Now, the Seniors weren't that way last year. You're only a Freshman, so of course you can't judge, but I never saw so slow a class as this year's, why they haven't said a word about the entertainment, and yet everyone knows they ought to give us a Thanksgiving party. (*any other festival can be substituted here*)

FRESHMAN. A party? What do they have to eat?

SOPHOMORE. They're not likely to have anything this year. If I had known that last Thanksgiving I would have eaten twice as much. I haven't anything to be thankful for.

FRESHMAN. But you passed in History. Why don't you tell the Seniors what they ought to do?

SOPHOMORE. Sh—here comes one of them. (*rises and goes to meet SENIOR*)

(Enter SENIOR, tired out, she sits down with a great sigh of relief.)



FRESHMAN and SOPHOMORE. What's the matter?

SENIOR. Matter? Why, I'm half dead thinking.

SOPHOMORE. (*giggles*) Thinking!

SENIOR. Say, did you ever hear the word Sophomoric? (*severely*)
That's the sort of a joke that was.

FRESHMAN. What were you thinking about?

SENIOR. Trying to get up some new and original kind of a Thanksgiving party for the school.

SOPHOMORE. You darling! (*embraces her*)



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FRESHMAN. We were afraid you had forgotten.

SENIOR. (*rises and joins others*) I wish I could forget for a while but they made me chairman of the committee so I have to get up something. If I can't think of anything better we'll have an ordinary spread and get just what everybody likes.

SOPHOMORE. Grand! Welsh rarebit for me.

FRESHMAN. I want chocolate *eclaires*.

SENIOR. We ought to ask one of the Juniors too, that wouldn't be enough variety.

SOPHOMORE. Ask Laurine.

SENIOR. Where is she?

FRESHMAN. She told me she was going to study her Chaucer.

SENIOR. She didn't mean it. She never does.

SOPHOMORE. (*going to door and calling*) Laurine, Laurine.

JUNIOR. (*outside*) All right.

SENIOR. Maybe she's thinking up a new class souvenir to go with their rings and hatpins and pins and banners.

FRESHMAN. Tell her we want to ask her advice, then she'll hurry.

SOPHOMORE. (*calling*) Laurine, how soon are you coming?

JUNIOR. (*beginning before she enters with a Chaucer in her hand*) "Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote"—I came much more quickly than I'll ever get that old stuff in my head. (*she throws the book down*)

SENIOR. Don't you like Chaucer? We just loved him.

JUNIOR. So do all the rest of our class except me. I just can't get him into my head.

SOPHOMORE. Poor thing! I should hope not.

SENIOR. What would you like to eat at the Thanksgiving spread?

JUNIOR. Eat! Everything you're going to have. (*suspiciously*) This isn't one of those stupid puns on *Chaucer* is it?



SOPHOMORE. I should say not.

FRESHMAN. We are helping make out the menu. There's Welsh rarebit and chocolate *eclaires* already.

JUNIOR. Have you any angel food?

SOPHOMORE. Oysters!

FRESHMAN. Fudge!

SENIOR. And olives. Quick, give me a pencil so I can write it down. (*goes to table and writes*)

JUNIOR. Hurry, before the bell rings. That's much more fun to talk about than Chaucer. I'm glad I didn't live in his day. Imagine being praised for not putting your fingers in the gravy and spotting up your shirt front! I wager that old Prioress was a stick. I shouldn't want her on our basket ball team. There isn't a sensible woman in the whole of Chaucer so far as I can see. (*the curtain at the front of the bookcase begins to shake slightly, becoming more violent as the JUNIOR continues*) The Wife of Bath was a regular Mormon, five husbands, that's what she had, and she wore red stockings. Such taste!

SENIOR. (*rises and goes to JUNIOR*) Laurine, don't talk so much. Come help us decide between dill pickle and strawberry jam, we can't have both.



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SOPHOMORE. Laurine can't help talking. Her whole class does it.

JUNIOR. And what about your class, Miss? And the angelic Seniors? They never talk, do they. Thank Goodness, we're not like that old patient Griselda in Chaucer. She was afraid to open her head.

FRESHMAN. I think you know a lot about Chaucer. I never will remember all those names.

JUNIOR. Oh, there are a lot more of them. One was a silly girl named Emily. She didn't do anything but have "hair a yard long I guess" and for that she had two lovers. I am going to get a hair tonic. That's how silly men were in Chaucer's day, before they learned how to play football, or had fraternities.

SOPHOMORE. Oh, girls, if you had only seen the hero in the matinee yesterday. He was simply grand! And he had such pretty curly hair.

(The bell rings.)

SENIOR. I know I could think of lots more things to eat if I only had more time.

**SOPHOMORE. Well, come on, I have to go to History.
(she starts out)**

FRESHMAN. Wait for me.

(Exeunt SENIOR, SOPHOMORE and FRESHMAN.)

JUNIOR. Here's where I die. Where's that hateful book? It won't do any good to lose it, there are a dozen more copies in the bookcase. *(sings)*

"Hang Geof Chaucer on a sour apple tree,
Hang Geof Chaucer on a sour apple tree,
Hang Geof Chaucer on a sour apple tree,
Our teacher marks us on!"
(exit as she sings)

*(The curtain in front of the bookcase shakes more violently than before.
Then from behind the curtain comes the voice of the WIFE OF BATH.)*

WIFE. Ladies, I prithe harkneth for the best.
Can Chaucer's children swich words hear, and rest?
This is the point, to speken short and pleyn,
We, one and all, were used with desdeyn.



(She comes out of the bookcase.)

Come forth and when we've made our reckoning
That girl perchance another tune will sing.

(Enter the PRIORESS.)

What word, sweet Eglantine, would you employ
To tell us of your vengeful wrath?

PRIORESS. *(with deep intensity)* St. Loy!

WIFE. Then Chaucer's uttered sooth about her oath!
Odsbodikins! That cannot do us both!

PRIORESS. Come hider, my two nonnes to my side,
Till that my mighty anger shall subside.

(Enter two NUNS who stand on either side of the PRIORESS.)

That girl, alas! hath made my speech too tarte
Who once was conscience al and tendre herte.
O Emelye, whose hair is in a tresse
Behynd your back, a yarde long.

WIFE. *(aside)* I guesse.



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(Enter EMILY.)

PRIORESS. O Emelye, let that hair's golden ray
Shine on our vengeance ere another day.

EMILY. The path of duty plain is to be seen.

(Enter HIPPOLYTA, *the queen.*)

EMILY. Ladies, this is Hippolyta, the queen.

(*They all bow, the PRIORESS with delicate grace, the WIFE with a clumsy courtesy.*)

EMILY. My sister is a famous Amazon.

HIPPOLYTA. I have no grievance, but I want the fun.

PRIORESS. In courtesye lay ever my desire.

(*Aside to NUNS.*)

How charming with a real queen to conspire.

FIRST NUN. Madame, your smiling is full simple.

SECOND NUN. And coy.

WIFE. Come, how can we that saucy wight destroy?

EMILY. (*musingly*)
She, as a servant, would befit my station.

FIRST NUN. (*to PRIORESS*) Or feed your hounds.

(*The SECOND NUN nods in agreement.*)

PRIORESS. (*catching sight of the WIFE'S look of disapproval—aside*)
Or scour *her* reputation!

WIFE. Pray, madam, if it's all the same to you
Perhaps the rest would like a word or two.

PRIORESS. I fear you ask too little, for I know
That you have answered "yes" five times or so!



WIFE. A spiteful thing! Perhaps if you'd had *one*,
He might have taught you how to curb your tongue.

(There is a weak cry from the bookcase.)

EMILY. Surely 'twas not to quarrel that we came.

(A second cry from the bookcase)

PRIORESS. Hark. 'Tis a voice I hardly dare to name.

(Enter from behind the curtains, GRISELDA.)

ALL. *(as GRISELDA appears)* Griselda!

HIPPOLYTA. *(disapprovingly)*
You for patience always quoted!

GRISELDA. 'Twas only to my Duke that was devoted.
Now, further patience would but be disgrace.
I move we put that Junior in our place!

(ALL signify emphatic agreement.)

ALL. Where is she?

FIRST NUN. That, alas, we none can tell.

SECOND NUN. Heaven help us!

(A bell rings outside.)

PRIORESS. Hark! the ringing of the bell.

(They draw into the background as the JUNIOR comes in. She throws the Chaucer on the floor. All the Canterbury characters jump and cry out as if in pain as it hits the ground.)

JUNIOR. I knew that I didn't know a word of that Chaucer lesson. I don't believe English people ever spoke like those old Canterbury pilgrims. If I studied a year I'd never know whether a letter was silent or wasn't silent. *I* think it ought all to be made silent, and I think we ought to be allowed to read George Barr McCutcheon or somebody interesting instead of old fogies that died in—Dear me! When did old Chaucer die anyway?



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(The PRIORESS comes forward with dignity and speaks to the evident wonder of the JUNIOR.)

PRIORESS. Mademoiselle, were you from Stratford-at-the-Bowe,
Where I learned French, some manners you might know.

JUNIOR. Bats in my belfry all right.

PRIORESS. Alas, my child, try while that you are yonge
To make your Englishe sweet upon the tonge.
You should speak always in fair Charity.

WIFE. Yea, but how harshly did you speak of me!

JUNIOR. I'm blessed if I know what you are, so how could I say anything?

HIPPOLYTA. We are Dan Chaucer's children, he who hath
But love for all men.

WIFE. I'm the wife of Bath.
What did you say of me? What did you say?

(JUNIOR looks around wildly.)

EMILY. Look out, be careful, or she'll run away.

JUNIOR. Honest, you've got me so muddled I don't know what I'm doing. Do you want me to believe that you're people out of a book? Why those old Canterbury Tales' characters never did live, Chaucer just made them up. If you aren't somebody dressed up to tease me, I've got 'em.

PRIORESS. Ladies, hear that which maketh the last straw.
I plead for justice and demand the law.
Not live, when we are deathless? Chaucer, dear,
I pray that you that heresy can't hear!

HIPPOLYTA. Hark one and all, while judgment I pronounce:
If that this maid her treason will renounce,
Most humbly on her knees our grace beseech,
And duly quote some lines of praise for each,
Then we will pardon grant? Do all consent?

(All bow.)



If not, *unto the bookcase she is sent.*

JUNIOR. Say something about each one of you! I never could in the world. That's why I hate Chaucer so. (*as she says hate Chaucer the characters all cringe*) I never could learn the old stuff, (*as she says old stuff they sigh and raise their eyes in silent protest*)

FIRST NUN. It will go hard with thee for that same sin.

(SECOND NUN *nods to these words.*)

EMILY. Prithee, delay no longer but begin.

(*The JUNIOR looks around until her eye meets the PRIORESS.*)

JUNIOR. Are you the Prioress?

PRIORESS. I am y-cleped Madame Eglantine.

JUNIOR. What rhymes with Eglantine? Wine? (*the PRIORESS looks duly shocked*) Thine? Divine? I know. It's something about singing through your nose the *service divine*.

FIRST NUN. The seemly way to sing.

SECOND NUN. The seemly way.

GRISELDA. Here, Eglantine, you can't take up all day.



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PRIORESS. I'd prove my vocal method without peer.

HIPPOLYTA. Perhaps she could.

WIFE. Suppose she does it here!

JUNIOR. Never mind. Miss Eglantine. Did they call you Sister in those days? Never mind. I'll play your accompaniment on the piano.

ALL. Piano?

JUNIOR. Why, yes, Oh I never thought that you wouldn't know that. There's a piano.

(The following passage can be omitted if a piano is not convenient.)

(They go over looking curiously at it. The WIFE touches the keys by accident. ALL jump at the sound.)

JUNIOR. What do you want to sing?

PRIORESS. *(slightly affected)*
Alas, I cannot sing without my notes.

WIFE. Surely that is a line each reader quotes!

JUNIOR. Do you know the *Yama-Yama Girl*? *(substitute any popular song)*

(The PRIORESS looks blank.)

JUNIOR. Nor even the *Merry Widow*?

PRIORESS. Why 'tis a thing that Chaucer never had,
In his day seemly widows all were sad.
You speak of folk of whom I have no ken.

FIRST NUN. One song, Madame, you know.

SECOND NUN. O, try it then!

(The PRIORESS sings to the tune of the Old English Ballad, "Drink to Me Only With Thine Eyes.")

Oh! We are Chaucer's children here,
And well we love his name
We live in hearts that hold him dear,



Are nourished by his fame.
Oh, listen now, while thus we sing
Our songs of olden days,
When court and king and common folk
United, voiced his praise.

When I was once a little lasse
At Stratford-on-the-Bowe
I hastened daily to my classe,
My one dream was to know.
I studied there, full seemly deep,
With ne'er the smallest hint
That other maids would some day weep,
At seeing me in print.

I thought of nothing but my booke,
To make my mind grow fair
So I'm afraid I never took
The pains to do my hair!

(*She looks at the JUNIOR'S hair.*)

Perchance if now I went to school,
And sought its culture wide,
Of *coiffures* strange I'd learn the rule,
And scorn what was inside.

Oh, gentle Chaucer, could you see
The world around us here,
Perhaps you'd change your poetry
And call no pilgrim *queer*
And could you see the ladies' dress,
And what they wear the while,
You'd know what made the critics guess
You had a *simple style*.

WIFE. (*to EMILY*)

Look at her smile upon that silly miss!
Look, Emilye, did we come here for this?
As to her singing, well, I have heard worse!
I fear her verses will make her perverse.



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PRIORESS. (*to HIPPOLYTA*)

To punish her would make my conscience prick.

GRISELDA. O Madame, be not flattered, think of *stick*.

PRIORESS. Alas 'tis true!

EMILY. Fire up your dying wrath.

WIFE. (*to JUNIOR*)

What can you say about the Wife of Bath?

JUNIOR. I don't know. I can't remember anything.

WIFE. (*severely*)

Did you not say my hosen were of red?

JUNIOR. Well, they are, aren't they?

WIFE. And what of that? Is that a case for scorn?

My gear is eke as fine as e'er was worn.

EMILY. What about me?

JUNIOR. (*puzzled*) Who are you? I just *can't* remember.

HIPPOLYTA. Do you not recognize her by her hair?

EMILY. 'Tis falling out because of grief and care!

JUNIOR. Then I suppose you're Emily. But who is that? (*points to GRISELDA*)

GRISELDA. Ignorance!! (*she stamps her foot*)

ALL. Griselda! You impatient!

JUNIOR. Are you the one they used to call "Patient Griselda"? I never should have known you. And who are you? (*to HIPPOLYTA*)

HIPPOLYTA. You did not mention me so I excuse

Your ignorance. And yet your suit you lose.

Come, ladies, come, draw close while we confer,

The instruments of Justice must not err.

(*They draw together and hold a whispered consultation, the JUNIOR vainly trying to pinch herself into reality.*)



JUNIOR. I know it's all a dream, but I just can't wake myself up.

HIPPOLYTA. For her mad crime, she's judged and in disgrace
The sentence is to put her in our case.

(They take hold of the JUNIOR and begin pushing her toward the bookcase at the back of the stage.)

JUNIOR. Why, I thought you were only joking.

PRIORESS. Chaucer alone it is, with whom we jest.
Come, nonnes both, and push her in with zest.

JUNIOR. Oh, let me stay out. Don't make me go into that stuffy bookcase. There never will be room for me with all those other books. It will squeeze what little I do know out of me.

(Relentless, they push her behind the curtains into the bookcase. Her voice grows weaker, finally dying away.)

WIFE. Life sentence is not much to pay for this.

PRIORESS. *(to her NUNS who nod in agreement)*
I think a little mercy not amiss.

EMILY. She's quite filled up the space that once was ours.

HIPPOLYTA. How are we going to pass our leisure hours?

FIRST NUN. *(to SECOND)*
Perhaps she'll sing again.



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SECOND NUN. Perchance she will.

WIFE. *(to HIPPOLYTA)*

Say something quick, that we may hold her still.

EMILY. Hark, did I hear a pleading little voice?

Ah, ladies, in her punishment rejoice!

JUNIOR. *(meekly, in a weak, timid tone from behind the curtain)* Dear ladies all, whom Father Chaucer loved, Hippolyta, and Emily, Mrs. Wife of Bath and Sister Prioress, and the two nuns, and Griselda and anybody else I haven't mentioned, I'm sorry, and I'll never do it again.

HIPPOLYTA. Justice and law demand your punishment.

PRIORESS. My tender heart would bid me cry "relent".

JUNIOR. *(crying)*

Please, ladies, for sweet Chaucer's sake.

(They look at each other, moved by the mention of Chaucer's name.)

JUNIOR. O Chaucer, you who loved all people, come to my aid!

HIPPOLYTA. Sorrow has taught the maid the surest key,
That will unlock our hearts to charity.

PRIORESS. Come forth, you are forgiven for your crime,

WIFE. Our duty's done, to leave it is full time.

JUNIOR. *(enters out of bookcase)* I'm sure I'm much obliged and if you'd only stay awhile longer I'd like you to meet some of the other girls.

HIPPOLYTA. We thank you for your courtesy indeed,
Since *you* believe, there is no further need.

(They start toward the bookcase.)

GRISELDA. From all my mates some lesson you might learn.

EMILY. Forget us not, in case we ne'er return.

JUNIOR. Let me see, what I can learn from each: *(as she speaks each name, the character disappears in bookcase)* Griselda,—patience; Hippolyta,—courtesy; the Good



Wife—red stockings—well, that clothes don't matter. Emily—no rats! (*hides her face for a moment*) The Prioress—(the two NUNS *disappear*)

PRIORESS. Read the last line that Master Chaucer penned
About me, and believe it without end!

(*She disappears. The JUNIOR looks at the bookcase curtain which slowly stops swinging.*)

JUNIOR. The last line! (*she picks up the book she has thrown upon the floor and finds the passage*)

“And thereon hung a brooch of gold full sheen,
On which there was first writ a crowned A,
And after *Amor Vincit Omnia*.”

Amor vincit omnia, love conquers all. I believe I do love Chaucer now. And to think they all live!

(*Enter the FRESHMAN, SOPHOMORE and SENIOR.*)

SENIOR. What on earth have you been doing?

JUNIOR. Talking to the Canterbury Pilgrims.

SOPHOMORE. (*tapping her head*) Sand in her gear box.

FRESHMAN. I should think it would make her crazy to study that queer English so hard!



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SENIOR. Poor dear! I'm going to make some fudge, that will make her feel better!

(They start out of the room.)

JUNIOR. Oh, girls!

(They stop and turn around. The JUNIOR starts to tell them, hesitates.)

JUNIOR. They'll never believe it. But *I* know.

SENIOR. What did you call us back about?

(The JUNIOR catches sight of the bookcase.)

JUNIOR. *(with a little smile they do not understand)* Oh, nothing, I'm just glad that isn't a sectional bookcase!

(The others look at her blankly.)

CURTAIN.

* * * * *