



*Written by
Cora Alley*

“The Wife of Bath’s Tale”

From *The Canterbury Tales*, by Geoffrey Chaucer

*Loosely Adapted by Cora Alley
For the Christmas Madrigal Dinner*

Scripture: Philippians 2: 3, 4

"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others."

Dramatic Category: Christmas Madrigal Dinner Theater

What is a “Madrigal Dinner”?

A "Madrigal Dinner" is a trip back in time. Twelve singers dress in 16th century, English costumes and herald in the Christmas season with a harmonious concert of traditional, acappella carols. The ten members of the royal court join the King and Queen as they sit on stage in a semi-circle that opens to the audience.

The guests are seated at festively decorated tables ready to enjoy a Christmas dinner with all the trimmings: the Wassail (hot apple cider), the "boar's head" (prime rib), and Figgie Pudding (bread pudding). The King's Jester serves as the "Master of Ceremonies" for the evening, as he delights and surprises the audience with toasts, jokes, and comic asides.

A troupe of the "King's players" join the Court and present a traditional play that dates back to the time of classic European literature. The scenes of the play are woven among the courses of the meal and set up the sweet message of the Christmas carols. The audience comes away from the evening having enjoyed a delicious holiday feast, laughed and cried at the players, and marveled at the vocal talent of the ensemble.

NOTE:

See the “Madrigal Checklist,” at the end of the script, to assist you in producing the wonderful evening of celebration.

Topic: True love is mutual submission.

Performance Time: 1 hour program + the concert and the meal = 2 hours total

Number of Players: 2 players, 12 singers, (with an option of 15+ entertainers)

Objective:

To present a picture of love by submitting one's own desires and elevating the value of another.

Synopsis:

This evening's story is loosely adapted from Geoffrey Chaucer's 12th century classic, "The Wife of Bath's Tale," contained in the larger work, The Canterbury Tales. Chaucer compiled the tales told by the faithful pilgrims each evening as they gathered around the warm fire on their way to the church at Canterbury.

A most outstanding tale was told by a woman who hailed from the town of Bath. Having had five husbands, she glibly called herself the "Wife of Bath." Considering herself an authority on men and women, the Wife of Bath relates a desperate tale of a knight in King Arthur's court who betrays a maiden. In lieu of removing his head for his crime against womanhood, the Queen gives him an impossible task: discover what it is that women want most, and bring the answer to the ladies of the court.

If all the ladies in the court agree, the knight lives, but if only one of the fairer sex disagrees with the knight's answer, "Off with his head!" What adventure awaits our knight this night? Will he find an answer with which all women agree? Eat up, dear guests, relax and see!

Cast:

The Royal Players:

The Jester: *A fun-loving, clownish fellow who conducts the fun*

Wife of Bath: *An old "hag" who transforms into a lovely lady.*

Note: It's easier to "hag up" a beauty than beautify a hag, so look for a pretty girl to play this part!

The Madrigal Singers:

The King: *A commanding champion who wants the knight beheaded*

The Queen: *A sensitive woman who gives the knight his sentence*

The Knight: *A member of the royal court who left his lady at the altar (Lord 1)*

The Lady Scorned: *The King's daughter and a member of the royal court (Lady 5)*

Ladies 1, 2, 3, 4: *Royal female members of the court*

Lords 2, 3, 4, 5: *Royal male members of the court*

Note:

These 12 singers, dressed in Renaissance costumes, make up the king's court. They are an acappella singing cast, which also presents a concert of Christmas carols during the program. Mix the vocal parts as you see fit. The parts sung do not have any bearing on the parts spoken.

Additional Cast (optional):

(The play does not require these people, but they add a wonderful dimension to the program)

- 1 Juggler:** *entertains at mealtime*
3 Mimes: *perform antics during mealtime*
4 Minstrels: *serenade with instruments at mealtime, at the tables*
Trumpeter(s): *signal events with fanfare*
2 Beefeaters: *armored knights who stand guard at the door*
2 Announcers: *announce guests by name, at the door*
Serving girls: *dressed as peasants, to wait on each table (as many as you need)*
2 Litter bearers: *carry in the courses of the meal*
1 Magician: *entertains guests during mealtime, at their tables*
4 Troubadours: *sing to guests during mealtime, at their tables*
- Dancers:** *They add festivity to the evening. They perform a dance number dressed as “Merry Maids” with flowing dresses and flowers in their hair; like in the days of “Robin Hood.”*
- Orphan children:** *This is an opportunity for your “children’s choir” to get involved. They sing a song to the audience during the show. Dress these elementary-aged children in rags, dirty their faces, and give them bowls to beg at the tables. Then, put chocolate “gold coins” on each table and let the people give them to the children when they come by.*
- Disgruntled Serving Girls:** *An ensemble of six women who work up a few songs that are off-pitch, and silly in nature. They are generally irritated that their voices are not good enough to be one of those “uppity Madrigal Singers.” After all, “We clean up real nice, too!”*

Costumes:

Dress in Renaissance and medieval costumes. See specific cast descriptions above, for costuming suggestions.

Props:

Set the King’s table for a traditional Renaissance Christmas feast
Gold-wrapped, chocolate coins (for “Orphan Chorus” option)

Lights:

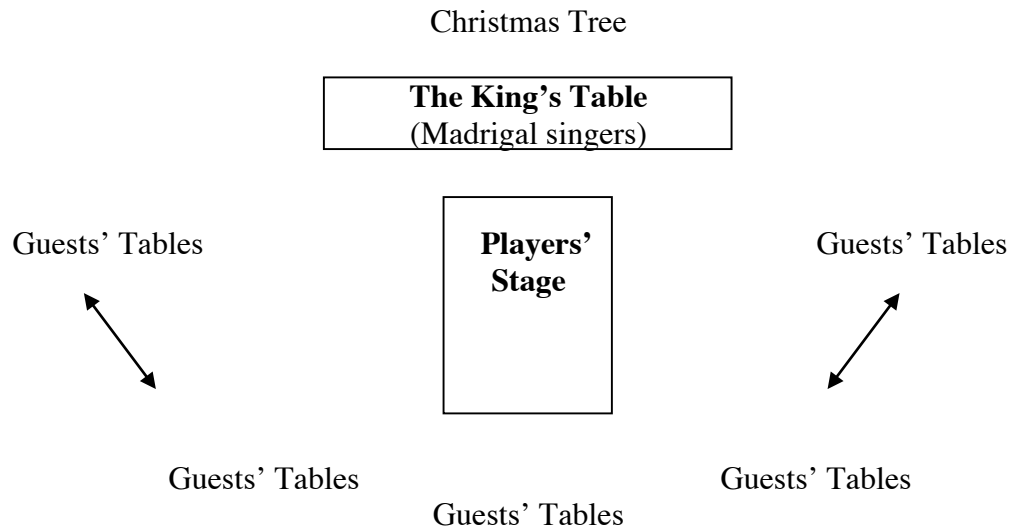
Design the lighting in such a way that the players and King’s Court are highlighted according to their dominance in the program.

Sound:

Microphones for the singers, at the table
Wireless mics for the actors with lines, who aren’t at the table

Staging:

If you can “transform” your room into a “castle hall” with “theater-in-the-round” seating, it will enhance the “ambience” of the evening. Here is a suggested diagram:



A Guide to 16th Century English Christmas Customs

Wassail - The festive holiday drink from the Anglo-Saxon, “Wes-hal,” means “be whole.” The old wassail bowls, usually of silver or pewter, were immense. It was the custom of the stewards upon entering the banquet hall to call out, “Wassail, Wassail,” and this was answered by the host and the guests alike with song or carol. A forerunner was “lamb’s wool,” a mixture of hot ale, sugar, spices, eggs, and roasted apples. Thick cream was sometimes added. It was served in the wassail bowl with pieces of toast floating on top. Hence, the origin of the drinking toast.

Boar’s Head - Traditionally, this is the heart of the Christmas feast. Its mouth propped open with an apple, the head was brought in on a silver dish, to a fanfare and a special carol. Its origin comes from Psalm 80, in which Satan is the “boar out of the wood.” The head of the slain boar, paraded about the Great Hall, showed the defeat of Satan by the newborn Christ child. The master of the house would take an oath upon it to perform some charitable deed, and often the other gentlemen seated at the table would follow suit.

Flaming Plum Pudding - Everyone in the household stirred the plum pudding and made a wish. If a trinket were found in the piece one ate, the wish would come true; consequently, it became known as “Figgie Pudding.”

The Twelve Days of Christmas - Known liturgically as Epiphany, representing the traditional time of the journey of the Magi to worship the Christ child. The twelve days were a time of great feasting, celebration, singing of Madrigals and carols, plays and general merry making.

Madrigals - A vocal music idiom from the 14th and 15th century in Italy, the Madrigals developed chiefly in the 16th century in England. The word has its origin in either Mandrialis (pastoral song), or matricials (in the mother tongue). English Madrigals were variously called songs, sonnets, canzonets, and ayres.

Instruction for the beginning:

Do a cheery job of decorating the set like an old English castle. Use coats of arms, banners, swords, thrones, drapes of rich tapestry, etc. The Christmas tree should be magnificent, the wreaths and centerpieces should be studded with decorations and lights, and the entire mood should be magical.

Set all the tables with china and good glassware. No paper plates. Outfit each table with rolls and fill the water glasses. People want something to eat and drink the minute they arrive. Hungry people are generally grumpy!

Light the candles, dim the lights and instruct the minstrels to roam the house playing their instruments while the guests enter. The “announcers,” welcome each guest and shout out his/her name (i.e. “The Lord and Lady Parker”). Servers wait inside the hall near the door, with their guest list for their table in hand. When they hear a name called that is assigned to their table, they come to the door and escort them to their table. Mimes and the magician can entertain the guests.

Caution:

Assign the mimes, the musician, and the juggler, various parts of the house at various times, so they do not wear out their welcome by frequenting the same part of the house all night.

The Script:

Fanfare 1

(The trumpeters enter and march around the hall. They meet at the front of the King's table.)

(Prologue)

Jester:

(Enters the house with exuberance)

Alas, dear guests, you've come again,
To escape life's sorrow, strife, and pain!

So gaily clad in handsome dress,
(aside) No doubt this royal mob you'll impress.

Unstick thy mind from present day,
Let it come with us, let it fly away,

This room is now a castle hall,
And we are players; one and all.

Turn back the clock a thousand years,
To knights and ladies, toasts and cheers!

Good King Arthur rules these days,
With a code of honor, all knights praise!

Save one, who let his honor falter
He left his lady alone at the altar.

He spent her dowry on lecherous living,
And needless to say, she's not too forgiving.

Tonight you will see his story unfold,
Justice to him! Or, so I am told...

(changing the mood)

Well, let's be on with it, I pray,
For all too soon comes 'morrow's day.

Hear me now guests, and don't forget,
My simple rules of etiquette!

(Unfurls his scroll)

Please be cordial, never rude,
And do not steal your neighbor's food.

Eating with fingers will make a mess,
So, wipe them on your lady's dress.

And if you feel the need to spit;
Please wait until the singers quit.

Do all you are told by the King and his Queen
Don't cross him, just don't... If you know what I mean.

There, of rules, there are no more,
But if you break them, you're out the door

Speaking of door, our evening begins!
Our Madrigals enter; enjoy them, my friends.

(As the Madrigals strike their opening chord, the Jester rushes back in and informs the audience with terror in his voice.)

Oh merciful Heaven!
They're both here, tonight, so gaily adorned!
The lecherous knight, and the lady he scorned!

(He runs out as the Madrigals enter.)

(The Knight is in the last couple to enter.)

Processional:

(The madrigal singers enter as they sing a Christmas carol. "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" is a favorite. They line up at opposite doors as they enter, weave through the audience as they sing, meet at the front, curtsy and bow to each other, and finally the Ladies are escorted to their seats by the Lords.)

King: *(All Madrigals remain standing; The king opens his arms wide as he welcomes his guests)*

Welcome guests from far and wide,
From hill, and vale, and countryside,

My bounty is yours' eat, drink, and be merry!
With jests and fine song this party will tarry!

The feast before us is beyond all compare,
Let us bow to our maker in most humble prayer.

Opening Prayer:

(This could be a prayer that is sung. All Madrigals remain standing.)

Song: “The Blessing”

(This is any song of a prayer-like nature)

Scene 1: “Crime & Punishment”

(The Madrigals assume their positions, and the Lady Scorned sees her betrothed scoundrel, gives a slight scream, and promptly faints. The Madrigals do their best to prop her back up. The Knight sees the Lady Scorned and tries to hide behind the floral arrangements, napkins, etc.)

Queen: What is it?
(hurries over to the Lady’s side)
Perhaps the excitement has made her grow pale,
I fear what she needs, is a glass of wassail!

Jester: *(jumping to attention and motioning to the litter-bearers who carry the wassail)*
Come quickly wassail; I fear for her life!
Bring ale, for the King, his guests, and his wife!

SONG: Wassail Song

“Wassail, Wassail all over the town....”

(A bowl of apple-colored gelatin that “looks like cider, but isn’t” is carried by the pages on a litter. It is paraded around the house and stops at the king’s table for approval. The King rises, survey’s the cider and nods. He waves the pages on, and they exit.)

WASSAIL SERVED:

(The hot apple cider brought out by the servers.)

Fanfare 2

(The Lady Scorned revives and tells those around her what the Knight has done. He squirms and sinks in his chair. The whispers and commotion ripple throughout the ladies at the table.)

Toasts:

King: A toast, a toast! Raise your glasses high!
To a season of cheer! Here’s mud in your eye!

(The King and his court raise their glasses to drink, but the Queen stops them.)

Queen: *(Returning to her place beside the king after reviving the Lady Scorned.)*
Thy toast, dear husband, was really quite plain,
I pray thee, my love, try it again.

King: Plain? Again? Ah, my throat is too dry,
If it’s wit that you want, ask the Jester to try.

Queen: *(She looks around for the Jester, claps her hands, but he does not appear.)*
Good husband, the prankster, so known for his chiding,
is absent tonight, I fear he is hiding.

King: *(standing up and looking around for the Jester)*
If our fool is absent, his head I will sever,
I want him here now, just as clever as ever!

Jester: *(bounds into the room and bows before the King)*
Your pardon, my king, I'll conduct your fun.
We'll bandy some toasts that are second to none!

King: On with it then, the Queen wants some jests!

Queen: With wit and with rhyme,
make some toasts for our guests.

Jester:
(The jester walks in among the audience and begins to chat with them. He runs quickly to several couples.)

Our first toast will go, I am afraid,
To the cad who brought the youngest maid!

(He searches in the audience and asks who is the youngest woman. He eliminates them until he finds her. To her escort he scolds:)

Confess, you rogue; you've stolen a child!
Pray her father won't find you; he's apt to go wild.

Jester: A toast to these children!

(The court and the audience raise their glasses and quickly confer on the first line of the toast)

The Court: May the Lord pour his blessings on all that you do,
(They motion in unison to the Jester to complete the rhyme.)

Jester: *(hesitating and giving himself time to think)*
May your children be many, and your problems be few!

(cheers from the court and requests for more)

Who has weathered life's storms,
and emerged yet the boldest,
At which table tonight,
sits the man who is oldest?

(He repeats the search for the oldest man. When He finds him, the jester informs the court.)

Here sits the man who is gifted with age!
His wisdom awards him the title of, "Sage."

The Court: *(after conferring briefly and raising their glasses again)*
May you stay in good health, and your years yet be many.
(again they motion to the Jester)

Jester: *(after thinking briefly)* And your wealth in this world,
come to more than a penny!

(The court cheers and motions to the jester to go on.)

Now which couple among you has been the most dutiful,
And raised a large brood, thus being quite "fruitful"!

(again he searches for the couple who has the most children)

I have found the couple, your grace,
Who has populated half of our race!

The Court: *(After their conference, they raise their glasses and say:)*

May your children bring you honor and never an ill,
(They motion to the Jester again.)

Jester: Clean up after themselves, and not stick you with the bill!

(The court cheers.)

King: So, my wife, have these toasts been sufficient?

Queen: In toasting, our Jester is once more proficient!

King: Well done, good Jester, you have reason to boast,
But my belly's not filled by a series of toasts.
If you really want us to think you quite good,
Get those servers in order, and bring out the food!

(The Madrigals all toast each other.)

Lord 5: Good King! A moment of your time?
I pray, first deal with this heinous crime!
(The lord points to the Knight.)