

# The Canterbury Tales

Translated by Nevill Coghill

## The Prologue

Here biginneth the Book of the Tales of Caunterbury

Whan that Aprill with his shourës sotē<sup>1</sup>  
The droghte of Marche hath percēd to the rotē,  
And bathēd every veyne in swich licour  
Of which vertu engendrēd is the flour;  
Whan Zepirus eek<sup>2</sup> with his swetē breeth  
Inspirēd hath in every holt<sup>3</sup> and heeth  
The tendrē croppēs, and the yongē sonnē  
Hath in the Ram his halfe cours y-ronnē,  
And smalē fowlēs maken melodyē,  
That slepen al the night with open yē  
(So priketh hem Nature in hir corages):<sup>4</sup>  
Than longen folk to goon on pilgrimages  
And palmers for to seken straungē strondēs,<sup>5</sup>  
To fernē halwēs, couthe in sondry londēs;  
And specially, from every shirēs endē  
Of Engelond, to Caunterbury they wendē,  
The holy blisful martir for to sekē.  
That hem hath holpen, whan that they were sekē.  
Bifel that in that seson on a day,  
In Southwerk at the Tabard as I lay  
Redy to wenden on my pilgrimagē  
To Caunterbury with ful devout coragē,<sup>6</sup>  
At night was come into that hostelryē  
Wel nyne and twenty in a companyē  
Of sondry folk, by aventure y-fallē  
In felawshipe, and pilgrims were they allē,  
That toward Caunterbury wolden rydē.  
The chambrēs and the stablēs weren wydē,  
And wel we weren esēd attē bestē.  
And shortly, whan the sonnē was to restē,  
So hadde I spoken with hem everichon,<sup>7</sup>  
That I was of hir<sup>8</sup> felawshipe anon,  
And madē forward erly for to rysē,  
To take our wey, ther as I yow devysē.<sup>9</sup> . . .

1. sotē: sweet.

2. eek: also.  
3. holt: wood.

4. corages: heart.

5. strondēs: strands.

6. coragē: heart.

7. everichon: everyone.

8. hir: their.

9. devysē: tell.

In "The Prologue" a pilgrim introduces the other pilgrims with whom he will journey to Canterbury and establishes the framework within which the pilgrims will relate their tales. The opening lines of "The Prologue" are printed in both the original Middle English and Modern English.

## The Prologue

Here begins the Book of the Canterbury Tales

When in April the sweet showers fall  
And pierce the drought of March to the root, and all  
The veins are bathed in liquor of such power  
As brings about the engendering of the flower,  
When also Zephyrus<sup>1</sup> with his sweet breath  
Exhales an air in every grove and heath  
Upon the tender shoots, and the young sun  
His half-course in the sign of the *Ram* has run,  
And the small fowl are making melody  
That sleep away the night with open eye  
(So nature pricks them and their heart engages)  
Then people long to go on pilgrimages  
And palmers<sup>2</sup> long to seek the stranger strands  
Of far-off saints, hallowed in sundry lands,  
And specially, from every shire's end  
In England, down to Canterbury they wend  
To seek the holy blissful martyr,<sup>3</sup> quick  
In giving help to them when they were sick.  
It happened in that season that one day  
In Southwark,<sup>4</sup> at *The Tabard*, as I lay  
Ready to go on pilgrimage and start  
For Canterbury, most devout at heart,  
At night there came into that hostelry  
Some nine and twenty in a company  
Of sundry folk happening then to fall  
In fellowship, and they were pilgrims all  
That towards Canterbury meant to ride.  
The rooms and stables of the inn were wide,  
They made us easy, all was of the best.  
And shortly, when the sun had gone to rest,  
By speaking to them all upon the trip  
I was admitted to their fellowship  
And promised to rise early and take the way  
To Canterbury, as you heard me say.

5 1. Zephyrus (zef' or əs): the gentle west wind.

10 2. palmers: persons who visited the Holy Land.

15 3. martyr: Thomas à Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, murdered in 1170.

20 4. Southwark (sūth' ark): a suburb of London.



CHAUCER (detail). Ellesmere Ms.  
Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif.

But none the less, while I have time and space,  
Before my story takes a further pace,  
It seems a reasonable thing to say  
What their condition was, the full array  
Of each of them, as it appeared to me,  
According to profession and degree,  
And what apparel they were riding in;  
And at a Knight I therefore will begin.

There was a *Knight*, a most distinguished man,  
Who from the day on which he first began  
To ride abroad had followed chivalry,  
Truth, honor, greatness of heart and courtesy.  
He had done nobly in his sovereign's war  
And ridden into battle, no man more,  
As well in Christian as in heathen places,  
And ever honored for his noble graces.

He saw the town of Alexandria<sup>5</sup> fall;  
Often, at feasts, the highest place of all  
Among the nations fell to him in Prussia.  
In Lithuania he had fought, and Russia,  
No Christian man so often, of his rank.  
And he was in Granada when they sank  
The town of Algeciras, also in  
North Africa, right through Benamarin;  
And in Armenia he had been as well  
And fought when Ayas and Attalia fell,  
For all along the Mediterranean coast  
He had embarked with many a noble host.  
In fifteen mortal battles he had been  
And jousted for our faith at Tramissene  
Thrice in the lists, and always killed his man.  
This same distinguished knight had led the van  
Once with the Bey of Balat, doing work  
For him against another heathen Turk;  
He was of sovereign value in all eyes.  
And though so much distinguished, he was wise  
And in his bearing modest as a maid.  
He never yet a boorish thing had said  
In all his life to any, come what might;  
He was a true, a perfect gentle-knight.  
Speaking of his appearance, he possessed  
Fine horses, but he was not gaily dressed.

5. *Alexandria*: a battle in 1365.

He wore a fustian<sup>6</sup> tunic stained and dark  
With smudges where his armor had left mark;  
Just home from service, he had joined our ranks  
To do his pilgrimage and render thanks.

He had his son with him, a fine young *Squire*,  
A lover and cadet, a lad of fire  
With curly locks, as if they had been pressed.  
He was some twenty years of age, I guessed.  
In stature he was of a moderate length,  
With wonderful agility and strength.  
He'd seen some service with the cavalry  
In Flanders and Artois and Picardy  
And had done valiantly in little space  
Of time, in hope to win his lady's grace.  
He was embroidered like a meadow bright  
And full of freshest flowers, red and white.  
Singing he was, or fluting all the day;  
He was as fresh as is the month of May.  
Short was his gown, the sleeves were long and wide;  
He knew the way to sit a horse and ride.  
He could make songs and poems and recite,  
Knew how to joust and dance, to draw and write.  
He loved so hotly that till dawn grew pale  
He slept as little as a nightingale.  
Courteous he was, lowly and serviceable,  
And carved to serve his father at the table.

There was a *Yeoman* with him at his side,  
No other servant; so he chose to ride.  
This Yeoman wore a coat and hood of green,  
And peacock-feathered arrows, bright and keen  
And neatly sheathed, hung at his belt the while  
—For he could dress his gear in yeoman style,  
His arrows never drooped their feathers low—  
And in his hand he bore a mighty bow.  
His head was like a nut, his face was brown.  
He knew the whole of woodcraft up and down.  
A saucy brace was on his arm to ward  
It from the bow-string, and a shield and sword  
Hung at one side, and at the other slipped  
A jaunty dirk,<sup>7</sup> spear-sharp and well-equipped.  
A medal of St. Christopher he wore

6. *fustian*: a coarse, sturdy cloth of cotton and flax.

7. *dirk*: a dagger.



THE SQUIRE (detail).  
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Of shining silver on his breast, and bore  
 A hunting-horn, well slung and burnished clean,  
 That dangled from a baldrick<sup>8</sup> of bright green.  
 He was a proper forester I guess.

There also was a *Nun*, a Prioress;  
 Simple her way of smiling was and coy.  
 Her greatest oath was only "By St. Loy!"<sup>9</sup>  
 And she was known as Madam Eglantyne.  
 And well she sang a service, with a fine  
 Intoning through her nose, as was most seemly,  
 And she spoke daintily in French, extremely,  
 After the school of Stratford-atte-Bowe;  
 French in the Paris style she did not know.  
 At meat her manners were well taught withal;  
 No morsel from her lips did she let fall,  
 Nor dipped her fingers in the sauce too deep;  
 But she could carry a morsel up and keep  
 The smallest drop from falling on her breast.  
 For courtliness she had a special zest.  
 And she would wipe her upper lip so clean  
 That not a trace of grease was to be seen  
 Upon the cup when she had drunk; to eat,  
 She reached a hand sedately for the meat.  
 She certainly was very entertaining,  
 Pleasant and friendly in her ways, and straining  
 To counterfeit a courtly kind of grace,  
 A stately bearing fitting to her place,  
 And to seem dignified in all her dealings.  
 As for her sympathies and tender feelings,  
 She was so charitably solicitous  
 She used to weep if she but saw a mouse  
 Caught in a trap, if it were dead or bleeding.  
 And she had little dogs she would be feeding  
 With roasted flesh, or milk, or fine white bread.  
 Sorely she wept if one of them were dead  
 Or someone took a stick and made it smart;  
 She was all sentiment and tender heart.  
 Her veil was gathered in a seemly way,  
 Her nose was elegant, her eyes glass-gray;  
 Her mouth was very small, but soft and red,  
 And certainly she had a well-shaped head,

8. **baldrick**: an ornamented leather belt worn across the chest to support a sword.  
 9. **St. Loy**: a French saint.

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THE PRIORESS (detail).  
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Almost a span across the brows, I own;  
 She was indeed by no means undergrown.  
 Her cloak, I noticed, had a graceful charm.  
 She wore a coral trinket on her arm,  
 A set of beads, the gaudies<sup>10</sup> tricked in green,  
 Whence hung a golden brooch of brightest sheen  
 On which there first was graven a crowned A,  
 And lower, *Amor vincit omnia*.<sup>11</sup>

Another *Nun*, the chaplain at her cell,  
 Was riding with her, and *three Priests* as well.

There was a *Monk*, a leader of the fashions;  
 Inspecting farms and hunting were his passions,  
 A manly man, to be an Abbot able,  
 Many the dainty horses in his stable;  
 His bridle, when he rode, a man might hear  
 Jingling in a whistling wind as clear,  
 Aye, and as loud as does the chapel bell  
 Where my lord Monk was Prior of the cell.  
 The Rule of good St. Benet or St. Maur  
 As old and strict he tended to ignore;  
 He let go by the things of yesterday  
 And followed the new world's more spacious way.  
 He did not rate that text at a plucked hen  
 Which says that hunters are not holy men  
 And that a monk uncloistered is a mere  
 Fish out of water, flapping on the pier,  
 That is to say a monk out of his cloister.  
 That was a text he held not worth an oyster;  
 And I said I agreed with his opinion;  
 What! Study until reason lost dominion  
 Poring on books in cloisters? Must he toil  
 As Austin<sup>12</sup> bade and till the very soil?  
 Was he to leave the world upon the shelf?  
 Let Austin have his labor to himself.

This Monk was therefore a good man to horse;  
 Greyhounds he had, as swift as birds, to course.  
 Hunting a hare or riding at a fence  
 Was all his fun, he spared for no expense.  
 I saw his sleeves were garnished at the hand  
 With fine gray fur, the finest in the land,  
 And where his hood was fastened at his chin

10. **gaudies**: Every eleventh bead on a rosary stands for a *paternoster* (Lord's prayer). A gaud is green and a bit larger than the rest.

11. **Amor vincit omnia** (ä' môr' wîŋ' kət.ôm' nē ə) *Latin*: "Love Conquers All."

12. **Austin**: An English version of St. Augustine's name.

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THE SECOND NUN (detail).  
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THE NUN'S PRIEST (detail).  
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He had a wrought-gold cunningly fashioned pin,  
Into a lover's knot it seemed to pass.  
His head was bald and shone as any glass,  
So did his face, as if it had been greased.  
He was a fat and personable priest;  
His bright eyes rolled, they never seemed to settle,  
And glittered like the flames beneath a kettle;  
Supple his boots, his horse in fine condition.  
He was a prelate fit for exhibition,  
He was not pale like a tormented soul.  
He liked a fat swan best, and roasted whole.  
His palfrey<sup>13</sup> was as brown as is a berry.

There was a *Friar*, a wanton one and merry,  
A *Limitier*,<sup>14</sup> a very festive fellow.  
In all *Four Orders*<sup>15</sup> there was none so mellow  
As he in flattery and dalliant speech.  
He'd fixed up many a marriage, giving each  
Of his young women what he could afford her.  
He was a noble pillar to his Order.  
Highly beloved and intimate was he  
With Country folk wherever he might be,  
And worthy city women with possessions;  
For he was qualified to hear confessions,  
Or so he said, with more than priestly scope;  
He had a special license from the Pope.  
Sweetly he heard his penitents at shrift<sup>16</sup>  
With pleasant absolution, for a gift.  
He was an easy man in penance-giving  
Where he could hope to make a decent living;  
It's a sure sign whenever gifts are given  
To a poor Order that a man's well shriven,  
And should he give enough he knew in verity  
The penitent repented in sincerity.  
For many a fellow is so hard of heart  
He cannot weep, for all his inward smart.  
Therefore instead of weeping and of prayer  
One should give silver for a poor Friar's care.  
He kept his tippet<sup>17</sup> stuffed with pins for curls,

13. *palfrey*: saddle horse.

14. *Limitier*: a begging friar who was given a specific district in which to beg.

15. *Four Orders*: The four orders of begging friars were the Dominicans, the Franciscans, the Carmelites, and the Austin Friars.

16. *shrift*: confession to a priest.

17. *tippet*: a long stole worn by clergymen.

And pocket-knives, to give to pretty girls.  
And certainly his voice was gay and sturdy,  
For he sang well and played the hurdy-gurdy.<sup>18</sup>  
At sing-songs he was champion of the hour.  
His neck was whiter than a lily-flower  
But strong enough to butt a bruiser down.  
He knew the taverns well in every town  
And every innkeeper and barmaid too  
Better than lepers, beggars and that crew,  
For in so eminent a man as he  
It was not fitting with the dignity  
Of his position dealing with such scum.  
It isn't decent, nothing good can come  
Of having truck with slum-and-gutter dwellers,  
But only with the rich and victual-sellers.  
But anywhere a profit might accrue  
Courteous he was and lowly of service too.  
Natural gifts like his were hard to match.  
He was the finest beggar of his batch,  
And, for his begging-district, payed a rent;  
His brethren did no poaching where he went.  
For though a widow mightn't have a shoe,  
So pleasant was his holy how-d'ye-do  
He got his farthing from her just the same  
Before he left, and so his income came  
To more than he laid out. And how he romped,  
Just like a puppy! He was ever prompt  
To arbitrate disputes on settling days  
(For a small fee) in many helpful ways,  
Not then appearing as your cloistered scholar  
With threadbare habit hardly worth a dollar,  
But much more like a Doctor or a Pope.  
Of double-worsted was the semi-cope<sup>19</sup>  
Upon his shoulders, and the swelling fold  
About him, like a bell about its mold  
When it is casting, rounded out his dress.  
He lisped a little out of wantonness  
To make his English sweet upon his tongue.  
When he had played his harp, or having sung,  
His eyes would twinkle in his head as bright  
As any star upon a frosty night.  
This worthy's name was Hubert, it appeared.

18. *hurdy-gurdy*: a medieval instrument shaped like a lute and played by cranking a wheel.

19. *semi-cope*: a cape.

There was a *Merchant* with a forking beard  
 And motley dress; high on his horse he sat,  
 Upon his head a Flemish beaver hat  
 And on his feet daintily buckled boots.  
 He told of his opinions and pursuits  
 In solemn tones, and how he never lost.  
 The sea should be kept free at any cost  
 (He thought) upon the Harwich-Holland ranges.  
 He was expert at dabbling in exchanges.  
 This estimable Merchant so had set  
 His wits to work, none knew he was in debt,  
 He was so stately in negotiation,  
 Loan, bargain, and commercial obligation.  
 He was an excellent fellow all the same;  
 To tell the truth I do not know his name.

There was an *Oxford Cleric* too, a student,  
 Long given to Logic, longer than was prudent;  
 The horse he had was leaner than a rake,  
 And he was not too fat, I undertake,  
 But had a hollow look, a sober air;  
 The thread upon his overcoat was bare.  
 He had found no preferment in the church  
 And he was too unworldly to make search.  
 He thought far more of having by his bed  
 His twenty books all bound in black and red,  
 Of Aristotle and philosophy  
 Than of gay music, fiddles or finery.  
 Though a philosopher, as I have told,  
 He had not found the stone for making gold.  
 Whatever money from his friends he took  
 He spent on learning or another book  
 And prayed for them most earnestly, returning  
 Thanks to them thus for paying for his learning.  
 His only care was study, and indeed  
 He never spoke a word more than was need,  
 Formal at that, respectful in the extreme,  
 Short, to the point, and lofty in his theme.  
 The thought of moral virtue filled his speech  
 And he would gladly learn, and gladly teach.

A *Sergeant at the Law* who paid his calls,  
 Wary and wise, for clients at St. Paul's<sup>20</sup>

20. *St. Paul's*: Lawyers used to meet for consultation at the portico of St. Paul's cathedral.

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THE MERCHANT (detail).  
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There also was, of noted excellence.  
 Discreet he was, a man to reverence,  
 Or so he seemed, his sayings were so wise.  
 He often had been Justice of Assize  
 By letters patent, and in full commission. 325  
 His fame and learning and his high position  
 Had won him many a robe and many a fee.  
 There was no such conveyancer<sup>21</sup> as he;  
 All was fee-simple to his strong digestion,  
 Not one conveyance could be called in question. 330  
 Though there was none so busy as was he  
 He was less busy than he seemed to be.  
 He knew of every judgment, case, and crime  
 Recorded ever since King William's time.  
 He could dictate defenses or draft deeds; 335  
 No one could pinch a comma from his screeds,<sup>22</sup>  
 And he knew every statute off by rote.  
 He wore a homely parti-colored coat  
 Girt with a silken belt of pin-stripe stuff;  
 Of his appearance I have said enough. 340

A land-owner, a *Franklin*,<sup>23</sup> had appeared,  
 White as a daisy-petal was his beard.  
 A sanguine man, high-colored and benign,  
 He loved a morning sop of cake in wine.  
 He lived for pleasure and had always done, 345  
 For he was Epicurus<sup>24</sup> very son,  
 In whose opinion sensual delight  
 Was the one true felicity in sight.  
 As noted as St. Julian was for bounty  
 He made his household free to all the County. 350  
 His bread, his ale were finest of the fine  
 And no one had a better stock of wine.  
 His house was never short of bake-meat pies,  
 Of fish and flesh, and these in such supplies  
 It positively snowed with meat and drink 355  
 And all the dainties that a man could think.  
 According to the seasons of the year  
 Changes of dish were ordered to appear.  
 He kept fat partridges in coops, beyond,

21. *conveyancer*: one who prepares papers for the transfer of real estate or property.

22. *screeds*: long, monotonous documents.

23. *Franklin*: a landowner who is free by birth but not a noble.

24. *Epicurus* (ep' ə kyoor' əs): a Greek philosopher who taught that the pursuit of pleasure is the goal of living.



THE FRANKLIN (detail).  
 Ellesmere Ms.  
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Many a bream and pike were in his pond. 360  
Woe to the cook whose sauces had no sting  
Or who was unprepared in anything!  
And in his hall a table stood arrayed  
And ready all day long, with places laid. 365  
As Justice at the Sessions none stood higher;  
He often had been Member for the Shire.  
A dagger and a little purse of silk  
Hung at his girdle, white as morning milk.  
As Sheriff he checked audit, every entry. 370  
He was a model among landed gentry.

A *Haberdasher*, a *Dyer*, a *Carpenter*,  
A *Weaver* and a *Carpet-maker* were  
Among our ranks, all in the livery  
Of one impressive guild-fraternity.  
They were so trim and fresh their gear would pass 375  
For new. Their knives were not tricked out with brass  
But wrought with purest silver, which avouches  
A like display on girdles and on pouches.  
Each seemed a worthy burgess, fit to grace  
A guild-hall with a seat upon the dais. 380  
Their wisdom would have justified a plan  
To make each one of them an alderman;  
They had the capital and revenue,  
Besides their wives declared it was their due.  
And if they did not think so, then they ought; 385  
To be called "*Madam*" is a glorious thought,  
And so is going to church and being seen  
Having your mantle carried like a queen.

They had a *Cook* with them who stood alone  
For boiling chicken with a marrow-bone, 390  
Sharp flavoring-powder and a spice for savor.  
He could distinguish London ale by flavor,  
And he could roast and seethe and broil and fry,  
Make good thick soup and bake a tasty pie.  
But a great pity, as it seemed to me, 395  
Was that he had an ulcer on his knee.  
As for *blancmange*,<sup>25</sup> he made it with the best.

There was a *Skipper* hailing from far west;  
He came from Dartmouth, so I understood.  
He rode a farmer's horse as best he could, 400

25. *blancmange* (blə mǎnzʰ'): a dish of chopped chicken or fish with rice.

In a woolen gown that reached his knee.  
A dagger on a lanyard falling free  
Hung from his neck under his arm and down.  
The summer heat had tanned his color brown,  
And certainly he was an excellent fellow. 405  
Many a draught of vintage, red and yellow,  
He'd drawn at Bordeaux, while the vintner slept.  
Few were the rules his tender conscience kept.  
If, when he fought, the enemy vessel sank,  
He sent his prisoners home; they walked the plank. 410  
As for his skill in reckoning his tides,  
Currents and many another risk besides,  
Moons, harbors, pilots, he had such dispatch  
That none from Hull to Carthage was his match.  
Hardy he was, prudent in undertaking; 415  
His beard in many a tempest had its shaking,  
And he knew all the havens as they were  
From Gottland to the Cape of Finisterre,<sup>26</sup>  
And every creek in Brittany and Spain;  
The barge he owned was called *The Maudelayne*. 420

A *Doctor* too emerged as we proceeded;  
No one alive could talk as well as he did  
On points of medicine and of surgery,  
For, being grounded in astronomy,  
He watched his patient's favorable star 425  
And, by his Natural Magic, knew what are  
The lucky hours and planetary degrees  
For making charms and magic effigies.  
The cause of every malady you'd got  
He knew, and whether dry, cold, moist or hot;<sup>27</sup> 430  
He knew their seat, their humor and condition.  
He was a perfect practicing physician.  
These causes being known for what they were,  
He gave the man his medicine then and there.  
All his apothecaries in a tribe 435  
Were ready with the drugs he would prescribe,  
And each made money from the other's guile;  
They had been friendly for a goodish while.  
He was well-versed in Esculapius too  
And what Hippocrates and Rufus knew 440  
And Dioscorides, now dead and gone,

26. From Gottland . . . Finisterre: from Sweden to Spain.

27. He knew . . . hot: The body was thought to be composed of equal portions of earth, water, fire, and ice.

Galen and Rhazes, Hali, Serapion,  
 Averroes, Avicenna, Constantine,  
 Scotch Bernard, John of Gaddesden, Gilbertine.  
 In his own diet he observed some measure;  
 There were no superfluities for pleasure,  
 Only digestives, nutritives and such.  
 He did not read the Bible very much.  
 In blood-red garments, slashed with bluish-gray  
 And lined with taffeta, he rode his way;  
 Yet he was rather close as to expenses  
 And kept the gold he won in pestilences.  
 Gold stimulates the heart, or so we're told.  
 He therefore had a special love of gold.

A worthy woman from beside Bath city  
 Was with us, somewhat deaf, which was a pity.  
 In making cloth she showed so great a bent  
 She bettered those of Ypres and of Ghent.<sup>28</sup>  
 In all the parish not a dame dared stir  
 Towards the altar steps in front of her,  
 And if indeed they did, so wrath was she  
 As to be quite put out of charity.  
 Her kerchiefs were of finely woven ground,  
 I dared have sworn they weighed a good ten pound,  
 The ones she wore on Sunday, on her head.  
 Her hose were of the finest scarlet red  
 And gartered tight; her shoes were soft and new.  
 Bold was her face, handsome, and red in hue.  
 A worthy woman all her life, what's more  
 She'd had five husbands, all at the church door,  
 Apart from other company in youth;  
 No need just now to speak of that, forsooth.  
 And she had thrice been to Jerusalem,  
 Seen many strange rivers and passed over them;  
 She'd been to Rome and also to Boulogne,  
 St. James of Compostella and Cologne,  
 And she was skilled in wandering by the way.  
 She had gap-teeth, set widely, truth to say.  
 Easily on an ambling horse she sat  
 Well wimpled up, and on her head a hat  
 As broad as is a buckler or a shield;  
 She had a flowing mantle that concealed  
 Large hips, her heels spurred sharply under that.  
 In company she liked to laugh and chat

28. Ypres (ē' pr') and Ghent: centers of Flemish wool trade.



THE WIFE OF BATH (detail).  
 Ellesmere Ms.  
 Huntington Library,  
 San Marino, Calif.

And knew the remedies for love's mischances,  
 An art in which she knew the oldest dances.

A holy-minded man of good renown  
 There was, and poor, the Parson to a town,  
 Yet he was rich in holy thought and work.  
 He also was a learned man, a clerk,  
 Who truly knew Christ's gospel and would preach it  
 Devoutly to parishioners, and teach it.  
 Benign and wonderfully diligent,  
 And patient when adversity was sent  
 (For so he proved in great adversity)  
 He much disliked extorting tithe or fee,  
 Nay rather he preferred beyond a doubt  
 Giving to poor parishioners round about  
 From his own goods and Easter offerings.  
 He found sufficiency in little things.  
 Wide was his parish, with houses far asunder,  
 Yet he neglected not in rain or thunder,  
 In sickness or in grief, to pay a call  
 On the remotest whether great or small  
 Upon his feet, and in his hand a stave.<sup>29</sup>  
 This noble example to his sheep he gave,  
 First following the word before he taught it,  
 And it was from the gospel he had caught it.  
 This little proverb he would add thereto  
 That if gold rust, what then will iron do?  
 For if a priest be foul in whom we trust  
 No wonder that a common man should rust;  
 And shame it is to see—let priests take stock—  
 A shitten shepherd and a snowy flock.  
 The true example that a priest should give  
 Is one of cleanness, how the sheep should live.  
 He did not set his benefice to hire  
 And leave his sheep encumbered in the mire  
 Or run to London to earn easy bread  
 By singing masses for the wealthy dead,  
 Or find some Brotherhood and get enrolled.  
 He stayed at home and watched over his fold  
 So that no wolf should make the sheep miscarry.  
 He was a shepherd and no mercenary.  
 Holy and virtuous he was, but then  
 Never contemptuous of sinful men,  
 Never disdainful, never too proud or fine,

29. stave: a staff.

But was discreet in teaching and benign.  
His business was to show a fair behavior  
And draw men thus to Heaven and their Savior,  
Unless indeed a man were obstinate;  
And such, whether of high or low estate,  
He put to sharp rebuke to say the least.

530

I think there never was a better priest.  
He sought no pomp or glory in his dealings,  
No scrupulosity had spiced his feelings.  
Christ and His Twelve Apostles and their lore  
He taught, but followed it himself before.

535

There was a *Plowman* with him there, his brother.  
Many a load of dung one time or other  
He must have carted through the morning dew.

540

He was an honest worker, good and true,  
Living in peace and perfect charity,  
And, as the gospel bade him, so did he,  
Loving God best with all his heart and mind  
And then his neighbor as himself, repined  
At no misfortune, slacked for no content,  
For steadily about his work he went  
To thrash his corn, to dig or to manure  
Or make a ditch; and he would help the poor  
For love of Christ and never take a penny  
If he could help it, and, as prompt as any,  
He paid his tithes in full when they were due  
On what he owned, and on his earnings too.  
He wore a tabard<sup>30</sup> smock and rode a mare.

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There was a *Reeve*, also a *Miller*, there,  
A College *Manciple* from the Inns of Court,  
A papal *Pardoner* and, in close consort,  
A Church-Court *Summoner*, riding at a trot,  
And finally myself—that was the lot.

560

The *Miller* was a chap of sixteen stone,  
A great stout fellow big in brawn and bone.  
He did well out of them, for he could go  
And win the ram at any wrestling show.  
Broad, knotty and short-shouldered, he would boast  
He could heave any door off hinge and post,  
Or take a run and break it with his head.  
His beard, like any sow or fox, was red

565



THE MILLER (detail).  
Ellesmere Ms.  
Huntington Library,  
San Marino, Calif.

And broad as well, as though it were a spade,  
And, at its very tip, his nose displayed  
A wart on which there stood a tuft of hair  
Red as the bristles in an old sow's ear.  
His nostrils were as black as they were wide,  
He had a sword and buckler at his side,  
His mighty mouth was like a furnace door.  
A wrangler and buffoon, he had a store  
Of tavern stories, filthy in the main.  
His was a master-hand at stealing grain.  
He felt it with his thumb and thus he knew  
Its quality and took three times his due—  
A thumb of gold, by God, to gauge an oat!  
He wore a hood of blue and a white coat.  
He liked to play his bagpipes up and down  
And that was how he brought us out of town.

570

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The *Manciple*<sup>31</sup> came from the Inner Temple,  
All caterers might follow his example  
In buying victuals; he was never rash  
Whether he bought on credit or paid cash.  
He used to watch the market most precisely  
And got in first, and so he did quite nicely.  
Now isn't it a marvel of God's grace  
That an illiterate fellow can outpace  
The wisdom of a heap of learned men?  
His masters—he had more than thirty then—  
All versed in the abstrusest legal knowledge,  
Could have produced a dozen from their College  
Fit to be stewards in land and rents and game  
To any Peer in England you could name,  
And show him how to live on what he had  
Debt-free (unless of course the Peer were mad)  
Or be as frugal as he might desire,  
And they were fit to help about the Shire  
In any legal case there was to try;  
And yet this Manciple could wipe their eye.

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The *Reeve*<sup>32</sup> was old and choleric and thin,  
His beard was shaven closely to the skin,  
His shorn hair came abruptly to a stop  
Above his ears, and he was docked on top  
Just like a priest in front; his legs were lean,

605

31. *Manciple*: a purchasing agent.

32. *Reeve*: a minor official or steward on an estate.



Like sticks they were, no calf was to be seen. 610  
 He kept his bins and garners very trim;  
 No auditor could gain a point on him.  
 And he could judge by watching drought and rain  
 The yield he might expect from seed and grain. 615  
 His master's sheep, his animals and hens,  
 Pigs, horses, dairies, stores and cattle-pens  
 Were wholly trusted to his government.  
 And he was under contract to present  
 The accounts, right from his master's earliest years. 620  
 No one had ever caught him in arrears.  
 No bailiff, serf, or herdsman dared to kick,  
 He knew their dodges, knew their every trick;  
 Feared like the plague he was, by those beneath.  
 He had a lovely dwelling on a heath, 625  
 Shadowed in green by trees above the sward.  
 A better hand at bargains than his lord,  
 He had grown rich and had a store of treasure  
 Well tucked away, yet out it came to pleasure  
 His lord with subtle loans or gifts of goods,  
 To earn his thanks and even coats and hoods. 630  
 When young he'd learnt a useful trade and still  
 He was a carpenter of first-rate skill.  
 The stallion-cob he rode at a slow trot  
 Was dapple-gray and bore the name of Scot. 635  
 He wore an overcoat of bluish shade  
 And rather long, he had a rusty blade  
 Slung at his side. He came, as I heard tell,  
 From Norfolk, near a place called Baldeswell.  
 His coat was tucked under his belt and splayed. 640  
 He rode the hindmost of our cavalcade.

There was a *Summoner*<sup>33</sup> with us in the place  
 Who had a fire-red cherubiny face,  
 For he had carbuncles. His eyes were narrow,  
 He was as hot and lecherous as a sparrow. 645  
 Black, scabby brows he had, and a thin beard.  
 Children were afraid when he appeared.  
 No quicksilver, lead ointments, tartar creams,  
 Boracic, no, nor brimstone, so it seems,  
 Could make a salve that had the power to bite,  
 Clean up or cure his whelks<sup>34</sup> of knobby white 650  
 Or purge the pimples sitting on his cheeks.

33. **Summoner:** one paid to summon sinners to church courts.  
 34. **whelks:** pimples.

Garlic he loved, and onions too, and leeks,  
 And drinking strong red wine till all was hazy.  
 Then he would shout and jabber as if crazy, 655  
 And wouldn't speak a word except in Latin  
 When he was drunk, such tags as he was pat in;  
 He only had a few, say two or three  
 That he had mugged up out of some decree;  
 No wonder, for he heard them every day. 660  
 And, as you know, a man can teach a jay  
 To call out "Walter" better than the Pope.  
 But had you tried to test his wits and grope.  
 For more, you'd have found nothing in the bag.  
 Then "*Questio quid juris*"<sup>35</sup> was his tag. 665  
 He was a gentle varlet<sup>36</sup> and a kind one,  
 No better fellow if you went to find one.  
 He would allow—just for a quart of wine—  
 Any good lad to keep a concubine  
 A twelvemonth, and dispense it altogether!  
 Yet he could pluck a finch to leave no feather; 670  
 And if he found some rascal with a maid  
 He would instruct him not to be afraid  
 In such a case of the Archdeacon's curse  
 (Unless the rascal's soul were in his purse)  
 For in his purse the punishment should be. 675  
 "Purse is the good Archdeacon's Hell," said he.  
 But well I know he lied in what he said;  
 A curse should put a guilty man in dread,  
 For curses kill, as shriving brings, salvation.  
 We should beware of excommunication. 680  
 Thus, by mere threat, this fellow could possess  
 The boys and girls of all the Diocese,  
 He knew their secrets and they went in dread.  
 He wore a garland set upon his head  
 Large as the holly-bush upon a stake 685  
 Outside an ale-house, and he had a cake,  
 A round one, which it was his joke to wield  
 As if it were intended for a shield.

He and a gentle *Pardoner*<sup>37</sup> rode together,  
 A bird from Charing Cross of the same feather, 690  
 Just back from visiting the Court of Rome.

35. *Questio quid juris* Latin: "The question is, what is the point in law?"  
 36. varlet: rascal, knave.  
 37. **Pardoner:** one who has the authority from the Pope to sell pardons and indulgences.



THE PARDONER (detail).  
 Ellesmere Ms.  
 Huntington Library,  
 San Marino, Calif.

He loudly sang "*Come hither, love, come home!*"  
 The Summoner sang deep seconds to this song,  
 No trumpet ever sounded half so strong.  
 This Pardoner had hair as yellow as wax 695  
 Hanging down smoothly like a hank of flax.  
 In driblets fell his locks behind his head  
 Down to his shoulders which they overspread;  
 Thinly they fell, like rat-tails, one by one.  
 He wore no hood upon his head, for fun; 700  
 The hood inside his wallet had been stowed,  
 He aimed at riding in the latest mode;  
 But for a little cap his head was bare  
 And he had bulging eye-balls, like a hare.  
 He'd sewed a holy relic on his cap; 705  
 His wallet lay before him on his lap,  
 Brimful of pardons come from Rome all hot.  
 He had the same small voice a goat has got.  
 His chin no beard had harbored, nor would harbor,  
 Smoother than ever chin was left by barber. 710  
 I judge he was a gelding, or a mare.  
 As, to his trade, from Berwick down to Ware  
 There was no pardoner of equal grace,  
 For in his trunk he had a pillow-case  
 Which he asserted was Our Lady's veil. 715  
 He said he had a gobbet<sup>38</sup> of the sail  
 Saint Peter had the time when he made bold  
 To walk the waves, till Jesu Christ took hold.  
 He had a cross of metal set with stones  
 And, in a glass, a rubble of pigs' bones. 720  
 And with these relics, any time he found  
 Some poor up-country parson to astound,  
 On one short day, in money down, he drew  
 More than the parson in a month or two,  
 And by his flatteries and prevarication 725  
 Made monkeys of the priest and congregation.  
 But still to do him justice first and last  
 In church he was a noble ecclesiast.  
 How well he read a lesson or told a story!  
 But best of all he sang an Offertory, 730  
 For well he knew that when that song was sung  
 He'd have to preach and tune his honey-tongue  
 And (well he could) win silver from the crowd.  
 That's why he sang so merrily and loud.

38. *gobbet*: a piece, or chunk.

Now I have told you shortly, in a clause, 735  
 The rank, the array, the number and the cause  
 Of our assembly in this company  
 In Southwark, at that high-class hostelry  
 Known as *The Tabard*, close beside *The Bell*.  
 And now the time has come for me to tell 740  
 How we behaved that evening; I'll begin  
 After we had alighted at the Inn.  
 Then I'll report our journey, stage by stage,  
 All the remainder of our pilgrimage.  
 But first I beg of you, in courtesy, 745  
 Not to condemn me as unmannerly  
 If I speak plainly and with no concealings  
 And give account of all their words and dealings,  
 Using their very phrases as they fell.  
 For certainly, as you all know so well, 750  
 He who repeats a tale after a man  
 Is bound to say, as nearly as he can,  
 Each single word, if he remembers it,  
 However rudely spoken or unfit,  
 Or else the tale he tells will be untrue, 755  
 The things invented and the phrases new.  
 He may not flinch although it were his brother,  
 If he says one word he must say the other.  
 And Christ Himself spoke broad in Holy Writ,  
 And as you know there's nothing there unfit, 760  
 And Plato says, for those with power to read,  
 "The word should be as cousin to the deed."  
 Further I beg you to forgive it me  
 If I neglect the order and degree  
 And what is due to rank in what I've planned. 765  
 I'm short of wit as you will understand.

Our *Host*<sup>39</sup> gave us great welcome; everyone  
 Was given a place and supper was begun.  
 He served the finest victuals you could think,  
 The wine was strong and we were glad to drink. 770  
 A very striking man our Host withal,  
 And fit to be a marshal in a hall.  
 His eyes were bright, his girth a little wide;  
 There is no finer burgess in Cheapside.  
 Bold in his speech, yet wise and full of tact, 775  
 There was no manly attribute he lacked,

39. *Host*: Harry Bailly, who owned an inn in Southwark in Chaucer's day.

What's more he was a merry-hearted man.  
After our meal he jokingly began  
To talk of sport, and, among other things  
After we'd settled up our reckonings,  
He said as follows: "Truly, gentlemen,  
You're very welcome and I can't think when  
—Upon my word I'm telling you no lie—  
I've seen a gathering here that looked so spry,  
No, not this year, as in this tavern now.  
I'd think you up some fun if I knew how.  
And, as it happens, a thought has just occurred  
And it will cost you nothing, on my word.  
You're off to Canterbury—well, God speed!  
Blessed St. Thomas answer to your need!  
And I don't doubt, before the journey's done  
You mean to while the time in tales and fun.  
Indeed, there's little pleasure for your bones  
Riding along and all as dumb as stones.  
So let me then propose for your enjoyment,  
Just as I said, a suitable employment.  
And if my notion suits and you agree  
And promise to submit yourselves to me  
Playing your parts exactly as I say  
Tomorrow as you ride along the way,  
Then by my father's soul (and he is dead)  
If you don't like it you can have my head!  
Hold up your hands, and not another word."  
Well, our consent of course was not deferred,  
It seemed not worth a serious debate;  
We all agreed to it at any rate  
And bade him issue what commands he would.  
"My lords," he said, "now listen for your good,  
And please don't treat my notion with disdain.  
This is the point, to make it short and plain.  
Each one of you shall help to make things slip  
By telling two stories on the outward trip  
To Canterbury, that's what I intend,  
And, on the homeward way to journey's end  
Another two, tales from the days of old;  
And then the man whose story is best told,  
That is to say who gives the fullest measure  
Of good morality and general pleasure,  
He shall be given a supper, paid by all,  
Here in this tavern, in this very hall,  
When we come back again from Canterbury.  
And in the hope to keep you bright and merry

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I'll go along with you myself and ride  
All at my own expense and serve as guide.  
I'll be the judge, and those who won't obey  
Shall pay for what we spend upon the way.  
Now if you all agree to what you've heard  
Tell me at once without another word,  
And I will make arrangements early for it."  
Of course we all agreed, in fact we swore it  
Delightedly, and made entreaty too  
That he should act as he proposed to do,  
Become our Governor in short, and be  
Judge of our tales and general referee,  
And set the supper at a certain price.  
We promised to be ruled by his advice  
Come high, come low; unanimously thus  
We set him up in judgment over us.  
More wine was fetched, the business being done;  
We drank it off and up went everyone  
To bed without a moment of delay.  
Early next morning at the spring of day  
Up rose our Host and roused us like a cock,  
Gathering us together in a flock,  
And off we rode, at slightly faster pace  
Than walking, to St. Thomas' watering-place;  
And there our Host drew up, began to ease  
His horse, and said, "Now, listen if you please,  
My lords! Remember what you promised me.  
If evensong and matins will agree  
Let's see who shall be first to tell a tale.  
And as I hope to drink good wine and ale  
I'll be your judge. The rebel who disobeys,  
However much the journey costs, he pays.  
Now draw for cut and then we can depart;  
The man who draws the shortest cut shall start. . . .

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**Getting at Meaning**  
RECALLING, INTERPRETING, CRITICAL THINKING

1. Which of the pilgrims belong to each of these five categories: nobility, clergy, professionals, craftsmen, and servants and laborers? Which of the pilgrims are part of the old feudal system? Which belong to the emerging middle class?
2. The first pilgrim is "... a true, a perfect gentle-knight." How does the description of the Knight support this conclusion? Which phrases or lines summarize each of the following characters: Merchant, Sergeant, Clerk, Franklin, Parson, Plowman, Summoner?
3. Which pilgrims are unscrupulous? Explain your choices.
4. What character types are represented among the pilgrims? Are these character types evident in contemporary life? Explain your answer.
5. Only three women embark on the pilgrimage. Discuss reasons why Chaucer might have included these particular women.
6. What are the rules of the storytelling contest as explained by the Host?

**Developing Skills in Reading Literature**

1. **Characterization.** "The Prologue" is primarily a series of character sketches created through carefully selected details. These details include precise words and phrases that describe physical appearance: for example, the Doctor wore "... blood-red garments, slashed with bluish-gray/And lined with taffeta. . . ." Details also describe the actions and accomplishments of each pilgrim as in the sketch of the Oxford Clerk: "Whatever money from his friends he took/He spent on learning or another book." Comments by the speaker provide additional information about many of the characters: for instance, the speaker calls the Parson "Benign and wonderfully diligent."

Similes too create vivid impressions of both appearance and inner qualities. These similes describe two of the pilgrims:

Squire: He was embroidered like a meadow bright  
And full of freshest flowers, red and white.  
Pardoner: This Pardoner had hair as yellow as wax  
Hanging down smoothly like a hank of flax.

Choose five of the pilgrims and analyze each description, identifying the significant details and commenting on their effect.

2. **Meter.** Meter is the repetition of a regular rhythmic unit in a line of poetry. Each unit of meter is known as a foot, with each foot having one stressed and one or two unstressed syllables. One type of metrical foot is the iamb, one unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (""). A line of poetry consisting of iambs would be named for the type of foot (iambic) and also for the number of feet in the line; for example, monometer (one foot), trimeter (three feet), or hexameter (six feet). Iambic pentameter is the most common metrical pattern in English poetry, for it closely approximates the natural cadence of the spoken language.

The process of determining meter is known as scanning. For example, these two lines from "The Prologue" are scanned as follows:

lĭ ha'p/penēd in/thāt seā/soñ thát/oñe dáy

lĭñ South/wa'rk, a/The Tab'larđ, a's/lĭ láy

Select one character sketch from "The Prologue" and scan each line. Notice that the regularity of the meter is not apparent as you read the sketch aloud, due to pauses for punctuation, to the emphasis of key words, and to the continuity of thought from one line to the next.

3. **Rhyme, Couplet, and Heroic Couplet.** When two consecutive lines of poetry end with rhyming words, words whose accented vowels and all succeeding sounds are identical, the lines are called a couplet. When their meter is iambic pentameter, the lines constitute a heroic couplet. Chaucer introduced the heroic couplet into English literature.

Examine a ten-line unit of "The Prologue" and analyze the heroic couplets within the unit. You might encounter two lines ending with words that rhyme imprecisely: for example, *breath* and *heath*. This kind of rhyme is called off-rhyme, near-rhyme, imperfect rhyme, slant rhyme, or sprung rhyme. Some off-rhymes result from changes in the pronunciations of words, others from a poet's intent to vary a regular metrical pattern.

4. **Tone.** The details in a literary work and the way that these details are presented reveal the writer's tone. Among the many possible tones are sarcastic, sympathetic, objective, and condescending. Think about the human weaknesses exhibited by the pilgrims. What is Chaucer's attitude toward these weaknesses? What is his attitude toward the clergy? Which pilgrims does he seem to admire the most? Characterize the overall tone of "The Prologue."

**Developing Writing Skills**

» See Handbook: How To Write About Literature, page 938, Lessons 1-5, 7.

1. **Writing a Character Sketch.** Although the Host is not described in as much detail as the other pilgrims,

the reader does learn a great deal about him. Write a one paragraph character sketch of the Host based on the descriptive details in "The Prologue" and on the inferences you might make from the Host's words and actions.

2. **Writing Heroic Couplets.** Select a contemporary entertainer, politician, statesman, or athlete, and write a poetic description of that person in heroic couplets. Use the character sketches in "The Prologue" as a model.

3. **Writing an Explanation.** Imagine that you are the Host at The Tabard and that your tables each seat four guests. Select twelve pilgrims and assign four to each of three tables. In a composition explain your reasons for seating each group of pilgrims together.



THE CANTERBURY PILGRIMS LEAVING CANTERBURY.  
British Museum.