

# THE CANTERBURY TALES

*William Chaucer*

*Rendered into modern English by J.U. Nicolson*

*With an Introduction by  
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## INTRODUCTION

Spring has arrived, prompting folks from all stations of medieval life to pilgrimage together to the shrine of Thomas Becket. Because long trips tend to be rather dull, the travelers begin a storytelling competition featuring roosters, murders, bewitched hags, banished wives in barrels, plenty of adulterers, a whole host of churchmen, and a frying pan whisked to hell. Who will tell the best story on the way? That is for the host, Harry Bailey, to decide.

### **The World Around**

In the decades between 1380 and 1400, the year Chaucer died, England was certainly reeling from a good deal of turmoil. Paramount was the devastation caused by the Black Death, which had just torn through England from 1348–1351, destroying a full third of her population.\*

In addition to the social chaos, religious superstition, and grief that this plague caused, the loss of laborers to work the landed estates led to much political upheaval; the peasants now actually had the position to lobby for better treatment and better rights. They did just that in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, challenging the rigidity of the feudal structure.†

\* John Hatcher, "England in the Aftermath of the Black Death," *Past & Present* 144 (1994): 3.

† *Ibid.*, 27.

Alongside the Peasants' Revolt against the nobility, complaints against the abuses of the Catholic Church were quickly multiplying. The Protestant Reformation was about to break on the horizon of medieval England. While John Wycliffe is, perhaps, the most well-known English spokesman against abuses in the church at this time, the Lollards, who referenced large portions of Wycliffe's teaching, were the most vocal in broadcasting these abuses. Between rumblings in the culture at large and among some of his own friends, Chaucer was not far removed from the growing complaints against the church.

Additionally, William the Conqueror's invasion of England with the hordes of French-speaking nobility whom he brought along propelled the English language through a Great Vowel Shift; the language had grown up out of Anglo-Saxon Old English to Middle English with its sweet, romantic vowel sounds. Middle English became a literary language—one robust enough to sustain dramatic poetry—with the publication of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and his *Troilus and Criseyde*.

### About the Author

Geoffrey Chaucer was not a reclusive, scholarly poet. Rather than spending most of his time scribbling and composing in his private study, Chaucer spent most of his career in a highly public and political role.

Chaucer primarily worked for Edward III and Richard II as an ambassador (and spy) on the European continent. In this capacity, he traveled extensively, spending time in France (1360), Spain (1366), and Italy (1372–1373). In his travels he encountered various, contemporary literary geniuses such as Boccaccio and Petrarch.\* Truth be told, Chaucer actually borrowed a good handful of plot lines for the stories of *The Canterbury Tales* from authors like Boccaccio and Petrarch. In fact the very structure of *The Canterbury Tales* mimics Boccaccio's *Decameron*. It would be nearly impossible to overestimate the influence of Chaucer's travels and those he met on his own work.

\* Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. Walter Skeat (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906), 31.

humorous, each tale pairs uniquely with its narrator. Each tale becomes a sort of commentary on each pilgrim narrator; the fact that the Miller and the Reeve tell such bawdy tales reveals much about their characters. Similarly the introduction of the pilgrims in the “General Prologue” prepares the reader for the tales that follow.

The breadth of the tales showcases the literary craftsmanship of Chaucer, but few, if any, of the tales originated with Chaucer; he borrowed the storylines for most tales from ancient texts, the popular stories in England and across the continent, and sometimes from the published works of his contemporaries. Before condemning Chaucer for plagiarism, however, it is important to keep in mind that the medieval act of reading was one of rewriting: the act of imitation and adaptation was a great sign of respect and admiration—as well as a way for Chaucer to show off. The logic is fairly simple: if Chaucer can write Petrarch’s stories better than Petrarch, what a very splendid author Chaucer proves himself to be.

### Worldview Analysis

Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* seem structurally simple: a long train of stories told by a range of pilgrims. The connections between the tales, however, feel far more elusive. Even Boccaccio, Chaucer’s Italian literary contemporary brought the worldview of his own frame narrative more easily to the surface. Boccaccio sets his *Decameron* in the middle of the Black Death’s rapid spread throughout the Italian peninsula. The ten companions decide to escape from the plague to the countryside and spend their days with nothing better to do but “eat, drink, and be merry”—telling tales to pass the time while they wait for the plague to pass over or to infect them too. For Boccaccio, stories are the best antidotes to disease as they offer diversion while putting the present tragic circumstances in the larger context of the human drama. For Chaucer, however, the narrative plot thread seems no stronger than a smattering of spontaneous vignettes motivated by competition and boredom on the road.

The breath of the characters also complicates the teasing out of Chaucer’s worldview; Chaucer can hide himself by speaking

in so many voices and from many vantages. Can such a frame narrative have any sort of worldview integrity, or must such a work's worldview be simply defined as the aggregate of the thirty travelers' worldviews?

Some critics have argued that Chaucer's goal was merely to give us a survey of "all walks of life" in Medieval England in the late 1300s. From the list of pilgrims, we see the Knight and his son, the Squire, representing the landed class. Chaucer also gives us a long list of churchmen and women including the Friar, the Monk, the Prioress, the Nun's Priest, the Summoner, the Pardoner, and the Parson, as well as a gaggle of lay folk and laborers like the Miller, the Reeve, and the Plowman, among many others. These three social groupings give us the three estates common to Medieval England. Some have suggested that rather than merely present how the three estates interacted in his day and age, Chaucer sought to comment upon the social setup of Medieval England by creating an "estate satire," one that mocked certain absurdities in all classes by having members of each estate tell tales responding to others from other classes. Chaucer also introduces members that don't fit nicely into the three estates—members of what appears to be the future middle class: the Man of Law, the Merchant, the land-owning Franklin, and perhaps the Wife of Bath. And indeed much of the story holds together as a string of interactions between characters moderated by the host. For example, the Friar responds to the Wife of Bath, the Summoner responds to the Friar, the Clerk responds to the Wife of Bath, and so on and so forth.

The action of "narration and counter-narration or a response narrator" between Pilgrims is indeed strong throughout the tales, even if the responses aren't always between estates (often-times, the competition is between members of the same social class like the Miller and the Reeve or the Friar and the Summoner). We call this urge among the pilgrims to respond one to another, either with a better story or with an attack on the previous narrator, "*quitting*," and Chaucer's characters model it in one of two ways. If it is done in good humor between two characters, we call the response tale one of *game* (pronounced





## PROLOGUE

*Here begins the Book of the Tales of Canterbury*

**W**hen April with his showers sweet with fruit  
The drought of March has pierced unto the root  
And bathed each vein with liquor that has power  
To generate therein and sire the flower;  
When Zephyr also has, with his sweet breath,  
Quickened again, in every holt and heath,  
The tender shoots and buds, and the young sun  
Into the Ram one half his course has run,  
And many little birds make melody  
That sleep through all the night with open eye  
(So Nature pricks them on to ramp and rage)-  
Then do folk long to go on pilgrimage,  
And palmers to go seeking out strange strands,  
To distant shrines well known in sundry lands.  
And specially from every shire's end  
Of England they to Canterbury wend,  
The holy blessed martyr there to seek  
Who helped them when they lay so ill and weal  
Befell that, in that season, on a day  
In Southwark, at the Tabard, as I lay  
Ready to start upon my pilgrimage  
To Canterbury, full of devout homage,  
There came at nightfall to that hostelry

Some nine and twenty in a company  
 Of sundry persons who had chanced to fall  
 In fellowship, and pilgrims were they all  
 That toward Canterbury town would ride.  
 The rooms and stables spacious were and wide,  
 And well we there were eased, and of the best.  
 And briefly, when the sun had gone to rest,  
 So had I spoken with them, every one,  
 That I was of their fellowship anon,  
 And made agreement that we'd early rise  
 To take the road, as you I will apprise.  
 But none the less, whilst I have time and space,  
 Before yet farther in this tale I pace,  
 It seems to me accordant with reason  
 To inform you of the state of every one  
 Of all of these, as it appeared to me,  
 And who they were, and what was their degree,  
 And even how arrayed there at the inn;  
 And with a knight thus will I first begin.

*The Knight:*

A knight there was, and he a worthy man,  
 Who, from the moment that he first began  
 To ride about the world, loved chivalry,  
 Truth, honour, freedom and all courtesy.  
 Full worthy was he in his liege-lord's war,  
 And therein had he ridden (none more far)  
 As well in Christendom as heathenesse,  
 And honoured everywhere for worthiness.  
 At Alexandria, he, when it was won;  
 Full oft the table's roster he'd begun  
 Above all nations' knights in Prussia.  
 In Latvia raided he, and Russia,  
 No christened man so oft of his degree.  
 In far Granada at the siege was he  
 Of Algeciras, and in Belmarie.  
 At Ayas was he and at Satalye  
 When they were won; and on the Middle Sea

At many a noble meeting chanced to be.  
Of mortal battles he had fought fifteen,  
And he'd fought for our faith at Tramissene  
Three times in lists, and each time slain his foe.  
This self-same worthy knight had been also  
At one time with the lord of Palatye  
Against another heathen in Turkey:  
And always won he sovereign fame for prize.  
Though so illustrious, he was very wise  
And bore himself as meekly as a maid.  
He never yet had any vileness said,  
In all his life, to whatsoever wight.  
He was a truly perfect, gentle knight.  
But now, to tell you all of his array,  
His steeds were good, but yet he was not gay.  
Of simple fustian wore he a jupon  
Sadly discoloured by his habergeon;  
For he had lately come from his voyage  
And now was going on this pilgrimage.

*The Squire:*

With him there was his son, a youthful squire,  
A lover and a lusty bachelor,  
With locks well curled, as if they'd laid in press.  
Some twenty years of age he was, I guess.  
In stature he was of an average length,  
Wondrously active, aye, and great of strength.  
He'd ridden sometime with the cavalry  
In Flanders, in Artois, and Picardy,  
And borne him well within that little space  
In hope to win thereby his lady's grace.  
Prinked out he was, as if he were a mead,  
All full of fresh-cut flowers white and red.  
Singing he was, or fluting, all the day;  
He was as fresh as is the month of May.  
Short was his gown, with sleeves both long and wide.  
Well could he sit on horse, and fairly ride.  
He could make songs and words thereto indite,

Joust, and dance too, as well as sketch and write.  
 So hot he loved that, while night told her tale,  
 He slept no more than does a nightingale.  
 Courteous he, and humble, willing and able,  
 And carved before his father at the table.

*The Yeoman:*

A yeoman had he, nor more servants, no,  
 At that time, for he chose to travel so;  
 And he was clad in coat and hood of green.  
 A sheaf of peacock arrows bright and keen  
 Under his belt he bore right carefully  
 (Well could he keep his tackle yeomanly:  
 His arrows had no draggled feathers low),  
 And in his hand he bore a mighty bow.  
 A cropped head had he and a sun-browed face.  
 Of woodcraft knew he all the useful ways.  
 Upon his arm he bore a bracer gay,  
 And at one side a sword and buckler, yea,  
 And at the other side a dagger bright,  
 Well sheathed and sharp as spear point in the light;  
 On breast a Christopher of silver sheen.  
 He bore a horn in baldric all of green;  
 A forester he truly was, I guess.

*The Prioress:*

There was also a nun, a prioress,  
 Who, in her smiling, modest was and coy;  
 Her greatest oath was but "By Saint Eloy!"  
 And she was known as Madam Eglantine.  
 Full well she sang the services divine,  
 Intoning through her nose, becomingly;  
 And fair she spoke her French, and fluently,  
 After the school of Stratford-at-the-Bow,  
 For French of Paris was not hers to know.  
 At table she had been well taught withal,  
 And never from her lips let morsels fall,  
 Nor dipped her fingers deep in sauce, but ate

With so much care the food upon her plate  
That never driblet fell upon her breast.  
In courtesy she had delight and zest.  
Her upper lip was always wiped so clean  
That in her cup was no iota seen  
Of grease, when she had drunk her draught of wine.  
Becomingly she reached for meat to dine.  
And certainly delighting in good sport,  
She was right pleasant, amiable in short.  
She was at pains to counterfeit the look  
Of courtliness, and stately manners took,  
And would be held worthy of reverence.  
But, to say something of her moral sense,  
She was so charitable and piteous  
That she would weep if she but saw a mouse  
Caught in a trap, though it were dead or bled.  
She had some little dogs, too, that she fed  
On roasted flesh, or milk and fine white bread.  
But sore she'd weep if one of them were dead,  
Or if men smote it with a rod to smart:  
For pity ruled her, and her tender heart.  
Right decorous her pleated wimple was;  
Her nose was fine; her eyes were blue as glass;  
Her mouth was small and therewith soft and red;  
But certainly she had a fair forehead;  
It was almost a full span broad, I own,  
For, truth to tell, she was not undergrown.  
Neat was her cloak, as I was well aware.  
Of coral small about her arm she'd bear  
A string of beads and gauded all with green;  
And therefrom hung a brooch of golden sheen  
Whereon there was first written a crowned "A,"  
And under, *Amor vincit omnia*.  
Another little nun with her had she,  
Who was her chaplain; and of priests she'd three.

*The Monk:*

A monk there was, one made for mastery,

An outrider, who loved his venery;  
A manly man, to be an abbot able.  
Full many a blooded horse had he in stable:  
And when he rode men might his bridle hear  
A-jingling in the whistling wind as clear,  
Aye, and as loud as does the chapel bell  
Where this brave monk was of the cell.  
The rule of Maurus or Saint Benedict,  
By reason it was old and somewhat strict,  
This said monk let such old things slowly pace  
And followed new-world manners in their place.  
He cared not for that text a clean-plucked hen  
Which holds that hunters are not holy men;  
Nor that a monk, when he is cloisterless,  
Is like unto a fish that's waterless;  
That is to say, a monk out of his cloister.  
But this same text he held not worth an oyster;  
And I said his opinion was right good.  
What? Should he study as a madman would  
Upon a book in cloister cell? Or yet  
Go labour with his hands and swink and sweat,  
As Austin bids? How shall the world be served?  
Let Austin have his toil to him reserved.  
Therefore he was a rider day and night;  
Greyhounds he had, as swift as bird in flight.  
Since riding and the hunting of the hare  
Were all his love, for no cost would he spare.  
I saw his sleeves were purfled at the hand  
With fur of grey, the finest in the land;  
Also, to fasten hood beneath his chin,  
He had of good wrought gold a curious pin:  
A love-knot in the larger end there was.  
His head was bald and shone like any glass,  
And smooth as one anointed was his face.  
Fat was this lord, he stood in goodly case.  
His bulging eyes he rolled about, and hot  
They gleamed and red, like fire beneath a pot;  
His boots were soft; his horse of great estate.

Now certainly he was a fine prelate:  
He was not pale as some poor wasted ghost.  
A fat swan loved he best of any roast.  
His palfrey was as brown as is a berry.

*The Friar:*

A friar there was, a wanton and a merry,  
A limiter, a very festive man.  
In all the Orders Four is none that can  
Equal his gossip and his fair language.  
He had arranged full many a marriage  
Of women young, and this at his own cost.  
Unto his order he was a noble post.  
Well liked by all and intimate was he  
With franklins everywhere in his country,  
And with the worthy women of the town:  
For at confessing he'd more power in gown  
(As he himself said) than it good curate,  
For of his order he was licentiate.  
He heard confession gently, it was said,  
Gently absolved too, leaving naught of dread.  
He was an easy man to give penance  
When knowing he should gain a good pittance;  
For to a begging friar, money given  
Is sign that any man has been well shriven.  
For if one gave (he dared to boast of this),  
He took the man's repentance not amiss.  
For many a man there is so hard of heart  
He cannot weep however pains may smart.  
Therefore, instead of weeping and of prayer,  
Men should give silver to poor friars all bare.  
His tippet was stuck always full of knives  
And pins, to give to young and pleasing wives.  
And certainly he kept a merry note:  
Well could he sing and play upon the rote.  
At balladry he bore the prize away.  
His throat was white as lily of the May;  
Yet strong he was as ever champion.

In towns he knew the taverns, every one,  
 And every good host and each barmaid too-  
 Better than begging lepers, these he knew.  
 For unto no such solid man as he  
 Accorded it, as far as he could see,  
 To have sick lepers for acquaintances.  
 There is no honest advantageousness  
 In dealing with such poverty-stricken curs;  
 It's with the rich and with big victualers.  
 And so, wherever profit might arise,  
 Courteous he was and humble in men's eyes.  
 There was no other man so virtuous.  
 He was the finest beggar of his house;  
 A certain district being farmed to him,  
 None of his brethren dared approach its rim;  
 For though a widow had no shoes to show,  
 So pleasant was his In principio,  
 He always got a farthing ere he went.  
 He lived by pickings, it is evident.  
 And he could romp as well as any whelp.  
 On love days could he be of mickle help.  
 For there he was not like a cloisterer,  
 With threadbare cope as is the poor scholar,  
 But he was like a lord or like a pope.  
 Of double worsted was his semi-cope,  
 That rounded like a bell, as you may guess.  
 He lisped a little, out of wantonness,  
 To make his English soft upon his tongue;  
 And in his harping, after he had sung,  
 His two eyes twinkled in his head as bright  
 As do the stars within the frosty night.  
 This worthy limiter was named Hubert.

*The Merchant:*

There was a merchant with forked beard, and girt  
 In motley gown, and high on horse he sat,  
 Upon his head a Flemish beaver hat;  
 His boots were fastened rather elegantly.



His spoke his notions out right pompously,  
Stressing the times when he had won, not lost.  
He would the sea were held at any cost  
Across from Middleburgh to Orwell town.  
At money-changing he could make a crown.  
This worthy man kept all his wits well set;  
There was no one could say he was in debt,  
So well he governed all his trade affairs  
With bargains and with borrowings and with shares.  
Indeed, he was a worthy man withal,  
But, sooth to say, his name I can't recall.

*The Clerk:*

A clerk from Oxford was with us also,  
Who'd turned to getting knowledge, long ago.  
As meagre was his horse as is a rake,  
Nor he himself too fat, I'll undertake,  
But he looked hollow and went soberly.  
Right threadbare was his overcoat; for he  
Had got him yet no churchly benefice,  
Nor was so worldly as to gain office.  
For he would rather have at his bed's head  
Some twenty books, all bound in black and red,  
Of Aristotle and his philosophy  
Than rich robes, fiddle, or gay psaltery.  
Yet, and for all he was philosopher,  
He had but little gold within his coffer;  
But all that he might borrow from a friend  
On books and learning he would swiftly spend,  
And then he'd pray right busily for the souls  
Of those who gave him wherewithal for schools.  
Of study took he utmost care and heed.  
Not one word spoke he more than was his need;  
And that was said in fullest reverence  
And short and quick and full of high good sense.  
Pregnant of moral virtue was his speech;  
And gladly would he learn and gladly teach.

*The Lawyer:*

A sergeant of the law, wary and wise,  
 Who'd often gone to Paul's walk to advise,  
 There was also, compact of excellence.  
 Discreet he was, and of great reverence;  
 At least he seemed so, his words were so wise.  
 Often he sat as justice in assize,  
 By patent or commission from the crown;  
 Because of learning and his high renown,  
 He took large fees and many robes could own.  
 So great a purchaser was never known.  
 All was fee simple to him, in effect,  
 Wherefore his claims could never be suspect.  
 Nowhere a man so busy of his class,  
 And yet he seemed much busier than he was.  
 All cases and all judgments could he cite  
 That from King William's time were apposite.  
 And he could draw a contract so explicit  
 Not any man could fault therefrom elicit;  
 And every statute he'd verbatim quote.  
 He rode but badly in a medley coat,  
 Belted in a silken sash, with little bars,  
 But of his dress no more particulars.

*The Franklin:*

There was a franklin in his company;  
 White was his beard as is the white daisy.  
 Of sanguine temperament by every sign,  
 He loved right well his morning sop in wine.  
 Delightful living was the goal he'd won,  
 For he was Epicurus' very son,  
 That held opinion that a full delight  
 Was true felicity, perfect and right.  
 A householder, and that a great, was he;  
 Saint Julian he was in his own country.  
 His bread and ale were always right well done;  
 A man with better cellars there was none.  
 Baked meat was never wanting in his house,

Of fish and flesh, and that so plenteous  
It seemed to snow therein both food and drink  
Of every dainty that a man could think.  
According to the season of the year  
He changed his diet and his means of cheer.  
Full many a fattened partridge did he mew,  
And many a bream and pike in fish-pond too.  
Woe to his cook, except the sauces were  
Poignant and sharp, and ready all his gear.  
His table, waiting in his hall always,  
Stood ready covered through the livelong day.  
At county sessions was he lord and sire,  
And often acted as a knight of shire.  
A dagger and a trinket-bag of silk  
Hung from his girdle, white as morning milk.  
He had been sheriff and been auditor;  
And nowhere was a worthier vavasor.

*The Weaver, the Dyer, and the Arras-Maker:*

A haberdasher and a carpenter,  
An arras-maker, dyer, and weaver  
Were with us, clothed in similar livery,  
All of one sober, great fraternity.  
Their gear was new and well adorned it was;  
Their weapons were not cheaply trimmed with brass,  
But all with silver; chastely made and well  
Their girdles and their pouches too, I tell.  
Each man of them appeared a proper burges  
To sit in guildhall on a high dais.  
And each of them, for wisdom he could span,  
Was fitted to have been an alderman;  
For chattels they'd enough, and, too, of rent;  
To which their goodwives gave a free assent,  
Or else for certain they had been to blame.  
It's good to hear "Madam" before one's name,  
And go to church when all the world may see,  
Having one's mantle borne right royally.

*The Cook:*

A cook they had with them, just for the nonce,  
 To boil the chickens with the marrow-bones,  
 And flavour tartly and with galingale.  
 Well could he tell a draught of London ale.  
 And he could roast and seethe and broil and fry,  
 And make a good thick soup, and bake a pie.  
 But very ill it was, it seemed to me,  
 That on his shin a deadly sore had he;  
 For sweet blanc-mange, he made it with the best.

*The Sailor:*

There was a sailor, living far out west;  
 For aught I know, he was of Dartmouth town.  
 He sadly rode a hackney, in a gown,  
 Of thick rough cloth falling to the knee.  
 A dagger hanging on a cord had he  
 About his neck, and under arm, and down.  
 The summer's heat had burned his visage brown;  
 And certainly he was a good fellow.  
 Full many a draught of wine he'd drawn, I trow,  
 Of Bordeaux vintage, while the trader slept.  
 Nice conscience was a thing he never kept.  
 If that he fought and got the upper hand,  
 By water he sent them home to every land.  
 But as for craft, to reckon well his tides,  
 His currents and the dangerous watersides,  
 His harbours, and his moon, his pilotage,  
 There was none such from Hull to far Carthage.  
 Hardy and wise in all things undertaken,  
 By many a tempest had his beard been shaken.  
 He knew well all the havens, as they were,  
 From Gottland to the Cape of Finisterre,  
 And every creek in Brittany and Spain;  
 His vessel had been christened Madeleine.

*The Physician:*

With us there was a doctor of physic;

In all this world was none like him to pick  
 For talk of medicine and surgery;  
 For he was grounded in astronomy.  
 He often kept a patient from the pall  
 By horoscopes and magic natural.  
 Well could he tell the fortune ascendant  
 Within the houses for his sick patient.  
 He knew the cause of every malady,  
 Were it of hot or cold, of moist or dry,  
 And where engendered, and of what humour;  
 He was a very good practitioner.  
 The cause being known, down to the deepest root,  
 Anon he gave to the sick man his boot.  
 Ready he was, with his apothecaries,  
 To send him drugs and all electuaries;  
 By mutual aid much gold they'd always won—  
 Their friendship was a thing not new begun.  
 Well read was he in Esculapius,  
 And Deiscorides, and in Rufus,  
 Hippocrates, and Hali, and Galen,  
 Serapion, Rhazes, and Avicen,  
 Averrhoes, Gilbert, and Constantine,  
 Bernard and Gatisden, and John Damascene.  
 In diet he was measured as could be,  
 Including naught of superfluity,  
 But nourishing and easy. It's no libel  
 To say he read but little in the Bible.  
 In blue and scarlet he went clad, withal,  
 Lined with a taffeta and with sendal;  
 And yet he was right chary of expense;  
 He kept the gold he gained from pestilence.  
 For gold in physic is a fine cordial,  
 And therefore loved he gold exceeding all.

*The Wife of Bath:*

There was a housewife come from Bath, or near,  
 Who—sad to say—was deaf in either ear.  
 At making cloth she had so great a bent

She bettered those of Ypres and even of Ghent.  
 In all the parish there was no goodwife  
 Should offering make before her, on my life;  
 And if one did, indeed, so wroth was she  
 It put her out of all her charity.  
 Her kerchiefs were of finest weave and ground;  
 I dare swear that they weighed a full ten pound  
 Which, of a Sunday, she wore on her head.  
 Her hose were of the choicest scarlet red,  
 Close gartered, and her shoes were soft and new.  
 Bold was her face, and fair, and red of hue.  
 She'd been respectable throughout her life,  
 With five church'd husbands bringing joy and strife,  
 Not counting other company in youth;  
 But thereof there's no need to speak, in truth.  
 Three times she'd journeyed to Jerusalem;  
 And many a foreign stream she'd had to stem;  
 At Rome she'd been, and she'd been in Boulogne,  
 In Spain at Santiago, and at Cologne.  
 She could tell much of wandering by the way:  
 Gap-toothed was she, it is no lie to say.  
 Upon an ambler easily she sat,  
 Well wimpled, aye, and over all a hat  
 As broad as is a buckler or a targe;  
 A rug was tucked around her buttocks large,  
 And on her feet a pair of sharpened spurs.  
 In company well could she laugh her slurs.  
 The remedies of love she knew, perchance,  
 For of that art she'd learned the old, old dance.

*The Parson:*

There was a good man of religion, too,  
 A country parson, poor, I warrant you;  
 But rich he was in holy thought and work.  
 He was a learned man also, a clerk,  
 Who Christ's own gospel truly sought to preach;  
 Devoutly his parishioners would he teach.  
 Benign he was and wondrous diligent,

Patient in adverse times and well content,  
As he was ofttimes proven; always blithe,  
He was right loath to curse to get a tithe,  
But rather would he give, in case of doubt,  
Unto those poor parishioners about,  
Part of his income, even of his goods.  
Enough with little, coloured all his moods.  
Wide was his parish, houses far asunder,  
But never did he fail, for rain or thunder,  
In sickness, or in sin, or any state,  
To visit to the farthest, small and great,  
Going afoot, and in his hand, a stave.  
This fine example to his flock he gave,  
That first he wrought and afterwards he taught;  
Out of the gospel then that text he caught,  
And this figure he added thereunto-  
That, if gold rust, what shall poor iron do?  
For if the priest be foul, in whom we trust,  
What wonder if a layman yield to lust?  
And shame it is, if priest take thought for keep,  
A shitty shepherd, shepherding clean sheep.  
Well ought a priest example good to give,  
By his own cleanness, how his flock should live.  
He never let his benefice for hire,  
Leaving his flock to flounder in the mire,  
And ran to London, up to old Saint Paul's  
To get himself a chantry there for souls,  
Nor in some brotherhood did he withhold;  
But dwelt at home and kept so well the fold  
That never wolf could make his plans miscarry;  
He was a shepherd and not mercenary.  
And holy though he was, and virtuous,  
To sinners he was not impiteous,  
Nor haughty in his speech, nor too divine,  
But in all teaching prudent and benign.  
To lead folk into Heaven but by stress  
Of good example was his busyness.  
But if some sinful one proved obstinate,

Be who it might, of high or low estate,  
 Him he reproved, and sharply, as I know.  
 There is nowhere a better priest, I trow.  
 He had no thirst for pomp or reverence,  
 Nor made himself a special, spiced conscience,  
 But Christ's own lore, and His apostles' twelve  
 He taught, but first he followed it himselfe.

*The Plowman:*

With him there was a plowman, was his brother,  
 That many a load of dung, and many another  
 Had scattered, for a good true toiler, he,  
 Living in peace and perfect charity.  
 He loved God most, and that with his whole heart  
 At all times, though he played or plied his art,  
 And next, his neighbour, even as himself.  
 He'd thresh and dig, with never thought of pelf,  
 For Christ's own sake, for every poor wight,  
 All without pay, if it lay in his might.  
 He paid his taxes, fully, fairly, well,  
 Both by his own toil and by stuff he'd sell.  
 In a tabard he rode upon a mare.  
 There were also a reeve and miller there;  
 A summoner, manciple and pardoner,  
 And these, beside myself, made all there were.

*The Miller:*

The miller was a stout churl, be it known,  
 Hardy and big of brawn and big of bone;  
 Which was well proved, for when he went on lam  
 At wrestling, never failed he of the ram.  
 He was a chunky fellow, broad of build;  
 He'd heave a door from hinges if he willed,  
 Or break it through, by running, with his head.  
 His beard, as any sow or fox, was red,  
 And broad it was as if it were a spade.  
 Upon the coping of his nose he had  
 A wart, and thereon stood a tuft of hairs,



Red as the bristles in an old sow's ears;  
 His nostrils they were black and very wide.  
 A sword and buckler bore he by his side.  
 His mouth was like a furnace door for size.  
 He was a jester and could poetize,  
 But mostly all of sin and ribaldries.  
 He could steal corn and full thrice charge his fees;  
 And yet he had a thumb of gold, begad.  
 A white coat and blue hood he wore, this lad.  
 A bagpipe he could blow well, be it known,  
 And with that same he brought us out of town.

*The Manciple:*

There was a manciple from an inn of court,  
 To whom all buyers might quite well resort  
 To learn the art of buying food and drink;  
 For whether he paid cash or not, I think  
 That he so knew the markets, when to buy,  
 He never found himself left high and dry.  
 Now is it not of God a full fair grace  
 That such a vulgar man has wit to pace  
 The wisdom of a crowd of learned men?  
 Of masters had he more than three times ten,  
 Who were in law expert and curious;  
 Whereof there were a dozen in that house  
 Fit to be stewards of both rent and land  
 Of any lord in England who would stand  
 Upon his own and live in manner good,  
 In honour, debtless (save his head were wood),  
 Or live as frugally as he might desire;  
 These men were able to have helped a shire  
 In any case that ever might befall;  
 And yet this manciple outguessed them all.

*The Reeve:*

The reeve he was a slender, choleric man  
 Who shaved his beard as close as razor can.  
 His hair was cut round even with his ears;

His top was tonsured like a pulpiteer's.  
 Long were his legs, and they were very lean,  
 And like a staff, with no calf to be seen.  
 Well could he manage granary and bin;  
 No auditor could ever on him win.  
 He could foretell, by drought and by the rain,  
 The yielding of his seed and of his grain.  
 His lord's sheep and his oxen and his dairy,  
 His swine and horses, all his stores, his poultry,  
 Were wholly in this steward's managing;  
 And, by agreement, he'd made reckoning  
 Since his young lord of age was twenty years;  
 Yet no man ever found him in arrears.  
 There was no agent, hind, or herd who'd cheat  
 But he knew well his cunning and deceit;  
 They were afraid of him as of the death.  
 His cottage was a good one, on a heath;  
 By green trees shaded with this dwelling-place.  
 Much better than his lord could he purchase.  
 Right rich he was in his own private right,  
 Seeing he'd pleased his lord, by day or night,  
 By giving him, or lending, of his goods,  
 And so got thanked but yet got coats and hoods.  
 In youth he'd learned a good trade, and had been  
 A carpenter, as fine as could be seen.  
 This steward sat a horse that well could trot,  
 And was all dapple-grey, and was named Scot.  
 A long surcoat of blue did he parade,  
 And at his side he bore a rusty blade.  
 Of Norfolk was this reeve of whom I tell,  
 From near a town that men call Badeswell.  
 Bundled he was like friar from chin to croup,  
 And ever he rode hindmost of our troop.

*The Summoner:*

A summoner was with us in that place,  
 Who had a fiery-red, cherubic face,  
 For eczema he had; his eyes were narrow

As hot he was, and lecherous, as a sparrow;  
With black and scabby brows and scanty beard;  
He had a face that little children feared.  
There was no mercury, sulphur, or litharge,  
No borax, ceruse, tartar, could discharge,  
Nor ointment that could cleanse enough, or bite,  
To free him of his boils and pimples white,  
Nor of the bosses resting on his cheeks.  
Well loved he garlic, onions, aye and leeks,  
And drinking of strong wine as red as blood.  
Then would he talk and shout as madman would.  
And when a deal of wine he'd poured within,  
Then would he utter no word save Latin.  
Some phrases had he learned, say two or three,  
Which he had garnered out of some decree;  
No wonder, for he'd heard it all the day;  
And all you know right well that even a jay  
Can call out "Wat" as well as can the pope.  
But when, for aught else, into him you'd grope,  
'Twas found he'd spent his whole philosophy;  
Just "Questio quid juris" would he cry.  
He was a noble rascal, and a kind;  
A better comrade 'twould be hard to find.  
Why, he would suffer, for a quart of wine,  
Some good fellow to have his concubine  
A twelve-month, and excuse him to the full  
(Between ourselves, though, he could pluck a gull).  
And if he chanced upon a good fellow,  
He would instruct him never to have awe,  
In such a case, of the archdeacon's curse,  
Except a man's soul lie within his purse;  
For in his purse the man should punished be.  
"The purse is the archdeacon's Hell," said he.  
But well I know he lied in what he said;  
A curse ought every guilty man to dread  
(For curse can kill, as absolution save),  
And 'ware significavit to the grave.  
In his own power had he, and at ease,

The boys and girls of all the diocese,  
 And knew their secrets, and by counsel led.  
 A garland had he set upon his head,  
 Large as a tavern's wine-bush on a stake;  
 A buckler had he made of bread they bake.

*The Pardoner:*

With him there rode a gentle pardoner  
 Of Rouncival, his friend and his compeer;  
 Straight from the court of Rome had journeyed he.  
 Loudly he sang "Come hither, love, to me,"  
 The summoner joining with a burden round;  
 Was never horn of half so great a sound.  
 This pardoner had hair as yellow as wax,  
 But lank it hung as does a strike of flax;  
 In wisps hung down such locks as he'd on head,  
 And with them he his shoulders overspread;  
 But thin they dropped, and stringy, one by one.  
 But as to hood, for sport of it, he'd none,  
 Though it was packed in wallet all the while.  
 It seemed to him he went in latest style,  
 Disheveled, save for cap, his head all bare.  
 As shiny eyes he had as has a hare.  
 He had a fine veronica sewed to cap.  
 His wallet lay before him in his lap,  
 Stuffed full of pardons brought from Rome all hot.  
 A voice he had that bleated like a goat.  
 No beard had he, nor ever should he have,  
 For smooth his face as he'd just had a shave;  
 I think he was a gelding or a mare.  
 But in his craft, from Berwick unto Ware,  
 Was no such pardoner in any place.  
 For in his bag he had a pillowcase  
 The which, he said, was Our True Lady's veil:  
 He said he had a piece of the very sail  
 That good Saint Peter had, what time he went  
 Upon the sea, till Jesus changed his bent.  
 He had a latten cross set full of stones,

And in a bottle had he some pig's bones.  
But with these relics, when he came upon  
Some simple parson, then this paragon  
In that one day more money stood to gain  
Than the poor dupe in two months could attain.  
And thus, with flattery and suchlike japes,  
He made the parson and the rest his apes.  
But yet, to tell the whole truth at the last,  
He was, in church, a fine ecclesiast.  
Well could he read a lesson or a story,  
But best of all he sang an offertory;  
For well he knew that when that song was sung,  
Then might he preach, and all with polished tongue.  
To win some silver, as he right well could;  
Therefore he sang so merrily and so loud.

Now have I told you briefly, in a clause,  
The state, the array, the number, and the cause  
Of the assembling of this company  
In Southwark, at this noble hostelry  
Known as the Tabard Inn, hard by the Bell.  
But now the time is come wherein to tell  
How all we bore ourselves that very night  
When at the hostelry we did alight.  
And afterward the story I engage  
To tell you of our common pilgrimage.  
But first, I pray you, of your courtesy,  
You'll not ascribe it to vulgarity  
Though I speak plainly of this matter here,  
Retailing you their words and means of cheer;  
Nor though I use their very terms, nor lie.  
For this thing do you know as well as I:  
When one repeats a tale told by a man,  
He must report, as nearly as he can,  
Every least word, if he remember it,  
However rude it be, or how unfit;  
Or else he may be telling what's untrue,  
Embellishing and fictionizing too.

He may not spare, although it were his brother;  
He must as well say one word as another.  
Christ spoke right broadly out, in holy writ,  
And, you know well, there's nothing low in it.  
And Plato says, to those able to read:  
"The word should be the cousin to the deed."  
Also, I pray that you'll forgive it me  
If I have not set folk, in their degree  
Here in this tale, by rank as they should stand.  
My wits are not the best, you'll understand.  
Great cheer our host gave to us, every one,  
And to the supper set us all anon;  
And served us then with victuals of the best.  
Strong was the wine and pleasant to each guest.  
A seemly man our good host was, withal,  
Fit to have been a marshal in some hall;  
He was a large man, with protruding eyes,  
As fine a burgher as in Cheapside lies;  
Bold in his speech, and wise, and right well taught,  
And as to manhood, lacking there in naught.  
Also, he was a very merry man,  
And after meat, at playing he began,  
Speaking of mirth among some other things,  
When all of us had paid our reckonings;  
And saying thus: "Now masters, verily  
You are all welcome here, and heartily:  
For by my truth, and telling you no lie,  
I have not seen, this year, a company  
Here in this inn, fitter for sport than now.  
Fain would I make you happy, knew I how.  
And of a game have I this moment thought  
To give you joy, and it shall cost you naught.  
"You go to Canterbury; may God speed  
And the blest martyr soon requite your meed.  
And well I know, as you go on your way,  
You'll tell good tales and shape yourselves to play;  
For truly there's no mirth nor comfort, none,  
Riding the roads as dumb as is a stone;

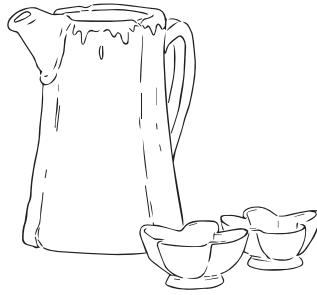
And therefore will I furnish you a sport,  
As I just said, to give you some comfort.  
And if you like it, all, by one assent,  
And will be ruled by me, of my judgment,  
And will so do as I'll proceed to say,  
Tomorrow, when you ride upon your way,  
Then, by my father's spirit, who is dead,  
If you're not gay, I'll give you up my head.  
Hold up your hands, nor more about it speak."  
Our full assenting was not far to seek;  
We thought there was no reason to think twice,  
And granted him his way without advice,  
And bade him tell his verdict just and wise,  
"Masters," quoth he, "here now is my advice;  
But take it not, I pray you, in disdain;  
This is the point, to put it short and plain,  
That each of you, beguiling the long day,  
Shall tell two stories as you wend your way  
To Canterbury town; and each of you  
On coming home, shall tell another two,  
All of adventures he has known befall.  
And he who plays his part the best of all,  
That is to say, who tells upon the road  
Tales of best sense, in most amusing mode,  
Shall have a supper at the others' cost  
Here in this room and sitting by this post,  
When we come back again from Canterbury.  
And now, the more to warrant you'll be merry,  
I will myself, and gladly, with you ride  
At my own cost, and I will be your guide.  
But whosoever shall my rule gainsay  
Shall pay for all that's bought along the way.  
And if you are agreed that it be so,  
Tell me at once, or if not, tell me no,  
And I will act accordingly. No more."  
This thing was granted, and our oaths we swore,  
With right glad hearts, and prayed of him, also,  
That he would take the office, nor forgo

The place of governor of all of us,  
Judging our tales; and by his wisdom thus  
Arrange that supper at a certain price,  
We to be ruled, each one, by his advice  
In things both great and small; by one assent,  
We stood committed to his government.  
And thereupon, the wine was fetched anon;  
We drank, and then to rest went every one,  
And that without a longer tarrying.  
Next morning, when the day began to spring,  
Up rose our host, and acting as our cock,  
He gathered us together in a flock,  
And forth we rode, a jog-trot being the pace,  
Until we reached Saint Thomas' watering-place.  
And there our host pulled horse up to a walk,  
And said: "Now, masters, listen while I talk.  
You know what you agreed at set of sun.  
If even-song and morning-song are one,  
Let's here decide who first shall tell a tale.  
And as I hope to drink more wine and ale,  
Whoso proves rebel to my government  
Shall pay for all that by the way is spent.  
Come now, draw cuts, before we farther win,  
And he that draws the shortest shall begin.  
Sir knight," said he, "my master and my lord,  
You shall draw first as you have pledged your word.  
Come near," quoth he, "my lady prioress:  
And you, sir clerk, put by your bashfulness,  
Nor ponder more; out hands, flow, every man!"  
At once to draw a cut each one began,  
And, to make short the matter, as it was,  
Whether by chance or whatsoever cause,  
The truth is, that the cut fell to the knight,  
At which right happy then was every wight.  
Thus that his story first of all he'd tell,  
According to the compact, it befell,  
As you have heard. Why argue to and fro?  
And when this good man saw that it was so,



Being a wise man and obedient  
To plighted word, given by free assent,  
He slid: "Since I must then begin the game,  
Why, welcome be the cut, and in God's name!  
Now let us ride, and hearken what I say."  
And at that word we rode forth on our way;  
And he began to speak, with right good cheer,  
His tale anon, as it is written here.

*Here ends the prologue of this book and here begins the first tale,  
which is the Knight's Tale*



## THE KNIGHT'S TALE

Once on a time, as old tales tell to us,  
There was a duke whose name was Theseus:  
Of Athens he was lord and governor,  
And in his time was such a conqueror  
That greater was there not beneath the sun.  
Full many a rich country had he won;  
What with his wisdom and his chivalry  
He gained the realm of Femininity,  
That was of old time known as Scythia.  
There wedded he the queen, Hippolyta,  
And brought her home with him to his country.  
In glory great and with great pageantry,  
And, too, her younger sister, Emily.  
And thus, in victory and with melody,  
Let I this noble duke to Athens ride  
With all his armed host marching at his side.  
And truly, were it not too long to hear,  
I would have told you fully how, that year,  
Was gained the realm of Femininity  
By Theseus and by his chivalry;  
And all of the great battle that was wrought  
Where Amazons and the Athenians fought;  
And how was wooed and won Hippolyta,  
That fair and hardy queen of Scythia;  
And of the feast was made at their wedding,