

from The Canterbury Tales

Geoffrey Chaucer

translated by Nevill Coghill

The Prologue

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,
5 When also Zephyrus° 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
10 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° long to seek the stranger strands
Of far-off saints, hallowed in sundry lands,
15 And specially, from every shire's end
Of England, down to Canterbury they wend
To seek the holy blissful martyr,° quick
To give his help to them when they were sick.
It happened in that season that one day
20 In Southwark, 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
25 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.
30 And, briefly, when the sun had gone to rest,
I'd spoken to them all upon the trip
32 And was soon one with them in fellowship,
Pledged to rise early and to take the way
To Canterbury, as you heard me say.
35 But none the less, while I have time and space,
Before my story takes a further pace,
It seems a reasonable thing to say

spring

pilgrims to the martyr Thomas

1st part

29 people who met up different ~~part~~ stories / stables together for pilgrim to Canterbury.

now join the group.

5. **Zephyrus** (zef'ə-rəs): in Greek mythology, god of the west wind.

8. **Ram**: Aries, first sign of the zodiac. The time is mid-April.

13. **palmers**: people who had visited the Holy Land and wore palm fronds to show it.

17. **martyr**: Saint Thomas à Becket (c. 1118-1170) was martyred at Canterbury, December 29, 1170.

WORDS TO OWN

engendering (en-jen'dər-in) v. used as n.: creation; production.



What their condition was, the full array
 Of each of them, as it appeared to me,
 40 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
 45 To ride abroad had followed chivalry,
 Truth, honor, generousness, and courtesy.
 He had done nobly in his sovereign's war — King
 And ridden into battle, no man more,
 As well in Christian as in heathen places. — Crusades

have
 is going to
 describe each
 of the people
 based on

Miniature of John Lydgate and
 the Canterbury pilgrims leaving
 Canterbury, from a volume of
 Lydgate's poems (early 16th century).
 MS Royal 18 D II, fol. 148.

British Library, London.

50 And ever honored for his noble graces.

When we took Alexandria, ° he was there.

He often sat at table in the chair

Of honor, above all nations, when in Prussia.

In Lithuania he had ridden, and Russia,

65 No Christian man so often, of his rank.

When, in Granada, Algeciras sank

Under assault, he had been there, and in

North Africa, raiding Benamarin;

In Anatolia he had been as well

60 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 jostled for our faith at Tramisene

65 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.

70 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.

75 Speaking of his equipment, he possessed,

Fine horses, but he was not gaily dressed.

He wore a fustian ° tunic stained and dark

With smudges where his armor had left mark;

Just home from service, he had joined our ranks

80 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 locks as curly as if they had been pressed.

He was some twenty years of age, I guessed.

85 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

90 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.

95 Short was his gown, the sleeves were long and wide

knights many battles

direct

knight

knights son when

is short here due a well in battle to impress his lady

dress

51. Alexandria: city in Egypt captured by the Crusaders in 1365. In the next few lines, Chaucer is indicating the knight's distinguished and extensive career.



The Knight, from the Ellesmere manuscript, fol. 10r.

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74. gentle-knight: In Chaucer's day, gentle meant "well bred and considerate."

77. fustian (fus'chən): coarse cloth made of linen and cotton.

82. cadet: soldier.



The Squire, from the Ellesmere manuscript, fol. 115v.

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WORDS TO OWN

stature (stach'ər) n.: height.

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
 100 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.
 105 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—
 110 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
 115 Hung at one side, and at the other slipped
 A jaunty dirk,° spear-sharp and well-equipped.
 A medal of St. Christopher° he wore
 Of shining silver on his breast, and bore
 A hunting-horn, well slung and burnished clean,
 120 That dangled from a baldrick° of bright green.
He was a proper forester, I guess.

There also was a Nun, a Prioress,
 Her way of smiling very simple and coy,
 *Her greatest oath was only "By St. Loy!"°
 125 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;°
 130 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.
 135 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,
 140 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,

Squire

Yeoman dressed in his style - green surcoat

Yeoman dressed in his style - green surcoat

Yeoman

She speaks French in inferior manner & knew English/French

well-mannered

try to present proper image



The Canon Yeoman, from the Ellesmere manuscript, fol. 194r.

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116. **dirk:** long dagger.

117. **St. Christopher:** patron saint of travelers.

120. **baldrick:** belt slung over the shoulder and chest to hold a sword.

124. **St. Loy:** Saint Eligius, known for his perfect manners.

129. **Stratford-atte-Bowe:** Benedictine convent near London where inferior French was spoken.



The Prioress, from the Ellesmere manuscript, fol. 148v.

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145 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.

showed her
tenderness
about behaving a nun.

150 And she had little dogs she would be feeding
 With roasted flesh, or milk, or fine white bread.
 And bitterly she wept if one were dead
 Or someone took a stick and made it smart;
 She was all sentiment and tender heart.

155 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,
 Her forehead, certainly, was fair of spread,
 Almost a span° across the brows, I own;

physical

160 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 tricked in green,
 Whence hung a golden brooch of brightest sheen

fat

clerk

165 On which there first was graven a crowned A,
 And lower, *Amor vincit omnia*.°

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

A Monk there was, one of the finest sort

170 Who rode the country; hunting was his sport.

A manly man, to be an Abbott able;

* Many a dainty horse he had in stable.

His bridle, when he rode, a man might hear

* Jingling in a whistling wind as clear,

Monk
hunted
many man - but
rode dainty horses
had bells

175 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

180 And took the modern 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.

185 That is to say a monk out of his cloister;

That was a text he held not worth an oyster;

And I agreed and said his views were sound;

Was he to study till his head went round

Poring over books in cloisters? Must he toil

190 As Austin° 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;

where from
ignored old rule
text in modern part
+ accent idon monk be
to know
only read/study
this monk come into real
world.
merely



The Nun's Priest, from the Ellesmere manuscript, fol. 179r.

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159. span: nine inches.

163. a set of beads . . . green:

Beads are a rosary, or prayer beads and a crucifix on a string or chain. Every eleventh bead is a gaud, a large bead indicating when the Lord's Prayer is to be said.

166. *Amor vincit omnia* (ä'môr'vin'chit ôm'nê-ä'): Latin for "Love conquers all."

167. cell: a small convent connected to a larger one.

177. St. Benet [Benedict] or St. Maur [Maurice]:

Saint Benedict (c. 480-c. 547) was an Italian monk who founded numerous monasteries and wrote a famous code of regulations for monastic life. Saint Maurice was a follower of Benedict.

190. Austin: Saint Augustine (354-430), bishop of Hippo in North Africa. He criticized lazy monks and suggested they do some hard manual labor.

Greyhounds he had, as swift as birds, to course.^o
 195 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 on his hood, to fasten it at his chin
 200 He had a wrought-gold, cunningly fashioned pin;
 Into a lover's knot it seemed to pass.
 His head was bald and shone like looking-glass,
 So did his face, as if it had been greased.
 He was a fat and personable priest;
 205 His prominent eyeballs never seemed to settle.
 They 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. *- # sickly*
 210 He liked a fat swan best, and roasted whole. *- ate well*
 His palfrey^o was as brown as is a berry.
 There was a Friar, a wanton^o one and merry,
 A Limit^{er},^o a very festive fellow.
 In all Four Orders^o there was none so mellow,
 215 So glib with gallant phrase and well-turned 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
 220 With County folk within his boundary,
 And city dames of honor and 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. *confession/absolution*
 225 Sweetly he heard his penitents at shrift^o *for a gift*
 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
 230 To a poor Order that a man's well shriven,^o
 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.
 235 Therefore instead of weeping and of prayer
 One should give silver for a poor Friar's care. ***
 He kept his tippet^o stuffed with pins for curls,
 And pocket-knives, to give to pretty girls.

194. **course:** to cause to chase game.



The Friar, from the Ellesmere manuscript, fol. 76v.

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211. **palfrey:** horse.

212. **wanton:** here, jolly.

213. **Limit**^{er}: a friar having the exclusive right to beg and preach in an assigned (limited) district.

214. **Four Orders:** The four orders of mendicant (beggar) friars are the Franciscans, the Dominicans, the Carmelites, and the Augustinians.

225. **shrift:** confession and absolution.

230. **well shriven:** well confessed and absolved (or forgiven) of sins.

237. **tippet:** hood or long sleeve (of his robe).

WORDS TO OWN

personable (pər'sən·ə·bəl) *adj.*: attractive in appearance and personality.

735 Now I have told you shortly, in a clause,
 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*.
 740 And now the time has come for me to tell
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.
 745 But first I beg of you, in courtesy,
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.
 750 For certainly, as you all know so well,
 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,

Note
 the #
 (jump)

All people interested
 at the Tabard

Now, ask yourself
 if (condemning him as)
 rude - if repeated,
 the words said by the
 people (if they are rude).

the matter how much the story / how -
 must be retold the way said to be true.

755 Or else the tale he tells will be untrue,
 The things pretended and the phrases new.
 He may not flinch although it were his brother,
 He may as well say one word as another.
 And Christ Himself spoke broad in Holy Writ,
 760 Yet there is no scurrility in it,
 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
 765 And what is due to rank in what I've planned.
 I'm short of wit as you will understand.
 Our *Host* gave us great welcome; everyone
 Was given a place and supper was begun.
 He served the finest victuals you could think,
 770 The wine was strong and we were glad to drink.
 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.
 775 Bold in his speech, yet wise and full of tact,
 There was no manly attribute he lacked,
 What's more he was a merry-hearted man.
 After our meal he jokingly began
 To talk of sport, and, among other things
 780 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,
 785 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
 To please you, costing nothing, on my word.
 You're off to Canterbury—well, God speed!

It held to
 custom (order/phrase)

to remember what we had all
 said before

Host talked
 to the travelers

Host thinks of something for
 drink - no cost

774. Cheapside: district of
 medieval London.

790 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.

795 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

800 Tomorrow as you ride along the way,
Then by my father's soul (and he is dead)
not here If you don't like it you can have my head!
Hold up your hands, and not another word."

Well, our opinion was not long deferred,
805 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.
810 This is the point. I'll 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
815 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.

820 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
I'll go along with you myself and ride
All at my own expense and serve as guide.

825 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."

830 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,
835 And set the supper at a certain price.

Hest asks if they will agree to a game of his own the journey to Canterbury
ask if all agree to play his game

all agree

each tell 2 stories on way in + 2 stories on way out

best story gets supper pd by all

Hest se along w/ them as guide & judge

All agree

WORDS TO OWN

deferred (dē·furd') v.: postponed.

We promised to be ruled by his advice
Come high, come low; unanimously thus
We set him up in judgment over us.

840 We drank it off and up went everyone
To bed without a moment of delay.

*drank it
went to bed*

Early next morning at the spring of day
Up rose our Host and roused us like a cock,
Gathering us together in a flock,
845 And off we rode at slightly faster pace

*next morning
by the pilgrim*

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.

850 If evensong and matins will agree°

Let's see who shall be first to tell a tale.

** 11/10, he rule -
1/27 the out of
Journey.*

And as I hope to drink good wine and ale
I'll be your judge. The rebel who disobeys,

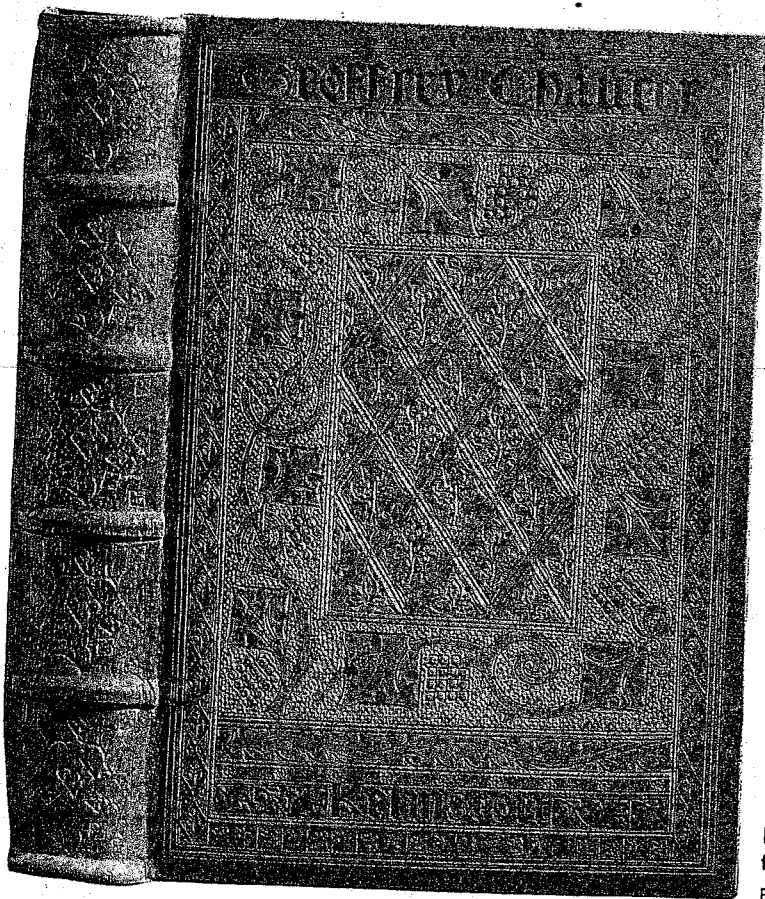
However much the journey costs, he pays,

855 Now draw for cut and then we can depart;

The man who draws the shortest cut shall start."

*draw draws
to decide
who goes 1st*

850. if . . . agree: in other words, if you feel the same way in the evening (at evensong, or evening prayers) as you do in the morning (at matins, or morning prayers).



Pigskin binding by Doves Bindery for the Kelmscott Chaucer (1896). Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge.