

The Prologue

Geoffrey Chaucer
translated by Nevill Coghill

When that April with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote
And bathed every veyne in swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour.
Whan Zephrus eek with his sweete breath
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his half cours y-ronne,
And smale fowles maken melodye
That stепен at the nyght with open eye.
So priketh hem Nature in hir corages,
Than longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,
And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,
To ferre halwes kouthe in sondry londes.
And specially, from every shires ende
Of Engelond, to Caunterbury they wende,
The holy, blisful martir for to seke
That hem hath holpen whan that they were secke.

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' with his sweet breath
Exhales an air in every grove and heath
Upon tender shoots, and the young sun
His half-course in the sign of the Ram² 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 palmer³s long to seek the stranger strands⁴
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 martyr⁵,⁵ quick
To give his help to them when they were sick.

1. **Zephyrus** (zef' or os):
The west wind.

2. **Ram**: Aries, the first
sign of the zodiac. The
pilgrimage began on April
11, 1387.

3. **palmeres**: Pilgrims who
wore two crossed palm
leaves to show that they
had visited the holy Land.

4. **strands**: Shores.

5. **martyr**: St. Thomas à
Becket, the Archbishop of
Canterbury, who was
murdered in the
Canterbury Cathedral in
1170.

The Prologue from *The Canterbury Tales* 117



THE TABARD INN
Arthur Szuk for the *Canterbury Tales*
The George Heyl Company

It happened in that season that one day
20 In Southwark⁶, at The Tabard⁷ 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.

6. **Southwark** (sauh' ark):
A suburb of London at the
time.

7. **The Tabard** (ta' bard):
An inn.

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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 soon was one of them in fellowship
 And promised to rise early and take the way
 To Canterbury, as you heard me say.
 But nonetheless, 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, generosity and courtesy.
 He had done nobly in his sovereign's war
 And ridden into battle, no man more,
 As well in Christian as heathen places,
 And ever honored for his noble graces.
 When we took Alexandria,⁸ 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,
 No Christian man so often, of his rank.
 When, in Granada, Algeciras sank
 Under assaill, he had been there, and in
 North Africa, raiding Benamarin;
 In Aralolia he had been as well
 And fought when Ayas and Atthalia 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 Tramisene
 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.

8. *Alexandria*: The site of one of the campaigns fought by Christians against groups who posed a threat to Europe during the fourteenth century. The place names that follow refer to other battlesites in these campaigns, or crusades.

Speaking of his equipment, he possessed
 Fine horses, but he was not gaily dressed.
 He wore a fustian⁹ 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 locks as curly 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,¹⁰
 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 Yeoman¹¹ 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 brace¹² 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,¹³ spear-sharp and well-equipped.
 A medal of St. Christopher¹⁴ he wore
 Of shining silver on his breast, and bore
 A hunting-horn, well slung and burnished clean,
 That dangled from a baldric¹⁵ of bright green.
 He was a proper forester I guess.

9. *fustian* (fus' chun): A coarse cloth of cotton and linen.

10. *Flanders . . . Picardy*: Regions in Belgium and France.

11. *Yeoman* (yó' man) n.: Attendant.

12. *brace*: Bracelet.

13. *dirk* n.: A short, straight dagger.

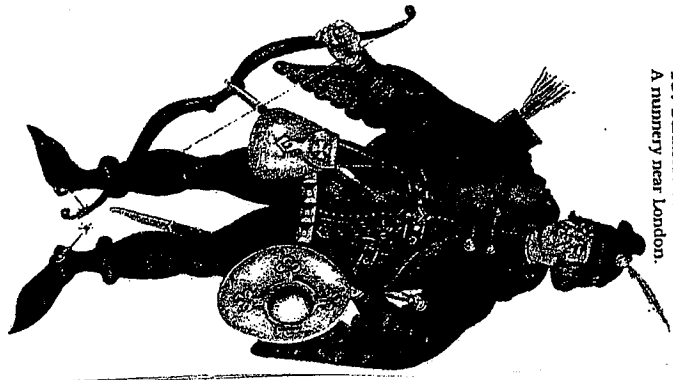
14. *St. Christopher*: The patron saint of forests and travelers.

15. *baldric* n.: A belt worn over one shoulder and across the chest to support a sword.

There also was a Nun, a Prioress,¹⁶
 Her way of smiling very simple and coy.
 Her greatest oath was only "By St. Loy!"¹⁷
 And she was known as Madam Eglantyne.
 And well she sang a service,¹⁸ 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;¹⁹
 French in the Paris style she did not know.
 At meal 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.
 And bitterly she wept if one were dead
 Or someone took a sick 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,
 Her forehead, certainly, was fair of spread,
 Almost a span²⁰ across the brows, I own:
 She was indeed by no means undergrown.
 Her cloak, I noticed, had a graceful charm.
 She wore a coral tinker on her arm,
 A set of beads, the gaudies²¹ 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.²²
 Another Nun, the chaplain at her cell,
 Was riding with her, and three Priests as well.

16. Prioress n.: In an abbey, the nun ranking just below the abbess.
 17. St. Loy: St. Eligius, patron saint of goldsmiths and courtiers.
 18. service: Daily prayer.

19. Stratford-atte-Bowe: A nunnery near London.



THE YEOMAN
 Arthur Szjk for the *Canterbury Tales*
 The George Harg Compants

20. span: Nine inches.
 21. gaudies: Large green beads that marked certain prayers on a set of prayer beads.
 22. Amor vincit omnia (â mör' vînt! 'î öm' nî ä): "Love conquers all" (Latin).

A Monk there was, one of the finest sort
 Who rode the country; hunting was his sport.
 A manly man, to be an Abbot 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.
 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. Maur²³
 As old and strict he tended to ignore:
 He let go by the things of yesterday
 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.
 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
 As Austin²⁴ 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 on his hood, to fasten it at his chin
 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:
 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.
 He liked a fat swan best, and roasted whole.
 His palfrey²⁵ was as brown as is a berry.
 There was a Friar, a wanton²⁶ one and merry.
 A Limiter²⁷ a very festive fellow.
 In all four Orders²⁸ there was none so mellow
 So glib with gallant phrase and well-turned speech.

23. St. Benet or St. Maur: St. Benedict, author of monastic rules, and St. Maurice, one of his followers. Benet and Maur are French versions of Benedict and Maurice.

24. Austin: English version of St. Augustine, who criticized lazy monks.

25. palfrey: Saddle horse.
 26. wanton: Jolly.
 27. Limiter: A friar who is given begging rights for a certain limited area.
 28. Four Orders: There were four orders of friars who supported themselves by begging: Dominicans, Franciscans, Carmelites, and Augustinians.

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 County folk within his boundary.
 220 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.
 225 Sweetly he heard his penitents at shrift,²⁹
 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,³⁰
 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 tippet³¹ stuffed with pins for curls,
 And pocket-knives, to give to pretty girls.
 And certainly his voice was gay and sturdy,
 240 For he sang well and played the hardy-gurdy.³²
 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
 245 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
 250 Of his position, dealing with a scum
 Of wretched lepers: nothing good can come
 Of dealings with the slum-and-gutter dwellers,
 But only where the rich and victual-sellers,
 255 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, paid a rent:
 His brethren did no poaching where he went.
 260 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

29. *shrifft*: Confession.

30. *well shriven*: Absolved of his sins.

31. *tippet*: Hood.

32. *hardy-gurdy*: A stringed instrument played by cranking a wheel.

To more than he laid out. And how he romped,
 Just like a puppy! He was ever prompt
 265 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.
 270 Of double-worsted was the semi-cope³³
 Upon his shoulders, and the swelling fold
 About him, like a bell about its mold
 When it is casting, rounded out his dress.
 275 He hisped 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.
 280 This worthy's name was Hubert, it appeared.
 There was a Merchant with a forking beard
 And moly dress: high on his horse he sat,
 Upon his head a Flemish³⁴ beaver hat
 And on his feet daintily buckled boots.
 285 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 range,³⁵
 He was expert at currency exchange.
 290 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.
 295 An *Oxford Cleric*, still a student though,
 One who had taken logic long ago,
 Was there: his horse was thinner than a rake,
 And he was not too fat, I undertake,
 300 But had a hollow look, a sober stare.
 The thread upon his overcoat was bare.
 He had found no preferment in the church
 And he was too unworlily to make search
 For secular employment. By his bed
 305 He preferred having twenty books in red
 And black, of Aristotle's³⁶ philosophy,
 To having fine clothes, fiddle or psaltery.³⁷
 Though a philosopher, as I have told,
 He had not found the stone for making gold.³⁸
 Whatever money from his friends he took

33. *semi-cope*: Cape.

34. *Flemish*: From Flanders.

35. *Harwich-Holland range*: The North Sea between England and Holland.

36. *Aristotle's* *lar*: Is 101' a21: Referring to the Greek philosopher (384-322 B.C.).

37. *psaltery* (sol' lar e): An ancient stringed instrument.

38. *stone . . . gold*: At the time alchemists believed that a "philosopher's stone" existed that could turn base metals into gold.

310 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's³⁹
 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.
 His fame and learning and his high position
 Had won him many a robe and many a fee.
 There was no such conveyancer⁴⁰ as he:
 All was fee-simple⁴¹ to his strong digestion,
 Not one conveyance could be called in question.
 Nowhere there was so busy a man as he;
 But 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:
 No one could pinch a comma from his screeds,
 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.
 There was a Franklin⁴² with him, it appeared;
 While as a daisy-petal was his beard.
 A sanguine man, high-colored and benton,
 He loved a morning sop⁴³ of cake in wine.
 He lived for pleasure and had always done,
 For he was Epicurus⁴⁴ very son,
 In whose opinion sensual delight
 Was the one true felicity in sight.
 As noted as St. Julian⁴⁵ was for bounty
 He made his household free to all the County.
 His bread, his ale were the 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
 And all the dainties that a man could think.

39. St. Paul's: A London cathedral near which lawyers often met to discuss their cases.

40. conveyancer: One who draws up documents for transferring ownership of property.
 41. fee-simple: Restricted ownership.

42. Franklin: Wealthy landowner.

43. sop: Piece.

44. Epicurus: (ep' i kyoor' s): Referring to a Greek philosopher (342?-870 B.C.) who believed that happiness is the most important goal in life.
 45. St. Julian: Patron saint of hospitality.

According to the seasons of the year
 Changes of dish were ordered to appear.
 He kept fat partridges in coops, beyond,
 Many a bream and pike were in his pond.
 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.
 As Justice at the Sessions⁴⁶ none stood higher;
 He often had been Member for the Shire,⁴⁷
 A dagger and a little purse of silk
 Hung at his girdle, white as morning milk.
 As Sheriff he checked audt, every entry.
 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
 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,⁴⁸ fit to grace
 A guild-hall with a seat upon the dais.
 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:
 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.
 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 what a pity—so it seemed to me,
 That he should have an ulcer on his knee.
 As for blanchmange,⁴⁹ 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,
 In a woolen gown that reached his knee.
 A dagger on a lanyard⁵⁰ falling free
 Hung from his neck under his arm and down.
 The summer heat had tanned his color brown.

46. Sessions: Court sessions.
 47. Member . . . Shire: Parliamentary representative for the county.

48. Burgess: A member of a legislative body.

49. blanchmange (bls mánj): At the time, a creamy chicken dish.

50. lanyard: A loose rope around the neck.

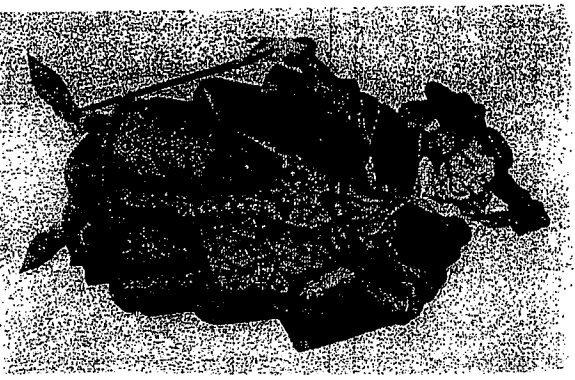
405 And certainly he was an excellent fellow.
 Many a draught of vintage, red and yellow,
 He'd drawn at Bordeaux, while the trader snored.
 The nicer rules of conscience he ignored.
 410 If, when he fought, the enemy vessel sank,
 He sent his prisoners home; they walked the plank.
 As for his skill 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.
 415 Hardy he was, prudent in undertaking;
 His beard in many a tempest had its shaking,
 And he knew all the heavens as they were
 From Gotland to the Cape of Finisterre,
 420 And every creek in Brittany and Spain;
 The barge he owned was called *The Maudelaigne*.
 A Doctor too emerged as we proceeded:
 No one alive could talk as well as he did
 On points of medicine and of surgery,
 425 For, being grounded in astronomy,
 He watched his patient's favorable star
 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
 430 He knew, and whether dry, cold, moist or hot;⁵¹
 He knew their seal, 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.
 435 All his apothecaries⁵² in a tribe
 Were ready with the drugs he would prescribe,
 And each made money from the other's gulf;
 They had been friendly for a goodish while.
 He was well-versed in Esculapius⁵³ too
 440 And what Hippocrates and Rufus knew
 And Dioscorides, now dead and gone,
 Galen and Rhazes, Halli, Serapion,
 Averroes, Avicenna, Constatine,
 445 Scotch Bernard, John of Gaddesden, Gilbertine,⁵⁴
 In his own diet he observed some measure;
 There were no superfluties for pleasure,
 Only digestives, nutritives and such.
 He did not read the Bible very much.
 In blood-red garments, slashed with bluish-gray
 450 And lined with taffeta,⁵⁵ he rode his way;
 Yet he was rather close-as-to expenses
 And kept the gold he won in pestilences.

51. *The cause . . . hot*: It was believed that the body was composed of four "humors" (cold and dry, hot and moist, hot and dry, cold and moist) and that diseases resulted from a disturbance of one of these humors.
 52. *apothecaries* (ə-pə-thē-ˈeɪ-zē): Persons who prepared drugs.
 53. *Esculapius* (es-kyoo-lə-pe-əs): In Roman mythology, the god of medicine and healing.
 54. *Hippocrates . . . Gilbertine*: Famous physicians and medical authorities.
 55. *taffeta* (tāf-ə-tā): A fine silk fabric.

Gold stimulates the heart, or so we're told.
 He therefore had a special love of gold.
 455 A worthy woman from beside *Bath*⁵⁶ city
 Was with us, somewhat deaf, which was a pity.
 In making cloth she showed so great a bent
 She beltered those of Ypres and of Ghent,⁵⁷
 In all the parish not a dame dared stir
 460 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;⁵⁸
 465 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.
 470 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.
 475 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.⁵⁹
 And she was skilled in wandering by the way.
 480 She had gap-teeth, set widely, truth to say.
 Easily on an ambling horse she sat
 Well wimpled⁶⁰ up, and on her head a hat
 As broad as is a buckler⁶¹ or a shield;
 She had a flowing mantle that concealed
 Large hips, her heels spurred sharply under that.
 485 In company she liked to laugh and chat
 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,
 490 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,
 495 And patient when adversity was sent
 (For so he proved in great adversity)
 He much disliked extorting tithes⁶² or fee,
 Nay, rather he preferred beyond a doubt
 Giving to poor parishioners round about
 500 From his own goods and Easter offerings.
 He found sufficiency in little things.

56. *Bath*: An English resort city.
 57. *Ypres* (ɛˈpra) and of *Ghent* (ɛn): Flemish cities known for wool making.
 58. *ground*: A composite fabric.
 59. *Boulogne . . . St. James of Compostella . . . Cologne*: Famous pilgrimage sites at the time.
 60. *wimpled*: Wearing a scarf covering the head, neck, and chin.
 61. *buckler*: A small, round shield.
 62. *tithe* (tɪθ): One tenth of a person's income, paid as a tax to support the church.

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,
 505 Upon his feet, and in his hand a slave.
 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
 510 That if gold rust, what then will iron do?
 For if a prest be foul in whom we trust
 No wonder that a common man should rust;
 And shame it is to see—let prestis take stock—
 515 A soiled shepherd and a snowy flock.
 The true example that a prest should give
 Is one of cleanness, how the sheep should live.
 He did not set his benefice to hire;⁶³
 And leave his sheep encumbered in the mire
 Or run to London to earn easy bread
 520 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.
 525 Holy and virtuous he was, but then
 Never contemptuous of sinful men,
 Never disdainful, never too proud or fine,
 But was discreet in teaching and benign.
 His business was to show a fair behavior
 530 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.
 I think there never was a better prest.
 535 He sought no pomp or glory in his dealings,
 No scrupulously had spiced his feelings.
 Christ and His Twelve Apostles and their lore
 He taught, but followed it himself before.
 540 There was a Plowman with him there, his brother.
 He must have carted through the morning dew.
 He was an honest worker, good and true,
 Living in peace and perfect charity,
 545 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



63. set . . . hire: Pay someone else to perform his parish duties.

To thrash his corn, to dig or to manure
 550 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.
 555 He wore a tabard⁶⁴ smock and rode a mare.
 There was a Reeve⁶⁵ also a Miller, there,
 A College Manciple⁶⁶ from the Inns of Court,
 A papal Pardoner⁶⁷ and, in close consort,
 560 A Church-Court Summoner,⁶⁸ riding at a trot,
 And finally myself—that was the lot.
 The Miller was a chap of sixteen stone,⁶⁹
 A great stout fellow big in drawn and bone.
 He did well out of them, for he could go
 565 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
 And broad as well, as though it were a spade;
 570 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.
 575 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 lavern stories, filthy in the main.
 His was a master-hand at stealing grain.
 580 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.
 585 The Manciple 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.
 590 He used to watch the market most precisely
 And go 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?
 595 His masters—he had more than thirty then—
 All versed in the abstrusest legal knowledge,
 Could have produced a dozen from their College

64. tabard: A loose jacket.
 65. Reeve: An estate manager.
 66. Manciple: A buyer of provisions.
 67. Pardoner: One who dispenses papal pardons.
 68. Summoner: One who serves summonses to church courts.
 69. sixteen stone: 224 pounds. A stone equals 14 pounds.

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.
 The Reeve 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,
 Like sticks they were, no calf was to be seen,
 He kept his bins and garner⁷⁰ 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.
 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.
 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,
 Shadowed in green by trees above the sward.⁷¹
 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.
 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.
 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.
 He rode the hindmost of our cavalcade.
 There was a Summoner with us in the place
 Who had a fire-red cherubinish face,⁷²
 For he had carbuncles. His eyes were narrow,
 He was as hot and lecherous as a sparrow.

⁷⁰ *garner* n.: Buildings for storing grain.

⁷¹ *sward* n.: Turf.

⁷² *fire-red . . . face*: In the art of the Middle Ages, the faces of cherubs, or angels, were often painted red.

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 whekles of knobby white,
 Or purge the pimples sitting on his cheeks,
 Garlic he loved, and onions too, and leeks,
 And drinking strong wine till all was hazy.
 Then he would shout and jabber as if crazy,
 And wouldn't speak a word except in Latin
 When he was drunk, such lags as he was pat in;
 He only had a few, say two or three,
 That he had niggged up out of some decree:
 No wonder, for he heard them every day,
 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"⁷³ was his tag.
 He was a gentle varlet 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 fanch to leave no feather:
 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.
 "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.
 Thus, as he pleased, the man could bring duress
 On any young fellow in the diocese.
 He knew their secrets, they did what he said.
 He wore a garland set upon his head
 Large as the holly-bush upon a stake
 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 rode together,
 A bird from Charing Cross of the same feather,
 Just back from visiting the Court of Rome.
 He loudly sang "Come hither, love, come home!"

⁷³ "Questio quid juris": "The question is, what is the point of the law?" (Latin).

The Summerer sang deep seconds to this song,
 No trumpet ever sounded half so strong.
 695 This Pardoner had hair as yellow as wax,
 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.
 700 He wore no hood upon his head, for fun:
 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 eyeballs, like a hare.
 705 He'd sewed a holy relic on his cap:
 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,
 710 Smoother than ever chin was left by barber.
 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 pillowcase
 715 Which he asserted was Our Lady's veil.
 He said he had a gobbet⁷⁴ of the sail
 Saint Peter had the time when he made bold
 To walk the waves, till Jesu Christ took hold.
 720 He had a cross of metal set with stones
 And, in a glass, a ruble of pigs' bones.
 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,
 725 And by his flatteries and prevarication
 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!
 730 But best of all he sang an Offertory.⁷⁵
 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.
 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

74. gobbet: Pecc.

75. Offertory: The song that accompanies the collection of the offering at a church service.

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,
 750 Using their very phrases as they fell.
 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,
 755 However rudely spoken or unfit.
 Or else the tale he tells will be untrue.
 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 broad⁷⁶ in Holy Writ,
 760 And as you know there's nothing there unfit,
 "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 burghess in Cheapside.⁷⁸
 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 he—
 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
 And it will cost you nothing, on my word."

76. broad: bluntly.

77. Plato: A Greek philosopher (427?-347? B.C.).

78. Cheapside: A district in London.

790 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.
 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)
 If you don't like it you can have my head!
 Hold up your hands, and not another word."
 805 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,
 810 And please don't treat my notion with disdain.
 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.
 815 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 morally and general pleasure,
 820 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
 I'll go along with you myself and ride
 825 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."
 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
 835 Judge of our tales and general referee,
 And set the supper at a certain price.
 We promised to be ruled by his advice

840 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.
 845 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:⁷⁹
 850 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 agree⁸⁰
 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,
 855 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..."

79. St. Thomas' watering-place: A brook two miles from the inn.

80. If evensong . . . agree: If what you said last night holds true this morning.

Primary Source

Seventeenth-century poet and dramatist John Dryden called Chaucer the "Father of English poetry," a ranking still considered valid today. Dryden called Chaucer "with the degree of veneration as the Greeks had for Homer, the Romans for Virgil, and the French for the *poète divin* Molière." His work "is perpetual verdure of good sense, writing about it with a later poet and essayist, Chaucer is especially delicious to me. . . . How exquisitely tender . . ."

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