

The Prologue to Canterbury Tales

When April's gentle rains have pierced the drought
Of March right to the root, and bathed each sprout
Through every vein with liquid of such power
It brings forth the engendering of the flower;
When [Zephyrus](#) too with his sweet breath has blown 5
Through every field and forest, urging on
The tender shoots, and there's a youthful sun,
His second half course through the [Ram](#) now run,
And little birds are making melody
And sleep all night, eyes open as can be 10
(So Nature pricks them in each little heart),
On pilgrimage then folks desire to start.
The [palmers](#) long to travel foreign strands
To distant shrines renowned in sundry lands;
And specially, from every shire's end 15
In England, folks to [Canterbury](#) wend:
To seek the [blissful martyr](#) is their will,
The one who gave such help when they were ill.
Now in that season it befell one day
In [Southwark](#) at the [Tabard](#) where I lay, 20
As I was all prepared for setting out
To Canterbury with a heart devout,
That there had come into that hostelry
At night some twenty-nine, a company
Of sundry folk whom chance had brought to fall 25
In fellowship, for pilgrims were they all
And onward to Canterbury would ride.
The chambers and the stables there were wide,
We had it easy, served with all the best;
And by the time the sun had gone to rest 30
I'd spoken with each one about the trip
And was a member of the fellowship.
We made agreement, early to arise
To take our way, of which I shall advise.
But nonetheless, while I have time and space, 35
Before proceeding further here's the place
Where I believe it reasonable to state
Something about these pilgrims--to relate
Their circumstances as they seemed to me,
Just who they were and each of what degree 40
And also what array they all were in.
And with a Knight I therefore will begin.
There with us was a KNIGHT, a worthy man
Who, from the very first time he began 45
To ride about, loved honor, chivalry,
The spirit of giving, truth and courtesy.
He was a valiant warrior for his lord;
No man had ridden farther with the sword
Through Christendom and lands of heathen creeds,
And always he was praised for worthy deeds. 50
He helped win Alexandria in the East,
And often sat at table's head to feast
With knights of all the nations when in Prussia.
In Lithuania as well as Russia
No other noble Christian fought so well. 55

When Algaciras in Granada fell,
 When Ayas and Attalia were won,
 This Knight was there. Hard riding he had done
 At Benmarin. Along the [Great Sea](#) coast
 He'd made his strikes with many a noble host. 60
 His mortal battles numbered then fifteen,
 And for our faith he'd fought at Tramissene
 Three tournaments and always killed his foe.
 This worthy Knight was ally, briefly so,
 Of the lord of Palathia (in work 65
 Performed against a fellow heathen Turk).
 He found the highest favor in all eyes,
 A valiant warrior who was also wise
 And in deportment meek as any maid.
 He never spoke unkindly, never played 70
 The villain's part, but always did the right.
 He truly was a perfect, gentle knight.
 But now to tell of his array, he had
 Good horses but he wasn't richly clad;
 His fustian tunic was a rusty sight 75
 Where he had worn his hauberk, for the Knight
 Was just back from an expedition when
 His pilgrimage he hastened to begin.
 There with him was his son, a youthful [SQUIRE](#),
 A lover and [knight bachelor](#) to admire. 80
 His locks were curled as if set by a press.
 His age was twenty years or so, I guess.
 In stature he was of an average height
 And blest with great agility and might.
 He'd ridden for a time with cavalry 85
 In Flanders and Artois and Picardy,
 Performing well in such a little space
 In hopes of standing in his lady's grace.
 He was embroidered like a flowerbed
 Or meadow, full of flowers white and red. 90
 He sang or else he fluted all the day;
 He was as fresh as is the month of May.
 His gown was short, his sleeves were long and wide.
 And well upon a horse the lad could ride;
 Good verse and songs he had composed, and he 95
 Could joust and dance, drew well, wrote gracefully.
 At night he'd love so hotly, without fail,
 He slept no more than does a nightingale.
 He was a courteous, humble lad and able,
 And carved meat for his father at the table. 100
 Now he had brought one servant by his side,
 A [YEOMAN](#)--with no more he chose to ride.
 This Yeoman wore a coat and hood of green.
 He had a sheaf of arrows, bright and keen,
 Beneath his belt positioned handily-- 105
 He tended to his gear most yeomanly,
 His arrow feathers never drooped too low--
 And in his hand he bore a mighty bow.
 His head was closely cropped, his face was brown.
 The fellow knew his woodcraft up and down. 110
 He wore a bracer on his arm to wield
 His bolts. By one side were his sword and shield,

And on the other, mounted at the hip,
 A dagger sharply pointed at the tip.
 A [Christopher](#) of silver sheen was worn 115
 Upon his breast; a green strap held his horn.
 He must have been a forester, I guess.
 There also was a Nun, a [PRIORESS](#),
 Her smile a very simple one and coy.
 Her greatest oath was only "By [Saint Loy!](#)" 120
 Called Madam Eglantine, this Nun excelled
 At singing when church services were held,
 Intoning through her nose melodiously.
 And she could speak in French quite fluently,
 After the school of Stratford at the Bow 125
 (The French of Paris wasn't hers to know).
 Of table manners she had learnt it all,
 For from her lips she'd let no morsel fall
 Nor deeply in her sauce her fingers wet;
 She'd lift her food so well she'd never get 130
 A single drop or crumb upon her breast.
 At courtesy she really did her best.
 Her upper lip she wiped so very clean
 That not one bit of grease was ever seen
 Upon her drinking cup. She was discreet 135
 And never reached unseemly for the meat.
 And certainly she was good company,
 So pleasant and so amiable, while she
 Would in her mien take pains to imitate
 The ways of court, the dignity of state, 140
 That all might praise her for her worthiness.
 To tell you of her moral consciousness,
 Her charity was so great that to see
 A little mouse caught in a trap would be
 Enough to make her cry, if dead or bleeding. 145
 She had some little dogs that she was feeding
 With roasted meat or milk and fine white bread;
 And sorely she would weep if one were dead
 Or if someone should smite it with a stick.
 She was all tender heart right to the quick. 150
 Her pleated wimple was of seemly class,
 She had a well formed nose, eyes gray as glass,
 A little mouth, one that was soft and red.
 And it's for sure she had a fair forehead--
 It must have been a handbreadth wide, I own, 155
 For hardly was the lady undergrown.
 The beauty of her cloak I hadn't missed.
 She wore a rosary around her wrist
 Made out of coral beads all colored green,
 And from it hung a brooch of golden sheen 160
 On which there was an A crowned with a wreath,
 With [Amor vincit omnia](#) beneath.
 She brought along another NUN, to be
 Her chaplain, and her PRIEST, who made it three.
 A MONK there was, a fine outrider of 165
 Monastic lands, with venery his love;
 A manly man, to be an abbot able.
 He had some dainty horses in the stable,
 And when he rode, his bridle might you hear

Go jingling in the whistling wind as clear 170
 And loud as might you hear the chapel bell
 Where this lord not too often kept his cell.
 Because Saint Maurus and Saint Benedict
 Had rules he thought were old and rather strict,
 This mounted Monk let old things pass away 175
 So that the modern world might have its day.
 That text he valued less than a plucked hen
 Which says that hunters are not holy men,
 Or that a monk ignoring rules and order
 Is like a flapping fish out of the water 180
 (That is to say, a monk out of his cloister).
 He held that text not worth a single oyster,
 And his opinion, I declared, was good.
 Why should he study till he's mad? Why should
 He pore through books day after day indoors, 185
 Or labor with his hands at all the chores
 That [Austin](#) bids? How shall the world be served?
 Let such works be to Austin then reserved!
 And so he was a pricker and aright;
 Greyhounds he had as swift as birds in flight, 190
 For tracking and the hunting of the hare
 Were all his pleasure, no cost would he spare.
 His sleeves, I saw, were fur-lined at the hand
 With gray fur of the finest in the land,
 And fastening his hood beneath his chin 195
 There was a golden, finely crafted pin,
 A love knot in the greater end for class.
 His head was bald and shinier than glass.
 His face was shiny, too, as if anointed.
 He was a husky lord, one well appointed. 200
 His eyes were bright, rolled in his head and glowed
 Just like the coals beneath a pot. He rode
 In supple boots, his horse in great estate.
 Now certainly he was a fine prelate,
 He wasn't pale like some poor wasted ghost. 205
 Fat swan he loved the best of any roast.
 His palfrey was as brown as is a berry.
 A [FRIAR](#) there was, a wanton one and merry,
 Who begged within a certain limit. None
 In all four orders was a better one 210
 At idle talk, or speaking with a flair.
 And many a marriage he'd arranged for fair
 And youthful women, paying all he could.
 He was a pillar of his brotherhood.
 Well loved he was, a most familiar Friar 215
 To many franklins living in his shire
 And to the worthy women of the town;
 For he could hear confessions and played down
 The parish priest. To shrive in every quarter
 He had been given license by his order. 220
 He'd sweetly listen to confession, then
 As pleasantly absolve one of his sin.
 He easily gave penance when he knew
 Some nice gift he'd receive when he was through.
 For when to a poor order something's given, 225
 It is a sign the man is truly shriven.

If someone gave, the Friar made it clear,
 He knew the man's repentance was sincere.
 For many men are so hard of the heart
 They cannot weep, though grievous be the smart; 230
 Instead of tears and prayers, they might therefore
 Give silver to the friars who are poor.
 He kept his cape all packed with pins and knives
 That he would give away to pretty wives.
 At merriment he surely wasn't middling; 235
 He sang quite well and also did some fiddling,
 And took the prize with all his balladry.
 His neck was white as any fleur-de-lis,
 His strength like any wrestler's of renown.
 He knew the taverns well in every town, 240
 Each hosteler and barmaid, moreso than
 He knew the leper and the beggarman.
 For anyone as worthy as the Friar
 Had faculties that called for something higher
 Than dealing with those sick with leprosy. 245
 It wasn't dignified, nor could it be
 Of profit, to be dealing with the poor,
 What with the rich and merchants at the store.
 Above all where some profit might arise
 Was where he'd be, in courteous, humble guise. 250
 No man had greater virtue than did he,
 The finest beggar in the friary.
 (He paid a fee for his exclusive right: 252a
 No brethren might invade his begging site.) 252B
 And though a widow shoeless had to go,
 So pleasant was his "*In principio*"
 He'd have a farthing when he went away. 255
 He gained much more than what he had to pay,
 And he could be as wanton as a pup.
 He'd arbitrate on days to settle up
 In law disputes, not like a cloisterer
 Dressed in a threadbare cope as students were, 260
 But rather like a master or a pope.
 He wore a double-worsted semicope
 As rounded as a church bell newly pressed.
 He lisped somewhat when he was at his best,
 To make his English sweet upon his tongue. 265
 And when he fiddled and his songs were sung,
 His eyes would twinkle in his head as might
 The stars themselves on any frosty night.
 Now Hubert was this worthy Friar's name.
 A MERCHANT with a forked beard also came, 270
 Dressed in a motley. Tall and proud he sat
 Upon his horse. A Flemish beaver hat
 He wore, and boots most elegantly wrought.
 He spoke with pomp on everything he thought,
 And boasted of the earnings he'd collected. 275
 He felt the trade route had to be protected
 Twixt Middleburgh and Orwell by the sea.
 He speculated in French currency.
 He used his wits so well, with such finesse,
 That no one guessed the man's indebtedness, 280
 So dignified he was at managing

All of his bargains and his borrowing.
 He was a worthy fellow all the same;
 To tell the truth, I do not know his name.

There also was an Oxford STUDENT, one 285
 Whose logic studies long since had begun.
 The horse he rode was leaner than a rake,
 And he was hardly fat, I undertake,
 But looked quite hollow, far from debonair.
 And threadbare was the cloak he had to wear; 290
 He had no [benefice](#) as yet and, most
 Unworldly, wouldn't take a secular post.
 For he would rather have at his bed's head
 Some twenty books, all bound in black or red,
 Of Aristotle and his philosophy 295
 Than finest robes, fiddle or [psaltery](#).
[Philosopher](#) he was, and yet his coffer
 Had little of the gold that it should offer.
 But all that from his friends he could acquire
 He spent on books and learning, didn't tire 300
 Of praying for the souls of all those who
 Would give to help him see his schooling through,
 For study was the foremost thing he heeded.
 He never spoke one word more than was needed,
 And then he spoke with formal reverence; 305
 He'd make it short but make a lot of sense.
 Of highest moral virtue was his speech,
 And gladly he would learn and gladly teach.

A wise and prudent [SERGEANT OF THE LAW](#),
 One who at [Saint Paul's porch](#) one often saw, 310
 Was with us too, a man of excellence.
 Discreet he was, deserving reverence
 (Or so it seemed, his sayings were so wise).
 He often was a judge in the assize
 By virtue of his patent and commission. 315
 He had with his renown and erudition
 Gained many fees and robes in his career.
 A purchaser of land without a peer,
 His holdings were fee simple in effect;
 No one could prove one purchase incorrect. 320
 Nowhere was there a busier man, yet he
 Seemed busier than even he could be.
 He knew each court decision, every crime
 Adjudicated from King William's time.
 He'd execute a deed with such perfection 325
 No man could call its writing into question,
 And every statute he could state by rote.
 He wore a simple multicolored coat
 Girt by a striped silk belt. Enough to tell,
 On what he wore I will no longer dwell. 330

There was a [FRANKLIN](#) in his company
 Whose beard was lily-white as it could be,
 Though his complexion was a healthy red.
 In wine he loved to sop his morning bread;
 A devotee of all delights that lure us, 335
 He truly was a son of Epicurus
 (Who thought the life that's pleasure-filled to be
 The only one of true felicity).

He was a great householder, and his bounty
 Made him [Saint Julian](#) to those in his county. 340
 His bread and ale were always fresh and fine,
 And no one had a better stock of wine.
 Baked meat was always in his house, the best
 Of fish and flesh, so much that to each guest
 It almost seemed to snow with meat and drink 345
 And all the dainties of which one could think.
 His meals would always vary, to adhere
 To all the changing seasons of the year.
 The coop was partridge-filled, birds fat as any,
 And in the pond the breams and pikes were many. 350
 Woe to the cook unless his sauce was tart
 And he had all utensils set to start!
 His table would stay mounted in the hall
 All set and ready at a moment's call.
 In county sessions he was lord and sire, 355
 And often he had been [Knight of the Shire](#).
 A dagger and a purse made out of silk
 Hung from his belt, as white as morning milk.
 A sheriff he'd been, and county auditor.
 There wasn't a more worthy [vavasor](#). 360
 A HABERDASHER, DYER, CARPENTER,
 TAPESTRY MAKER, and a WEAVER were
 All there as well, clothed in the livery
 Of guildsmen, of one great fraternity.
 Their gear was polished up till it would pass 365
 For new. Their knives were mounted not with brass
 But all with silver. Finely wrought array
 Their belts and pouches were in every way.
 Each one looked like a burgess, one whose place
 Would be before the whole guild on a dais. 370
 They had the means and wits, were it their plan,
 Each of them to have been an alderman;
 They had enough income and property
 And wives who would to such a plan agree,
 Or else they'd have to blame themselves alone. 375
 It's very nice as "Madam" to be known,
 And lead processions on a holy day
 And have one's train borne in a royal way.
 They brought along a COOK with them to fix
 Their meals. He boiled their chicken in a mix 380
 Of marrowbones, tart herbs and galingale.
 He knew right off a draught of London ale,
 Knew how to boil and roast and broil and fry,
 Whip up a stew as well as bake a pie.
 It seemed a shame, and caused me some chagrin, 385
 To see he had an ulcer on his shin.
 He made blancmange that I'd rank with the best.
 There was a SKIPPER hailing from the west,
 As far away as Dartmouth, I'd allow.
 He rode a nag as best as he knew how. 390
 A woolen gown down to his knees he wore,
 And round his neck and neath his arm he bore
 A strap from which a dagger dangled down.
 The summer sun had turned his color brown.
 He surely was a festive sort of fellow; 395

Many a pilfered wine draught made him mellow
 While sailing from Bordeaux, the merchant snoring.
 He had no use for conscience, thought it boring.
 In battle, when he gained the upper hand,
 By plank he'd send them home to every land. 400
 As for his skill in reckoning the tides
 And all the dangers of the sea besides,
 By zodiac and moon to navigate,
 From Hull to Carthage there was none as great.
 Hardy and shrewd in all he'd undertaken, 405
 His beard by many tempests had been shaken;
 And he knew well the havens everywhere
 From Gotland to the Cape of Finisterre,
 And every creek in Brittany and Spain.
 The Skipper's ship was called the *Maudelayne*. 410
 There also was among us a PHYSICIAN,
 None like him in this world, no competition,
 To speak of medicine and surgery.
 He was well grounded in astrology:
 He tended patients specially in hours 415
 When natural magic had its greatest powers,
 For he could tell by which stars would ascend
 What talisman would help his patient mend.
 He knew the cause of every malady
 Whether from hot, cold, wet, or dry it be, 420
 And of each [humor](#) what the symptoms were.
 He truly was a fine practitioner.
 And once he knew a malady's root cause
 He'd give the cure without a further pause,
 For readily apothecaries heeded 425
 When there were drugs or medicines he needed,
 That profit might be shared by everyone
 (Their fellowship not recently begun).
 The ancient Aesculapius he knew,
 And Dioscorides and Rufus too, 430
 Hali and Galen, old Hippocrates,
 Serapion, Avicenna, Rhazes,
 Gaddesden, Damascenus, Constantine,
 Bernard and Averroes and Gilbertine.
 His diet was as measured as could be, 435
 Being not one of superfluity
 But greatly nourishing as well as prudent.
 He hardly could be called a Bible student.
 He decked himself in scarlet and in azure,
 With taffeta and silk. Yet he'd demure 440
 If something might necessitate expense;
 He saved his gains from times of pestilence,
 For gold's a cordial, so the doctors say.
 That's why he loved gold in a special way. 445
 From near the town of [BATH](#) a good WIFE came;
 She was a little deaf, which was a shame.
 She was a clothier, so excellent
 Her work surpassed that of [Ypres and Ghent](#).
 When parish wives their gifts would forward bring,
 None dared precede her to the offering-- 450
 And if they did, her wrath would surely be
 So mighty she'd lose all her charity.

The kerchiefs all were of the finest texture
 (And must have weighed ten pounds, that's no conjecture)
 That every Sunday she had on her head. 455
 The fine hose that she wore were scarlet red
 And tightly laced, she had a nice new pair
 Of shoes. Her face was ruddy, bold and fair.
 She was a worthy woman all her life:
 At church door with five men she'd been a wife, 460
 Not counting all the company of her youth.
 (No need to treat that now, but it's the truth.)
 She'd journeyed to Jerusalem three times;
 Strange rivers she had crossed in foreign climes;
 She'd been to Rome and also to Boulogne, 465
 To Galicia for Saint James and to Cologne,
 And she knew much of wandering by the way.
 She had the lover's gap teeth, I must say.
 With ease upon an ambling horse she sat,
 Well wimpled, while upon her head her hat 470
 Was broad as any buckler to be found.
 About her ample hips a mantle wound,
 And on her feet the spurs she wore were sharp.
 In fellowship she well could laugh and carp.
 Of remedies of love she had good notions, 475
 For of that art's old dance she knew the motions.
 There was a good man of religion, too,
 A PARSON of a certain township who
 Was poor, but rich in holy thought and work.
 He also was a learned man, a clerk; 480
 The Christian gospel he would truly preach,
 Devoutly his parishioners to teach.
 Benign he was, in diligence a wonder,
 And patient in adversity, as under
 Such he'd proven many times. And loath 485
 He was to get his tithes by threatening oath;
 For he would rather give, without a doubt,
 To all the poor parishioners about
 From his own substance and the offerings.
 Sufficiency he found in little things. 490
 His parish wide, with houses wide asunder,
 He'd never fail in either rain or thunder,
 Though sick or vexed, to make his visitations
 With those remote, regardless of their stations.
 On foot he traveled, in his hand a stave. 495
 This fine example to his sheep he gave:
 He always did good works before he taught them.
 His words were from the gospel as he caught them,
 And this good saying he would add thereto:
 "If gold should rust, then what will iron do?" 500
 For if a priest be foul in whom we trust,
 No wonder that the ignorant goes to rust.
 And it's a shame (as every priest should keep
 In mind), a dirty shepherd and clean sheep.
 For every priest should an example give, 505
 By his own cleanness, how his sheep should live.
 He never set his benefice for hire,
 To leave his sheep encumbered in the mire
 While he ran off to London and Saint Paul's

To seek a chantry, singing in the stalls, 510
 Or be supported by a guild. Instead
 He dwelt at home, and he securely led
 His fold, so that the wolf might never harry.
 He was a shepherd and no mercenary.
 A holy, virtuous man he was, and right 515
 In showing to the sinner no despite.
 His speech was never haughty or indignant,
 He was a teacher modest and benignant;
 To draw folks heavenward to life forever,
 By good example, was his great endeavor. 520
 But if some person were too obstinate,
 Whether he be of high or low estate,
 He would be sharply chided on the spot.
 A better priest, I wager, there is not.
 He didn't look for pomp or reverence 525
 Nor feign a too self-righteous moral sense;
 What Christ and his apostles had to tell
 He taught, and he would follow it as well.
 With him his brother came, a PLOWMAN who
 Had carted many a load of dung. A true 530
 And well-intentioned laborer was he,
 Who lived in peace and perfect charity.
 The Lord his God with whole heart he loved best,
 When times were good as well as when distressed,
 And loved his neighbor as himself, for which 535
 He'd gladly thresh, or dig to make a ditch,
 For love of Christ, to help the poor in plight
 Without a wage, if it lay in his might.
 He paid his proper tithes religiously,
 Both of his labor and his property. 540
 He wore a tunic and he rode a mare.
 A MILLER and a REEVE also were there,
 A SUMMONER, also a PARDONER,
 A MANCIPLER and me, no more there were.
 The MILLER was as stout as any known, 545
 A fellow big in brawn as well as bone.
 It served him well, for everywhere he'd go
 He'd win the ram at every wrestling show.
 Short-shouldered, broad he was, a husky knave;
 No door could keep its hinges once he gave 550
 A heave or ran and broke it with his head.
 His beard like any sow or fox was red,
 And broad as any spade it was, at that.
 He had a wart upon his nose, right at
 The tip, from which a tuft of hairs was spread 555
 Like bristles on a sow's ears, just as red;
 The nostrils on the man were black and wide.
 He had a sword and buckler at his side.
 Great as a furnace was his mouth. And he
 Could tell some jokes and stories, though they'd be 560
 Mostly of sin and lechery. He stole
 Much corn, charged three times over for a toll;
 Yet he'd a golden thumb, I do declare.
 A white coat and a blue hood were his wear.
 He blew the bagpipe, knew it up and down, 565
 And played it as he brought us out of town.

From an [Inn of Court](#) a gentle [MANCIPLE](#)
 Was with us, one who set a fine example
 In buying victuals wisely. Whether he
 Would buy with credit or with currency, 570
 He took such care in purchases he made
 He'd come out well ahead for what he paid.
 Now is that not a sign of God's fair grace,
 That such a simple man's wit can displace
 The wisdom of a heap of learned men? 575
 His masters numbered more than three times ten,
 All lawyers of a very skillful sort;
 A dozen of them in that Inn of Court
 Were worthy to be stewards of the treasure
 Of any lord in England, that in pleasure 580
 He might live, enjoying all that he had
 Without a debt (unless he had gone mad),
 Or live as simply as he might desire;
 If need be, they could help an entire shire
 Through any circumstance that might befall. 585
 And yet this Manciple could shame them all.
 The [REEVE](#) was a slender, choleric man.
 He shaved his beard as closely as one can;
 His hair was shortly clipped around the ears
 And cropped in front just like a priest's appears. 590
 The fellow's legs were very long and lean,
 Each like a staff, no calf was to be seen.
 Well could he keep a granary and bin
 (No auditor could challenge that and win),
 And he could augur by the drought and rain 595
 The true yield of his seed and of his grain.
 His master's sheep, his cattle, milk cows, horses,
 His poultry, swine, and all his stored resources
 Were wholly left to this Reeve's governing,
 For by contract his was the reckoning 600
 Since first his lord had grown to twenty years.
 No man could ever put him in arrears;
 There was no bailiff, herdsman, not one servant
 With sleight unknown--the Reeve was too observant,
 And feared like death itself by all beneath. 605
 He had a lovely dwelling on a heath
 Where green trees stood to shade it from the sun.
 In gaining goods his lord he had outdone,
 He stored up many riches privately.
 To please his lord, he'd give him subtly 610
 A gift or loan out of the lord's own goods,
 Receiving thanks and things like coats and hoods.
 He'd learnt a good trade as a youth, for he
 Was quite a gifted man at carpentry.
 He rode a steed with quite a sturdy frame, 615
 A dapple gray (the horse was Scot by name).
 He wore a long surcoat of bluish shade,
 And at his side he had a rusty blade.
 From Norfolk was this Reeve of whom I tell,
 Nearby a town that's known as Bawdeswell. 620
 His coat was tucked up like a friar's. He
 Rode always last among our company.
 A [SUMMONER](#) was with us in the place

Who like a cherub had a fire-red face,
So pimply was the skin, eyes puffed and narrow. 625
He was as hot and lecherous as a sparrow.
With black and scabby brows and scanty beard,
He had a face that all the children feared;
There's no quicksilver, litharge or brimstone,
Borax, ceruse, no tartar oil that's known-- 630
No ointment that could cleanse, to keep it simple,
And rid his face of even one white pimple
Among the whelks that sat upon his cheeks.
He loved his garlic, onions and his leeks,
And strong wine red as blood once he had eaten. 635
Then he would speak and cry out like a cretin,
And when with wine he was quite well infused,
Some Latin words were all the words he used.
He knew a few good phrases, two or three,
Which he had learnt to say from some decree. 640
(No wonder, what with hearing it all day;
And after all, as you well know, a jay
Can call out "Walt!" as well as any pope.)
But once a question came to test his scope,
He had no learning left to make reply, 645
So "Questio quid juris!" was his cry.
He was a gentle, kindly rascal, though;
A better fellow men may never know.
Why, he'd be willing, for a quart of wine,
To let some rascal have his concubine 650
For one whole year, excusing him completely.
He well could "pluck a bird" (always discreetly),
And if he found a fellow rogue wherever
He'd teach him that he should in his endeavor
Not be afraid of the archdeacon's curse-- 655
Unless the fellow's soul was in his purse,
For that is where his punishment would be.
"The purse is the archdeacon's hell," said he.
(I know that was a lie; a guilty man
Should be in dread of Holy Church's ban, 660
It slays as absolution saves. He best
Beware also a writ for his arrest.)
The Summoner controlled, himself to please,
All of the young girls of the diocese;
He knew their secrets, counseled them and led. 665
A garland he had set upon his head
As great as any ale sign on a stake.
He'd made himself a buckler out of cake.
With him there rode a gentle PARDONER
Of Rouncivalle (comrades and friends they were), 670
Who'd come straight from the court of Rome. And he
Would loudly sing "Come hither, love, to me!"
The Summoner bore him a stiff bass staff;
No trumpet ever sounded so by half.
The Pardoner's hair was as yellow as wax, 675
But hung as smoothly as a hank of flax;
In little strands the locks ran from his head
Till over both his shoulders they were spread
And thinly lay, one here, another there.
In jolly spirit, he chose not to wear 680

His hood but kept it packed away. He rode
 (Or so he thought) all in the latest mode;
 But for a cap his long loose hair was bare.
 Such glaring eyes he had, just like a hare!
 A [veronica](#) was sewn upon his cap. 685
 He had his bag before him in his lap,
 Brimming with pardons hot from Rome. He'd speak
 In voice as dainty as a goat's. From cheek
 To cheek he had no beard and never would,
 So smooth his face you'd think he'd shaved it good. 690
 I think he was a gelding or a mare.
 But speaking of his craft, Berwick to Ware
 There was no pardoner could take his place.
 For in his bag he had a pillowcase
 That used to be, he said, Our Lady's veil; 695
 He claimed he had a fragment of the sail
 That took Saint Peter out upon the sea
 Before Christ called him to his ministry;
 He had a cross of latten set with stones,
 And in a glass he had some old pig's bones; 700
 And with these relics, when he saw at hand
 A simple parson from the hinterland,
 He'd make more money in one day alone
 Than would the parson two months come and gone.
 So he made apes, with all the tricks he'd do, 705
 Of parson and of congregation too.
 And yet I should conclude, for all his tactic,
 In church he was a fine ecclesiastic,
 So well he read a lesson or a story,
 And best of all intoned the offertory. 710
 For well he knew that when the song was sung,
 He then must preach, and not with awkward tongue.
 He knew how one gets silver from the crowd;
 That's why he sang so merrily and loud.
 As briefly as I could I've told you now 715
 Degree, array, and number, and of how
 This company of pilgrims came to be
 In Southwark at that pleasant hostelry
 Known as the Tabard, which is near the Bell.
 And so with that, it's time for me to tell 720
 Exactly what we did that very night
 When at this inn we'd all come to alight;
 And after that I'll tell you of our trip,
 Of all that's left about our fellowship.
 But first I pray that by your courtesy 725
 You will not judge it my vulgarity
 If I should plainly speak of this assortment,
 To tell you all their words and their deportment,
 Though not a word of theirs I modify.
 For this I'm sure you know as well as I: 730
 Who tells the tale of any other man
 Should render it as nearly as he can,
 If it be in his power, word for word,
 Though from him such rude speech was never heard.
 If he does not, his tale will be untrue, 735
 The words will be invented, they'll be new.
 One shouldn't spare the words of his own brother,

He ought to say one word just like another.
 Christ spoke broad words himself in Holy Writ,
 And you know well no villainy's in it. 740
 And Plato says, to all those who can read
 Him, that words must be cousin to the deed.
 I also pray that you'll forgive the fact
 That in my tale I haven't been exact
 To set folks in their order of degree; 745
 My wit is short, as clearly you may see.
 Our HOST made welcome each and every one,
 And right away our supper was begun.
 He served us with the finest in good food;
 The wine was strong to fit our festive mood. 750
 Our Host performed, so it seemed to us all,
 As well as any marshal in a hall.
 A robust man he was, and twinkle-eyed,
 As fine as any burgess in Cheapside,
 Bold in his speech, one wise and educated, 755
 A man whose manhood could not be debated.
 He also was a merry sort of bloke,
 As after supper he began to joke
 And spoke to us of mirth and other things
 When we had finished with our reckonings. 760
 "My lords," he then addressed us, "from the start
 You've been most welcome here, that's from the heart.
 In faith, this year I've truly yet to see
 Here at this inn another company
 As merry as the one that's gathered now. 765
 I'd entertain you more if I knew how.
 Say, here's a thought that just occurred to me,
 A way to entertain you, and it's free.
 "You go to Canterbury--may God speed,
 The blissful martyr bless you for the deed! 770
 And well I know as you go on your way,
 You plan to tell some tales, to have some play.
 There won't be much amusement going on
 If everybody rides dumb as a stone.
 So as I said, I would propose a game 775
 To give you some diversion, that's the aim.
 If it's agreed, by everyone's assent,
 That you'll stand by the judgment I present,
 And strive to do exactly as I say
 Tomorrow when you're riding on your way, 780
 Then by my father's soul, who now is dead,
 You'll have some fun or you can have my head!
 Let's have a show of hands, no more to say."
 We let our will be known then right away;
 We didn't think it worth deliberation 785
 And gave him leave without a hesitation
 To tell us what his verdict was to be.
 "My lords," he said, "then listen well to me,
 And may this not, I pray, meet your disdain.
 Now here's the point, speaking short and plain: 790
 Each one of you, to pass the time of day,
 Shall tell two tales while you are on the way
 To Canterbury; then each one of you
 On the return shall tell another two,

About adventures said once to befall. 795
 And he who bears himself the best of all--
 That is to say, the one who's judged to tell
 The tales that in both aim and wit excel--
 Shall win a supper paid for by the lot,
 Here in this place, right at this very spot, 800
 When we return again from Canterbury.
 For in my wish to make your journey merry,
 I will myself most gladly with you ride--
 And at my own expense--to be your guide;
 And if my judgment one disputes, he'll pay 805
 For all that we shall spend along the way.
 If you will grant me that it's to be so,
 Then tell me in a word that I may know
 To make my preparations for the start."
 It was so granted, each with happy heart 810
 Gave him his oath. We therefore asked our Host
 To vouchsafe that indeed he'd take the post
 And function as our governor, to hear
 Our tales and judge, and make his judgment clear,
 And set the supper at a certain price; 815
 Then we would all be ruled by his device,
 Come high or low. And so it was agreed
 By one assent, his judgment we would heed.
 With that, more wine was fetched for every guest.
 We drank it, then were ready for some rest 820
 And went to bed with no more tarrying.
 Next morning, when the day began to spring,
 Up rose our Host and roused us like a cock.
 He gathered us together in a flock,
 Then forth we rode at but a walking pace 825
 Out to Saint Thomas's watering place.
 Our Host there checked his horse and said to all:
 "My lords, now listen, if you will. Recall
 The pact, as I remind you, made with me.
 If evensong and matins both agree, 830
 Let's see now who shall tell us the first tale.
 And if I've ever drunk of wine or ale,
 Whoso resists the judgment I present
 Shall pay along the way all that is spent.
 Draw lots before we travel farther, then, 835
 And he who draws the shortest shall begin.
 Sir Knight," he said, "my master and my lord,
 Now draw a lot, to keep with our accord.
 Come here," said he, "my Lady Prioress,
 And you, Sir Student--quit your bashfulness 840
 And studies too. Lay hand to, everyone!"
 And so the drawing was at once begun.
 I'll keep it short and tell you how it went:
 Whether by chance or fate or accident,
 The truth is that the lot fell to the Knight-- 845
 A fact in which the rest all took delight.
 As was required, then tell his tale he must,
 By the agreement that was made in trust
 As you have heard. What more is there to know?
 And when this good man saw that it was so, 850
 As one with wisdom and obedient

To that to which he'd given free assent,
He said, "Since I'm the one to start the game,
The lot I drew is welcome, in God's name!
Now let us ride, and hear what I've to say."
And with that word we rode forth on our way,
As he began at once with merry cheer
To tell his tale, and spoke as you may hear.