

# Before You Read

FROM THE CANTERBURY TALES

## Make the Connection

### From Sketch to Portrait

If you went on a tour today, what types of people would you expect to meet? Most of Chaucer's pilgrims are the kinds of people he would have known and perhaps even observed many times riding toward Canterbury on the old pilgrimage road. Here in the *Tales* is a cross section of medieval life: the conservative military man, the talkative and often-married feminist, the lover, the barnyard humorist, the elegant and Frenchified nun, to name a few. Chaucer seems mainly to describe his travelers' appearances in what appear to be mere physical sketches. But a close reading shows that he has cleverly selected details that give us shrewd psychological portraits as well.

## Quickwrite

Spend a few minutes describing a real or an imaginary person's appearance, from tip to toe. Try to show how certain details of the person's appearance suggest certain character traits (that she is miserly, that he is vain, that he wants to look like a popular rock star, and so on). Keep your notes.



## Elements of Literature

### Characterization

To create the portraits of his pilgrim characters—"nine and twenty in a company of sundry folk," Chaucer uses the methods of characterization that writers

continue to use to this day. Like his contemporary counterparts, Chaucer reveals his characters

- by telling us directly what the character is like
- by describing how the character looks and dresses
- by presenting the character's words and actions
- by revealing the character's private thoughts and feelings
- by showing how other people respond to the character

**C**haracterization is the process by which the writer reveals the personality of a character.

For more on Character, see the *Handbook of Literary Terms*.

## Background

When Chaucer chooses to have each of his pilgrims tell a story on the way to Canterbury, he is using a popular literary device, the frame story. A **frame story** is a story that includes any number of different narratives. Chaucer uses the outer story of the pilgrimage to unite his travelers' individual tales, and the tales themselves have thematic unity as well. The hundred tales in Boccaccio's *Decameron* (page 154) and the roughly one hundred tales in *The Arabian Nights* are each set within a single fictional frame as well. The frame story is still used today. If you've read Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, you've read a modern frame story.



Chaucer reciting his poetry. Ms. 61, fr.

The Master and Fellows of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge.



Here bygynneth the Book of the Tales of Caunterbury.

Whan that Aprill 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,  
5 Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth  
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 foweles maken melodye  
10 That slepen al 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 ferne halwes kouthe in sondry londes.  
15 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 seeke  
Bifel that in that sesoun on a day  
20 In Southwerk at the Tabard, as I lay  
Redy to wenden on my pilgrymage  
To Caunterbury with ful devout corage,  
At nyght was come into that hostelrye  
Wel nyne-and-twenty in a compaignye  
25 Of sondry folk by aventure y-falle  
In felawshipe, and pilgrymes were they alle  
That toward Caunterbury wolden ryde.  
The chambres and the stables weren wyde,  
And wel we weren esed atte beste;  
30 And shortly, whan the sonne was to reste,  
So hadde I spoken with hem everichon  
That I was of hir felawshipe anon;  
And made forward erly for to ryse  
To take oure wey ther-as I yow devyse.  
35 But, nathelees, whil I have tyme and space,  
Er that I ferther in this tale pace,  
Me thynketh it acordant to resoun  
To telle yow al the condicioun  
Of ech of hem so as it semed me,  
40 And whiche they weren, and of what degree,  
And eek in what array that they were inne;  
And at a knyght than wol I first bigynne.

# 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<sup>o</sup> with his sweet breath  
Exhales an air in every grove and heath  
Upon the tender shoots, and the young sun  
His half-course in the sign of the *Ram*<sup>o</sup> 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<sup>o</sup> 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,<sup>o</sup> 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  
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

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.

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### WORDS TO OWN

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

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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.

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.

① There was a *Knicht*, 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  
And ridden into battle, no man more,  
As well in Christian as in heathen places,

- 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,  
 55 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 jousted for our faith at Tramissene  
 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 distinguishèd, 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. } why he went  
 ② 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:

**WORDS TO OWN**  
**stature** (stach'ər) n.: height.

**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.

By permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

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,<sup>o</sup> spear-sharp and well-equipped.  
 A medal of St. Christopher<sup>o</sup> he wore  
 Of shining silver on his breast, and bore

A hunting-horn, well slung and burnished clean,  
 120 That dangled from a baldrick<sup>o</sup> 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!"<sup>o</sup>

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;<sup>o</sup>

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,



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.

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;

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

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. (e) (7) (8)

(9) 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,

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;



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

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 The Huntington Library,  
 San Marino, California.

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'nē.ä'): Latin for "Love  
 conquers all."

167. cell: a small convent con-  
 nected 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 regula-  
 tions 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.

hard worker

Benignical  
 to the  
 church?

Greyhounds he had, as swift as birds, to course.<sup>o</sup>  
 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.  
 210 He liked a fat swan best, and roasted whole.  
 His palfrey<sup>o</sup> was as brown as is a berry.  
 There was a Friar, a wanton<sup>o</sup> one and merry,  
 A Limiter,<sup>o</sup> a very festive fellow.  
 In all Four Orders<sup>o</sup> 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.  
 225 Sweetly he heard his penitents at shrift<sup>o</sup>  
 With pleasant absolution, for a gift.  
 He was an easy man in penance-giving  
 Where he could hope to make a decent living;  
 It's a sure sign whenever gifts are given  
 230 To a poor Order that a man's well shriven,<sup>o</sup>  
 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<sup>o</sup> 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. **Limiter**: 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** (pɜr'sən·ə·bəl) *adj.*: attractive in appearance and personality.



And certainly his voice was gay and sturdy,  
 240 For he sang well and played the hurdy-gurdy.<sup>o</sup>  
 At sing-songs he was champion of the hour.  
 His neck was whiter than a lily-flower  
 But strong enough to butt a bruiser down.  
 He knew the taverns well in every town  
 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  
 Of his position, dealing with a scum  
 250 Of wretched lepers; nothing good can come  
 Of commerce with such slum-and-gutter dwellers,  
 But only with the rich and victual-sellers.<sup>o</sup>  
 But anywhere a profit might accrue  
Courteous he was and lowly of service too.  
 255 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.  
 For though a widow mightn't have a shoe,  
 260 So pleasant was his holy how-d'ye-do  
 He got his farthing<sup>o</sup> from her just the same  
 Before he left, and so his income came  
 To more than he laid out. And how he romped,  
 Just like a puppy! He was ever prompt  
 265 To arbitrate disputes on settling days<sup>o</sup>  
 (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-cope<sup>o</sup>  
 Upon his shoulders, and the swelling fold  
 About him, like a bell about its mould  
 When it is casting, rounded out his dress.  
 He lisped a little out of wantonness<sup>o</sup>  
 275 To make his English sweet upon his tongue.  
 When he had played his harp, or having sung,  
 His eyes would twinkle in his head as bright  
 As any star upon a frosty night.  
This worthy's name was Hubert, it appeared.  
 280 There was a Merchant with a forking beard  
 And motley<sup>o</sup> dress; high on his horse he sat,  
 Upon his head a Flemish beaver hat  
 And on his feet daintily buckled boots.

240. **hurdy-gurdy:** lutelike instrument played by turning a crank.

252. **victual-sellers:** merchants, especially of food.

261. **farthing:** British coin worth one fourth of a penny but no longer in circulation.

265. **settling days:** days on which disputes could be settled out of court by independent negotiators. Though friars often acted as negotiators (for a fee), they were officially forbidden to do so.

270. **semi-cope:** capelike garment.

274. **wantonness:** here, pretense.

281. **motley:** multicolored.

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### WORDS TO OWN

**accrue** (ə·krōō') v.: increase over time.

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He told of his opinions and pursuits  
 285 In solemn tones, he harped on his increase  
 Of capital; there should be sea-police  
 (He thought) upon the Harwich-Holland ranges;  
 He was expert at dabbling in exchanges.  
 This estimable Merchant so had set  
 290 His wits to work, none knew he was in debt,  
 He was so stately in administration,  
 In loans and bargains and negotiation.  
 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,  
 But had a hollow look, a sober stare;  
 300 The thread upon his overcoat was bare.  
 He had found no preferment in the church  
 And he was too unworldly to make search  
 For secular employment. By his bed  
 He preferred having twenty books in red  
 305 And black, of Aristotle's<sup>o</sup> philosophy,  
 Than costly clothes, fiddle, or psaltery.<sup>o</sup>  
 Though a philosopher, as I have told,  
 He had not found the stone for making gold.<sup>o</sup>  
 Whatever money from his friends he took  
 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,  
 315 Formal at that, respectful in the extreme,  
 Short, to the point, and lofty in his theme.  
 A tone of moral virtue filled his speech  
 And gladly would he learn, and gladly teach.  
 A Serjeant at the Law who paid his calls,  
 320 Wary and wise, for clients at St. Paul's<sup>o</sup>  
 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  
 325 By letters patent,<sup>o</sup> 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 conveyancer<sup>o</sup> as he;  
 All was fee-simple<sup>o</sup> to his strong digestion,  
 330 Not one conveyance could be called in question.  
 Though there was nowhere one so busy as he,  
 He was less busy than he seemed to be.



The Clerk of Oxford, from the Ellesmere manuscript, fol. 88r.

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**305. Aristotle's** (ar'is-tät' 'lɜ): Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) was a Greek philosopher.

**306. psaltery** (sôl'tər-ē): stringed instrument that is plucked.

**308. stone . . . gold:** Alchemists at the time were searching for a stone that was supposed to turn ordinary metals into gold.

**320. St. Paul's:** London cathedral. Lawyers often met outside it to discuss their cases when courts were closed.

**325. letters patent:** letters from the king permitting people to act as judges at the Assizes, court sessions held periodically.

**328. conveyancer:** person who draws up a deed.

**329. fee-simple:** absolute ownership of real property; in other words, either entirely right or entirely wrong.

### Places of Pilgrimage

Chaucer's pilgrims are hardly alone in their faith that visiting a holy site will have spiritual benefits. Besides Canterbury, many Christians of Chaucer's time made pilgrimages to Rome and to Jerusalem, both sites that the Wife of Bath, something of a professional pilgrim, had visited. Today, Christian pilgrims still travel to Jerusalem and Rome.

In ancient times, the Jews also made pilgrimages to Jerusalem during three major festivals: Pesah (Passover), Shavuot (Pentecost), and Sukkot (Tabernacles). These pilgrimages, associated with festivals that mark the Jews' escape from Egypt and journey to Israel, were expected of Jewish men.

For a follower of Islam, no place is more sacred than Mecca, located near the Red Sea in western Saudi Arabia. Mecca is the site of the Kaaba, a sacred, cube-shaped building made of stone, around which Muslim pilgrims must walk. Mohammed, the founder of Islam, decreed that all Muslims who are physically and financially able to make the trip must journey to Mecca at least once in their lifetime.

Varanasi, a city on the Ganges River in India and site of fifteen hundred temples, is visited by more than a million Hindu pilgrims each year. The Golden Temple, the main Hindu shrine there, is dedicated to the god Shiva. Pilgrims who worship at the Ganges at Varanasi believe they gain special merit in this life, and Hindus who die in Varanasi believe they are guaranteed release from endless rebirths.

The Grand Shrine of Ise, the most sacred site of Japanese Shinto pilgrimages, is located at Ise in Mie Prefecture, Japan. The shrines there are viewed as the dwelling place of two deities, the sun goddess Amaterasu and the agricultural god Toyuke. The history of Ise shrine dates back some two thousand years, but the actual buildings are always fairly new. By tradition, the shrines must be rebuilt in the same style every twenty-one years.

- He knew of every judgment, case, and crime  
 Ever recorded since King William's time.<sup>o</sup>  
 335 He could dictate defenses or draft deeds;  
 No one could pinch a comma from his screeds<sup>o</sup>  
 And he knew every statute off by rote.  
 He wore a homely parti-colored<sup>o</sup> coat,

334. **King William's time:** William the Conqueror (c. 1027–1087) was king of England from 1066 to 1087.  
 336. **screeds:** tiresome, lengthy writings.  
 338. **parti-colored:** multicolored.

#### WORDS TO OWN

**statute** (stach'oot) *n.*: law.

Girt with a silken belt of pin-stripe stuff;  
340 Of his appearance I have said enough.

There was a Franklin° with him, it appeared;  
White as a daisy-petal was his beard.

A sanguine° man, high-colored and benign,  
He loved a morning sop of cake in wine.

345 He lived for pleasure and had always done,  
For he was Epicurus'° very son,  
In whose opinion sensual delight  
Was the one true felicity in sight.

As noted as St. Julian° was for bounty  
350 He made his household free to all the County.  
His bread, his ale were finest of the fine  
And no one had a better stock of wine.

His house was never short of bake-meat pies,  
Of fish and flesh, and these in such supplies  
355 It positively snowed with meat and drink  
And all the dainties that a man could think.

According to the seasons of the year  
Changes of dish were ordered to appear.  
He kept fat partridges in coops, beyond,  
360 Many a bream and pike were in his pond.  
Woe to the cook unless the sauce was hot  
And sharp, or if he wasn't on the spot!  
And in his hall a table stood arrayed  
And ready all day long, with places laid.

365 As Justice at the Sessions° none stood higher;  
He often had been Member for the Shire.°  
A dagger and a little purse of silk  
Hung at his girdle,° white as morning milk.  
As Sheriff he checked audit, every entry.

370 He was a model among landed gentry.  
A Haberdasher,° a Dyer, a Carpenter,  
A Weaver; and a Carpet-maker were  
Among our ranks, all in the livery  
Of one impressive guild-fraternity.

375 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,° fit to grace

380 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.

341. **Franklin**: well-to-do landowner, but not of the nobility.

343. **sanguine**: ruddy-complexioned. In Chaucer's day this was considered a sign of a cheerful temperament; today the word signifies optimism.

346. **Epicurus**' (341-270 B.C.): Epicurus, an ancient Greek philosopher, taught that the goal of life is pleasure, which is achieved through virtue and moderation. Most people came to think of Epicureans as pleasure seekers.

349. **St. Julian**: patron saint of hospitality.

365. **Justice at the Sessions**: judge at a periodically held court meeting.

366. **Member for the Shire**: county representative in Parliament.

368. **girdle**: belt.

371. **Haberdasher** (hab'ər·dash'ər): seller of men's clothing and accessories.

379. **burgess**: citizen.

382. **alderman**: head of a guild and therefore a town council member.

---

### WORDS TO OWN

**benign** (bi·nīn') *adj.*: kind; gracious.

---

385 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.

(20)

They had a *Cook* with them who stood alone  
390 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.

395 But what a pity—so it seemed to me,  
That he should have an ulcer on his knee.  
As for *blancmange*,<sup>o</sup> he made it with the best.

(21)

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

A dagger on a lanyard<sup>o</sup> falling free  
Hung from his neck under his arm and down.  
The summer heat had tanned his color brown,  
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.

If, when he fought, the enemy vessel sank,  
410 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 havens as they were  
From *Gottland* to the *Cape of Finisterre*,  
And every creek in *Brittany* and *Spain*;

(22)

420 The barge he owned was called *The Maudelayne*.

A *Doctor* too emerged as we proceeded;  
No one alive could talk as well as he did  
On points of medicine and of surgery,

\* For, being grounded in astronomy,  
425 He watched his patient closely for the hours  
When, by his horoscope, he knew the powers  
Of favorable planets, then ascendent,  
Worked on the images for his dependent.  
The cause of every malady you'd got

430 He knew, and whether dry, cold, moist, or hot;<sup>o</sup>  
He knew their seat, their humor and condition.

He was a perfect practicing physician.  
These causes being known for what they were,  
He gave the man his medicine then and there.



The Cook,  
from the  
Ellesmere  
manuscript,  
fol. 47r.

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Library, San Marino,  
California.

397. *blancmange* (blā·mōnzh'): French for "white food." In Chaucer's day this was a sweet dish containing diced chicken, milk, sugar, and almonds.

402. *lanyard* (lan'yərd): cord.

The Franklin,  
from the  
Ellesmere  
manuscript,  
fol. 123v.

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430. *dry . . . hot*: the four humors, or fluids. People of the time believed that one's physical and mental conditions were influenced by the balance of four major fluids in the body—blood (hot and wet), yellow bile (hot and dry), phlegm (cold and wet), and black bile (cold and dry).

- 435 All his apothecaries in a tribe  
 Were ready with the drugs he would prescribe  
 And each made money from the other's guile;  
 They had been friendly for a goodish while.  
 He was well-versed in Aesculapius° too
- 440 And what Hippocrates and Rufus knew  
 And Dioscorides, now dead and gone,  
 Galen and Rhazes, Hali, Serapion,  
 Averroes, Avicenna, Constantine,  
 Scotch Bernard, John of Gaddesden, Gilbertine.
- 445 In his own diet he observed some measure;  
 There were no superfluities for pleasure,  
 Only digestives, nutritives and such.  
 He did not read the Bible very much. *believer in science*  
 In blood-red garments, slashed with bluish gray
- 450 And lined with taffeta, he rode his way;  
 Yet he was rather close as to expenses  
 And kept the gold he won in pestilences.  
 Gold stimulates the heart, or so we're told.  
 He therefore had a special love of gold.
- 455 A worthy woman from beside Bath city  
 Was with us, somewhat deaf, which was a pity.  
 In making cloth she showed so great a bent  
 She bettered those of Ypres and of Ghent.°  
 In all the parish not a dame dared stir *unmarried*
- 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;°  
 I dared have sworn they weighed a good ten pound,
- 465 The ones she wore on Sunday, on her head.  
 Her hose were of the finest scarlet red  
 And gartered tight; her shoes were soft and new.  
 Bold was her face, handsome, and red in hue.  
 A worthy woman all her life, what's more
- 470 She'd had five husbands, all at the church door,°  
 Apart from other company in youth;  
 No need just now to speak of that, forsooth.  
 And she had thrice been to Jerusalem, *4th pilgrimage*  
 Seen many strange rivers and passed over them;
- 475 She'd been to Rome and also to Boulogne,  
 St. James of Compostella and Cologne,  
 And she was skilled in wandering by the way.  
 She had gap-teeth, set widely, truth to say.  
 Easily on an ambling horse she sat

439. **Aesculapius:** in Greek and Roman mythology, the god of medicine. The names that follow were early Greek, Roman, Middle Eastern, and medieval medical authorities.



The Physician, from the Ellesmere manuscript, fol. 133r.

By permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

458. **Ypres (ē'pr')** and of Ghent: Flemish centers of the wool trade.

463. **ground:** type of cloth.

470. **church door:** In Chaucer's day the marriage ceremony was performed at the church door.

---

### WORDS TO OWN

**guile** (gīl) *n.*: sly dealings.

---

480 Well wimpled° up, and on her head a hat  
As broad as is a buckler or a shield;  
She had a flowing mantle that concealed  
Large hips, her heels spurred sharply under that.  
In company she liked to laugh and chat

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

24

A holy-minded man of good renown  
There was, and poor, the *Parson* to a town,  
Yet he was rich in holy thought and work.

490 He also was a learned man, a clerk,  
Who truly knew Christ's gospel and would preach it  
Devoutly to parishioners, and teach it.

Benign and wonderfully diligent,  
And patient when adversity was sent

495 (For so he proved in much adversity)

He hated cursing to extort a fee,  
Nay rather he preferred beyond a doubt  
Giving to poor parishioners round about  
Both from church offerings and his property;

500 He could in little find sufficiency.

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 stave.°

This noble example to his sheep he gave  
That first he wrought, and afterward he taught;  
And it was from the Gospel he had caught  
Those words, and he would add this figure too,

510 That if gold rust, what then will iron do?

For if a priest be foul in whom we trust  
No wonder that a common man should rust;  
And shame it is to see—let priests take stock—  
A shitten shepherd and a snowy flock.

515 The true example that a priest should give  
Is one of cleanness, how the sheep should live.  
He did not set his benefice to hire°

And leave his sheep encumbered in the mire  
Or run to London to earn easy bread

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.

**480. wimpled:** A wimple is a linen covering for the head and neck.



The Parson, from the Ellesmere manuscript, fol. 206v.

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**505. stave:** staff.

**517. benefice to hire:** He did not hire someone else to perform his duties.

**521. find . . . enrolled:** He did not take a job as a paid chaplain to a guild.

---

### WORDS TO OWN

**diligent** (dil'ə-jənt) *adj.*: careful and persistent in work.

**adversity** (ad-vur'sə-tē) *n.*: trouble; misfortune.

---

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 priest.  
 535 He sought no pomp or glory in his dealings,  
 No scrupulosity had spiced his feelings.  
 Christ and His Twelve Apostles and their lore  
 He taught, but followed it himself before.

25

There was a Plowman with him there, his brother;  
 540 Many a load of dung one time or other  
 He must have carted through the morning dew.  
 He was an honest worker, good and true,  
 Living in peace and perfect charity,  
 And, as the gospel bade him, so did he,  
 545 Loving God best with all his heart and mind  
 And then his neighbor as himself, repined  
 At no misfortune, slacked for no content,  
 For steadily about his work he went  
 To thrash his corn, to dig or to manure  
 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 tabard smock° and rode a mare.  
 There was a Reeve,° also a Miller, there,  
 A College Manciple° from the Inns of Court,  
 A papal Pardoner° and, in close consort,  
 A Church-Court Summoner,° riding at a trot,  
 560 And finally myself—that was the lot.

26  
27  
28  
29  
30

The Miller was a chap of sixteen stone,°  
 A great stout fellow big in brawn and bone.  
 He did well out of them, for he could go  
 And win the ram at any wrestling show.  
 565 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.

31



The Miller, from the Ellesmere manuscript, fol. 34v.  
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- 555. **tabard** (tab'ərd) **smock**: short jacket.
- 556. **Reeve**: serf who was the steward of a manor. He saw that the estate's work was done and that everything was accounted for.
- 557. **Manciple** (man'sə·pəl): minor employee whose principal duty was to purchase provisions for a college or law firm.
- 558. **Pardoner**: minor member of the Church who bought and sold pardons for sinners.
- 559. **Summoner**: low-ranking officer who summoned people to appear in church court.
- 561. **sixteen stone**: 224 pounds.

---

**WORDS TO OWN**  
**disdainful** (dis·dān'fəl) *adj.*: scornful.  
**discreet** (di·skrēt') *adj.*: cautious about one's words and actions.  
**obstinate** (əb'stə·nət) *adj.*: unreasonably stubborn.

---



- 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.  
He had a sword and buckler at his side,  
 575 His mighty mouth was like a furnace door.  
 A wrangler and buffoon, he had a store  
 Of tavern stories, filthy in the main.  
 His was a master-hand at stealing grain.  
 He felt it with his thumb and thus he knew  
 580 Its quality and took three times his due—  
 A thumb of gold, by God, to gauge an oat!<sup>o</sup>  
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.
- 28 585 The *Manciple* came from the Inner Temple;<sup>o</sup>  
 All caterers might follow his example  
 In buying victuals; he was never rash  
 Whether he bought on credit or paid cash.  
 He used to watch the market most precisely  
 590 And got in first, and so he did quite nicely.  
 Now isn't it a marvel of God's grace  
 That an illiterate fellow can outpace  
 The wisdom of a heap of learned men?  
 His masters—he had more than thirty then—  
 595 All versed in the abstrusest legal knowledge,  
 Could have produced a dozen from their College  
 Fit to be stewards in land and rents and game  
 To any Peer in England you could name,  
 And show him how to live on what he had  
 600 Debt-free (unless of course the Peer were mad)  
 Or be as frugal as he might desire,  
 And make them fit to help about the Shire  
 In any legal case there was to try;  
 And yet this Manciple could wipe their eye.
- 29 605 The *Reeve* was old and choleric<sup>o</sup> 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.  
 610 Like sticks they were, no calf was to be seen.  
 He kept his bins and garners<sup>o</sup> very trim;  
 No auditor could gain a point on him.



The Manciple, from the  
 Ellesmere manuscript, fol. 203

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581. thumb . . . oat: In other  
 words, he pressed on the scale with  
 his thumb to increase the weight of  
 the grain.

585. Inner Temple: one of the four  
 legal societies in London comprising  
 the Inns of Court. Only the Inns  
 were permitted to license lawyers.



The Reeve, from  
 the Ellesmere  
 manuscript,  
 fol. 42r.

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605. choleric (käl'ər-ik): having  
 too much choler, or yellow bile, and  
 thus (supposedly) bad-tempered.

611. garners: granaries.

---

**WORDS TO OWN**

frugal (frōō'gəl) adj.: thrifty.

---

And he could judge by watching drought and rain  
 The yield he might expect from seed and grain.

615 His master's sheep, his animals and hens,  
 Pigs, horses, dairies, stores, and cattle-pens  
 Were wholly trusted to his government.  
 He had been under contract to present  
 The accounts, right from his master's earliest years.

620 No one had ever caught him in arrears.  
 No bailiff, serf, or herdsman dared to kick,  
 He knew their dodges, knew their every trick;  
 Feared like the plague he was, by those beneath.  
 He had a lovely dwelling on a heath,

625 Shadowed in green by trees above the sward.<sup>o</sup>  
 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,

630 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.

635 He wore an overcoat of bluish shade  
 And rather long; he had a rusty blade  
 Slung at his side. He came, as I heard tell,  
 From Norfolk, near a place called Baldeswell.  
 His coat was tucked under his belt and splayed.

640 He rode the hindmost of our cavalcade.  
 There was a *Summoner* with us at that Inn,  
 His face on fire, like a cherubim.<sup>o</sup>  
 For he had carbuncles.<sup>o</sup> His eyes were narrow,  
 He was as hot and lecherous as a sparrow.

645 Black scabby brows he had, and a thin beard.  
 Children were afraid when he appeared.  
 No quicksilver, lead ointment, tartar creams,  
 No brimstone, no boracic, so it seems,  
 Could make a salve that had the power to bite,

650 Clean up, or cure his whelks<sup>o</sup> of knobby white  
 Or purge the pimples sitting on his cheeks.  
 Garlic he loved, and onions too, and leeks,  
 And drinking strong red wine till all was hazy.  
 Then he would shout and jabber as if crazy,

655 And wouldn't speak a word except in Latin  
 When he was drunk, such tags as he was pat in;  
 He only had a few, say two or three,  
 That he had mugged up out of some decree;  
 No wonder, for he heard them every day.

660 And, as you know, a man can teach a jay<sup>o</sup>  
 To call out "Walter" better than the Pope.

625. **sward** (swôrd): lawn.



The Summoner, from the Ellesmere manuscript, fol. 81r.

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642. **cherubim**: in medieval art, a little angel with a rosy face.

643. **carbuncles** (kär'bun'kəlz): pus-filled skin inflammations, something like boils.

650. **whelks**: pus-filled sores.

660. **jay**: type of bird.

- But had you tried to test his wits and grope  
 For more, you'd have found nothing in the bag.  
 Then "*Questio quid juris*"<sup>o</sup> was his tag.
- 665 He was a noble varlet<sup>o</sup> and a kind one,  
 You'd meet none better if you went to find one.  
 Why, he'd allow—just for a quart of wine—  
 Any good lad to keep a concubine  
 A twelvemonth and dispense him altogether!
- 670 And he had finches of his own to 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)
- 675 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.
- 680 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
- 685 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,
- 690 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!*"  
 The Summoner sang deep seconds<sup>o</sup> 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 eye-balls, like a hare.
- 705 He'd sewed a holy relic on his cap;  
 His wallet lay before him on his lap,

664. *Questio quid juris*  
 (kwest'ē·ō kwid yōō'ris): Latin for "I  
 ask what point of the law [applies]."  
 The Summoner uses this phrase to  
 stall and dodge the issue.

665. *varlet* (vār'lit): scoundrel.



The Pardoner, from the Ellesmere  
 manuscript, fol. 138r.

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693. **deep seconds:** harmonies.

---

**WORDS TO OWN**

**duress** (dōō·res') *n.*: pressure.;

---

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 pillow-case  
 715 Which he asserted was Our Lady's veil.  
 He said he had a gobbet° of the sail  
 Saint Peter had the time when he made bold  
 To walk the waves, till Jesu Christ took hold.  
 He had a cross of metal set with stones  
 720 And, in a glass, a rubble of pigs' bones.  
 And with these relics, any time he found  
 Some poor up-country parson to astound,  
 In 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,°  
 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  
 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,

707. **pardons**: small strips of parchment with papal seals attached. They were sold as indulgences (pardons for sins), with the proceeds supposedly going to a religious house. Many pardoners were dishonest, and even loyal church members often ridiculed them.

716. **gobbet**: fragment.

728. **ecclesiast** (e·klē'zē·ast): practitioner of church ritual.

730. **Offertory**: hymn sung while offerings are collected in church.

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.<sup>o</sup>  
 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!

774. **Cheapside:** district of medieval London.



Chaucer, from the Ellesmere manuscript, fol. 153v.

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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)  
 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.

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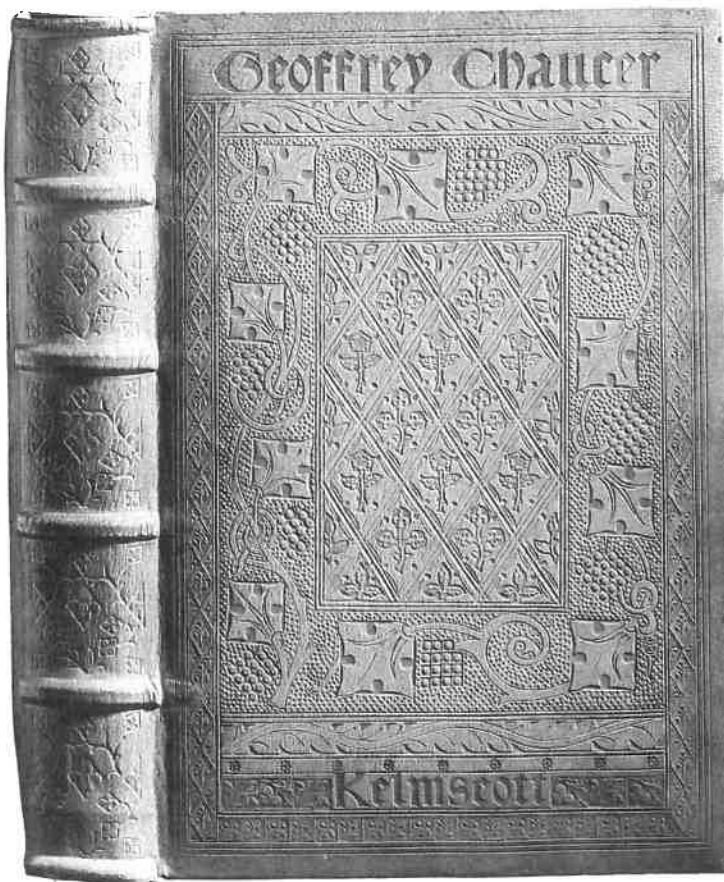
### WORDS TO OWN

**deferred** (dē·fərd') v.: postponed.

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We promised to be ruled by his advice  
 Come high, come low; unanimously thus  
 We set him up in judgment over us.  
 More wine was fetched, the business being done;  
 840 We drank it off and up went everyone  
 To bed without a moment of delay.  
 Early next morning at the spring of day  
 Up rose our Host and roused us like a cock,  
 Gathering us together in a flock,  
 845 And off we rode at slightly faster pace  
 Than walking to St. Thomas' watering-place;  
 And there our Host drew up, began to ease  
 His horse, and said, "Now, listen if you please,  
 My lords! Remember what you promised me.  
 850 If evensong and matins will agree°  
 Let's see who shall be first to tell a tale.  
 And as I hope to drink good wine and ale  
 I'll be your judge. The rebel who disobeys,  
 However much the journey costs, he pays.  
 855 Now draw for cut and then we can depart;  
 The man who draws the shortest cut shall start."

**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.