

from *The*  
*Canterbury Tales*  
*The Prologue*

*Geoffrey Chaucer*  
*Translated by Nevill Coghill*

**Background** In medieval Christianity, pilgrimages—long, annual trips to holy places—were a popular way to express religious devotion. Canterbury, a town 55 miles southeast of London, was a major destination for English pilgrims. The cathedral in Canterbury was the site of Archbishop Thomas à Becket's murder in 1170. Days after the murder and three years before Becket was made a saint, people began flocking to the cathedral to pay their respects.

The first eighteen lines of the Prologue are presented here in Chaucer's original Middle English, followed by the entire Prologue in a modern translation.

Whan that Aprill with his shourës sootë  
The droghte of March hath percëd to the rootë,  
And bathëd every veyne in swich licour  
Of which vertu engendrëd is the flour;  
5 Whan Zephirus eek with his sweetë breeth  
Inspirëd hath in every holt and heeth  
The tendrë croppës, and the yongë sonnë  
Hath in the Ram his halvë cours yronnë,  
And smalë fowelës maken melodyë,  
10 That slepen al the nyght with open ye  
(So priketh hem nature in hir corages);  
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,  
And palmeres for to seken straungë strondës,  
To fernë halwës, kowthe in sondry londës;  
15 And specially from every shirës endë  
Of Engeland to Caunterbury they wendë,  
The hooly blisful martir for to seke,  
That hem hath holpen whan that they were seekë.

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>1</sup> with his sweet breath  
 Exhales an air in every grove and heath  
 Upon tender shoots, and the young sun  
 His half-course in the sign of the Ram<sup>2</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>3</sup> long to seek the stranger strands<sup>4</sup>  
 Of far-off saints, hallowed in sundry lands,  
 15 And specially, from every shire's end  
 In England, down to Canterbury they wend  
 To seek the holy blissful martyr,<sup>5</sup> quick  
 To give his help to them when they were sick.

It happened in that season that one day  
 20 In Southwark,<sup>6</sup> at The Tabard,<sup>7</sup> 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 shortly, when the sun had gone to rest,  
 By speaking to them all upon the trip  
 I soon was one of them in fellowship  
 And promised to rise early and take the way  
 To Canterbury, as you heard me say.

35 But nonetheless, while I have time and space,  
 Before my story takes a further pace,  
 It seems a reasonable thing to say  
 What their condition was, the full array  
 Of each of them, as it appeared to me  
 40 According to profession and degree,

1. **Zephyrus** (zef' ə rəs) the west wind.
2. **Ram** Aries, the first sign of the zodiac. The pilgrimage began on April 11, 1387.
3. **palmers** pilgrims who wore two crossed palm leaves to show that they had visited the Holy Land.
4. **strands** shores.
5. **martyr** St. Thomas à Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury, who was murdered in Canterbury Cathedral in 1170.
6. **Southwark** (suth' ɜrk) suburb of London at the time.
7. **The Tabard** (ta' bərd) an inn.

### Literary Analysis

**Characterization** In these lines, what does the narrator suggest about the pilgrims' motives for going to Canterbury?

### Reading Strategy

**Analyzing Difficult Sentences** What does Chaucer say he will do in lines 35–42? How, or in what manner, will he do it?



### Reading Check

Who have gathered at The Tabard?

And what apparel they were riding in;  
 And at a Knight I therefore will begin.  
 There was a *Knight*, a most distinguished man,  
 Who from the day on which he first began  
 45 To ride abroad had followed chivalry,  
 Truth, honor, generousness and courtesy.  
 He had done nobly in his sovereign's war  
 And ridden into battle, no man more,  
 As well in Christian as heathen places,  
 50 And ever honored for his noble graces.  
     When we took Alexandria,<sup>8</sup> 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 jostled for our faith at Tramissene  
 65 Thrice in the lists, and always killed his man.  
 This same distinguished knight had led the van<sup>9</sup>  
 Once with the Bey of Balat,<sup>10</sup> doing work  
 For him against another heathen Turk;  
 He was of sovereign value in all eyes.  
 70 And though so much distinguished, he was wise  
 And in his bearing modest as a maid.  
 He never yet a boorish thing had said  
 In all his life to any, come what might;  
 He was a true, a perfect gentle-knight.  
 75 Speaking of his equipment, he possessed  
 Fine horses, but he was not gaily dressed.  
 He wore a fustian<sup>11</sup> tunic stained and dark  
 With smudges where his armor had left mark;  
 Just home from service, he had joined our ranks  
 80 To do his pilgrimage and render thanks.  
     He had his son with him, a fine young *Squire*,  
 A lover and cadet, a lad of fire

**Literary Analysis**  
**Characterization** What  
 do lines 54–65 indirectly  
 suggest about the  
 Knight's character?

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

9. **van** the part of the army that goes before the rest (short for *vanguard*).

10. **Bey of Balat** pagan leader.

11. **fustian** (fus' chən) *n.* coarse cloth of cotton and linen.

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<sup>12</sup>  
 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;  
 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.  
 Courtcous he was, lowly and serviceable,  
 And carved to serve his father at the table.

There was a *Yeoman*<sup>13</sup> 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<sup>14</sup> 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>15</sup> spear-sharp and well-equipped.  
 A medal of St. Christopher<sup>16</sup> he wore  
 Of shining silver on his breast, and bore  
 A hunting-horn, well slung and burnished clean,  
 120 That dangled from a baldric<sup>17</sup> of bright green.  
 He was a proper forester I guess.

There also was a *Nun*, a Prioress.<sup>18</sup>  
 Her way of smiling very simple and coy.

**V Critical Viewing**  
 Compare this portrait with Chaucer's description of the Yeoman. What details did the artist choose to change or omit?  
 [Compare and Contrast]



12. **Flanders . . . Picardy** regions in Belgium and France.  
 13. **Yeoman** (yō' mən) *n.* attendant.  
 14. **brace** bracelet.  
 15. **dirk** *n.* dagger.  
 16. **St. Christopher** patron saint of travelers.  
 17. **baldric** *n.* belt worn over one shoulder and across the chest to support a sword.  
 18. **Prioress** *n.* in an abbey, the nun ranking just below the abbess.

**Reading Check**  
 What is the relationship among the Knight, the Squire and the Yeoman?

Her greatest oath was only "By St. Loy!"<sup>19</sup>  
 125 And she was known as Madam Eglantyne.  
 And well she sang a service,<sup>20</sup> 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>21</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,  
 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<sup>22</sup> 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<sup>23</sup> tricked in green,  
 Whence hung a golden brooch of brightest sheen  
 165 On which there first was graven a crowned A,

### Reading Strategy

#### Analyzing Difficult

**Sentences** What two basic qualities does the sentence in lines 141–145 attribute to the Nun?

### Vocabulary Builder

**solicitous** (sə lis' ə təs) *adj.*  
 showing care or concern

### Literary Analysis

**Characterization** What can you infer about the Prioress based on this detailed description of her jewelry?

19. **St. Loy** St. Eligius, patron saint of goldsmiths and courtiers.

20. **service** daily prayer.

21. **Stratford-atte-Bowe** nunnery near London.

22. **span** nine inches.

23. **gaudies** large green beads that marked certain prayers on a set of prayer beads.

And lower, *Amor vincit omnia*.<sup>24</sup>

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

A Monk there was, one of the finest sort  
170 Who rode the country; hunting was his sport.  
A manly man, to be an Abbot able;  
Many a dainty horse he had in stable.  
His bridle, when he rode, a man might hear  
Jingling in a whistling wind as clear,  
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<sup>25</sup>  
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<sup>26</sup> bade and till the very soil?  
Was he to leave the world upon the shelf?  
Let Austin have his labor to himself.

This Monk was therefore a good man to horse;  
Greyhounds he had, as swift as birds, to course.  
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.

### ✓ Critical Viewing

What can you infer from this picture about the Monk's style of living? List three details supporting your conclusion. [Infer]



The Monk, Arthur Szyk for *The Canterbury Tales*

### Vocabulary Builder

**garnished** (gār' nisht) *adj.*  
decorated; trimmed

### ✓ Reading Check

What is the Monk's main interest?

24. *Amor vincit omnia* (ă' mōr' vin' chit ōm' nē ä') "love conquers all" (Latin).

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

26. **Austin** English version of St. Augustine, who criticized lazy monks.

210 He liked a fat swan best, and roasted whole.  
 His palfrey<sup>27</sup> was as brown as is a berry.  
 There was a *Friar*, a wanton<sup>28</sup> one and merry  
 A Limiter,<sup>29</sup> a very festive fellow.  
 In all Four Orders<sup>30</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<sup>31</sup> 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>32</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>33</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>34</sup> stuffed with pins for curls,  
 And pocket-knives, to give to pretty girls.  
 And certainly his voice was gay and sturdy,  
 240 For he sang well and played the hurdy-gurdy.<sup>35</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

27. **palfrey** *n.* saddle horse.

28. **wanton** *adj.* jolly.

29. **Limiter** friar who is given begging rights for a certain limited area.

30. **Four Orders** There were four orders of friars who supported themselves by begging: Dominicans, Franciscans, Carmelites, and Augustinians.

31. **County folk** The phrase refers to rich landowners.

32. **shrift** *n.* confession.

33. **well shriven** *adj.* absolved of his sins.

34. **tippet** *n.* hood.

35. **hurdy-gurdy** stringed instrument played by cranking a wheel.

### Literary Analysis

#### Characterization and

#### Social Commentary

What do the details about the Monk's habits and tastes indirectly suggest about religious institutions of the time?

### Vocabulary Builder

**absolution** (ab' sə lōō' shən)  
*n.* act of freeing someone of a sin or of a criminal charge

### Literary Analysis

**Characterization** In lines 244–254, is Chaucer using direct characterization or indirect characterization? Explain.