

FOCUS ACTIVITY

Imagine yourself on a long trip, surrounded by strangers, on a train, ship, or bus.

CHART IT! Your fellow travelers probably have a variety of characteristics. Think about the numerous possibilities. Which qualities would attract you? Which would you find unattractive? Chart your answers.

Attractive	Unattractive
sense of humor	boring

SETTING A PURPOSE Read about a motley group of travelers and discover their personalities.

BACKGROUND

Frame Story

The Canterbury Tales uses a **frame tale**, a story that provides a vehicle, or frame, for telling other stories. The frame is about a pilgrimage, a trip made to a holy place for religious reasons or just for fun and adventure.

In Chaucer's work, twenty-nine pilgrims travel to Canterbury to visit the shrine of Saint Thomas à Becket. When Chaucer's pilgrims first meet, at an inn, their host suggests they tell stories to pass the time. Their stories become the main part of *The Canterbury Tales*.

Real Characters

Chaucer's pilgrims are well-rounded characters with personalities and pasts. As one critic said, "Not a whisper, not a wart, is omitted."

The pilgrims' occupations reflect different aspects of fourteenth-century society:

- Feudal System: Knight, Squire, Yeoman, Franklin, Plowman, Miller, Reeve
- Religious Life: Nun, Monk, Friar, Cleric, Parson, Summoner, Pardoner

- Trades or Professions: Merchant, Sergeant at the Law, Five Tradesmen, Cook, Skipper, Doctor, Wife of Bath, Manciple, Host

The Language of Chaucer

Although Chaucer wrote in English, the language that he spoke, it was not the same English that we speak today. He spoke what is now called Middle English, the result of mixing the Old English of the Anglo-Saxons with the Old French of the Normans. The grammar and vocabulary of Middle English might seem familiar to speakers of Modern English, but certain pronunciations are quite different. For example, the silent e of Modern English was a separate, audible syllable in many Middle English words.

Chaucer's decision to write in English was in itself remarkable. Middle English was the language of the people, considered to be unsuitable for literary purposes. Other writers of the time chose to write in French or Latin.

The famous opening lines appear on the next page in the original Middle English that Chaucer used. They are followed by a modern translation of "The Prologue."

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

solicitous (sə lis' ə tās) *adj.* full of concern; p. 105

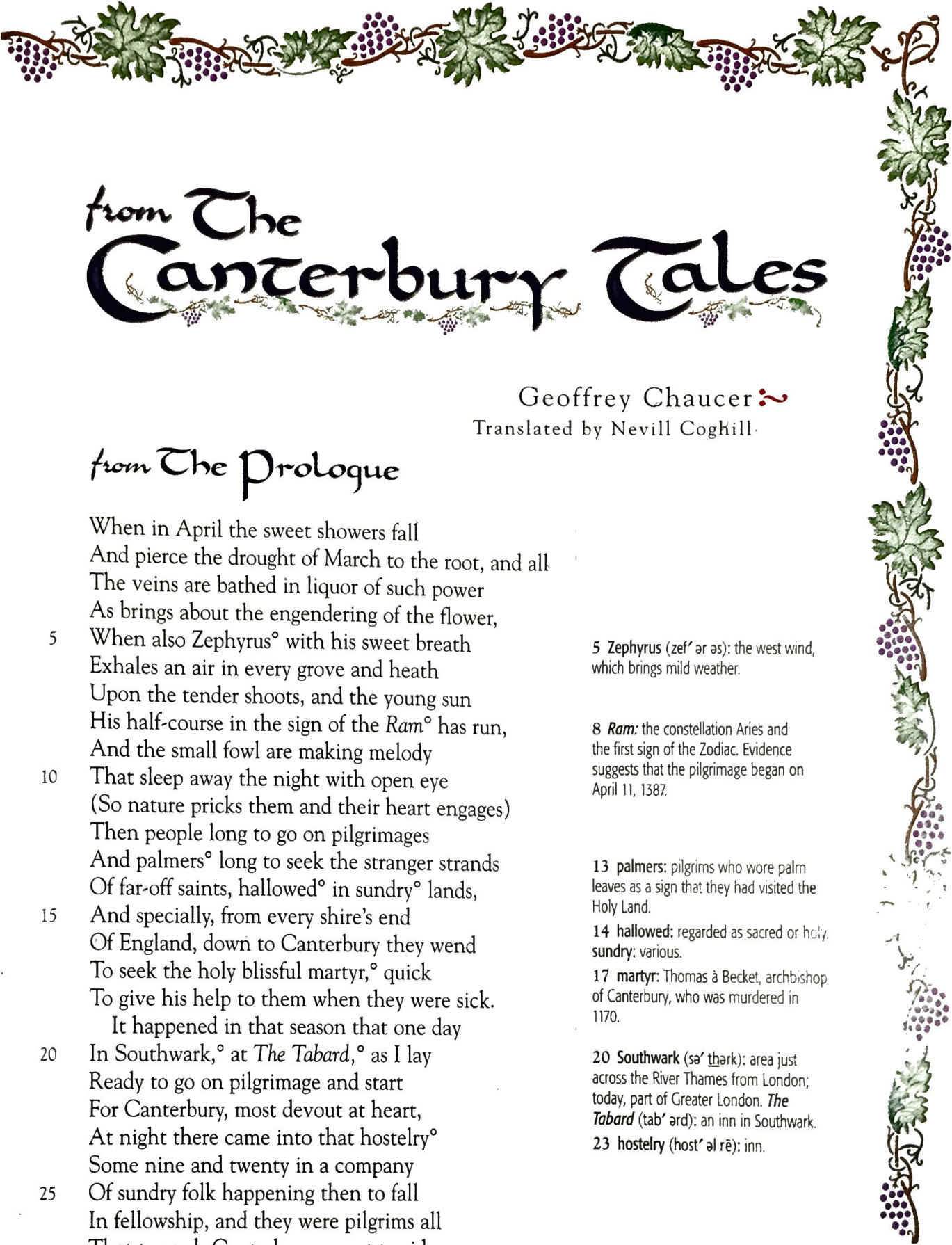
estimable (es' tə mə bəl) *adj.* deserving of esteem; admirable; p. 109

discreet (dis krēt') *adj.* having or showing careful judgment in speech and action; prudent; p. 110

renown (ri noun') *n.* widespread acclaim; fame; p. 114

disdainful (dis dān' fəl) *adj.* feeling or showing contempt; scornful; p. 115

prevarication (pri var' ə kā' shən) *n.* the act of evading the truth; lying; p. 119



from The Canterbury Tales

Geoffrey Chaucer ~

Translated by Nevill Coghill

from 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^o 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^o 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^o long to seek the stranger strands
Of far-off saints, hallowed^o in sundry^o lands,
15 And specially, from every shire's end
Of England, down to Canterbury they wend
To seek the holy blissful martyr,^o quick
To give his help to them when they were sick.
It happened in that season that one day
20 In Southwark,^o at *The Tabard*,^o as I lay
Ready to go on pilgrimage and start
For Canterbury, most devout at heart,
At night there came into that hostelry^o
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.

5 **Zephyrus** (zef' ə r ə s): the west wind, which brings mild weather.

8 **Ram**: the constellation Aries and the first sign of the Zodiac. Evidence suggests that the pilgrimage began on April 11, 1387.

13 **palmers**: pilgrims who wore palm leaves as a sign that they had visited the Holy Land.

14 **hallowed**: regarded as sacred or holy.
sundry: various.

17 **martyr**: Thomas à Becket, archbishop of Canterbury, who was murdered in 1170.

20 **Southwark** (sə' thərk): area just across the River Thames from London; today, part of Greater London. **The Tabard** (tab' ərd): an inn in Southwark.

23 **hostelry** (host' əl rē): inn.



from *The Canterbury Tales*

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
What their condition was, the full array^o
Of each of them, as it appeared to me,
40 According to profession and degree,
And what apparel they were riding in;
And at a Knight I therefore will begin.

★ There was a Knigh^t, 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^o 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,^o 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.^o
 In fifteen mortal battles he had been
 And jousted^o for our faith at Tramissen

47 sovereign's: ruler

51 Alexandria: This names that immediate wide-ranging campaign medieval Christians a

62 host: army.

64 jousted: fought part of a knightly



from *The Canterbury Tales*



65 Thrice in the lists,^o and always killed his man.
This same distinguished knight had led the van
Once with the Bey of Balat,^o 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^o 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^o tunic stained and dark
With smudges where his armor had left mark;
Just home from service, he had joined our ranks
80 To do his pilgrimage and render thanks.
He had his son with him, a fine young *Squire*,
A lover and cadet, a lad of fire
With locks as curly as if they had been pressed.
He was some twenty years of age, I guessed.
85 In stature he was of a moderate length,
With wonderful agility and strength.
He'd seen some service with the cavalry
In Flanders and Artois and Picardy^o
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.
Courteous he was, lowly and serviceable,
And carved to serve his father at the table.
There was a *Yeoman*^o 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—

65 lists: the fens
were held.

67 Bey of Balat:

72 boorish: crude

77 fustian: coarse,
and linen.

88 Flanders . . . Picardy
of Belgium, Holland, and

103 *Yeoman* (yō' man): a
attendant.

- 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^o 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,^o spear-sharp and well-equipped.
A medal of St. Christopher^o he wore
Of shining silver on his breast, and bore
A hunting-horn, well slung and burnished clean,
120 That dangled from a baldrick^o of bright green.
He was a proper forester, I guess.
There also was a Nun, a Prioress,^o
Her way of smiling very simple and coy.
Her greatest oath was only "By St. Loy!"^{oo}
125 And she was known as Madam Eglantyne.
And well she sang a service,^o 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;^o
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.

113 **brace**: leather guard worn on the archer's forearm.

116 **dirk**: a small dagger.

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

120 **baldrick**: shoulder belt.

122 **Prioress**: the nun ranking next below the head nun in an abbey.

124 **St. Loy**: Saint Eligius, who would not swear upon holy relics.

126 **service**: daily prayers.

129 **Stratford-atte-Bowe**: a nunnery far from London.



The Monk (detail), 15th century illuminated manuscript. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Vocabulary

solicitous (sə lis' ə təs) *adj.* full of concern

from *The Canterbury Tales*

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,

160 Almost a span° across the brows, I own;
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.

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°
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;
Greyhounds he had, as swift as birds, to course.°

159 span: nine in forehead was a sign of Chaucer's day.

163 gaudies: large and bright prayers.

166 *Amor vincit omnia*: "Love conquers all."

171 Abbot: the head of a monastery.

176 Prior of the cell: the head of a small monastery.

177 St. Benet or St. Maur: the rules of European monasteries. Saint Maurice, one of the early Monastic life is governed by the rules of Saint Benedict, requiring poverty, chastity, and obedience.

183 uncloistered: Monks who were not in a cloister, or retired or sequestered from the world.

190 Austin: English version of Augustine (A.D. 354-430), a scholar who criticized the laxity of Saint Augustine (?-A.D. 604) who founded Canterbury Cathedral.

194 to course: for hunting.