

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^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 in sundry lands,
15 And specially, from every shire's end
Of England, down to Canterbury they wend^o
To seek the holy blissful martyr, 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^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.
The rooms and stables of the inn were wide:
They made us easy, all was of the best.

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** *n. pl.*: people who had visited the Holy Land and wore palm fronds to show it.

16. **wend** *v.*: go; travel.

23. **hostelry** *n.*: inn. The T a lodging place.

1–18. These lines consist of a single, long sentence that follows the structure: "When x occurs, then y happens."

? When spring brings the snow then—according to the rator—what do people



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.

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
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.



The Knight

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 in heathen^o 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.
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 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^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.

The Squire

— 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.

43. Notice that *Knight* appears in italics; so will each new character's designation as the character is introduced.
? As you read, you might want to create a list of all the characters introduced in the Prologue.

49. *heathen* *adj.*: pagan. Chaucer uses the term to mean non-Christian.

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

77. *fustian* (*fus'chan*) *adj.*: of coarse cloth woven from wool and cotton.

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the Ellesmere

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en) *adj.*: made
ven from linen

The Squire, from the Ellesmere manuscript.

Fol. 115v. By permission of The Huntington Library,
San Marino, California.



93. *fluting v.*: whistling.

- 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^o 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.

The Yeoman

- 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,^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.

Vocabulary

agility (ə•jil'ə•tē) *n.*: ability to move quickly and easily.

? **87–102.** Summarize the narrator's description of the Squire. In what ways does the Squire appear to embody the code of chivalry? (See page 100 for a review of chivalry.)



The Canon Yeoman, from the
Ellesmere manuscript.

Fol. 194r. By permission of The Hun-
Library, San Marino, California.

116. *dirk n.*: long dagger.

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

120. *baldrick* (bôl'drik') *n.*
slung over the shoulder a
chest to hold a sword.

Geoffrey Chaucer

The Nun

There also was a *Nun*, a Prioress,^o
Her way of smiling very simple and coy.
Her greatest oath was only "By St. Loy!"^o
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;^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.
150 And she had little dogs she would be feeding

122. Prioress: h
of nuns.

124. St. Loy: Sa
for his perfect n

129. Stratfor
Benedictine co
where inferior

? 122-
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Prioress th
narrator t
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2. Prioress: head of a convent
nuns.

4. St. Loy: Saint Eligius, known
his perfect manners.

Stratford-atte-Bowe:
medicinal convent near London
where inferior French was spoken.

122-145. What details
in the description of the
prioress thus far suggest that the
narrator thinks she is putting on
—that is, trying to appear
refined and “high class”
she really is?



from the
The Huntington
Library, San Marino, California.

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.

The Monk

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;
Greyhounds he had, as swift as birds; to course.°
— 195 Hunting a hare or riding at a fence



159. span *n.*: nine inches. A span
was supposed to be the distance
between the extended thumb
and little finger.

162. coral *adj.*: In the Middle
Ages, coral was a defense against
worldly temptations—but it was
also a love charm.

163. a set of beads . . . green:
Beads are a rosary, or a set of
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 òm'nē·ä'): Latin
for “Love conquers all.”

167. cell *n.*: small convent
connected to a larger one.

177. St. Benet or St. Maur:
Benet is Benedict (c. 480–
543) who founded numerous monasteries
and wrote a famous collection
of regulations for monasteries.
Saint Maur is Maurice, a
follower of Benedict.

190. Austin: Saint Augustine
(354–430), bishop of Hippo in
North Africa. He criticized
monks and suggested
hard manual labor.

194. course *v.*: cause
a chase game.