

Averroes, Avicenna, Constantine,
 Scotch Bernard, John of Gaddesden, Gilbertine.
 445 In his own diet he observed some measure;
 There were no superfluities^o for pleasure,
 Only digestives, nutritives and such.
 He did not read the Bible very much.
 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.

The Wife of Bath

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.^o
 In all the parish not a dame dared stir
 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;^o
 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,
 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,^o set widely, truth to say.
 Easily on an ambling horse she sat
 480 Well wimpled^o 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.

446. **superfluities:** (sōō'pər·
 flōō'ə·tēz) *n. pl.*: excesses.

? 451–454. How did the
 Doctor get his gold?

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

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

? 455–486. Does the Wife
 of Bath remind you of any
 comic female stereotypes?
 Explain.



478. **gap-teeth:** In Chaucer's
 time, gap-teeth on a woman were
 considered a sign of boldness and
 were said to indicate an aptitude
 for love and travel.

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

The Parson

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.^o
This noble example to his sheep^o 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^o
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.^o
He stayed at home and watched over his fold
So that no wolf should make the sheep miscarry.
He was a shepherd and no mercenary.^o
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,



The Parson, from the Ellesmere manuscript.

Fol. 206v. By permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

505. *stave* *n.*: staff.

506. *sheep* *n. pl.*: his parishioners.

? 487–538. Contrast the parson with the Monk and the Friar described earlier. Which of the three characters does the parson present as a true man of God?

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

521. find . . . enrolled: He would take a job as a paid chaplain in a guild.

524. mercenary *n.*: someone who will agree to do anything for money.



Unless indeed a man were obstinate;
 And such, whether of high or low estate,^o
 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.

The Plowman

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^o and rode a mare.
 There was a *Reeve*,^o also a *Miller*, there,
 A *College Manciple*^o from the Inns of Court,
 A papal *Pardoner*^o and, in close consort,
 A *Church-Court Summoner*,^o riding at a trot,
 560 And finally myself—that was the lot.

The Miller

The *Miller* was a chap of sixteen stone,^o
 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.
 His beard, like any sow or fox, was red
 And broad as well, as though it were a spade;

Vocabulary

obstinate (äb'stä·nät) *adj.*: unreasonably stubborn.

532. **estate** *n.*: rank; social standing.



The Miller, from the Ellesmere manuscript.

Fol. 34v. By permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

? 539–555. How is the *Plowman* like his brother, the *Parson*? How can you tell that the narrator approves of him?

555. **tabard** (tab'ärd) **smock**: short jacket.

556. **Reeve**: serf who was the steward of a manor. A reeve saw that the estate's work was done and that everything was accounted for.

557. **Manciple** (man'sä·päl): 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.



The Manciple, from the Ellesmere manuscript.

Fol. 203r. By permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.



The Reeve, from the Ellesmere manuscript.

Fol. 42r. By permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

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.
His 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!^o
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.

The Manciple

585 The *Manciple* came from the Inner Temple;^o
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^o 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

? 568–575. Are any of the comparisons that the narrator makes flattering to the character of the Miller? Explain.

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.

595. abstrusest (ab·strū'st) adj.: most complex; hardest to understand.

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.°

The Reeve

605 The Reeve was old and choleric° 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° very trim;
No auditor could gain a point on him.
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.°
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.

Vocabulary

frugal (frōō'gal) *adj.*: thrifty; careful with money.

604. **wipe their eye**: outdo them. This medieval idiom means something like "steal their thunder" or "show them up."

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

608. **docked** *adj.*: clipped short.

611. **garners** *n. pl.*: granaries.

620. **in arrears**: behind schedule in paying back debts.

621. **bailiff** *n.*: here, farm manager.

625. **sward** (swôrd) *n.*: lawn.

633. **stallion-cob**: stocky male riding horse.



The Summoner

There was a *Summoner*^o with us at that Inn,
His face on fire, like a cherubim,^o
For he had carbuncles.^o 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,
650 Could make a salve that had the power to bite,
Clean up, or cure his whelks^o 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.
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^o
To call out "Walter" better than the Pope.
But had you tried to test his wits and grope
For more, you'd have found nothing in the bag.
Then "*Questio quid juris*"^o was his tag.
665 He was a noble varlet^o 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:^o
— 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.

Vocabulary

duress (doo·resⁿ) *n.*: pressure.

641. **Summoner**: A summoner delivers summonses that call people to appear in church courts.
642. **cherubim** *n.*: in medieval art, a little angel with a rosy face.
643. **carbuncles** (kär'bun'kälz) *n. pl.*: pus-filled skin inflammations, something like boils.

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

? **641–666**. How does the Summoner's physical appearance (lines 642–651) match his inner character? How do you know that Chaucer is being ironic in lines 665–666?

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

664. **Questio quid juris** (kwes'ti-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** (vär'lit) *n.*: scoundrel.

670. **finches . . . feather**: a *maxim* that means roughly the same as "feathering one's nest"—taking care of one's own interests.



The Summoner, from the Ellesmere manuscript.

Fol. 81r. The Huntington Library, San Marino, CA.

A summoner
es that call
n church courts.
; in medieval
with a rosy face.
kär'bun'kälz) n.
n inflammations,
oils.

l.: pus-filled

How does the
s physical appear-
651) match his
How do you
cer is being ironic
6?

of bird.

id juris (kwest'ē-
Latin for "I ask
ne law [applies]."
r uses this phrase
ge the issue.
'lit) n.: scoundrel.

feather: a maxim
ghly the same as
's nest"—taking
wn interests.



The Pardoner, from the Ellesmere manuscript.

Fol. 138r. By permission of The Huntington Library,
San Marino, California.

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.

The Pardoner

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^o 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^o on his cap;
His wallet lay before him on his lap,
Brimful of pardons^o 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^o 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



693. deep seconds: harmonies.

A Pardoner dispensed pardons
granted by the pope.

? 689-704. How do such
details as "driblets," "like rat-
tails," "yellow as wax," and "bulging
eye-balls, like a hare" affect the
way you feel about this man?

705. relic n.: remains of a saint

707. pardons n. pl.: small strips
of parchment with papal seals
attached. They were sold as in-
dulgences (pardons for sins),
with the proceeds supposedly
going to a religious house.

716. gobbet n.: fragment.

? 714-734. These lines
depict the Pardoner as
scam artist. Why do people
for his tricks?

Geoffrey Chaucer

725 More than the parson in a month or two,
 And by his flatteries and prevarication^o
 Made monkeys of the priest and congregation.
 But still to do him justice first and last
 In church he was a noble ecclesiast.^o
 How well he read a lesson or told a story!
 730 But best of all he sang an Offertory,^o
 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 courtesies,
 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,
 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^o 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.

725. **prevarication**
 (pri·var'i·kā'shən) *n.*: telling lies.

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

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

? 740–744. How will the
 narrator organize the rest of
 his narrative?

? 745–766. What is the
 narrator apologizing for
 in advance?

760. **scurrility** (skə·ril'ə·
 indecency.



The Host

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.^o
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!
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

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

? 771–779. What do you learn about the Host in these lines? How do you think the narrator feels about the Host?

? 781–803. What do words like fun (line 786), pleasure (line 793), and enjoyment (line 795) suggest about the Host's character?

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^o too
 That he should act as he proposed to do,
 Become our Governor in short, and be
 835 Judge of our tales and general referee,
 And set the supper at a certain price.
 We promised to be ruled by his advice
 Come high, come low; unanimously thus
 We set him up in judgment over us.
 840 More wine was fetched, the business being done;
 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,
 845 Gathering us together in a flock,
 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^o
 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^o and then we can depart;
 The man who draws the shortest cut shall start."

811–829. Summarize the rules the Host proposes for the storytelling competition. What's the prize? Who will be the judge?

825. By "those who won't obey," the Host means those who won't play the game of telling a story when it's their turn. Lines 853–854 further clarify their penalty: Those who won't obey must pay the cost of the entire journey.

831. entreaty *n.*: urgent request.



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).

855. draw for cut: in other words, draw straws.