The Canterbury Tales

by

GEOFFREY CHAUCER

A READER-FRIENDLY EDITION

Put into modern spelling

by

MICHAEL MURPHY

GENERAL PROLOGUE
GENERAL PROLOGUE

The opening is a long, elaborate sentence about the effects of Spring on the vegetable and animal world, and on people. The style of the rest of the Prologue and Tales is much simpler than this opening. A close paraphrase of the opening sentence is offered at the bottom of this page.¹

When April with its showers soote
The drought of March hath piercèd to the root
And bathèd every vein in such liquor
Of which virtûe engendered is the flower;²
When Zephyrus eke with his sweetè breath
Inspirèd hath in every holt and heath
The tender croppès, and the youngè sun
Hath in the Ram his halfè course y-run,³
And smallè fowlès maken melody
That sleepen all the night with open eye
(So pricke thin Nature in their courágès),
Then longen folk to go on pilgrimáges,
And palmers for to seeken strangè strands
To fernè hallows couth in sundry lands,⁴
And specially from every shirè's end
Of Engèland to Canterbury they wend
The holy blissful martyr for to seek,
That them hath holpen when that they were sick.

¹ When April with its sweet showers has pierced the drought of March to the root and bathed every rootlet in the liquid by which the flower is engendered; when the west wind also, with its sweet breath, has brought forth young shoots in every grove and field; when the early sun of spring has run half his course in the sign of Aries, and when small birds make melody, birds that sleep all night with eyes open, (as Nature inspires them to) --THEN people have a strong desire to go on pilgrimages, and pilgrims long to go to foreign shores to distant shrines known in various countries. And especially they go from every county in England to seek out the shrine of the holy blessed martyr who has helped them when they were sick.

² 4: "By virtue (strength) of which the flower is engendered."

³ 8: The early sun of Spring has moved part way through the sign of Aries (the Ram) in the Zodiac.

⁴ 13-14: "Pilgrims seek foreign shores (to go) to distant shrines known in different lands." Palmers: pilgrims, from the palm-leaves they got in Jerusalem.
At the Tabard Inn, just south of London, the poet-pilgrim falls in with a group of twenty nine other pilgrims who have met each other along the way.

Befell that in that season on a day
20 In Southwark at The Tabard as I lay
Ready to wenden on my pilgrimage
To Canterbury with full devout courage,
At night was come into that hostelry
Well nine and twenty in a company

Of sundry folk by aventure y-fall
In fellowship, and pilgrims were they all
That toward Canterbury woulden ride.
The chambers and the stables weren wide
And well we weren eased at the best.

And shortly, when the sunne was to rest,
So had I spoken with them every one
That I was of their fellowship anon,
And madé forward early for to rise
To take our way there as I you devise.

But natheless, while I have time and space,
Ere that I further in this talé pace,
Methinketh it accordant to reason
To tell you all the condition
Of each of them so as it seeméd me,

And which they weren, and of what degree
And eke in what array that they were in;
And at a knight then will I first begin.

The Knight is the person of highest social standing on the pilgrimage though you would never know it from his modest manner or his clothes. He keeps his ferocity for crusaders’ battlefields where he has distinguished himself over many years and over a wide geographical area. As the text says, he is not "gay", that is, he is not showily dressed, but is still wearing the military padded coat stained by the armor he has only recently taken off.

A KNIGHT there was and that a worthy man
That from the time that he first began
To riden out, he lovéd chivalry,
Truth and honóur, freedom and courtesy.¹

¹ 45-6: "He loved everything that pertained to knighthood: truth (to one's word), honor, magnanimity
Full worthy was he in his lorde's war,  
And thereto had he ridden-no man farre  
As well in Christendom as Heathenness  
And ever honoured for his worthiness.

His campaigns

At Alexandria he was when it was won.  
Full often time he had the board begun  
Aboven alle nations in Prussia.\(^1\)  
In Lithow had he riséd and in Russia  
55 No Christian man so oft of his degree.  
In Gránad' at the siege eke had he be  
Of Algesir and ridden in Belmarie.  
At Leyès was he and at Satalie  
When they were won, and in the Great Sea  
60 At many a noble army had he be.  
At mortal battles had he been fifteen  
And foughten for our faith at Tramissene  
In listés thrice, and ay slain his foe.\(^2\)  
This ilké worthy knight had been also  
65 Sometime with the lord of Palatie  
Against another heathen in Turkey,  
And ever more he had a sovereign prize,\(^3\)  
And though that he was worthy he was wise,  
And of his port as meek as is a maid.  
70 Ne never yet no villainy he said

His modest demeanor

\(lorde's = \text{king's or God's}\)  
\(farther\)  
\(heathendom\)  
\(captured\)  
\(table\)  
\(Lithuania / fought\)  
\(rank\)  
\(Granada / also\)  
\(Mediterranean\)  
\(combat 3 times & always\)  
\(same\)  
\(always\)  
\(valiant / sensible\)  
\(deportment\)  
\(rudeness\)

(freedom), courtesy."

\(^1\) 52-3: He had often occupied the seat of honor at the table of the Teutonic Knights in Prussia, where badges awarded to distinguished crusaders read "Honneur vainc tout: Honor conquers all." Though the campaigns listed below were real, and though it was perhaps just possible for one man to have been in them all, the list is probably idealized. The exact geographical locations are of little interest today. This portrait is generally thought to show a man of unsullied ideals; Jones (see Bibliography) insists that the knight was a mere mercenary.

\(^2\) 63: "In single combat (listes) three times, and always (ay) killed his opponent."

\(^3\) 64-67: The knight had fought for one Saracen or pagan leader against another, a common, if dubious, practice. And ever more ... may mean he always kept the highest reputation or that he always came away with a splendid reward or booty (prize)."
In all his life unto no manner wight.¹
He was a very perfect gentle knight.
But for to tellen you of his array:
His horse was good; but he was not gay.²
Of fustian he wearé a gipoun
All besmotered with his habergeon,
For he was late y-come from his voyáge,
And wenté for to do his pilgrimáge.³

The Knight’s 20-year-old son is a striking contrast to his father. True, he has seen some military action, but it was to impress his lady not his Lord God. Unlike his parent, he is fashionably dressed. He is very much in love, he has cultivated all the social graces, and is also aware of his duty to serve as his father’s squire

With him there was his son, a youngé SQUIRE,⁴
A lover and a lusty bachelor ⁴
With locks curled as they were laid in press.
Of twenty years he was of age, I guess.
Of his statúre he was of even length,
And wonderly deliver and of great strength,
And he had been sometime in chivachy
In Flanders, in Artois and Picardy,
And borne him well as in so little space⁵
In hope to standen in his lady's grace.
Embroidered was he as it were a mead
All full of freshé flowers white and red.

---

¹ 70-71: Notice quadruple negative: "ne, never, no ... no" used for emphasis, perhaps deliberately excessive emphasis. It is not bad grammar. The four negatives remain in Ellesmer’s slightly different version: "He never yet no villainy ne said ... unto no manner wight".

² 74: "He (the Knight) was not fashionably dressed." horse was: most MSS read hors weere(n) = "horses were." I have preferred the reading of MS Lansdowne.

³ 75-78: The poor state of the knight’s clothes is generally interpreted to indicate his pious anxiety to fulfill a religious duty even before he has had a chance to change his clothes. Jones thinks it simply confirms that the knight was a mercenary who had pawned his armor. voyage: MSS have viage. Blessed viage was the term often used for the holy war of the crusades.

⁴ 79-80: A squire learned his future duties as a knight by attending on one. Bachelor is another word meaning a young man in training to be a knight.

⁵ 87: "And distinguished himself, considering the short time he had been at it."
Singing he was or fluting all the day.
He was as fresh as is the month of May.
Short was his gown with sleeves long and wide.
Well could he sit on horse and faire ride.
He couldé songés make and well endite,
Joust and eke dance, and well portray and write.
So hot he lovèd that by nightertale
He slept no more than does a nightingale.
Courteous he was, lowly and serviceable,
And carved before his father at the table.¹

Knight and Squire are accompanied by their Yeoman. He is noticeably over-armed for a pilgrimage, which indicates probably suspicion of the big city by a man more at home in the forest.

A YEOMAN he had and servants no more²
At that timé, for him listé ridé so,
And he was clad in coat and hood of green.
A sheaf of peacock arrows bright and keen
Under his belt he bore full thriftily.
Well could he dress his tackle yeomanly—
His arrows droopéd not with feathers low,
And in his hand he bore a mighty bow.
A not-head had he with a brown viságe.
Of woodcraft could he well all the uságe.
Upon his arm he bore a gay bracér
And by his side a sword and a bucklér
And on that other side a gay daggér
Harnessed well and sharp as point of spear.³
A Christopher on his breast of silver sheen.
A horn he bore, the baldrick was of green.
A forester was he soothly as I guess.

The Prioress is the head of a fashionable convent. She is a charming lady, none the less charming for her slight worldliness: she has a romantic name, Eglantine, wild rose; she has delicate table

¹ 100: The table would be occupied at only one side, so when the Squire carved for his father, the Knight, he stood before him across the table.
² 101: A servant of middle rank. This one looks after his master's forest land.
³ 104-114: Why a forester should be so heavily armed on a pilgrimage is not clear.
There was also a nun, a PRIORESS, head of a convent modest
That of her smiling was full simple and coy.
120 Her greatest oath was but by Saint Eloy, called
And she was clepéd Madame Eglantine.
Full well she sang the servíce divine nicely
Entunéd in her nose full seemély.
And French she spoke full fair and fetisly
125 After the school of Stratford at the Bow, meals / indeed
For French of Paris was to her unknow.
At meaté well y-taught was she withall:
She let no morsel from her lippês fall, v. much her interest
Nor wet her fingers in her saucé deep.
130 Well could she carry a morsel and well keep handle
That no drop ne fell upon her breast. So that
In courtesy was set full much her lest:
Her over lippé wiped she so clean upper lip
That in her cup there was no farthing seen small stain
135 Of greasé, when she drunken had her draught.reached for her food
Full seemély after her meat she saught, certainly / charm
And sikerly she was of great desport
And full pleasánt and amiable of port, imitate the manners
And pained her to counterfeit cheer
140 Of court, thought worthy
And to be holden digne of reverence.
She is very sensitive

But for to speaken of her conscience:
She was so charitable and so pitous
She would weep if that she saw a mouse
Caught in a trap, if it were dead or bled.
Of smallè houndès had she that she fed
With roasted flesh or milk and wastel bread,
But sore wept she if one of them were dead
Or if men smote it with a yardè, smart;
And all was conscience and tender heart.

Her personal appearance

Full seemly her wimple pinchèd was,
Her nose tretis, her eyen grey as glass,
Her mouth full small and thereto soft and red,
But sikerly she had a fair forehead.
It was almost a spannè broad, I trow,
For hardly she was not undergrow.
Full fetis was her cloak as I was 'ware.
Of small coral about her arm she bare
A pair of beads gaudèd all with green,
And thereon hung a brooch of gold full sheen
On which was written first a crowned A
And after: Amor Vincit Omnia.¹

Her traveling companions

Another Nunne with her haddè she
That was her chaplain, and priestes three.²

¹ 161-2: The gold brooch on her rosary had a capital "A" with a crown above it, and a Latin motto meaning "Love conquers all," a phrase appropriate to both sacred and secular love. It occurs in a French poem that Chaucer knew well, The Romance of the Rose (21327-32), where Courteosie quotes it from Virgil's Eclogue X, 69, to justify the plucking of the Rose by the Lover, a decidedly secular, indeed sexual, act of "Amor".

² 164: The Prioress's traveling companion is called, confusingly, her chaplain. The priests are employees of the Prioress's well-to-do convent. Even in a market flooded with priests, bringing three along on the pilgrimage would be a display of celibate feminism and of conspicuous consumption as marked as the Prioress's jewelry and her choice of dog food. However, many scholars think that the words "and priestes three" were inserted by a scribe.
Another member of the church is the Monk who, like the Prioress, is supposed to stay in his monastery but who, like her, finds an excuse to get away from it, something he does a lot. He has long since lost any of the monastic ideals he may have set out with, and he now prefers travel, good clothes, good food, good hunting with well-equipped horses, in place of the poverty, study and manual labor prescribed by his monastic rule. He may not be a bad man, but he is not a good monk.

165  A MONK there was, a fair for the mastery,  
    An outrider that lovéd venery.¹  
    A manly man to be an abbot able,  
    Full many a dainty horse had he in stable,  
    And when he rode, men might his bridle hear

170  Jingle in a whistling wind as clear  
    And eke as loud as does the chapel bell  
    There as this lord is keeper of the cell.²  
    The rule of Saint Maur or of Saint Bennett  
    Because that it was old and some deal strait

175  This ilké monk let olde thingës pass  
    And held after the newë world the space.  
    He gave not of that text a pullèd hen  
    That says that hunters be not holy men  
    Nor that a monk, when he is reckless,  
    Is likened to a fish that's waterless,  
    That is to say, a monk out of his cloister.  
    But thilké text held he not worth an oyster.

The poet pretends to agree with his lax views

And I said his opinion was good;  
What! Should he study and make himselfen wood

185  Upon a book in cloister always to pore?  
    Or swinken with his handës and labóur  
    As Austin bids? How shall the world be served?

Three priests would make the number of pilgrims 31 not 29, and only one is heard from again, in the Nun's Priests Tale.

¹ 166: venery: both "hunting" and the work of Venus, goddess of love. This description of the Monk is larded with sexual innuendo.

² 172: The lordly monk is in charge of an annex (cell) of the monastery.
Let Austin have his swink to him reserved.¹

His taste in sport and clothes

Therefore he was a prickasour aright. hunter, for sure
190 Greyhounds he had as swift as fowl in flight. tracking
Of pricking and of hunting for the hare his passion
Was all his lust, for no cost would he spare. edged at the wrist
I saw his sleeve[s] purfled at the hand fur
With gris, and that the finest of the land,
195 And for to fasten his hood under his chin very elaborate
He had of gold y-wrought a full curious pin —
A love knot on the greater end there was.

His physical appearance

His head was bald, that shone as any glass also / as if oiled
And eke his face, as he had been anoint. in good health
200 He was a lord full fat and in good point, eyes prominent
His eyen steep and rolling in his head lead furnace
That steamèd as a furnace of a lead, in great shape
His boots supple, his horse in great estate. a fine cleric
Now certainly he was a fair prelate. tortured
205 He was not pale as is a forpined ghost. horse
A fat swan loved he best of any roast.
His palfrey was as brown as any berry.

The Friar, another cleric, is even less a man of God than the Monk. A member of a mendicant order of men who lived on what they could get by begging, he has become a professional fundraiser, the best in his friary because of some special skills: personal charm, a good singing voice, an attractive little lisp, a talent for mending quarrels and having the right little gift for the ladies, and a forgiving way in the confessional especially when he expects a generous donation. He can find good economic reasons to cultivate the company of the rich rather than the poor.

A FRIAR there was, a wanton and a merry, lively

¹ 188: "Let Augustine keep his work." An unbecoming way for a monk to speak of the great saint whose rule, like that of St. Maurus and St. Benedict (Maur and Bennett, 173) prescribed study and physical labor for monks.
A limiter, a full solémpné man.\(^1\) licensed beggar / v. impressive

In all the orders four is none that can knows
So much of dalliance and fair language. smooth manners
He had made full many a marriage
Of youngé women at his owné cost.\(^2\) pillar
Unto his order he was a noble post.

Full well beloved and familiar was he
With franklins over all in his country, landowners
And eke with worthy women of the town, And also
For he had power of confession, parish priest
As said himself, more than a curate, licensed
For of his order he was licentiate.\(^3\)

His manner in the confessional

Full sweetely heard he confession expected / offering
And pleasant was his absolution.
He was an easy man to give penance
to hear a good pittance,
There as he wist to have a good pittance,

For unto a poor order for to give
Is signé that a man is well y-shrive, confessed
For if he gave, he dursté make avaunt dared / boast
He wisté that a man was répentaunt,\(^4\) knew
For many a man so hard is of his heart, it hurt him sharply

He may not weep though that he sore smart.
Therefore, instead of weeping and [of] prayers
Men may give silver to the poore freres.

\(^1\) 208-9: A Friar (Fr. frère) was a member of one of four religious orders of men. Some were "mendicants," who depended on what they could get by begging. Our friar, a limiter, has a begging district within which he must stay. "Solemne" cannot mean solemn except as heavy irony. See l. 274

\(^2\) 212-13: He had provided dowries for many young women, or he had performed the marriage ceremonies without a fee.

\(^3\) 218-220: Sometimes the pope or bishop would reserve to himself or to a special delegate (licenciate) the right to hear the confessions of prominent public sinners, guilty of particularly heinous offences. This would have no relevance to the ordinary confession-goer, for whom the Friar had no more "power of confession" than the curate or parson.

\(^4\) 227-8: "For if he (the penitent) gave (an offering), he (the Friar) would dare to say that he knew the man was truly repentant."
His largess, his talents, and the company he cultivated

His tipet was ay farséd full of knives
And pinnés for to given fairé wives.

And certainly he had a merry note—
Well could he sing and playen on a rote.
Of yeddings he bore utterly the prize.
His neck was white as is the fleur de lys;
Thereto he strong was as a champion.

He knew the taverns well in every town
And every hosteler and tappester
Bet than a lazar or a beggester,¹
For unto such a worthy man as he
Accorded not as by his faculty

To have with sické lazars acquaintance.
It is not honest, it may not advance
For to dealen with no such poraille,
But all with rich and sellers of vitaille.
And overall there as profit should arise,

Courteous he was and lowly of service;

His begging manner was so smooth he could, if necessary, extract money from the poorest

There was no man nowhere so virtuous.²
He was the beste beggar in his house

And gave a certain farmë for the grant.³
None of his brethren came there in his haunt.
For though a widow hadde not a shoe,
So pleasant was his "In Principio"
Yet he would have a farthing ere he went.

His purchase was well better than his rent.⁴

---

¹ 241-2: "Tapster, beggester": the "-ster" ending signified, strictly, a female. It survives (barely) in "spinster."

² 251: The meaning of virtuous ("obliging? effective"?) would seem to depend on whether one takes 251 with the preceding or the following line.

³ 252a: He had paid a certain fee (farm') for the monopoly (grant) of begging in his district ('haunt'). The couplet 252 a-b occurs only in MS Hengwrt of the Six Text.

⁴ 256: His income from the begging was much larger than his outlay for the monopoly.
And he had other talents and attractions

And rage he could as it were right a whelp.  
In lovédays there could he muchel help.  
For there he was not like a cloisterer

With a threadbare cope as is a pooré scholar,  
But he was like a master or a pope. 
Of double worsted was his semi-cope,  
And rounded as a bell out of the press.  
Somewhat he lispéd for his wantonness

To make his English sweet upon his tongue, 
And in his harping when that he had sung, 
His eyen twinkled in his head aright  
As do the starrés in the frosty night.  
This worthy limiter was clept Huberd.

The Merchant is apparently a prosperous exporter who likes to TALK of his prosperity; he is concerned about pirates and profits, skillful in managing exchange rates, but tighetlipped about business details.

A MERCHANT was there with a forkéd beard,  
In motley, and high on horse he sat,  
Upon his head a Flandrish beaver hat,  
His boots claspéd fair and fetisly.  
His reasons he spoke full solémpnely,

Sounding always the increase of his winning.  
He would the sea were kept for anything  
Betwixt Middleburgh and Orwel. 
Well could he in Exchange shielde sell.

---

1 259: cloisterer: probably a "real" friar who stayed largely within his cloister, satisfied with poor clothes according to his vow of poverty.

2 261: master: possibly Master of Arts, a rather more eminent degree than it is now, though hardly making its holder as exalted as the pope.

3 271: (dressed in) motley: probably not the loud mixed colors of the jester, but possibly tweed.

4 276-7: "He wished above all that the stretch of sea between Middleburgh (in Flanders) and Orwell (in England) were guarded (kept) against pirates."

5 278: He knew the intricacies of foreign exchange. Scholars have charged the Merchant with gold smuggling or even coin clipping; but although shields were units of money, they were neither gold nor coins.
This worthy man full well his wit beset —

There wist no wight that he was in debt,
So stately was he of his governance
With his bargains and with his chevissance.
Forsooth he was a worthy man withal,
But sooth to say, I n'ot how men him call.

The Clerk is the first admirable church member we meet on the pilgrimage. "Clerk" meant a number of related things: a cleric, a student, a scholar. This clerk is all three, devoted to the love of learning and of God, the quintessential scholar, who would rather buy a book than a coat or a good meal, totally unworldly.

A CLERK there was of Oxenford also
That unto logic haddè long y-go.¹
As leanè was his horse as is a rake,
And he was not right fat, I undertake,
But lookèd hollow, and thereto soberly,

Full threadbare was his overest courtepy,
For he had gotten him yet no benefice
Nor was so worldly for to have office,
For him was lever have at his bed's head
Twenty bookès clad in black or red

Of Aristotle and his philosophy
Than robès rich or fiddle or gay psalt'ry.
But albeit that he was a philosopher,
Yet haddè he but little gold in coffer,²
But all that he might of his friendès hent

On bookès and on learning he it spent,
And busily gan for the soules pray
Of them that gave him wherewith to scholay.
Of study took he most care and most heed.
Not one word spoke he morè than was need,

1 285-6: He had long since set out to study logic, part of the trivium or lower section of the university syllabus (the other two parts were rhetoric and grammar); hence his early college years had long since passed. y-go (gone) is the past participle of "go."

2 298: A joke. Although he was a student of philosophy, he had not discovered the "philosopher's stone," which was supposed to turn base metals into gold. The two senses of "philosopher" played on here are: a) student of the work of Aristotle  b) student of science ("natural philosophy"), a meaning which shaded off into "alchemist, magician."
And that was spoke in form and reverence,  
And short and quick and full of high senténce.  
Sounding in moral virtue was his speech,  
And gladly would he learn and gladly teach.

*The Sergeant of the Law* is a successful but unostentatious, high-ranking lawyer who sometimes functions as a judge. We are told with just a touch of irony, that he is, like many of the pilgrims, the very best at what he does, a busy man, but "yet he seemed busier than he was."

A SERGEANT of the law, wary and wise  
That often hadde been at the Parvise  
There was also, full rich of excellence.  
Discreet he was and of great reverence;  
He seemèd such, his wordès were so wise.  
Justice he was full often in assize  
By patent and by plain commissïon.¹  
For his sciénce and for his high renown  
Of fees and robès had he many a one.  
So great a purchaser was nowhere none;  
All was fee simple to him in effect.  
His purchasing might not be infect.  
Nowhere so busy a man as he there n'as,  
And yet he seemèd busier than he was.  
In termès had he case and doomès all  
That from the time of King William were fall.  
Thereto he could endite and make a thing;  
There couldè no wight pinch at his writing.²  
And every statute could he plein by rote.  
He rode but homely in a medley coat  
Girt with a ceint of silk with barrès small.

The Lawyer is accompanied by his friend, the Franklin, a prosperous country gentleman, prominent in his county. He is a generous extroverted man ("sanguine" the text says) who likes good food and drink and sharing them with others, somewhat like St Julian, the patron saint of hospitality.

¹ 315: *patent/plain commission*: technical terms meaning by royal appointment.

² 326: "Nobody could fault any document he had drawn up" (*endited*). Clearly line 327 is a deliberate exaggeration.
A FRANKÉLIN was in his company. White was his beard as is the daisy. Of his complexion he was sanguine.\(^1\) Well loved he by the morrow a sop in wine.  

335 To livén in delight was ever his wont, For he was Epicurus's own son That held opinïon that plain delight Was very felicity perfite.\(^2\) A householder and that a great was he;  

340 Saint Julian he was in his country.\(^3\) His bread, his ale, was always after one. A better envinéd man was never none. Withouten bakéd meat was never his house Of fish and flesh, and that so plenteous  

345 It snowéd in his house of meat and drink Of alle dainties that men could bethink. After the sundry seasons of the year So changéd he his meat and his supper. Full many a fat partridge had he in mew  

350 And many a bream and many a luce in stew. Woe was his cook but if his saucé were Poignant and sharp, and ready all his gear.\(^4\) His table dormant in his hall alway Stood ready covered all the longé day.  

355 At sessions there was he lord and sire. Full often time he was knight of the shire. An anlace and a gipser all of silk Hung at his girdle white as morning milk. A sherriff had he been, and a counter.  

360 Was nowhere such a worthy vavasoúr.\(^5\)  

---  

\(^1\) 333: Complexion ... sanguine probably means (1) he had a ruddy face and (2) he was of "sanguine humor" i.e. outgoing and optimistic because of the predominance of blood in his system. See ENDPAPERS: Humor  

\(^2\) 336-8: Epicurus was supposed, rightly or wrongly, to have taught that utmost pleasure was the greatest good (hence "epicure").  

\(^3\) 340: St Julian was the patron saint of hospitality  

\(^4\) 351-2: His cook would regret it if his sauce was not pungent and sharp ....  

\(^5\) 359-60: sherriff: "shire reeve," King's representative in a county. counter: overseer of taxes for the treasury. vavasour: wealthy gentleman, possibly also a family name.
Somewhat lower in the social scale is a bevy of Skilled Tradesmen most of them connected with the fabric trades and belonging to a guild, a “fraternity”. Their prosperity shows in their clothes, and their accouterments and the fact that they have brought their own cook, perhaps to replace the skills of the ambitious wives they have left at home.

A HABERDASHER and a CARPENTER,¹
A WEBBER, a DYER and a TAPISER
And they were clothed all in one livery
Of a solemn and a great fraternity.

365 Full fresh and new their gear apikèd was:
Their knivès werè chaped not with brass
But all with silver; wrought full clean and well
Their girdles and their pouches everydeal.
Well seemed each of them a fair Burgess

370 To sitten in a Guildhall on a dais.
Ever each for the wisdom that he can
Was shapely for to be an alderman,
For chattels haddè they enough and rent,
And eke their wivès would it well assent

375 And elsè certainly they were to blame:
It is full fair to be y-cleped "Madame,"
And go to vigils all before
And have a mantle royally y-bore.

They have a great chef with a gorge-raising affliction

380 To boil the chickens and the marrow bones
And powder merchant tart, and galingale.
Well could he know a draught of London ale.
He couldè roast and seeth and broil and fry

¹ 361-64: Haberdasher: a dealer in items of clothing and notions; Webber: weaver; Dyer: a dyer of cloth; Tapiser: tapestry maker—all connected with the cloth business. Since the Carpenter is a member of their "fraternity," but not of their trade group, commentators say that theirs was not a trade guild but a parish guild, with its own livery or uniform. Perhaps "Carpeter" was meant, although all MSS of Six-Text read "Carpenter" and there is no entry for "Carpeter" in MED.
Make mortrews and well bake a pie.\(^1\)

But great harm was it, as it thoughtè me,
That on his shin a mormal haddè he,
For bláncmanger that made he with the best.\(^2\)

\(385\)

The Shipman is a ship’s captain, the most skilled from here to Spain, more at home on the deck of ship than on the back of a horse. He is not above a little larceny or piracy and in a sea fight he does not take prisoners.

A SHIPMAN was there, woning far by west;
For aught I wot, he was of Dartemouth.

He rode upon a rouncy as he couth,\(^3\)
In a gown of falding to the knee.
A dagger hanging on a lace had he
About his neck under his arm adown.
The hot summer had made his hue all brown.

And certainly he was a good fellow.
Full many a draught of wine had he y-draw
From Bordeaux-ward while that the chapman sleep.
Of nicè conscience took he no keep:
If that he fought and had the higher hand
By water he sent them home to every land.\(^4\)

But of his craft to reckon well his tides,
His streamès and his dangers him besides,
His harborow, his moon, his lodemenage
There was none such from Hull unto Cartháge.\(^5\)

Hardy he was and wise to undertake.
With many a tempest had his beard been shake.
He knew all the havens as they were

---

\(^1\) 384: Recipes for mortrews and chickens with marrow bones can be found in Pleyn Delit by C. Hieatt and S. Butler (Toronto, 1979), 9, 11, 83.

\(^2\) 387: bláncmanger: a dish of white food, such as chicken or fish, with other items of white food--rice, crushed almonds, almond "milk," etc. See Pleyn Delit, 58, 89.

\(^3\) 390: "He rode upon a nag as best he knew how."

\(^4\) 400: He made them walk the plank.

\(^5\) 401-4: These lines deal with the mariner’s skill as a navigator: he is the best from England to Spain. lodemenage = navigation, cf. lodestone, lodestar. harborow = position of the sun in the zodiac, or simply "harbors."
From Gothland to the Cape of Finisterre
And every creek in Brittany and Spain.

His barge y-clep was the Maudelain.

The medical Doctor is also the best in his profession, and though his practice, typical of the period, sounds to us more like astrology and magic than medicine, he makes a good living at it.

With us there was a DOCTOR of PHYSIC. medicine
In all this world ne was there none him like
To speak of physic and of surgery,
For he was grounded in astronomy: astrology

He kept his patient a full great deal
In hours, by his magic natural. astrology
Well could he fôrtunen the ascendent
Of his imáges for his patient.

He knew the cause of every malady

Were it of hot or cold or moist or dry
And where engendered and of what humor. See Endpapers
He was a very perfect practiser.
The cause y-know, and of his harm the root, known / source
Anon he gave the sické man his boote. medicine, cure

His connections with the druggists

Full ready had he his apothecaries druggists
To send him drugs and his letuaries, medicines
For each of them made other for to win; to profit
Their friendship was not newe to begin. to profit
Well knew he the old Esclapius

And Dioscorides and eke Rusus, also

---

1 414: Astronomy = astrology. Medieval medicine was less the practice of an applied science than of magic natural (white magic) including astrology.

2 415-18: These four lines are hard to render except by paraphrase: he treated his patient by "white magic" and he knew how to cast horoscopes and calculate astronomically the best hours to treat his patient.

3 423: "When the cause and root of his illness were diagnosed".

4 428: They were old colleagues.

5 429-434: This list of classical, Arabic and other medieval authorities on medicine functions somewhat like
Old Hippocras, Hali and Galen
Serapion, Rasis and Avicen,
Averrois, Damascene and Constantine,
Bernard and Gatesden and Gilbertine.

His personal habits; his appearance

435   Of his diet measurable was he  moderate
   For it was of no superfluity excess
But of great nourishing and digestible.
His study was but little on the Bible.¹
   In sanguine and in perse he clad was all In red & blue
440   Lined with taffeta and with sendall, silk
   And yet he was but easy of dispense. thrifty spender
He kept the what he won in pestilence.
during plague
For gold in physic is a cordial, Because
Therefore he loved gold in special.²  (Wife of Bath’s portrait begins on next page)

¹ 438: Physicians were sometimes thought to tend towards atheism. Perhaps the rhyme here was just very French. Or was meant to be comic; it could work in modern English if so regarded, with "digestible" pronounced exaggeratedly to rime fully with modern "Bible."

² 443-4: A pun. Gold was used in some medications (physic); but physic is also the practice of medicine at which much gold can be made, especially in time of plague (pestilence), and that is good for the heart (cordial).
In the Wife of Bath we have one of only three women on the pilgrimage. Unlike the other two she is not a nun, but a much-married woman, a widow yet again. Everything about her is large to the point of exaggeration: she has been married five times, has been to Jerusalem three times and her hat and hips are as large as her sexual appetite and her love of talk.

A good WIFE was there of besidé Bath
But she was somewhat deaf, and that was scath.
Of clothmaking she hadde such a haunt
She passèd them of Ypres and of Gaunt. ¹
In all the parish, wife ne was there none
That to the offering before her shouldè gon. ²
And if there did, certain so wroth was she
That she was out of allè charity.
Her coverchiefs full fine were of ground;
I durstè swear they weigheden ten pound
That on a Sunday were upon her head.
Her hosèn weren of fine scarlet red
Full straight y-tied, and shoes full moist and new.
Bold was her face and fair and red of hue.
She was a worthy woman all her life.
Husbands at churche door she had had five, ³
Withoutè other company in youth,
But thereof needeth not to speak asouth.
And thrice had she been at Jerusalem.
She had passèd many a strangè stream.
At Romè she had been and at Boulogne,
In Galicia at St James and at Cologne.

(cont’d)

¹ 448: Ypres, Ghent (Gaunt): Famous cloth-making towns across the English Channel.

² 449-452: There was no woman in the whole parish who dared to get ahead of her in the line to make their offering (in church). If anyone did, she was so angry that she had no charity (or patience) left.

³ 460: Weddings took place in the church porch, followed by Mass inside.
She couldé much of wandering by the way.\textsuperscript{1} 
Gat-toothed was she, soothly for to say. 
Upon an ambler easily she sat

470  Y-wimpled well,\textsuperscript{2} and on her head a hat
As broad as is a buckler or a targe,
A foot mantle about her hips large,
And on her feet a pair of spurs sharp.
In fellowship well could she laugh and carp.

475  Of remedies of love she knew perchance
For she could of that art the olde dance.\textsuperscript{3}

The second good cleric we meet is more than good; he is near perfection. The priest of a small, obscure and poor parish in the country. He has not forgotten the lowly class from which he came. Unlike most of the other pilgrims, he is not physically described, perhaps because he is such an ideal figure.

A good man was there of Religïon
And was a poore PARSON of a town, 
But rich he was of holy thought and work.

480  He was also a learnèd man, a clerk,
That Christë's gospel truly wouldé preach.
His parishens devoutly would he teach.
Benign he was and wonder diligent
And in adversity full patïent,

485  And such he was y-proved often sithes.
Full loath was he to cursèn for his tithes \textsuperscript{4}
But rather would he givèn out of doubt
Unto his poor parishioners about
Of his offering and eke of his substance.

490  He could in little thing have suffisance.

\textsuperscript{1} 467: “She knew plenty about travelling”. Chaucer does not explain, and the reader is probably not expected to ask, how the Wife managed to marry five husbands and be a renowned maker of cloth while taking in pilgrimage as a kind of third occupation. Going to Jerusalem from England three times was an extraordinary feat in the Middle Ages. This list is, like some of those already encountered, a deliberate exaggeration, as is everything else about the Wife.

\textsuperscript{2} 470: A wimple was a woman's cloth headgear covering the ears, the neck and the chin.

\textsuperscript{3} 476: She was an old hand at this game.

\textsuperscript{4} 486: “He was very reluctant to excommunicate a parishioner for not paying tithes,” i.e. the tenth part of one's income due to the Church.
He ministers to his flock without any worldly ambition

Wide was his parish and houses far asunder
But he ne lefte not, for rain nor thunder
In sickness nor in mischief, to visit
The furthest in his parish, much and little,

Upon his feet, and in his hand a stave.
This noble example unto his sheep he gave
That first he wrought and afterwards he taught:
Out of the gospel he those wordës caught
And this figure he added eke thereto:

"That if gold rustë, what shall iron do?"
For if a priest be foule (in whom we trust)
No wonder is a lewëd man to rust
And shame it is, if that a priest take keep,
A shitën shepherd and a cleanë sheep.

He sets a good example and practises what he preaches

Well ought a priest example for to give
By his cleanness, how that his sheep should live.
He sette not his benefice to hire
And let his sheep encumbred in the mire
And ran to London unto Saintë Paul’s

To seekë him a chantëry for souls
Or with a brotherhood to be withhold,
But dwelt at home, and keptë well his fold,
So that the wolf ne made it not miscarry;
He was a shepherd and not a mercenary.

And though he holy were and virtuous,
He was to sinful men not despitous
Nor of his speechë daungerous nor dignë,
But in his teaching discreet and benign.

To drawën folk to heaven with fairness
By good example, this was his business.

---

1 507-12: The "not" that goes with "set" also goes with "let" and "ran" (508-9). It was not uncommon for a priest in a parish in the country to rent the parish to a poorer priest, and take off to London to look for a better job, like saying mass every day for people who had died leaving money in their wills for that purpose (chantries for souls), or doing the light spiritual work for a brotherhood or fraternity of the kind to which the guildsmen belonged (see above 361-4). Our parson did not do this, but stayed in his parish and looked after his parishioners (sheep, fold) like a good shepherd.
But it were any person obstinate,
What so he were of high or low estate,
Him would he snibb sharply for the nonès.
A better priest I trow there nowhere none is.
He waited after no pomp and reverence
Nor makéd him a spicéd conscience,
But Christ's lore, and his apostles' twelve
He taught, but first he followed it himself.¹

His brother, the Plowman, probably the lowest in social rank on the pilgrimage is one of the highest in spirituality, the perfect lay Christian, the secular counterpart of his cleric brother.

With him there was a PLOUGHMAN was his brother
That had y-laid of dung full many a fodder.
A true swinker and a good was he,
Living in peace and perfect charity.
God loved he best with all his wholé heart
At allè timès, though him gamed or smart,
And then his neighebour right as himself.
He wouldé thresh, and thereto dike and delve
For Christé's sake, with every poorè wight
Without hire, if it lay in his might.
His tithès payèd he full fair and well
Both of his proper swink and his chattel.²
In a tabard he rode upon a mare.

We now come to a group of rogues and churls with whom the poet amusingly lumps himself.
You may well ask what some of these people are doing on a pilgrimage.

There was also a REEVE and a MILLÉR
A SUMMONER and a PARDONER also,
A MANCIPLE and myself, there were no more.

The Miller is a miller of other people's grain, who does not always give honest weight. He is a big, brawny, crude man whose idea of fun is smashing doors down with his head or telling vulgar stories.

¹ 527-8: "He taught Christ's doctrine and that of His twelve apostles, but first he practised it himself."
² 540: The phrase seems to mean "from the wages for his work (swink), and the value of his property (chattel)" or possibly that he paid his tithes to the church partly in work, partly in kind.
The MILLER was a stout carl for the nones. Full big he was of brawn and eke of bones. That proved well, for over all there he came.
At wrestling he would have always the ram.
He was short-shouldered, broad, a thické knarre.

There was no door that he n'ould heave off harre\textsuperscript{1} or break it at a running with his head.
His beard as any sow or fox was red,
And thereto broad as though it were a spade.
Upon the copright of his nose he had a wart, and thereon stood a tuft of hairs
Red as the bristles of a sowē's ears.
His nostrils blackē were and wide.
A sword and buckler bore he by his side.
His mouth as great was as a great furnace.

He was a jangler and a goliardese
And that was most of sin and harlotries.
Well could he stealen corn and toll thrice,
And yet he had a thumb of gold pardee.\textsuperscript{2}
A white coat and a blue hood wearèd he.
A bagpipe well could he blow and sound
And therewithal he brought us out of town.

The Manciple is in charge of buying provisions for a group of Lawyers in London, but is shrewder in his management than all of them put together.

A gentle MANCIPLE was there of a temple\textsuperscript{3}
Of which achatours mightè take example
For to be wise in buying of vitaille;
For whether that he paid or took by taille
Algate he waited so in his achaté

\textsuperscript{1} 550: "There was no door that he could not heave off its hinges (harre)."

\textsuperscript{2} 563: A phrase hard to explain. It is sometimes said to allude to a saying that an honest miller had a thumb of gold, i.e. there is no such thing as an honest miller. But the phrase "And yet" after the information that the miller is a thief, would seem to preclude that meaning, or another that has been suggested: his thumb, held on the weighing scale, produced gold.

\textsuperscript{3} 567: A manciple was a buying agent for a college or, as here, for one of the Inns of Court, the Temple, an association of lawyers, once the home of the Knights Templar. Clearly the meaning of the word "gentle" here as with the Pardoner later, has nothing to do with good breeding or "gentle" birth. Presumably it does not mean "gentle" in our sense either. Its connotations are hard to be sure of. See "ENDPAPERS."
That he was aye before and in good state.  

Now is not that of God a full great grace  
That such a lewèd manne’s wit shall pass  

The wisdom of a heap of learned men?  
Of masters had he more than thricé ten  
That were of law expér’t and curious  
Of which there were a dozen in that house  
Worthy to be stewardés of rent and land  

Of any lord that is in Engeland  
To make him livè by his proper good  
In honor debtless, but if he were wood,  
Or live as scarcely as him list desire;¹  
And able for to helpèn all a shire  

In any case that mightè fall or hap.  
And yet this manceple set their aller cap.  

---

The Reyve is the shrewd manager of a country estate. Old and suspicious, he is also a choleric man, that is he has a short temper that matches his skinny frame.  

The REEVÉ was a slender, choleric man.²  
His beard was shaved as nigh as ever he can.  
His hair was by his ears full round y-shorn,  

His top was dockèd like a priest beforne.  
Full longè were his leggès and full lean  
Y-like a staff; there was no calf y-seen.  
Well could he keep a garner and a bin;  
There was no auditor could on him win.  

Well wist he by the drought and by the rain  
The yielding of his seed and of his grain.  
His lordè’s sheep, his neat, his dairy,  
His swine, his horse, his store and his poultry  
Was wholly in this Reeve’s governing,  

And by his covenant gave the reckoning  
Since that his lord was twenty years of age.  
There could no man bring him in arreärage.  
There was no bailiff, herd nor other hine  

---

¹ 576-583: He worked for more than thirty learned lawyers, at least a dozen of whom could manage the legal and financial affairs of any lord in England, and who could show him how to live up to his rank (in honor) within his income (debtless), unless he was mad; or how to live as frugally as he wished.  

² 587: A reeve was a manager of a country estate.
That he ne knew his sleight and his covine. 
605 They were adread of him as of the death.

*Though he has made sure that no one takes advantage of him, he seems to have taken advantage of his young lord.*

His woning was full fair upon a heath: 
With greenë trees y-shadowed was his place. 
He coulde better than his lord purchase. 
Full rich he was astorèd privily. 
610 His lord well could he pleasèn subtly 
To give and lend him of his ownë good,  
And have a thank and yet a coat and hood. 
In youth he learned had a good mystèr: 
He was a well good wright, a carpentér. 
615 This Reevè sat upon a well good stot 
That was a pomely grey, and highte Scot. 
A long surcoat of perse upon he had 
And by his side he bore a rusty blade. 
Of Norfolk was this Reeve of which I tell 
620 Beside a town men clepèn Baldeswell. 
Tuckèd he was, as is a friar, about, 
And ever he rode the hindrest of our rout.

*The unlovely Summoner, and his unsavory habits*

A SUMMONER was there with us in that place  
That had a fire-red cherubinnè's face, 
625 For saucèfleme he was with eyen narrow. 
And hot he was and lecherous as a sparrow. 

---

1 610-11: It is not clear whether the Reeve sometimes lends money to his master from his (i.e. the Reeve's) resources or from his lord's own resources but giving the impression that the Reeve is the lender.

2 623: A Summoner was a man who delivered summonses for alleged public sinners to appear at the Archdeacon's ecclesiastical court when accused of public immorality. The job offered opportunities for serious abuse such as bribery, extortion, and especially blackmail of those who went with prostitutes, many of whom the summoner used himself, and all of them in his pay. His disgusting physical appearance is meant to suggest his wretched spiritual condition.

3 624: Medieval artists painted the faces of cherubs red. The summoner is of course less cherubic than satanic, his appearance being evidence of his vices.

4 626: Sparrows were Venus's birds, considered lecherous presumably because they were so many.
With scaled brows black, and piled beard,  
Of his visage children were afeared.  
There n'as quicksilver, litharge nor brimstone,  
Boras, ceruse, nor oil of tartar none,  
Nor ointment that would cleanse and bite  
That him might helpen of his whelkès white,  
Nor of the knobbès sitting on his cheeks.  
Well loved he garlic, onion and eke leeks,  
And for to drinken strong wine red as blood;  
Then would he speak and cry as he were wood.  
And when that he well drunken had the wine,  
Then would he speake no word but Latin.  
A fewè termès had he, two or three,  
That he had learnèd out of some decree.  
No wonder is; he heard it all the day.  
And eke you knowèn well how that a jay  
Can clepèn "Wat" as well as can the Pope.  
But whoso could in other things him grope,  
Then had he spent all his philosophy.  
Aye, "Questio quid juris" would he cry.¹
He was a gentle harlot, and a kind.  
A better fellow shouldè men not find:  
He wouldè suffer for a quart of wine  
A good fellow to have his concubine  
A twelvemonth, and excuse him at the full.  
Full privily a finch eke could he pull.²
And if he found owhere a good fellow,  
In such a case, of the archdeacon's curse,  
But if a manne's soul were in his purse,  
For in his purse he should y-punished be.  
"Purse is the archdeacon's hell," said he.  
But well I wot, he lièd right indeed.  
Of cursing ought each guilty man to dread,  
For curse will slay right as assoiling saveth  
And also 'ware him of "Significavit."³

¹ 646: "The question is: What is the law?" This is a lawyer's phrase which the Summoner heard regularly in the archdeacon's court.

² 652: "Secretly he would enjoy a girl himself" or "He could do a clever trick."

³ 662: The writ of excommunication began with the word "Significavit."
In daunger had he, at his ownè guise
The youngè girls of the diocese
And knew their counsel and was all their redde.
A garland had he set upon his head
As great as it were for an aléstake.
A buckler had he made him of a cake.

With the disgusting Summoner is his friend, his singing partner and possibly his lover,
the even more corrupt Pardoner

With him there rode a gentle PARDONER
Of Rouncival, his friend and his compeer
That straight was comèn from the court of Rome.
Full loud he sang "Come hither love to me."
This Summoner bore to him a stiff burdoun.
Was never trump of half so great a sound.
This pardoner had hair as yellow as wax
But smooth it hung as does a strike of flax.
By ounces hung his lockès that he had,
And therewith he his shoulders overspread.
But thin it lay, by colpons, one by one,
But hood, for jollity, wearèd he none,
For it was trussèd up in his wallet:
Him thought he rode all of the newè jet,
Dishevelled; save his cap he rode all bare.
Such glaring eyen had he as a hare.
A vernicle had he sewed upon his cap.

---

1 664: girls probably meant "prostitutes," as it still can. See "Friars Tale," 1355 ff for further information on the activities of summoners.

2 667: A tavern "sign" was a large wreath or broom on a pole. Acting the buffoon, the Summoner has also turned a thin cake into a shield.

3 669: The Pardoner professes to give gullible people pardon for their sins in exchange for money, as well as a view of his pretended holy relics which will bring them blessings. He too is physically repellent. His high voice and beardlessness suggest that he is not a full man but something eunuch-like, again a metaphor for his sterile spiritual state. His headquarters were at Rouncival near Charing Cross in London. See ENDPAPERS; and also for "gentle".

4 672: The Pardoner's relationship to the Summoner is not obvious but appears to be sexual in some way. The rhyme Rome / to me may have been forced or comic even in Chaucer's day; it is impossible or ludicrous today.

5 685: vernicle: a badge with an image of Christ's face as it was believed to have been imprinted on the veil of Veronica when she wiped His face on the way to Calvary. Such badges were frequently sold to pilgrims.
The offertory was that part of the Mass where the bread and wine were first offered by the priest. It was also the point at which the people made their offerings to the parish priest, and to the Pardoner when he was there. The prospect of money put him in good voice.

His wallet lay before him in his lap
Bretfull of pardons, come from Rome all hot.
A voice he had as small as hath a goat.
No beard had he nor never should he have;
As smooth it was as it were late y-shave.
I trow he were a gelding or a mare.

690

His "relics"

But of his craft, from Berwick unto Ware
Ne was there such another pardonner,
For in his mail he had a pillowber
Which that he saidë was Our Lady's veil.
He said he had a gobbet of the sail
That Saintê Peter had when that he went
Upon the sea, till Jesus Christ him hent.
He had a cross of latten full of stones
And in a glass he hadde piggës' bones.

695

His skill in reading, preaching and extracting money from people

But with these "relics" when that he [had] found
A poorë parson dwelling upon land,
Upon one day he got him more money
Than that the parson got in monthes tway;
And thus, with feignëd flattery and japes
He made the parson and the people his apes.
But truly, to tellën at the last,
He was in church a noble ecclesiast.
Well could he read a lesson and a story.

700

But alderbest he sang an offertory ¹
For well he wistë when that song was sung
He mustë preach and well afile his tongue
To winne silver as he full well could.
Therefore he sang the merrierly and loud.

710

This is the end of the portraits of the pilgrims.

¹ 710: The offertory was that part of the Mass where the bread and wine were first offered by the priest. It was also the point at which the people made their offerings to the parish priest, and to the Pardoner when he was there. The prospect of money put him in good voice.
Now have I told you soothly in a clause
Th'estate, th'array, the number, and eke the cause
Why that assembled was this company
In Southwark at this gentle hostelry
That hight The Tabard, fastè by The Bell.

But now is time to you for to tell
How that we borèn us that ilkè night
When we were in that hostelry alight;
And after will I tell of our viage
And all the remnant of our pilgrimage.

The poet offers a comic apologia for the matter and language of some of the pilgrims.

But first I pray you of your courtesy
That you n'arrette it not my villainy
Though that I plainly speak in this matter
To tell ye their wordès and their cheer,
Not though I speak their wordès properly,
For this you knowen all as well as I:
Whoso shall tell a tale after a man
He must rehearse as nigh as ever he can
Ever each a word, if it be in his charge,
All speak he ne'er so rudely and large,
Or else must he tell his tale untrue
Or feignè things or findèn wordès new.
He may not spare, although he were his brother.
He may as well say one word as another.
Christ spoke himself full broad in Holy Writ
And well you wot no villainy is it.
Eke Plato sayeth, whoso can him read:
"The wordès must be cousin to the deed."
Also I pray you to forgive it me
All have I not set folk in their degree
My wit is short, you may well understand.

1 726: "That you do not blame it on my bad manners." Villainy means conduct associated with villeins, the lowest social class. This apologia by Chaucer (725-742) is both comic and serious: comic because it apologizes for the way fictional characters behave as if they were real people and not Chaucer's creations; serious in that it shows Chaucer sensitive to the possibility that part of his audience might take offence at some of his characters, their words and tales, especially perhaps the parts highly critical of Church and churchmen, as well as the tales of sexual misbehavior. Even the poet Dryden (in the Restoration!) and some twentieth-century critics have thought the apology was needed.
After serving dinner, Harry Bailly, the fictional Host or owner of the Tabard Inn originates the idea for the Tales:

Great cheerè made our HOST us every one,¹
And to the supper set he us anon.
He servèd us with victuals at the best.

750 Strong was the wine and well to drink us lest.
A seemly man our Hostè was withall
For to be a marshall in a hall.
A largè man he was with eyen steep
A fairer burgess was there none in Cheap.

755 Bold of his speech and wise and well y-taught
And of manhood him lackèd right naught.
Eke thereto he was right a merry man,
And after supper playèn he began
And spoke of mirthè amongst other things,

760 (When that we had made our reckonings),
And saide thus: "Now, lوردings, truly
You be to me right welcome heartily,
For by my truth, if that I shall not lie,
I saw not this year so merry a company

765 At oncè in this harbor as is now.
Fain would I do you mirthè, wist I how,
And of a mirth I am right now bethought
To do you ease, and it shall costè naught.
You go to Canterbury, God you speed.

770 The blissful martyr 'quitè you your meed.
And well I wot, as you go by the way,
You shapèn you to talèn and to play;
For truly, comfort nor mirth is none
To ridèn by the way dumb as a stone;

775 And therefore would I maken you desport
As I said erst, and do you some comfort.
And if you liketh all by one assent
For to standen at my judgèment
And for to workèn as I shall you say,

780 Tomorrow when you ridèn by the way,

¹ 747: “The Host had a warm welcome for every one of us.” The Host is the innkeeper of The Tabard, Harry Bailly.
Now by my father's soule that is dead,\(^1\)
But you be merry, I'll give you my head.
Hold up your hands withouten morë speech."
Our counsel was not longë for to seek.

*The pilgrims agree to hear his idea*

785  Us thought it was not worth to make it wise,
And granted him withouten more advice,
And bade him say his verdict as him lest.

*To pass the time pleasantly, every one will tell a couple of tales on the way out
and a couple on the way back.*

"Lordings," quod he, "now hearken for the best,
But take it not, I pray you, in disdain.

790  This is the point -- to speaken short and plain:
That each of you to shorten with our way
In this viage, shall tellen tales tway
To Canterbury-ward, I mean it so,
And homeward he shall tellen other two

795  Of áventures that whilom have befall.

*The teller of the best tale will get a dinner paid for by all the others at Harry's inn, The Tabard,
on the way back from Canterbury. He offers to go with them as a guide*

And which of you that bears him best of all,
That is to say, that telleth in this case
Tales of best senténce and most soláce,
Shall have a supper at our aller cost

800  Here in this place, sitting by this post
When that we come again from Canterbury.
And for to makën you the morë merry
I will myselfen goodly with you ride
Right at mine ownë cost, and be your guide.

805  And whoso will my judgëment withsay
Shall pay all that we spendën by the way, \(^2\)

---

\(^1\) 781: "Now, by the soul of my dead father ..."

\(^2\) The host will be the Master of Ceremonies and judge. Anyone who revolts against the Host's rulings will have to pay what the others spend along the way.
And if you vouchesafe that it be so, 
Tell me anon withouten wordes mo’ 
And I will early shap’en me therefore."

They all accept, agreeing that the Host be MC, and then they go to bed.

This thing was granted and our oathës swore 
With full glad heart, and prayèd him also 
That he would vouchësafe for to do so 
And that he wouldè be our governor 
And of our talës judge and reporter, 
And set a supper at a certain price,
And we will ruled be at his device 
In high and low; and thus by one assent 
We been accorded to his judgëmt. 
And thereupon the wine was fetched anon.

We dranken, and to restë went each one 
Withoutèn any longer tarrying.

The next morning they set out and draw lots to see who shall tell the first tale.

A-morrow, when the day began to spring 
Up rose our Host, and was our aller cock,¹ 
And gathered us together in a flock, 
And forth we rode a little more than pace 
Unto the watering of St Thomas. 
And there our Host began his horse arrest, 
And saidë: "Lordings, hearkën if you lest. 
You wot your forward (and I it you record)
And that he would be our governor 
And of our tales judge and reporter,
And set a supper at a certain price,
And we will ruled be at his device 
In high and low; and thus by one assent 
We been accorded to his judgement.
And thereupon the wine was fetched anon.

We dranken, and to rest went each one
Without any longer tarrying.

The next morning they set out and draw lots to see who shall tell the first tale.

A-morrow, when the day began to spring
Up rose our Host, and was our aller cock,¹
And gathered us together in a flock,
And forth we rode a little more than pace
Unto the watering of St Thomas.
And there our Host began his horse arrest,
And said: "Lordings, hearken if you lest.
You know (wot) your agreement (forward), and I remind (record) you of it, if evening hymn and morning hymn agree," i.e. if what you said last night still holds this morning.

¹ 823: "He was the cock (rooster) for all of us." That is, he got us all up at cockcrow.

² 825-30: They set out at a gentle pace, and at the first watering place for the horses, (the watering of St. Thomas) the Host says: "Ladies and gentlemen, listen please. You know (wot) your agreement (forward), and I remind (record) you of it, if evening hymn and morning hymn agree," i.e. if what you said last night still holds this morning.
He which that has the shortest shall begin.
   Sir Knight," quod he, "my master and my lord,
Now draweth cut, for that is mine accord.
Come near," quod he, "my lady Prioress.

840  And you, Sir Clerk, let be your shamefastness,
Nor study not. Lay hand to, every man."

_They all draw lots. It falls to the Knight to tell the first tale_

Anon to drawën every wight began
And shortly for to tellyn as it was,
Were it by áventure or sort or cas,
   The sooth is this, the cut fell to the knight,
Of which full blithe and glad was every wight.
And tell he must his tale as was reason
By forward and by composition
   As you have heard. What needeth wordës mo'?
850  And when this good man saw that it was so,
As he that wise was and obedient
To keep his forward by his free assent,
He said: "Since I shall begin the game,
   What! welcome be the cut, in God's name.
855  Now let us ride, and hearkën what I say."
   And with that word we ridën forth our way
And he began with right a merry cheer
His tale anon, and said as you may hear.
ENDPAPERS / SPECIAL GLOSSARY

AUTHORITY, Auctoritee, Authors: The literate in the Middle Ages were remarkably bookish in spite of or because of the scarcity of books. They had a great, perhaps inordinate, regard for "authority," that is, established "authors": philosophers of the ancient world, classical poets, the Bible, the Church Fathers, historians, theologians, etc. Citing an "authority" was then, as now, often a substitute for producing a good argument, and then, as now, always useful to bolster an argument. The opening line of the Wife of Bath's Prologue uses "authority" to mean something like "theory"--what you find in books-- as opposed to "experience"--what you find in life.

CLERK: Strictly speaking a member of the clergy, either a priest or in the preliminary stages leading up to the priesthood, called "minor orders." Learning and even literacy were largely confined to such people, but anyone who who could read and write as well as someone who was genuinely learned could be called a clerk. A student, something in between, was also a clerk. The Wife of Bath marries for her fifth husband, a man who had been a clerk at Oxford, a student who had perhaps had ideas at one time of becoming a cleric.

"CHURL, churlish": At the opposite end of the social scale and the scale of manners from "gentil" (See below). A "churl" (OE "ceorl") was a common man of low rank. Hence the manners to be expected from a person of such "low birth" were equally low and vulgar, "churlish." "Villain" and "villainy" are rough equivalents also used by Chaucer.

COMPLEXION: See Humor below

COURTESY, Courteous, Courtoisie, etc.: Courtesy was literally conduct appropriate to the court of the king or other worthy. This, no doubt, included our sense of "courtesy" but was wider in its application, referring to the manners of all well bred people. The Prioress's concern to "counterfeit cheer of court" presumably involves imitating all the mannerisms thought appropriate to courtiers. Sometimes it is used to mean something like right, i.e. moral, conduct.

DAUN, Don: Sir. A term of respect for nobles or for clerics like the monk. The Wife of Bath refers to the wise "king Daun Solomon," a place where it would be wise to leave the word untranslated. But Chaucer uses it also of Gervase, the blacksmith in the "Miller's Tale." And Spenser used it of Chaucer himself.

DAUNGER, Daungerous: These do not mean modern "danger" and "dangerous." "Daunger" (from OF "daungier") meant power. The Summoner is said to have the prostitutes in his "daunger". In romantic tales it is the power that a woman had over a man who was sexually attracted by her. She...
was his "Mistress" in the sense that she had power over him, often to refuse him the least sexual favor. Hence "daungerous" was a word often used of a woman who was "hard-to-get" or over-demanding or disdainful, haughty, aloof.

"GENTLE, Gentil, Gentilesse, Gentleness: "Gentilesse" (Gentleness) is the quality of being "gentil" or "gentle" i.e. born into the upper class, and having "noble" qualities that were supposed to go with noble birth. It survives in the word "gentleman" especially in a phrase like "an officer & a gentleman" since officers traditionally were members of the ruling class. Chaucer seems to have had a healthy sceptical bourgeois view of the notion that "gentilesse" went always with "gentle" birth. See the lecture on the subject given by the "hag" in the Wife of Bath's Tale (1109-1176). But since "gentle" is used also to describe the Tabard Inn and the two greatest scoundrels on the pilgrimage, the Summoner and the Pardoner, one must suppose that it had a wide range of meanings, some of them perhaps ironic.

HUMOR (Lat. humor--fluid, moisture)/COMPLEXION: Classical, medieval and Renaissance physiologists saw the human body as composed of four fluids or humors: yellow bile, black bile, blood and phlegm. Perfect physical health and intellectual excellence were seen as resulting from the presence of these four humors in proper balance and combination.

Medieval philosophers and physiologists, seeing man as a microcosm, corresponded each bodily humor to one of the four elements--fire, water, earth, air. As Antony says of Brutus in Julius Caesar

```
His life was gentle, and the elements
So mixed in him that Nature might stand up
And say to all the world "This was a man"
```

(V,v,73-75).

Pain or illness was attributed to an imbalance in these bodily fluids, and an overabundance of any single humor was thought to give a person a particular personality referred to as "humor" or "complexion." The correspondences went something like this:

- Fire--Yellow or Red Bile (Choler)--Choleric, i.e. prone to anger
- Earth--Black Bile--melancholic i.e. prone to sadness
- Water--Blood--sanguine--inclined to cheerfulness, optimism
- Air--Phlegm--phlegmatic--prone to apathy, slow
Too much red bile or choler could make you have nightmares in which red things figured; with too much black bile you would dream about black monsters. (See *Nun's Priest's Tale*, ll. 4120-26). "Of his complexion he was sanguine" is said of the Franklin in the *General Prologue*. Similarly, "The Reeve was a slender choleric man" (G.P. 589). The Franklin's "complexion" (i.e. humor) makes him cheerful, and the Reeve's makes him cranky. A person's temperament was often visible in his face, hence our modern usage of "complexion." Even when the physiological theory of humors had long been abandoned, the word "humor" retained the meaning of "mood" or "personality." And we still speak of being in a good or bad humor.

**LORDINGS:** Something like "Ladies and Gentlemen." The first citation in OED contrasts "lordings" with "underlings." "Lordings" is used by both the Host and the Pardoner to address the rest of the pilgrims, not one of whom is a lord, though the Host also calls them "lords."

**NONE:** For the Nones; For the Nonce: literally "for the once," "for the occasion," but this meaning often does not fit the context in Chaucer, where the expression is frequently untranslateable, and is used simply as a largely meaningless tag, sometimes just for the sake of the rime.

**PARDONER:** The Church taught that one could get forgiveness for one's sins by confessing them to a priest, expressing genuine regret and a firm intention to mend one's ways. In God's name the priest granted absolution, and imposed some kind of penance for the sin. Instead of a physical penance like fasting, one might obtain an "indulgence" by, say, going on pilgrimage, or giving money to the poor or to another good cause like the building of a church.

There were legitimate Church pardoners licenced to collect moneys of this kind and to assure the people in the name of the Church that their almsgiving entitled them to an "indulgence." Even with the best of intentions, this practice was liable to abuse. For "where there is money there is muck," and illegitimate pardoners abounded in spite of regular Church prohibitions. They were sometimes, presumably, helped by gullible or corrupt clerics for a fee or a share of the takings. Our Pardoner tells ignorant people that if they give money to a good cause—which he somehow represents—they will be doing penance for their sins and can even omit the painful business of confession; that, in fact, he can absolve them from their sins for money. This was, of course, against all Church law and teaching.

**SHREW:** "Shrew, shrewed, beshrew" occur constantly in the Tales and are particularly difficult to gloss. The reader is best off providing his own equivalent in phrases like "old dotard shrew" (291) or "I beshrew thy face."

**SILLY, SELY:** Originally in Old English "sælig" = "blessed." By ME it still sometimes seems to retain some of this sense. It also means something like "simple", including perhaps "simpleminded" as in
the case of the Carpenter John in the "Millers Tale." The Host's reference to the "silly maid" after the Physician's Tale means something like "poor girl." and the "sely widow" of "Nuns Priests Tale" is a "poor widow" in the same sense. The Wife of Bath refers to the genital organ of the male as "his silly instrument."

**SUMMONER:** A man who delivered summonses for accused people to appear before an ecclesiastical court for infringements of morals or of ecclesiastical laws. He operated in a society where sin and crime were not as sharply differentiated as they are in our society. This inevitably led to abuse. Our summoner abuses his position by committing the very sins he is supposed to be chastising. The Friars Tale, about a summoner, gives more details of the abuses: using information from prostitutes to blackmail clients; extracting money from others on the pretense that he had a summons when he had none, etc.

**SOLACE:** Comfort, pleasure, often of a quite physical, indeed sexual, nature, though not exclusively so.

**WIT:** Rarely if ever means a clever verbal and intellectual sally, as with us. It comes from the OE verb "witan," to know, and hence as a noun it means "knowledge" or "wisdom" "understanding" "comprehension," "mind," "intelligence" etc.