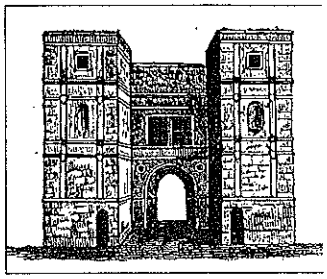
served as an attendant. Such a position was a vital means of advancement, teaching the young Chaucer the customs of upper-class life and bringing him into contact with influential people. It may have been during this period that Chaucer met Lionel's younger brother John of Gaunt, who would become Chaucer's lifelong patron and a leading political figure of the day.

While still a teenager, Chaucer joined the king's army to fight against the French in what we now call the Hundred Years' War. He was captured by the French during the siege of Rheims, and the king himself contributed to his ransom. Chaucer later served as a royal messenger, and he would be given more important diplomatic missions in years to come. His royal contacts also led to his marriage to Philippa, a lady in waiting to the queen, and his appointment as comptroller of customs for London in 1374.

Early Inspirations

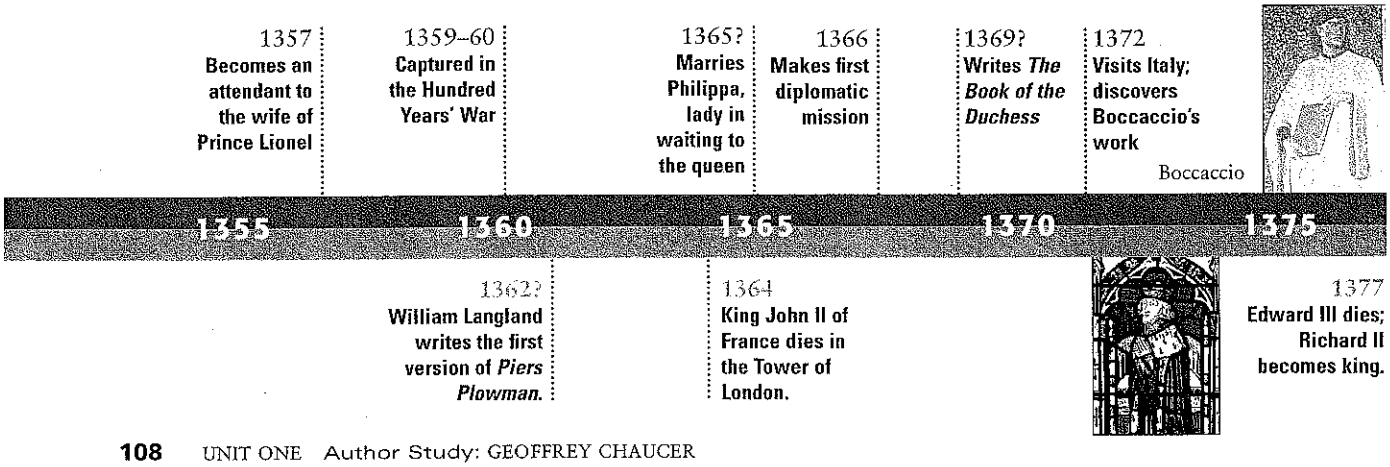
Chaucer's diplomatic travels to the European mainland exposed him to the latest in French and Italian literature—works that would stimulate his own writing. In Italy, for example, he discovered the works of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio. Chaucer's earliest major writing effort was probably an English translation of part of *The Romance of the Rose,* a famous medieval French verse romance. Not long afterward, he produced his first important original work, *The Book of the Duchess,* a long narrative poem paying tribute to Blanche, John of Gaunt's first wife, who died of plague in 1369. It was followed a few years later by *The House of Fame,* a humorous narrative about the instability of renown.



Chaucer's home above Aldgate in London from 1374–1385

Turbulent Times

Despite his writing successes, Chaucer's primary career remained one of politics and diplomacy. Unlike many other courtiers of the era, Chaucer continued to enjoy royal favor throughout the turbulent reign of Richard II, who was still only a boy when he became England's king in 1377. Chaucer's next major work, *The Parliament of Fowls,* was probably written to commemorate Richard's



marriage to Anne of Bohemia in 1382. Four years later, Chaucer was appointed a knight of the shire and became a member of Parliament. In the 1390s he continued to enjoy various royal appointments, including those of clerk of the king's works and subforester of a royal park.

Meanwhile, Richard II's reign was marked by conflict at home and abroad, including a peasants' revolt led by Wat Tyler and heightened agitation by the Lollards, a group of church reformers led by John Wycliffe. Finally, while Richard was off attempting to quell a rebellion in Ireland in 1399, his popular cousin Henry Bolingbroke wrested the throne from his control and was crowned as King Henry IV. The change of monarch did not affect Chaucer's political fortunes, since Henry was the son of Chaucer's longtime patron John of Gaunt. However, the writer had little time to enjoy the favor of the new monarch, for he died only a year after Henry came to the throne.

FRUITFUL YEARS The last two decades of Chaucer's life saw his finest literary achievements—the brilliant verse romance *Troilus and Criseyde* and his masterpiece, *The Canterbury Tales,* a collection of verse and prose tales of many different kinds. To join the stories together, Chaucer decided to pretend they are told by members of a group of travelers journeying from London to Canterbury. Though he may have written some of the stories earlier, most scholars think that he began organizing *The Canterbury Tales* about 1387. The work

LITERARY *Contributions*

Considered the greatest English writer before Shakespeare, Chaucer was praised in his lifetime and widely imitated after his death, when a group of 15th-century poets adopted his writing style. Later in the 15th century, when the printing press was introduced into England, *The Canterbury Tales* was among the first works to be printed.

Longer Poetic Works Chaucer is best known for his verse narratives. These include the following:

The Book of the Duchess
The House of Fame
The Parliament of Fowls
Troilus and Criseyde
The Legend of Good Women
The Canterbury Tales

Short Poems Chaucer also wrote several shorter poems, including these:

"Complaint to His Empty Purse"
"Words, to Adam, His Own Scrivener"
"Truth"
"Fortune"
"Gentilesse [Nobility]**"**
"Envoy [Message] **to Scogan"**
"Envoy [Message] **to Bukton"**

Prose As outgrowths of his scholarly interests, Chaucer produced these prose works:

The Consolation of Philosophy
(translated from the Latin of Boethius)
Treatise on the Astrolabe

1386 **Becomes a member of Parliament**

1387 **Begins to plan *The Canterbury Tales***

1389 **Appointed clerk of the king's works**

1400 **Dies and is buried in Westminster Abbey**

1380 | 1385 | 1390 | 1395 | 1400

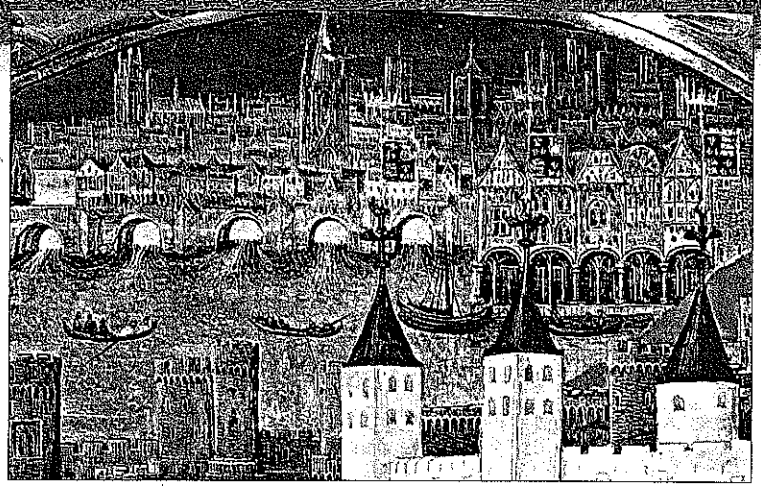
1381 **Peasants' Revolt breaks out.**

1382 **Richard II marries Anne of Bohemia.**

1388 **Opponents of Richard II execute eight of his friends.**

1395 **Lollards petition for church reform.**

1399 **Richard II is deposed; Henry IV becomes king.**



Chaucer's London

Originally a walled town built by the Romans London had become a bustling commercial city by Chaucer's day. Its walls enclosed a semicircular area of roughly a square mile, extending along the Thames River from the Tower of London to the Fleet River. On this small patch of land lived about 35,000 peopl plus rats and other vermin, crowded togethe in noisy, unsanitary conditions. A marsh outside the city's north wall, although little more than an open sewer, nevertheless afforded excellent diversion when frozen over in winte

was still unfinished at the time of his death; Chaucer had penned nearly 20,000 lines, but many more tales were planned.

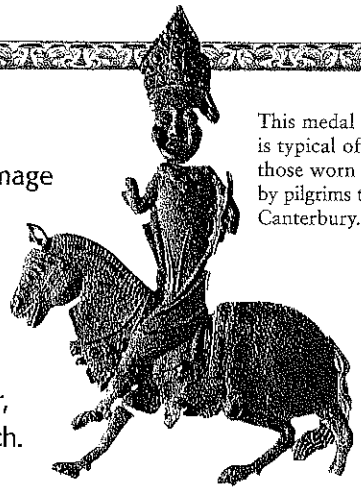
UNCOMMON HONOR When he died in 1400, Chaucer was accorded an honor rare for a commoner—burial in London's Westminster Abbey. In 1566 an admirer erected an elaborate marble tomb for his remains. This was the beginning of Westminster Abbey's famous Poets' Corner, where many other great English writers have since been buried.

Chaucer's attitude toward his great subsequent renown would probably be one c humility and amusement. In *The Canterbury Tales,* he portrayed himself as a short, plump slightly foolish pilgrim who commands no great respect. Yet from the mind of this gent poet came a host of memorable characters and some of the finest poetry ever created in the English language.

More Online: Author Link
www.mcdougallittell.com

The Shrine of Canterbury

The travelers in *The Canterbury Tales* are making a pilgrimage to the popular shrine of Saint Thomas à Becket in Canterbury. Becket was appointed archbishop of Canterbury by his friend King Henry II in 1162. However, after the two quarreled bitterly over the rights of the church, four of Henry's loyal knights murdered the archbishop in his own cathedral in 1170. Three years later, Becket was declared a saint by the Roman Catholic Church.



This medal is typical of those worn by pilgrims to Canterbury.

Comparing Literature of the World

The Canterbury Tales and *The Decameron*

If you wish to compare the storytelling tradition across cultures, you might read "Federigo's Falcon," the excerpt from *The Decameron* that follows the three excerpts from *The Canterbury Tales*. Points of Comparison between Chaucer's and Boccaccio's tales include the narrative structure of the frame story and the authors' focus on stories with love themes.

The Prologue
from The Canterbury Tales

Poetry by GEOFFREY CHAUCER
Translated by NEVILL COGHILL

Connect to Your Life

Story Time Recall a time when you and some friends told funny stories about growing up. What situations inspire people to tell stories? What role does an audience play in making the telling of a story more interesting? Share your thoughts in a class discussion.

Build Background

Medieval Story Time In the "Prologue," or introduction, from *The Canterbury Tales,* a group of travelers from various walks of life gather in an inn outside London to make a pilgrimage to the shrine of Saint Thomas à Becket in the city of Canterbury. At the suggestion of the innkeeper (the Host), the group decides to hold a storytelling competition to pass the time as they travel. The portion of *The Canterbury Tales* that follows the "Prologue" consists mainly of the stories that various pilgrims tell.

WORDS TO KNOW **Vocabulary Preview**

accrue	disdain	mode
agility	dispatch	personable
courtliness	eminent	repine
defer	frugal	sedately
diligent	malady	wield

Focus Your Reading

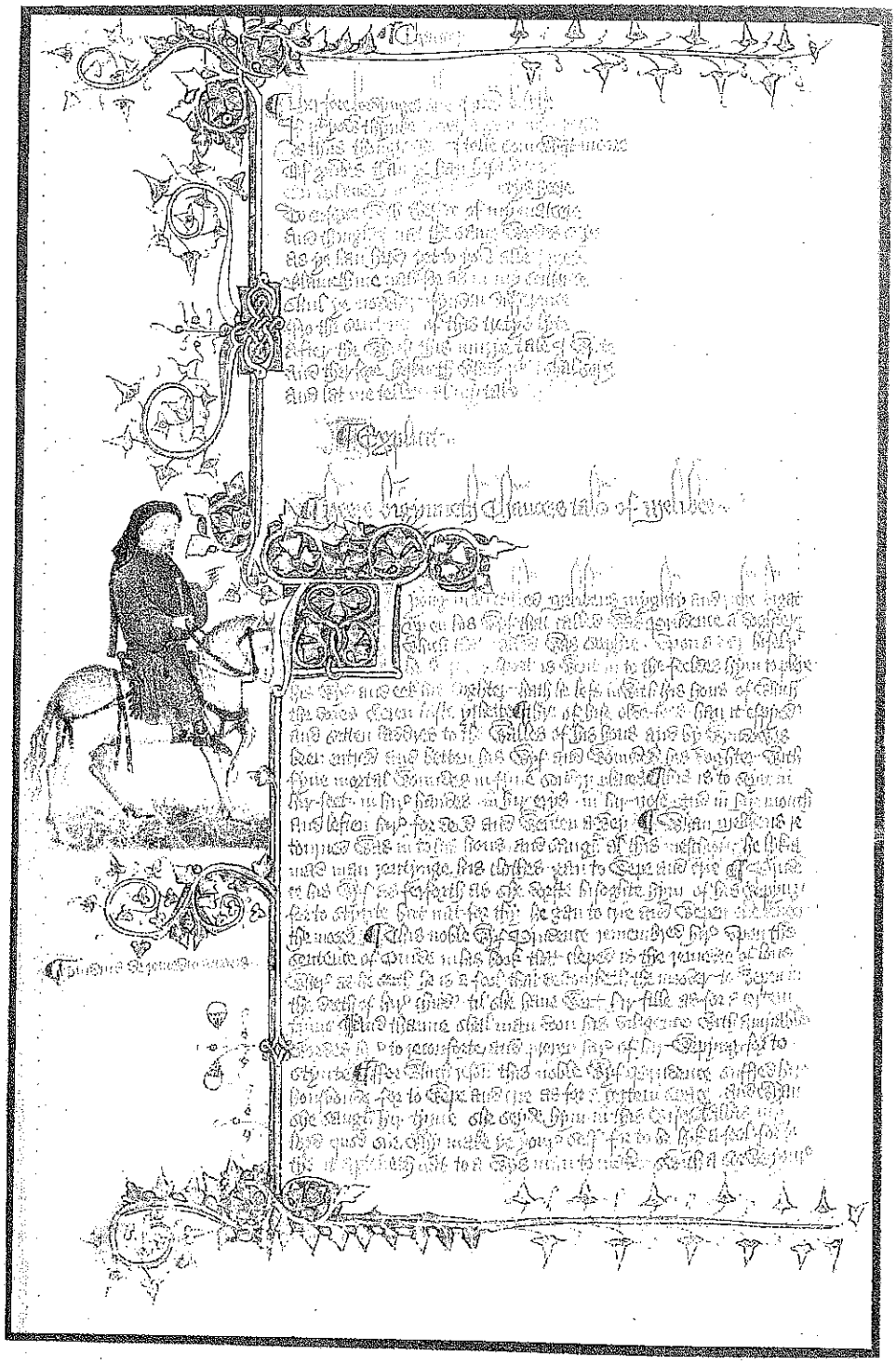
LITERARY ANALYSIS TONE The **tone** of a literary work expresses the writer's attitude toward the work's subject or characters. A tone, for example, may be formal or informal, amused or impatient. In the "Prologue" the narrator uses a detached, **ironic** tone, often understating his criticisms or saying the opposite of what he really thinks. For example, in the following lines Chaucer reveals his attitude toward a Friar who dispenses God's forgiveness ("absolution") freely, as long as he receives a donation—an attitude he probably expects the reader to share.

Sweetly he heard his penitents at shrift
With pleasant absolution, for a gift.

ACTIVE READING ANALYZING CHARACTERIZATION **Characterization** is the means by which a writer develops a **character**'s personality. A writer can use a number of techniques:

- description of the character's physical appearance
- presentation of the character's speech, thoughts, feelings, and actions
- presentation of other characters' speech, thoughts, feelings, and actions as they relate to the character

READER'S NOTEBOOK As you read the "Prologue," jot down words or phrases that convey the personalities of some of the characters the **narrator** describes, as well as the narrator himself. Be sure to include the Pardoner and the Wife of Bath.



Chaucer on horseback. From the Ellesmere manuscript, EL 26 c. 9, fol. 153v, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

from

Geoffrey Chaucer

The Canterbury Tales

The Prologue

When in April the sweet showers fall
And pierce the drought of March to the root, and all
The veins are bathed in liquor of such power
As brings about the engendering of the flower,
When also Zephyrus with his sweet breath
Exhales an air in every grove and heath
Upon the tender shoots, and the young sun
His half-course in the sign of the *Ram* has run,
And the small fowl are making melody
That sleep away the night with open eye
(So nature pricks them and their heart engages)
Then people long to go on pilgrimages
And palmers long to seek the stranger strands
Of far-off saints, hallowed in sundry lands,
And specially, from every shire's end
Of England, down to Canterbury they wend
To seek the holy blissful martyr, quick
To give his help to them when they were sick.

It happened in that season that one day
In Southwark, at *The Tabard,* as I lay
Ready to go on pilgrimage and start
For Canterbury, most devout at heart,
At night there came into that hostelry
Some nine and twenty in a company
Of sundry folk happening then to fall
In fellowship, and they were pilgrims all
That towards Canterbury meant to ride.

GUIDE FOR READING

5 Zephyrus (zĕf'ər-əs): the Greek god of the west wind (the blowing of which is viewed as a sign of spring). What detail or details in line 1 are reinforced here?

8 the Ram: Aries—one of the 12 groups of stars through which the sun appears to move in the course of the year. The sun completes its passage through Aries in mid-April.

13 palmers: people journeying to religious shrines; pilgrims; **strands:** shores.

14 sundry (sŭn'drē): various.

15 shire's: county's.

17 martyr: St. Thomas à Becket.

20 Southwark (sŭ*th*'ərk): in Chaucer's day, a town just south of London (now part of the city itself). The Tabard was an actual inn in Southwark.

23 hostelry (hŏs'təl-rē): inn.

The rooms and stables of the inn were wide;
They made us easy, all was of the best.
And, briefly, when the sun had gone to rest,
I'd spoken to them all upon the trip
And was soon one with them in fellowship,
Pledged to rise early and to take the way
To Canterbury, as you heard me say.

But none the less, while I have time and space,
Before my story takes a further pace,
It seems a reasonable thing to say
What their condition was, the full array
Of each of them, as it appeared to me,
According to profession and degree,
And what apparel they were riding in;
And at a Knight I therefore will begin.
There was a *Knight,* a most distinguished man,
Who from the day on which he first began
To ride abroad had followed chivalry,
Truth, honor, generousness and courtesy.
He had done nobly in his sovereign's war
And ridden into battle, no man more,
As well in Christian as in heathen places,
And ever honored for his noble graces.

When we took Alexandria, he was there.
He often sat at table in the chair
Of honor, above all nations, when in Prussia.
In Lithuania he had ridden, and Russia,
No Christian man so often, of his rank.
When, in Granada, Algeciras sank
Under assault, he had been there, and in
North Africa, raiding Benamarin;
In Anatolia he had been as well
And fought when Ayas and Attalia fell,
For all along the Mediterranean coast
He had embarked with many a noble host.
In fifteen mortal battles he had been
And jousted for our faith at Tramissene
Thrice in the lists, and always killed his man.
This same distinguished knight had led the van
Once with the Bey of Balat, doing work

35–41 What is the narrator goin to take time and space to do? What is he interrupting?

45 chivalry (shĭv'əl-rē): the code behavior of medieval knights, which stressed the values listed i line 46.

51 Alexandria: a city in Egypt, captured by European Christians 1365. All the places named in lin 51–64 were scenes of conflicts in which medieval Christians battle Muslims and other non-Christian peoples.

64 jousted: fought with a lance i an arranged battle against anoth knight.

65 thrice: three times; **lists:** fence areas for jousting.

66 van: vanguard—the troops foremost in an attack.

67 Bey of Balat: a Turkish ruler.

For him against another heathen Turk;
He was of sovereign value in all eyes.
And though so much distinguished, he was wise
And in his bearing modest as a maid.
He never yet a boorish thing had said
In all his life to any, come what might;
He was a true, a perfect gentle-knight.

Speaking of his equipment, he possessed
Fine horses, but he was not gaily dressed.
He wore a fustian tunic stained and dark
With smudges where his armor had left mark;
Just home from service, he had joined our ranks
To do his pilgrimage and render thanks.

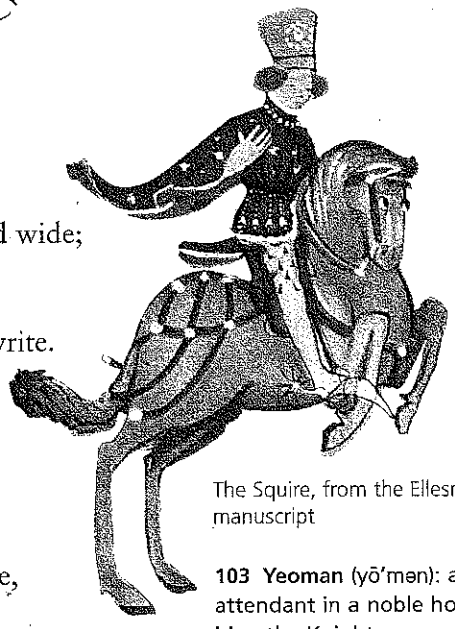
77 fustian (fŭs'chən): a strong cloth made of linen and cotton.

He had his son with him, a fine young *Squire,*
A lover and cadet, a lad of fire
With locks as curly as if they had been pressed.
He was some twenty years of age, I guessed.
In stature he was of a moderate length,
With wonderful agility and strength.
He'd seen some service with the cavalry
In Flanders and Artois and Picardy
And had done valiantly in little space
Of time, in hope to win his lady's grace.
He was embroidered like a meadow bright
And full of freshest flowers, red and white.
Singing he was, or fluting all the day;
He was as fresh as is the month of May.
Short was his gown, the sleeves were long and wide;
He knew the way to sit a horse and ride.
He could make songs and poems and recite,
Knew how to joust and dance, to draw and write.
He loved so hotly that till dawn grew pale
He slept as little as a nightingale.
Courteous he was, lowly and serviceable,
And carved to serve his father at the table.

81 Squire: a young man attending on and receiving training from a knight.

82 cadet: soldier in training.

88 Flanders and Artois (är-twä') **and Picardy** (pĭk'ər-dē): areas in what is now Belgium and northern France.



The Squire, from the Ellesmere manuscript

There was a *Yeoman* with him at his side,
No other servant; so he chose to ride.

103 Yeoman (yō'mən): an attendant in a noble household; **him:** the Knight.

WORDS TO KNOW **agility** (ə-jĭl'ĭ-tē) *n.* an ability to move quickly and easily; nimbleness

This Yeoman wore a coat and hood of green,
And peacock-feathered arrows, bright and keen
And neatly sheathed, hung at his belt the while
—For he could dress his gear in yeoman style,
His arrows never drooped their feathers low—
And in his hand he bore a mighty bow.
His head was like a nut, his face was brown.
He knew the whole of woodcraft up and down.
A saucy brace was on his arm to ward
It from the bow-string, and a shield and sword
Hung at one side, and at the other slipped
A jaunty dirk, spear-sharp and well-equipped.
A medal of St. Christopher he wore
Of shining silver on his breast, and bore
A hunting-horn, well slung and burnished clean,
That dangled from a baldrick of bright green.
He was a proper forester, I guess.

There also was a *Nun,* a Prioress,
Her way of smiling very simple and coy.
Her greatest oath was only "By St. Loy!"
And she was known as Madam Eglantyne.
And well she sang a service, with a fine
Intoning through her nose, as was most seemly,
And she spoke daintily in French, extremely,
After the school of Stratford-atte-Bowe;
French in the Paris style she did not know.
At meat her manners were well taught withal;
No morsel from her lips did she let fall,
Nor dipped her fingers in the sauce too deep;
But she could carry a morsel up and keep
The smallest drop from falling on her breast.
For courtliness she had a special zest,
And she would wipe her upper lip so clean
That not a trace of grease was to be seen
Upon the cup when she had drunk; to eat,
She reached a hand sedately for the meat.
She certainly was very entertaining,
Pleasant and friendly in her ways, and straining
To counterfeit a courtly kind of grace,
A stately bearing fitting to her place,

113 saucy: jaunty; stylish; **brace:** a leather arm-guard worn by archers

116 dirk: small dagger.

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

120 baldrick: shoulder strap.

122 Prioress: a nun ranking just below the abbess (head) of a convent.

124 St. Loy: St. Eligius (known as St. Eloi in France).

129 Stratford-atte-Bowe: a town (now part of London) near the Prioress's convent. How do you think the French spoken there differed from that spoken in Paris?

131 at meat: when dining; **withal:** moreover.


The Prioress

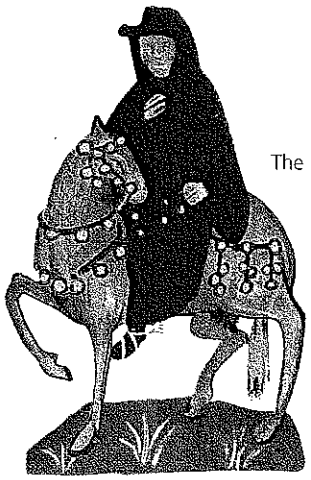
WORDS TO KNOW

courtliness (kôrt'lē-nĭs) *n.* refined behavior; elegance
sedately (sĭ-dāt'lē) *adv.* in a composed, dignified manner; calmly

And to seem dignified in all her dealings.
As for her sympathies and tender feelings,
She was so charitably solicitous
She used to weep if she but saw a mouse
Caught in a trap, if it were dead or bleeding.
And she had little dogs she would be feeding
With roasted flesh, or milk, or fine white bread.
And bitterly she wept if one were dead
Or someone took a stick and made it smart;
She was all sentiment and tender heart.
Her veil was gathered in a seemly way,
Her nose was elegant, her eyes glass-grey;
Her mouth was very small, but soft and red,
Her forehead, certainly, was fair of spread,
Almost a span across the brows, I own;
She was indeed by no means undergrown.
Her cloak, I noticed, had a graceful charm.
She wore a coral trinket on her arm,
A set of beads, the gaudies tricked in green,
Whence hung a golden brooch of brightest sheen
On which there first was graven a crowned A,
And lower, *Amor vincit omnia.*

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

A *Monk* there was, one of the finest sort
Who rode the country; hunting was his sport.
A manly man, to be an Abbot able;
Many a dainty horse he had in stable.
His bridle, when he rode, a man might hear
Jingling in a whistling wind as clear,
Aye, and as loud as does the chapel bell
Where my lord Monk was Prior of the cell.
The Rule of good St. Benet or St. Maur
As old and strict he tended to ignore;
He let go by the things of yesterday
And took the modern world's more spacious way.
He did not rate that text at a plucked hen
Which says that hunters are not holy men
And that a monk uncloistered is a mere
Fish out of water, flapping on the pier,



The Monk

159 span: a unit of length equal to nine inches. A broad forehead was considered a sign of beauty in Chaucer's day.

163 gaudies: the larger beads in a set of prayer beads.

166 *Amor vincit omnia* (ä'môr wĭn'kĭt ôm'nē-ə): Latin for "Love conquers all things."

171 Abbot: the head of a monastery.

172 dainty: excellent.

176 Prior of the cell: head of a subsidiary group of monks.

177 St. Benet . . . St. Maur: St. Benedict, who established a strict set of rules for monks' behavior, and his follower St. Maurus, who introduced those rules into France.

180 What does the narrator mean by "the modern world's more spacious way"?

That is to say a monk out of his cloister.
That was a text he held not worth an oyster;
And I agreed and said his views were sound;
Was he to study till his head went round
Poring over books in cloisters? Must he toil
As Austin bade and till the very soil?
Was he to leave the world upon the shelf?
Let Austin have his labor to himself.

190 Austin: St. Augustine of Hippo, who recommended that monks engage in hard agricultura labor.

This Monk was therefore a good man to horse;
Greyhounds he had, as swift as birds, to course.
Hunting a hare or riding at a fence
Was all his fun, he spared for no expense.
I saw his sleeves were garnished at the hand
With fine grey fur, the finest in the land,
And on his hood, to fasten it at his chin
He had a wrought-gold cunningly fashioned pin;
Into a lover's knot it seemed to pass.
His head was bald and shone like looking-glass;
So did his face, as if it had been greased.
He was a fat and personable priest;
His prominent eyeballs never seemed to settle.
They glittered like the flames beneath a kettle;
Supple his boots, his horse in fine condition.
He was a prelate fit for exhibition,
He was not pale like a tormented soul.
He liked a fat swan best, and roasted whole.
His palfrey was as brown as is a berry.

194 to course: for hunting.

208 prelate (prĕl'ĭt): high-ranking member of the clergy.

211 palfrey (pôl'frē): saddle horse.

212 Friar: a member of a religious group sworn to poverty and living on charitable donations; **wanton** (wŏn'tən): playful; jolly.

213 Limiter: a friar licensed to beg for donations in a limited area.

There was a *Friar,* a wanton one and merry,
A Limiter, a very festive fellow.
In all Four Orders there was none so mellow,
So glib with gallant phrase and well-turned speech.
He'd fixed up many a marriage, giving each
Of his young women what he could afford her.
He was a noble pillar to his Order.
Highly beloved and intimate was he
With County folk within his boundary,
And city dames of honor and possessions;
For he was qualified to hear confessions,
Or so he said, with more than priestly scope;

214 Four Orders: the four groups of friars—Dominican, Franciscan, Carmelite, and Augustinian.

222 confessions: church rites in which penitents (people seeking absolution, or formal forgiveness, for their sins) confess their sins to members of the clergy, who usuall require the penitents to perform certain tasks, called penances, as a condition of the forgiveness. Only certain friars were licensed to hear confessions.

WORDS TO KNOW **personable** (pûr'sə-nə-bəl) *adj.* pleasing in behavior and appearance

He had a special license from the Pope.
Sweetly he heard his penitents at shrift
With pleasant absolution, for a gift.
He was an easy man in penance-giving
Where he could hope to make a decent living;
It's a sure sign whenever gifts are given
To a poor Order that a man's well shriven,
And should he give enough he knew in verity
The penitent repented in sincerity.
For many a fellow is so hard of heart
He cannot weep, for all his inward smart.
Therefore instead of weeping and of prayer
One should give silver for a poor Friar's care.
He kept his tippet stuffed with pins for curls,
And pocket-knives, to give to pretty girls.
And certainly his voice was gay and sturdy,
For he sang well and played the hurdy-gurdy.
At sing-songs he was champion of the hour.
His neck was whiter than a lily-flower
But strong enough to butt a bruiser down.
He knew the taverns well in every town
And every innkeeper and barmaid too
Better than lepers, beggars and that crew,
For in so eminent a man as he
It was not fitting with the dignity
Of his position, dealing with a scum
Of wretched lepers; nothing good can come
Of commerce with such slum-and-gutter dwellers,
But only with the rich and victual-sellers.
But anywhere a profit might accrue
Courteous he was and lowly of service too.
Natural gifts like his were hard to match.
He was the finest beggar of his batch,
And, for his begging-district, paid a rent;
His brethren did no poaching where he went.
For though a widow mightn't have a shoe,
So pleasant was his holy how-d'ye-do
He got his farthing from her just the same
Before he left, and so his income came
To more than he laid out. And how he romped,
Just like a puppy! He was ever prompt

225 shrift: confession.

230 well shriven: completely forgiven through the rite of confession. What role does money seem to play in the confessions that the Friar hears?

231 verity: truth.

237 tippet: an extension of a hood or sleeve, used as a pocket.

240 hurdy-gurdy: a stringed musical instrument, similar to a lute, played by turning a crank while pressing down keys.

The Friar

252 victual (vĬt'l): food.

261 farthing: a coin of small value used in England until recent times.

WORDS TO KNOW

eminent (ĕm'ə-nənt) *adj.* standing out above others; high-ranking; prominent
accrue (ə-krōō') *v.* to come as gain; accumulate

To arbitrate disputes on settling days
(For a small fee) in many helpful ways,
Not then appearing as your cloistered scholar
With threadbare habit hardly worth a dollar,
But much more like a Doctor or a Pope.
Of double-worsted was the semi-cope
Upon his shoulders, and the swelling fold
About him, like a bell about its mold
When it is casting, rounded out his dress.
He lisped a little out of wantonness
To make his English sweet upon his tongue.
When he had played his harp, or having sung,
His eyes would twinkle in his head as bright
As any star upon a frosty night.
This worthy's name was Hubert, it appeared.

There was a *Merchant* with a forking beard
And motley dress; high on his horse he sat,
Upon his head a Flemish beaver hat
And on his feet daintily buckled boots.
He told of his opinions and pursuits
In solemn tones, he harped on his increase
Of capital; there should be sea-police
(He thought) upon the Harwich-Holland ranges;
He was expert at dabbling in exchanges.
This estimable Merchant so had set
His wits to work, none knew he was in debt,
He was so stately in administration,
In loans and bargains and negotiation.
He was an excellent fellow all the same;
To tell the truth I do not know his name.

An *Oxford Cleric,* still a student though,
One who had taken logic long ago,
Was there; his horse was thinner than a rake,
And he was not too fat, I undertake,
But had a hollow look, a sober stare;
The thread upon his overcoat was bare.
He had found no preferment in the church
And he was too unworldly to make search
For secular employment. By his bed
He preferred having twenty books in red

265 settling days: days on which disputes were settled out of court. Friars often acted as arbiters in the disputes and charged for their services, though forbidden by the church to do so.

270 double-worsted (wo͝os'tĭd): a strong, fairly costly fabric made from tightly twisted yarn; **semi-cope:** a short cloak.

281 motley: multicolored.

282 Flemish: from Flanders, an area in what is now Belgium and northern France.

287 Harwich-Holland ranges: shipping routes between Harwich (hăr' ĭj), a port on England's east coast, and the country of Holland.

288 exchanges: selling foreign currency at a profit. From his dabbling in this practice, which was illegal in Chaucer's day, what can you conclude about the Merchant?

295 Cleric: a clergyman—here, a student preparing for the priesthood.

301 preferment: advancement; promotion.

303 secular (sĕk'yə-lər): outside the church.

And black, of Aristotle's philosophy,
Than costly clothes, fiddle or psaltery.
Though a philosopher, as I have told,
He had not found the stone for making gold.
Whatever money from his friends he took
He spent on learning or another book
And prayed for them most earnestly, returning
Thanks to them thus for paying for his learning.
His only care was study, and indeed
He never spoke a word more than was need,
Formal at that, respectful in the extreme,
Short, to the point, and lofty in his theme.
A tone of moral virtue filled his speech
And gladly would he learn, and gladly teach.

A *Sergeant at the Law* who paid his calls,
Wary and wise, for clients at St. Paul's
There also was, of noted excellence.
Discreet he was, a man to reverence,
Or so he seemed, his sayings were so wise.
He often had been Justice of Assize
By letters patent, and in full commission.
His fame and learning and his high position
Had won him many a robe and many a fee.
There was no such conveyancer as he;
All was fee-simple to his strong digestion,
Not one conveyance could be called in question.
Though there was nowhere one so busy as he,
He was less busy than he seemed to be.
He knew of every judgement, case and crime
Ever recorded since King William's time.
He could dictate defenses or draft deeds;
No one could pinch a comma from his screeds
And he knew every statute off by rote.
He wore a homely parti-colored coat,
Girt with a silken belt of pin-stripe stuff;
Of his appearance I have said enough.

305 Aristotle's philosophy: the writings of Aristotle, a famous Greek philosopher of the fourth century B.C.

306 psaltery (sôl'tə-rē): a stringed instrument.

307–308 Though a philosopher . . . stone for making gold: Practitioners of the false science of alchemy often sought the "philosopher's stone," supposedly capable of turning common metals into gold. What does the narrator mean by this statement?

319 Sergeant at the Law: a lawyer appointed by the monarch to serve as a judge.

320 St. Paul's: the cathedral of London, outside which lawyers met clients when the courts were closed.

324 Justice of Assize: a judge who traveled about the country to hear cases.

325 letters patent: royal documents commissioning a judge.

328 conveyancer: lawyer specializing in conveyances (deeds) and property disputes.

329 fee-simple: property owned without restrictions.

331–332 Explain the apparent contradiction here. How would you sum up the skill and work habits of the Sergeant at the Law?

334 King William's time: the reign of William the Conqueror.

336 screeds: documents.

The Franklin

There was a *Franklin* with him, it appeared;
White as a daisy-petal was his beard.
A sanguine man, high-colored and benign,
He loved a morning sop of cake in wine.
He lived for pleasure and had always done,
For he was Epicurus' very son,
In whose opinion sensual delight
Was the one true felicity in sight.
As noted as St. Julian was for bounty
He made his household free to all the County.
His bread, his ale were finest of the fine
And no one had a better stock of wine.
His house was never short of bake-meat pies,
Of fish and flesh, and these in such supplies
It positively snowed with meat and drink
And all the dainties that a man could think.
According to the seasons of the year
Changes of dish were ordered to appear.
He kept fat partridges in coops, beyond,
Many a bream and pike were in his pond.
Woe to the cook unless the sauce was hot
And sharp, or if he wasn't on the spot!
And in his hall a table stood arrayed
And ready all day long, with places laid.
As Justice at the Sessions none stood higher;
He often had been Member for the Shire.
A dagger and a little purse of silk
Hung at his girdle, white as morning milk.
As Sheriff he checked audit, every entry.
He was a model among landed gentry.

341 Franklin: a wealthy landowner.

343 sanguine (săng'gwĭn): In medieval science, the human body was thought to contain four "humors" (blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile), the relative proportions of which determined a person's temperament. A sanguine person (one in whom blood was thought to predominate) was cheerful and good-natured.

346 Epicurus' very son: someone who pursues pleasure as the chief goal in life, as the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus was supposed to have recommended.

349 St. Julian: the patron saint of hospitality; **bounty:** generosity.

365 Sessions: local court proceedings.

366 Member for the Shire: his county's representative in Parliament.

368 girdle: belt.

369 Sheriff: a royal tax collector.

370 landed gentry (jĕn'trē): well-born, wealthy landowners.

A *Haberdasher,* a *Dyer,* a *Carpenter,*
A *Weaver* and a *Carpet-maker* were
Among our ranks, all in the livery
Of one impressive guild-fraternity.
They were so trim and fresh their gear would pass
For new. Their knives were not tricked out with brass
But wrought with purest silver, which avouches
A like display on girdles and on pouches.
Each seemed a worthy burgess, fit to grace
A guild-hall with a seat upon the dais.
Their wisdom would have justified a plan
To make each one of them an alderman;
They had the capital and revenue,
Besides their wives declared it was their due.
And if they did not think so, then they ought;
To be called *"Madam"* is a glorious thought,
And so is going to church and being seen
Having your mantle carried, like a queen.

They had a *Cook* with them who stood alone
For boiling chicken with a marrow-bone,
Sharp flavoring-powder and a spice for savor.
He could distinguish London ale by flavor,
And he could roast and seethe and broil and fry,
Make good thick soup and bake a tasty pie.
But what a pity—so it seemed to me,
That he should have an ulcer on his knee.
As for blancmange, he made it with the best.

There was a *Skipper* hailing from far west;
He came from Dartmouth, so I understood.
He rode a farmer's horse as best he could,
In a woolen gown that reached his knee.
A dagger on a lanyard falling free
Hung from his neck under his arm and down.
The summer heat had tanned his color brown,
And certainly he was an excellent fellow.
Many a draft of vintage, red and yellow,
He'd drawn at Bordeaux, while the trader snored.
The nicer rules of conscience he ignored.
If, when he fought, the enemy vessel sank,
He sent his prisoners home; they walked the plank.

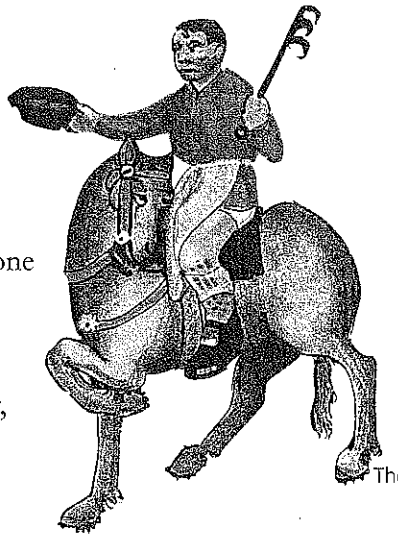
371 Haberdasher: a seller of hats and other clothing accessories.

373–374 livery . . . guild-fraternity: uniform of a social or religious organization.

379 burgess (bûr'jĭs): citizen of a town.

382 alderman: town councilor.

388 mantle: cloak.



The Cook

397 blancmange (blə-mänj'): in Chaucer's day, a thick chicken stew with almonds.

399 Dartmouth (därt'məth): a port in southwestern England.

402 lanyard (lăn'yərd): a cord worn as a necklace.

405 What might the narrator mean by calling the Skipper "an excellent fellow"?

406 vintage: wine.

407 Bordeaux (bôr-dō'): a region of France famous for its wine.

As for his skill in reckoning his tides,
Currents and many another risk besides,
Moons, harbors, pilots, he had such dispatch
That none from Hull to Carthage was his match.
Hardy he was, prudent in undertaking;
His beard in many a tempest had its shaking,
And he knew all the havens as they were
From Gottland to the Cape of Finisterre,
And every creek in Brittany and Spain;
The barge he owned was called *The Maudelayne*.

A *Doctor* too emerged as we proceeded;
No one alive could talk as well as he did
On points of medicine and of surgery,
For, being grounded in astronomy,
He watched his patient closely for the hours
When, by his horoscope, he knew the powers
Of favorable planets, then ascendent,
Worked on the images for his dependant.
The cause of every malady you'd got
He knew, and whether dry, cold, moist or hot;
He knew their seat, their humor and condition.
He was a perfect practicing physician.
These causes being known for what they were,
He gave the man his medicine then and there.
All his apothecaries in a tribe
Were ready with the drugs he would prescribe
And each made money from the other's guile;
They had been friendly for a goodish while.
He was well-versed in Aesculapius too
And what Hippocrates and Rufus knew
And Dioscorides, now dead and gone,
Galen and Rhazes, Hali, Serapion,
Averroes, Avicenna, Constantine,
Scotch Bernard, John of Gaddesden, Gilbertine.
In his own diet he observed some measure;
There were no superfluities for pleasure,
Only digestives, nutritives and such.
He did not read the Bible very much.
In blood-red garments, slashed with bluish grey
And lined with taffeta, he rode his way;

414 Hull . . . Carthage: ports in England and in Spain. The places named in lines 414–419 show tha the Skipper is familiar with all th western coast of Europe.

416 tempest: violent storm.

424 astronomy: astrology.

430 dry, cold, moist . . . hot: in medieval science, the four basic qualities that were thought to combine in various ways to form both the four elements of the world (fire, air, water, and earth) and the four humors of the hum body (see the note at line 343). excess of any of these qualities i person could lead to illness.

435 apothecaries (ə-pŏth'ĭ-kĕr'ēz druggists.

439–444 Aesculapius (ĕs'kyə-lā'p əs) . . . **Gilbertine:** famous ancie and medieval medical experts.

446 superfluities (sōō'pər-flōō'ĭ-tēz): excesses.

450 taffeta (tăf'ĭ-tə): a stiff, smooth fabric.

WORDS TO KNOW

dispatch (dĭ-spăch') *n.* promptness; efficiency
malady (măl'ə-dē) *n.* a disease or disorder; ailment

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.

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.
In all the parish not a dame dared stir
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;
I dared have sworn they weighed a good ten pound,
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
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;
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, set widely, truth to say.
Easily on an ambling horse she sat
Well wimpled 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
And knew the remedies for love's mischances,
An art in which she knew the oldest dances.

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.

452 pestilences: plagues.

455 Bath: a city in southwestern England.

458 Ypres (ē'prə) **. . . Ghent** (gĕnt): Flemish cities famous in the Middle Ages for manufacturing fine wool fabrics.

461 wrath (răth): angry.

463 ground: a textured fabric.

466 hose: stockings.

470 all at the church door: In medieval times, a marriage was performed outside or just within the doors of a church; afterwards, the marriage party went inside for mass. Why might the narrator feel it necessary to mention that all five weddings were church weddings?

472 forsooth: in truth; indeed.

473–476 Jerusalem . . . Rome . . . Boulogne (bo͞o-lōn'), **St. James of Compostella and Cologne** (kə-lōn'): popular goals of religious pilgrimages in the Middle Ages.

480 wimpled: with her hair and neck covered by a cloth headdress.

481 buckler: small round shield.

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
(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;
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,
Upon his feet, and in his hand a stave.
This noble example to his sheep he gave
That first he wrought, and afterwards he taught;
And it was from the Gospel he had caught
Those words, and he would add this figure too,
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.
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
And leave his sheep encumbered in the mire
Or run to London to earn easy bread
By singing masses for the wealthy dead,
Or find some Brotherhood and get enrolled.
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.
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
And draw men thus to Heaven and their Savior,
Unless indeed a man were obstinate;

490 clerk: scholar.

500 sufficiency: enough to get b on.

501 asunder: apart.

505 stave: staff.

507 wrought (rôt): worked.

509 figure: figure of speech. Wh does the figure of speech in line 510 mean?

517 set his benefice (bĕn'ə-fĭs) t **hire:** pay someone to perform hi parish duties for him.

WORDS TO KNOW **diligent** (dĭl'ə-jənt) *adj.* painstaking; hard-working

And such, whether of high or low estate,
He put to sharp rebuke, to say the least.
I think there never was a better priest.
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.

There was a *Plowman* with him there, his brother;
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,
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
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.
He wore a tabard smock and rode a mare.

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

The *Miller* was a chap of sixteen stone,
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.
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

536 scrupulosity (skro͞o′pyə-lŏs′ĭ-tē): excessive concern with fine points of behavior. How would a lack of scrupulosity add to the Parson's effectiveness?

553 tithes (tīthz): payments to the church, traditionally one-tenth of one's annual income.

555 tabard smock: a short loose jacket made of a heavy material.

556 Reeve: an estate manager.

557 Manciple: a servant in charge of purchasing food; **Inns of Court:** London institutions for training law students.

558–559 Pardoner: a church official authorized to sell people pardons for their sins; **Summoner:** a layman with the job of summoning sinners to church courts. Why might the Pardoner and the Summoner be riding together as friends?

561 stone: a unit of weight equal to 14 pounds.

WORDS TO KNOW **repine** (rĭ-pīn′) *v.* to complain; fret

And broad as well, as though it were a spade;
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,
His mighty mouth was like a furnace door.
A 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
Its quality and took three times his due—
A thumb of gold, by God, to gauge an oat!
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* came from the Inner Temple;
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
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—
All versed in the abstrusest 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
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* was old and choleric and thin;
His beard was shaven closely to the skin,
His shorn hair came abruptly to a stop

576 wrangler (răng'glər): a loud, argumentative person; **buffoon** (bə-fōōn'): a fool.

577 in the main: for the most par

581 thumb of gold: a reference t a proverb, "An honest miller has golden thumb"—perhaps meanin that there is no such thing as an honest miller.

585 Inner Temple: one of the Inns of Court.

594 his masters: the lawyers that the Manciple feeds.

595 abstrusest: most scholarly an difficult to understand.

597–598 stewards . . . Peer: estat managers for any nobleman.

604 wipe their eye: outdo them.

605 choleric (kŏl'ə-rĭk): having a temperament in which yellow bile predominates (see the note at line 343), and therefore prone to outbursts of anger.

WORDS TO KNOW **frugal** (frōō'gəl) *adj.* careful with money; thrifty

The Reeve

Above his ears, and he was docked on top
Just like a priest in front; his legs were lean,
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.
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.
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,
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,
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-grey and bore the name of Scot.
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.
He rode the hindmost of our cavalcade.

608 docked: clipped short.

611 garners: buildings for storing grain.

617 government: authority. What opinion of the Reeve does his employer seem to hold? How might the Reeve take advantage of his position?

620 in arrears: with unpaid debts.

621 bailiff: farm manager; **serf:** farm laborer.

625 sward: grassy plot.

633 stallion-cob: a thickset, short-legged male horse.

638 Norfolk (nôr'fək): a county in eastern England.

The Summoner

There was a *Summoner* with us at that Inn,
His face on fire, like a cherubin,
For he had carbuncles. His eyes were narrow,
He was as hot and lecherous as a sparrow.
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,
Could make a salve that had the power to bite,
Clean up or cure his whelks 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.
Then he would shout and jabber as if crazy,
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.
And, as you know, a man can teach a jay
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"* was his tag.
He was a noble varlet 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

642 cherubin (chĕr'ə-bĭn'): a type of angel—in the Middle Ages often depicted with a fiery red face.

643 carbuncles (kär'bŭng'kəlz): big pimples, considered a sign of drunkenness and lechery in the Middle Ages.

647–648 quicksilver . . . boracic (bə-răs'ĭk): substances used as skin medicines in medieval times.

650 whelks (hwĕlks): swellings.

656 tags: brief quotations.

658 mugged up: memorized.

660 jay: a bird that can be taught to mimic human speech without understanding it. What does the narrator's statement in lines 660–661 imply about the Summoner?

664 *Questio quid juris* (kwĕs'tē-ō kwĭd yŏŏr'ĭs): Latin for "The question is, What part of the law (is applicable)?"—a statement often heard in medieval courts.

A twelvemonth and dispense him altogether!
And he had finches of his own to feather:
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)
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.
We should beware of excommunication.
Thus, as he pleased, the man could bring duress
On any young fellow in the diocese.
He knew their secrets, they did what he said.
He wore a garland set upon his head
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.

He and a gentle *Pardoner* rode together,
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 to this song,
No trumpet ever sounded half so strong.
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.
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.
He'd sewed a holy relic on his cap;
His wallet lay before him on his lap,
Brimful of pardons come from Rome, all hot.
He had the same small voice a goat has got.

673 Archdeacon's curse: excommunication—an official exclusion of a person from participating in the rites of the church. (An archdeacon is a high church official.)

675 How could a sinner's punishment be "in his purse"?

681 duress (dŏŏ-rĕs'): compulsion by means of threats.

682 diocese (dī'ə-sĭs): the district under a bishop's supervision.

685–686 the holly-bush . . . ale-house: Since few people could read in the Middle Ages, many businesses identified themselves with symbols. Outside many taverns could be found wreaths of holly on stakes.

690 Charing Cross: a section of London.

696 flax: a pale grayish yellow fiber used for making linen cloth.

701 wallet: knapsack.

705 holy relic: an object revered because of its association with a holy person.

WORDS TO KNOW

wield (wēld) *v.* to handle skillfully
mode (mōd) *n.* a current fashion or style

His chin no beard had harbored, nor would harbor,
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
Which he asserted was Our Lady's veil.
He said he had a gobbet 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
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
More than the parson in a month or two,
And by his flatteries and prevarication
Made monkeys of the priest and congregation.
But still to do him justice first and last
In church he was a noble ecclesiast.
How well he read a lesson or told a story!
But best of all he sang an Offertory,
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.

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.*
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.
But first I beg of you, in courtesy,
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.

711 gelding (gĕl′dĭng): a castrated horse—here, a eunuch.

712 Berwick (bĕr′ĭk) . . . **Ware:** towns in the north and the south of England.

715 Our Lady's veil: the kerchief c the Virgin Mary.

716 gobbet: piece.

717–718 when he . . . took hold: a reference to an incident in which Jesus extended a helping hand to Peter as he tried to walk on water (Matthew 14:29–31).

725 prevarication (prĭ-văr′ĭ-kā′shən): lying.

728 ecclesiast (ĭ-klē′zē-ăst′): clergyman.

730 Offertory: a chant accompanying the ceremonial offering of bread and wine to Goc in a mass.

739 The Bell: another inn.

Pilgrims leaving Canterbury (about 1400). English manuscript illumination, The Granger Collection, New York.

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,
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,
Yet there is no scurrility in it,
And Plato says, for those with power to read,

745–756 The narrator apologizes in advance for using the exact words of his companions. Why might he make such an apology?

759 broad: bluntly; plainly.

760 scurrility (skə-rĭl'ĭ-tē): vulgarity; coarseness.

761 Plato (plā'tō): a famous philosopher of ancient Greece.

"The word should be as cousin to the deed."
Further I beg you to forgive it me
If I neglect the order and degree
And what is due to rank in what I've planned.
I'm short of wit as you will understand.

Our *Host* gave us great welcome; everyone
Was given a place and supper was begun.
He served the finest victuals you could think,
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.
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
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,
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!
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.
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
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."

767 Host: the innkeeper of the Tabard.

772 marshal in a hall: an official i charge of arranging a nobleman's banquet.

774 Cheapside: the main business district of London in Chaucer's da

780 settled up our reckonings: paid our bills.

790 St. Thomas: St. Thomas à Becket, to whose shrine the pilgrims are traveling.

794 dumb: silent.

Well, our opinion was not long deferred,
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.
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
To Canterbury, that's what I intend,
And, on the homeward way to journey's end
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,
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.
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."

Of course we all agreed, in fact we swore it
Delightedly, and made entreaty too
That he should act as he proposed to do,
Become our Governor in short, and be
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 judgement over us.
More wine was fetched, the business being done;
We drank it off and up went everyone
To bed without a moment of delay.

807 bade him: asked him to. Why do you think the pilgrims are so quick to agree to the innkeeper's proposal?

831 made entreaty: begged.

WORDS TO KNOW

defer (dĭ-fûr') *v.* to postpone
disdain (dĭs-dān') *n.* a show of contempt; scorn

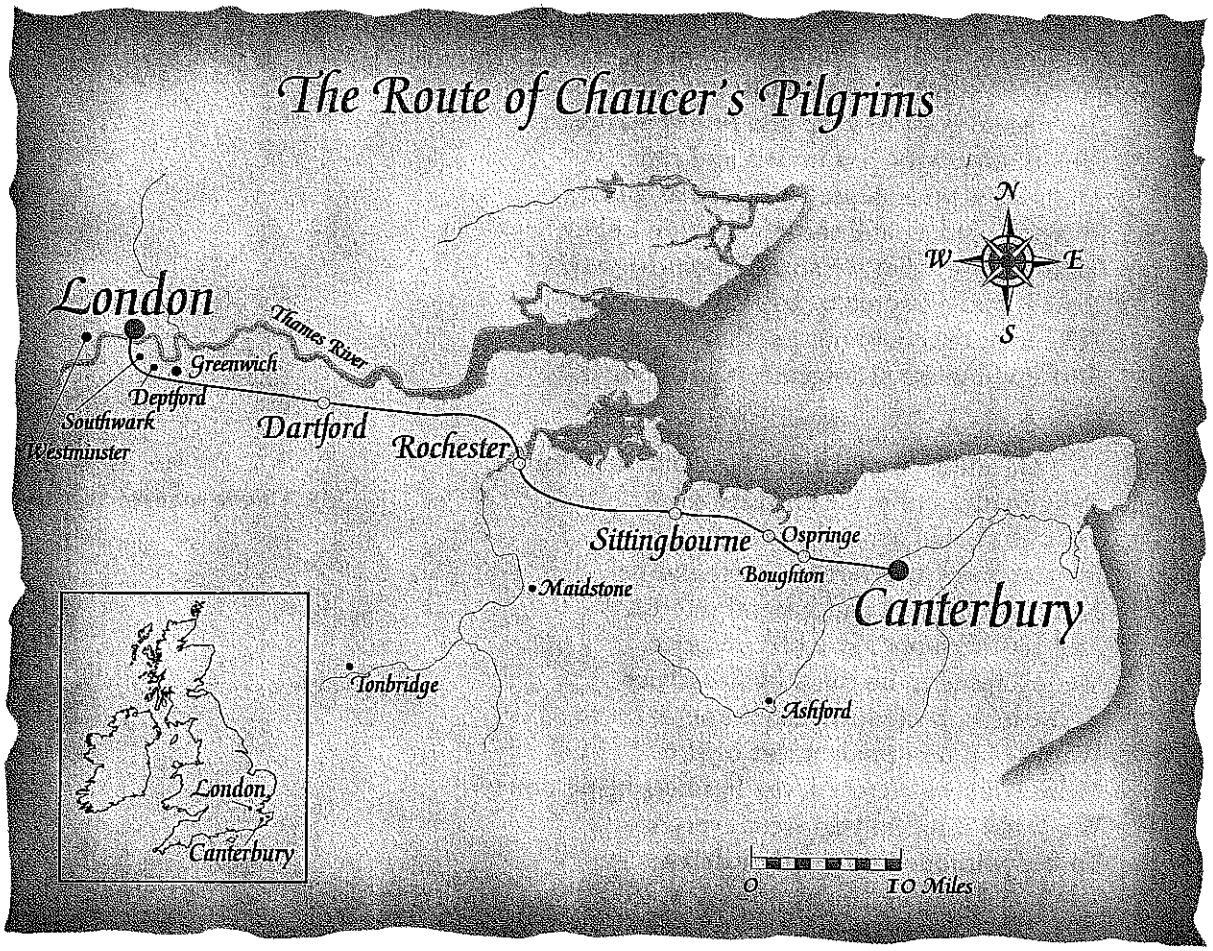
Early next morning at the spring of day
Up rose our Host and roused us like a cock,
Gathering us together in a flock,
And off we rode at slightly faster pace
Than walking to St. Thomas' watering-place;
And there our Host drew up, began to ease
His horse, and said, "Now, listen if you please,
My lords! Remember what you promised me.
If evensong and matins will agree
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.
Now draw for cut and then we can depart;
The man who draws the shortest cut shall start."

843 cock: rooster (whose cry rouses people from sleep).

846 St. Thomas' watering-place: a brook about two miles from London.

850 if evensong and matins (măt'nz) **will agree:** if what you said last night is what you will do this morning. (Evensong and matins are evening and morning prayer services.)

855 draw for cut: draw lots.



Connect to the Literature

1. **What Do You Think?** Would you like traveling with this group of people? Why or why not?

Comprehension Check
- In what month is the group making its pilgrimage?
- With what high-ranking person does the narrator open his descriptions?
- Who will judge the storytelling contest, and what will the prize be?

Think Critically

2. Consider the opening details about the season. Why would spring make people "long to go on pilgrimages"?

3. ACTIVE READING ANALYZING CHARACTERIZATION
As you read, study the cluster diagrams you created in your READER'S NOTEBOOK. According to the information you gathered, which of the pilgrims does the narrator admire most? Which does he admire least?

4. How would you describe the **narrator**'s values?

THINK ABOUT
- his varied view of medieval life
- the characters he admires and those he criticizes
- his descriptions of himself

5. What impression does the narrator give of the church in his day? Cite details from his portrayals of religious figures to support your answer.

6. Why do you think the Host proposes the storytelling contest?

Extend Interpretations

7. **Critic's Corner** In 1700, John Dryden made a famous observation about Chaucer's characterization: "All his pilgrims are severally [individually] distinguished from each other; and not only in their inclinations, but in their very physiognomies [faces] and persons." Do you agree that Chaucer was able to create a number of distinctive characters? Explain.

8. **Connect to Life** Think of modern professions for some of the characters in the "Prologue." What might be the modern equivalent of the Knight? the Squire? the Pardoner? Explain your choices.

Literary Analysis

TONE In the "Prologue," much of the humor springs from the narrator's **tone,** which is detached and **ironic.** Instead of openly criticizing the scoundrels of his age for their greed and hypocrisy, he understates his opinions about them or says the opposite of what he really thinks. His seemingly impersonal attitude forces readers to draw their own conclusions.

In lines 208–211, for example, the narrator describes the Monk:

He was a prelate fit for exhibition,
He was not pale like a tormented soul.
He liked a fat swan best, and roasted whole.
His palfrey was as brown as is a berry.

The narrator's tone reinforces the discrepancies between the Monk's life and the ideal monastic life of humility and self-sacrifice.

Paired Activity Working with a partner, identify passages that reveal the narrator's tone. Look for evidence in the form of particular words and phrases. Organize your ideas in a chart like this one.

Character	What Narrator Says	What Narrator Means
Friar	Natural gifts like his were hard to match. (line 255)	He was a greedy flatterer.