

## *Canterbury Tales*



“Chaucer is himself the great poetical observer of men, who in every age is born to record and eternize its acts. This he does as a master, as a father and superior, who looks down on their little follies from the Emperor to the Miller; sometimes with severity, oftener with joke and sport.”

*William Blake*

“I take unceasing delight in Chaucer. His manly cheerfulness is especially delicious to me in my old age. How exquisitely tender he is, and yet how perfectly free from the least touch of sickly melancholy or morbid drooping!”

*Samuel Taylor Coleridge*

“I read Chaucer still with as much pleasure as almost any of our poets. He is a master of manners, of description, and the first tale-teller in the true enlivened natural way.”

*Alexander Pope*

“I love the warmth, savagery and the unrelenting irony which appears, deceptively, to take nothing seriously.”

*A.N. Wilson*

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# *Canterbury Tales*

Geoffrey Chaucer

*A Selection Translated and Adapted*

*by Chris Lauer*



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## *Canterbury Tales*

## *General Prologue*

When lusty April with his virile powers 1  
Is overwhelming prudish March with showers  
Of potent liquor and engenders there  
New infant leaves and buds on branches bare –  
And when seductive, ardent Zephirus,\*  
Rewakened, breathing warm and amorous,  
Bestirs the frigid seeds to germinate –  
That time our newborn Sun bursts through the gate  
To race the Ram;\* that time when something tells 10  
The baby songbirds they must break their shells  
(For Nature wakes them in their hermitage) –  
Then people want to make a pilgrimage:  
Old pilgrims want to visit distant strands,  
And holy shrines renowned in foreign lands,  
But many of us are content to hurry  
Out from our winter homes to Canterbury,  
To thank the holy, blissful martyr Thomas:\*  
We prayed to him, and now fulfil our promise.  
In that sweet season, on a bonny day,  
In Southwark at the Tabard, where I lay 20  
And gathered me to make my preparation,  
One April evening, for my expedition,  
There congregated in that hostelry  
Some nine and twenty in a company  
Of sundry folks, who fell by accident  
In fellowship and with devout intent,  
Like mine – to ride to Canterbury too.  
So I began to talk with all my new  
Acquaintance in that caravansary,  
And soon was welcomed to their company. 30  
We made our plans to rise up bright and early,  
And so set off upon our holy journey.  
But let me take a moment here to tell  
Of all these folks I soon would know so well.

I think you'll find it well accords with reason  
 To tell you of each pilgrim's occupation,  
 And of their rank and how they spoke and bore  
 Themselves and how they looked and what they wore.

There was a **Knight**, a strong and worthy man,  
 Who, from the very time that he began 40  
 To ride, loved nothing more than chivalry,  
 And truth and honour, freedom, courtesy.  
 He'd proved himself in many a bloody war  
 While fighting for his lordship, near and far  
 In Christendom and in the heathen land:  
 No one more honoured than this very man  
 Who led the siege of Alexandria,  
 And fought in fabled Lithuania,  
 He presided at the banquet board in Prussia,  
 And rode beneath the sacred cross in Russia. 50  
 At Algeciras and at Belmarie  
 He drove the Moorish host across the sea;  
 And from Grenada off to Antioch,  
 Back from Adalia to Gibraltar's rock,  
 In many a noble army had he fought  
 And to their knees so many heathens brought  
 That he was chosen honoured champion  
 To fight in mortal jousts where he had won  
 The love and admiration of the Lords  
 Of Cyprus and of Palatia.\* Words 60  
 Cannot recount the glory he had earned,  
 Yet he was modest, as we quickly learned,  
 And his demeanour gentle as a maid,  
 With equal courtesy and kindness paid  
 To every person come within his sight:  
 A model of the perfect, worthy knight.  
 He rode among us on a sturdy steed  
 (In no way fancy – suited to his need),  
 His tunic was bestained from neck to knee  
 By rusty iron mail he recently 70  
 Had doffed with other warlike equipage  
 To hurry now upon his pilgrimage.

With him there rode his son, a lusty **Squire**,  
 A lover and a handsome bachelor,  
 With locks as curly as if they'd been pressed –  
 Some twenty years of age he was, I guessed.  
 He looked as if he'd hardly finished growing,  
 But yet with full and agile strength was glowing,  
 For he'd already fleshed his sword, said he,  
 In Flanders, Artois, and in Picardy,\* 80  
 And borne himself so well (though smooth of face)  
 He hoped to earn full soon his lady's grace.  
 His tunic was embroidered as if he  
 Were some rich field of flowers on a lea,  
 And he would sing or play his flute all day  
 As fresh and merry as the month of May.  
 Short was his gown, with sleeves both long and wide;  
 His horse was fine, and he knew how to ride.  
 Not only did he sing, but could compose,  
 And dance and paint, and write in verse or prose. 90  
 He loved to be in love, and would regale  
 The ladies like a cheerful nightingale.  
 Proud as he was, he bowed before his sire,  
 And carved for him, as should a modest squire.  
 Behind the Knight there rode, as well, his **Yeoman**,  
 A man well known to be a mighty bowman.  
 He dressed in coat and hood of forest green,  
 A sheaf of peacock arrows, bright and keen,  
 Was hanging from his belt, for he would scowl  
 At any feathers from more common fowl. 100  
 He wielded all his weapons yeomanly,  
 His mighty longbow most especially.  
 Upon his arm he wore a fancy guard  
 And by his side a buckler and a sword;  
 A pointed dagger hung upon his belt,  
 Well mounted on an ornamental hilt.  
 This burly, crop-haired, brown-faced forester  
 Displayed an image of St Christopher,\*  
 And bore a hunting horn upon his breast.

There rode with us a **Nun**, a prioress  
 Who smiled upon us all, so sweet and coy;  
 Her strongest oath was only, "By St Loy!"  
 And she was known as Madam Eglantyne.  
 She sang the service with a voice divine,  
 And piped it high with slightly nasal swell,  
 Just like the lilting French she spoke so well –  
 The French, that is, of Stratford-at-the-Bowe,  
 For how Parisians spoke, she didn't know.  
 It was a pleasure just to watch her eat:  
 No one could be so scrupulous and neat;  
 Immaculate her manners in the hall,  
 She never let the slightest morsel fall,  
 But delicately wiped her dainty lip  
 Anew with every little bite or sip.  
 Nor did a spot of grease adulterate  
 The cup from which she drank, nor yet her plate.  
 She bore herself just like a courtly dame,  
 While charming all, and calling all by name:  
 Though condescending, she was just as stately  
 As if she'd left the royal court quite lately.  
 Her senses were so fine and exquisite  
 She couldn't stand a sight indelicate,  
 And was so full of tears and sympathy  
 That she would weep if ever she should see  
 An injured mouse, if it were trapped or dead.  
 She kept some little hounds she always fed  
 The finest bread and milk; she'd nearly die  
 If one of them got hurt or made a cry.  
 Although she dressed according to the law  
 That ruled her sisterhood, I never saw  
 So fine a linen wimple as she'd pleat  
 To frame her pretty face: it was a treat  
 To see her slender nose and eyes of grey,  
 The dainty mouth with modest smile at play,  
 Her forehead broad, so white it nearly shone –  
 And surely she was hardly undergrown!  
 I loved to gaze upon her comely cloak –  
 She was a flower among us noisy folk!

A rosary around her arm she wore,  
 Of coral beads offset with green, that bore  
 A graven, golden brooch, securely held:  
 And *Amor vincit omnia*,\* it spelled.  
 One **Sister** from her house her escort made,  
 And with them rode their **Chaplain** on a jade.  
 There was a **Monk**, a model of his kind:  
 Who loved to hunt the boar and course the hind.  
 His duty was to manage every farm  
 His order owned, nor did he deem it sin or harm  
 To keep a string of horses, fast and strong,  
 And couldn't see that he was doing wrong  
 To hang, upon his bridle, little bells  
 As loud as those that woke them in their cells  
 Within the cloister where his brothers slept.  
 He was a manly man, our Monk, and kept  
 The rule of Maurus and of Benedict,\*  
 Although he found it just a little strict –  
 For just because, according to his light,  
 A thing be old, that doesn't make it right.  
 He didn't give a skinny hen – a pin! –  
 For any law that called his hunting "sin",  
 Or one that damned a pious monk who went  
 Abroad, "a fish out of his element" –  
 That is to say a monk out of his cloister –  
 To him, that order wasn't worth an oyster!  
 So he persuaded me that he was right:  
 Why should he study morning, noon and night,  
 And for old St Augustine\* toil and pray,  
 When he might chase the deer the livelong day?  
 So let the saint, said he, enjoy his labour  
 If he prefers, but let his honest neighbour  
 Pursue his greyhounds, hunting for the hare!  
 He kept the fastest dogs, and wouldn't spare  
 The cost, nor did he ever grudge to pay  
 For costly, ornamental trim of grey  
 Decor around the edges of his gown,  
 As fine as any seen in court or town.

To close his hood he wore a golden pin –  
 A lover's-knot beneath his double chin –  
 And when he threw his hood behind his head,  
 His tonsure shone a handsome, glossy red. 190  
 His bulging eyes would roll and flash with fire  
 As if, within, there burned a blazing pyre,  
 For surely he did love to feast upon  
 His favourite meal, a richly fattened swan;  
 He was not guilty of the least remorse  
 To ride among us on his prancing horse.  
 A **Friar**, too, a jovial mendicant  
 (To beg within the town he held a grant),  
 Had joined with us and never was there such  
 A clergyman or one who knew as much 200  
 About the art of dalliance and love  
 Of God, or of his neighbours. Far above  
 And well beyond his duty had he paid  
 For many a wedding of a blushing maid.  
 A pillar of his own community,  
 He basked in love and popularity,  
 And many worthy women of the town  
 Preferred this friar's smiling to the frown  
 Of their own curates when they made confession,  
 So pleasant was his licensed absolution. 210  
 They yearned to tell him of each little sin:  
 His gentle penance brought them back again.  
 For, as he told them, they were fully shriven  
 As soon as they had stooped and freely given.  
 He knew a man was truly penitent  
 When he had made his full emolument:  
 Since many a man is cold and hard of heart,  
 And cannot weep, however sore he smart,  
 Therefore, instead of tears and empty prayers,  
 Why not give silver to the holy friars? 220  
 The tippet of this monk was full of knives  
 And pins and trinkets for the pretty wives.  
 Was never such a singer as this friar  
 To stroke his merry tunes upon a lyre,

Nor one who knew so many happy airs.  
 In all the pubs, in all the inns and fairs,  
 He was the friend of every serving maid  
 And knew the names of all those in the trade  
 Of hospitality, but held no brief  
 For any scurvy guttersnipe or thief; 230  
 For such a worthy man, at any rate,  
 Should never, as he thought, associate  
 With such besotted beggars as would gather  
 Outside the inns and taverns. He would rather  
 Carouse with wealthy people. He was wise,  
 For, as he said, what profit could arise  
 From wasting time with any supplicant?  
 He was, by far, the greatest mendicant  
 Of all his brotherhood, for he'd the skill  
 To give his clientele a pious thrill 240  
 Just by the way he spoke the holy writ:  
 When he began his "*In principio*,"\*  
 The poorest widow felt a warming glow,  
 And though she'd been of man and gold bereft,  
 He'd have her last poor farthing when he left.  
 A mixture of debauch and clever guile,  
 Of piety with talents mercantile,  
 He often was implored to arbitrate  
 In arguments, for he'd insinuate  
 Himself and, never sanctimonious, 250  
 Would find a compromise ingenious.  
 This Friar Hubert wore no threadbare coat,  
 But double-worsted cloth from which his throat,  
 As white as lady's skin, thrust as he sang  
 And lisped his wanton songs. His music rang  
 And, as he rode, his eyes would twinkle bright  
 As stars, upon a cold and frosty night.  
 A **Merchant** with a double-pointed beard  
 Rode with us too (his name I never heard),  
 All dressed in motley and a Flanders hat. 260  
 When I admired his handsome boots, he sat  
 Up higher on his horse and nodded down;

Of his melodious voice he loved the sound,  
 And gave us all his views on price and trade:  
 How much he'd earned and just how much he'd paid.  
 His talk was all of commerce and of barter.  
 To fear of pirates was he ever martyr:  
 He spoke at length of dangers in the crossing  
 'Twixt Middelburgh and Orwell, ships a-tossing.

270

No trader was more canny and astute  
 About the gold exchange on every route,  
 And you would never guess, I'd gladly bet,  
 How much this stately fellow was in debt.  
 From Oxford came a long and lanky Clerk,  
 All worn and thin from years of dusty work.  
 He led a life of study, gloom and quiet –  
 And, surely, logic was no fattening diet.  
 His horse was lean as any garden rake,  
 For little money could his master make,

280

With no employment from the court or church;  
 But he was one who'd rather do research  
 Than eat a meal or buy a warmer cloak.  
 I heard it said, and sure it was no joke,  
 If he had twenty books of Aristotle,  
 He'd never care for food, nor fun, nor bottle.  
 Nor had he time for fiddling harmony,  
 Nor anything but pure philosophy,  
 Yet nothing in his books and learning told  
 Him how to turn base metals into gold:

290

The only money that his friends could lend,  
 He quickly on more manuscripts would spend,  
 Repaying them with interest, generously,  
 By praying for their souls most heartily.  
 Of study took he greatest care and heed,  
 And never spoke a word more than he need.  
 Thus he was ever quiet, reverential,  
 Most unassuming, sage and deferential;  
 Reserved and modest, pious in his speech;  
 And gladly would he learn and gladly teach.

Here, from the very portal of St Paul,

300

A lawyer of the highest rank of all:  
 A **Sergeant of the Law**, so circumspect  
 He'd earned himself a meed of great respect.  
 So worthy seemed his words and judgements wise,  
 He often sat as judge in the assize:  
 He had a patent and a full commission,  
 And with his learning earned in many a session  
 Great fees and robes and rich remuneration.  
 So quaint and artful was his litigation

310

That every judgement that he ever reached  
 Would win the day and could not be impeached.  
 With work and papers he was all abuzz –  
 Yet he appeared more busy than he was.  
 He carried in his head all precedent:  
 Each sentence, case and ruling ever sent  
 Down from the judges since the Conqueror,\*  
 And wrote his judgements, both against and for,  
 So pinched in arcane language no one could  
 Oppose or challenge, even if they would.

320

He rode, for all his golden revenue,  
 Quite humbly mounted in our retinue:  
 A belt of silk begirt his motley coat  
 With narrow stripes, and that's all I could note.  
 A **Franklin**\* rode beside him, shin to shin,  
 All daisy-white the beard upon his chin;  
 And one could tell how much he loved to dine  
 By his complexion: sanguine as his wine.  
 On Epicurus' law he did insist:  
 An unapologetic hedonist.

330

He strove to live in ease and perfect leisure:  
 No higher goal than to delight in pleasure.  
 No finer country gentleman than he –  
 A Julian of hospitality.  
 His bread and ale were always of the best;  
 Against his cellar, no one could contest.  
 He gave the finest dinners – goose and hind –  
 His larder snowed with food of every kind,  
 And every dainty that a man could think,

And every season's favourite meat or drink.  
 He kept at hand his private partridge flock, 340  
 And in his waters, bream and pike he'd stock.  
 Woe to his cook, unless his sauces were  
 Piquant and sharp, and ready all his gear.  
 There in his hall, his groaning board would wait  
 His guests' return, their hungry maws to sate.  
 He took, at trials, the honoured judge's seat,  
 And in the House of Parliament would meet.  
 He'd served as county sheriff frequently,  
 And showed us his importance modestly.  
 A **Haberdasher** and a **Carpenter**, 350  
 A **Weaver**, **Dyer** and a **Carpenter Maker**  
 All rode together, dressed in livery  
 To vaunt, each one, their great fraternity.  
 Full fresh and new their gear appointed was:  
 Their knives were never chased with petty brass,  
 But all with silver. They were richly dressed  
 With sashes, purses – we were much impressed –  
 For each aspired to a gentle rank,  
 As if he'd sit as alderman *en banc*,  
 Encouraging his wife, with all this pelf, 360  
 To 'sort with ladies and so call herself,  
 While marching to the church each holy day,  
 A royal banner leading all the way.  
 They brought with them a **Cook**, a man of parts,  
 A paragon of culinary arts;  
 With chicken, marrowbone and clever zeal,  
 He'd mix them many a rich and savoury meal  
 With powder-merchant tart and galingale.  
 Well did he understand a draught of ale.  
 And he could roast and simmer, broil and fry, 370  
 Or make *mortreaux* or bake a tasty pie,  
 But yet my appetite was spoiled to see  
 The open, running sore below his knee:  
 A shame, because his puddings were the best.  
 A **Shipman** from the mouth of Dart, out west,  
 Here jogged upon a stocky little horse

(As well as any sailor rides, of course);  
 A clever rascal, as he seemed to me,  
 He wore a woollen mantle to the knee;  
 Below his arm, a dagger dangled down; 380  
 The summer sun had turned his face dark brown  
 While shipping wine across from old Bordeaux,  
 Though he would spend a goodly time below,  
 To sample while the drunken watchman slept;  
 An over-nice decorum never kept  
 Him from the chance to play the upper hand:  
 He sent his foes all whimpering to the land.  
 But of his craft, to reckon well the tides,  
 And currents, winds and hazards all, besides, 390  
 To read the stars, the moon and calendar,  
 Was never any other mariner  
 Who bore a better compass in his skull  
 To sail from Cartagena up to Hull:  
 In all the risks that he had undertaken,  
 In all the tempests, though his beard was shaken,  
 He'd always found safe haven from the blast,  
 From Finisterre to Gotland, at the last,  
 Or any port in Brittany or Spain;  
 I think his ship was named the Madeleine.  
 A **Doctor** rode with us, and we heard tell 400  
 That no one knew that science quite so well:  
 To work in physic and in surgery,  
 He'd learned that ancient art, astrology.  
 For hours he'd watch his patient and compute  
 His magic drugs' effect. This man's repute  
 For naming every illness stood quite high,  
 Though it be hot, or cold, or moist, or dry,\*  
 Engendered how, which humour was to blame.  
 He was an artist of such skill, they claim,  
 That once he knew the cause, he'd find a cure;  
 And he was a such a fine practitioner, 410  
 He'd quickly order his apothecary  
 To conjure up a strong electuary –  
 For these men always would collaborate,  
 And charge their patients at the going rate.

He studied long in Aesculapius,  
 Dioscorides, and the works of Rufus,  
 In Galen, Avicenna, Averroes,  
 Hippocrates, Serapion and Rhazes –  
 All ancient doctors and each modern sage:  
 As Gordon and Gilbertus of this age; 420  
 And well he knew the works of Ali Ben  
 El-Abbas, Constantine and Gaddesden.\*  
 In diet, always moderate was he,  
 For he allowed no superfluity:  
 He said with little scripture he'd survive,  
 And said the less we eat, the more we thrive.  
 Rich blue and ox-blood purple was his dress,  
 Although he hated any lavishness,  
 But hoarded profits won in pestilence,  
 For well he loved how gold can recompense, 430  
 And is, itself, a potent medicine.  
 A **Wife from Bath** who wore a happy grin,  
 Had joined us too. Though somewhat hard of hearing,  
 They say she knew all to be known concerning  
 The art of making cloth; her knowledge went  
 Beyond the artisans of Ypres and Ghent.  
 In all her parish, when they made oblation,  
 No goodwife went before this stately matron –  
 And if one were to try, so wroth was she,  
 She'd lose her patience and her charity. 440  
 The hand and texture of her linen shawl  
 Was rich: it must have weighed ten pounds in all;  
 Her scarlet stocking and her supple shoe  
 Were always of the best and always new.  
 Bold was her face, and fair, though somewhat red;  
 She'd had five husbands – four of them now dead –  
 And, certainly, a full and busy youth,  
 As I believe – I speak no more than truth.  
 Three times had she been to the Holy Land,  
 And travelled over many a foreign strand; 450  
 At Rome she'd been, and also at Boulogne,  
 And to Galicia's shrine and to Cologne:.\*

She was, in fact, a noted wanderer,  
 A jolly, gap-toothed, bold adventurer!  
 Upon her palfrey easily she sat,  
 Demurely wimpled, on her head a hat  
 As broad as any buckler, and she wore,  
 About her ample hips, a pinafore,  
 A pair of raking spurs upon her heels;  
 We often heard her voice in laughing peals. 460  
 No one knew as well, nor better could enhance,  
 The joys of carnal love: the oldest dance!  
 There rode among us one good man of God,  
 A simple **Parson** who – it may seem odd –  
 Was poor and rich at once: his poverty  
 Was compensated by his sanctity;  
 For he was rich in holy thought and work,  
 A learned man, a scholar and a clerk,  
 Who Christ's own gospel honestly would preach,  
 Who selflessly and piously would teach. 470  
 Benign he was, and very diligent,  
 With people of his parish tolerant.  
 They knew that he was always loath to curse  
 Them if they had no money in their purse,  
 But would, in fact, donate his little store  
 To those whose circumstance and need was sore;  
 The tithes they paid returned within a trice,  
 Since, for himself, but little did suffice.  
 His parish sprawled, its houses far asunder,  
 But never would he fail, for rain or thunder, 480  
 For sickness, nor adversity to go  
 And visit all his people, high and low,  
 By foot, and in his hand his humble stave.  
 This fine example to his flock he gave:  
 At first he wrought, and afterward he taught  
 Out of the gospel – thus the word he brought,  
 And added his own wisdom thereunto:  
 If gold should rust, then what shall iron do?  
 For if a priest be foul, on whom we trust,  
 No wonder if a common man should rust; 490

And it's a shame, to all who wear the frock,  
 To see a soiled shepherd guide a flock.  
 A priest should set examples to his sheep  
 To show them all good Christian rules to keep:  
 As, never set his benefice to hire,  
 And leave his sheep encumbered in the mire,  
 While he ignores his congregation's calls  
 To seek a cosy sinecure at Paul's.  
 The wolf will surely make his flock miscarry  
 If he becomes a reckless mercenary. 500  
 And though this parson was so virtuous,  
 To sinners he was not contemptuous,  
 Nor harsh with righteous punishments condign,  
 But in his teaching moderate, benign.  
 He hoped to draw his flock to heaven fair,  
 By good example, this his only care.  
 But if he dealt with someone reprobate,  
 If he be low or of the highest rate,  
 He'd pull him short, rebuke and castigate. 510  
 If only all the priests could imitate  
 This worthy man, who sought no eminence,  
 Nor any worldly pomp and circumstance,  
 But only brought the lore of Christ to teach  
 And tend his fold, and practise what he'd preach!  
 Beside the priest, his **Ploughman** brother rode,  
 A worthy man who'd carted many a load  
 Of heavy dung. A hearty worker, he  
 Had lived in peace and perfect charity.  
 He always loved his God and didn't care 520  
 If trifling time should play him foul or fair;  
 More than he loved himself, he loved his neighbour;  
 He'd help to plough and ditch and thresh and labour  
 With those who needed help in any way –  
 For love of Christ, and not for worldly pay.  
 He always paid his tithes and never grudged  
 However hard he sweated, slaved and drudged.  
 Now plainly clad, he rode a dusty mare.

A **Reeve**\* and burly **Miller** joined us there;  
 As did a certain red-faced **Summoner**  
 Who rode beside his friend, a **Pardoner**. 530  
 A **Manciple**\* and I made up the rout.  
 That **Miller** was a sturdy churl, no doubt:  
 So gnarly that he seemed to have no neck;  
 No wrestler ever held him down in check;  
 Nor was there any door he could not pull  
 Clear off its hinge or shatter with his skull.  
 As red as any boar or fox, his beard  
 Was broad and stiff; and on his nose appeared  
 A mighty wart with bristles thick and ruddy  
 As tufts projecting from the ears of muddy 540  
 Sows. Each nostril gaped an inky cave;  
 His open mouth, as deep as any grave,  
 Blared out his bawdy songs and sinful tales.  
 He stole full measure of each farmer's corn,  
 But yet his thumb of gold was not forsworn.  
 He wore a coat of white and hood of blue,  
 And, by his side, a sword and buckler too.  
 The skirling of his bagpipes, up and down,  
 Escorted our procession out of town.  
 The **Manciple** had joined us from his temple: 550  
 A genteel man, for dealers an example  
 Of clever trade and lucrative decisions  
 In buying food and drink and all provisions;  
 For whether cash or credit, he arose,  
 From each transaction, smelling like a rose.  
 Now, isn't that a lovely proof of grace,  
 That God allows a simple man to race  
 And match the wit of many learned men?  
 For who could guess this man could triumph when  
 Of masters in his house he had full thirty, 560  
 Who knew all legal tricks, both clean and dirty?  
 A dozen of these men could pass the board  
 To serve as steward to the highest lord,  
 And make him live the way he really ought  
 (Within his rent and with full honour fraught),  
 Compound his wealth, economize, acquire

Enough to fund the credit of a shire;  
 And yet this Manciple, who'd had no school,  
 Could make of any one of them a fool.

The **Reeve**, a slender and choleric man,  
 Was shaved as close as mortal ever can;  
 The hair above his ears was cropped as well;  
 A priestly fringe above his forehead fell.  
 His legs were long and meagre as a staff,  
 And little flesh appeared upon his calf.  
 Well could he husband, garner, larder, store –  
 All auditors he neatly overbore.  
 And, ready for the drought or for the rain,  
 He managed all the profit of his grain;  
 For all his master's cattle, sheep and dairy  
 And all his swine, his horses and his poultry  
 Had been in this man's single governing;  
 He had, by contract, given reckoning,  
 Since first his lord turned twenty years of age.  
 Of each account, he mastered every page;  
 No bailiff, herdsman, farmer could beguile  
 This clever Reeve, who knew their every wile,  
 And like the plague the people feared his teeth.  
 His dwelling stood upon a pretty heath,  
 In shadows of a green and fertile grove,  
 And there he gathered up his treasure trove:  
 He'd saved until he really had more wealth  
 At hand than did his lord, and all by stealth;  
 But yet he kept that lord in solvency,  
 And kindly loaned him his own currency,  
 For which he was so grateful that he'd grieve  
 He couldn't give more presents to his Reeve.  
 Once, in his youth, this man had learned a trade:  
 A cunning master carpenter he'd made.  
 He rode upon a sturdy farmer's horse  
 And, since he came from Norfolk he, of course,  
 Would call his dapple "Scot". His surcoat made  
 Him seem a friar, though a rusty blade  
 Swung by his side. I think he told our Host

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His home was Bawdeswell, somewhere near the coast.  
 As we rode out each day, we'd always find  
 This Reeve was careful to ride last, behind.

A **Summoner**\* rode with us whose pimply cheeks  
 Were red as any cherub's face that peeks  
 From painted clouds. His eyes were pinched and narrow. 610  
 As hot he was and lecherous as a sparrow,  
 With scabby brows of black, and patchy beard:  
 The sight of him made children dread afeard.  
 No sulphur, lead or mercury could cure,  
 Nor borax, ceruse, cream of tartar pure,  
 No ointment ever dry up, clean or bite  
 His red carbuncles or his pustules white,  
 Nor cleanse the welks that swelled along his jaw.  
 He gnawed on onions, leeks and garlic raw,  
 And guzzled blood-red wine with might and main, 620  
 Until he roared and cried as if insane.  
 And when the wine straight down his throat he'd flung,  
 He'd never speak except in Caesar's tongue:  
 Some Latin terms he had, just two or three,  
 Old phrases he had learned from some decree;  
 No wonder, for he'd heard it every day;  
 And well you know the way a silly jay  
 Can squawk out "Walter" easily as the Pope.  
 (If someone tested him, he couldn't cope  
 And, having spent his little scholarship 630  
 With "*Questio quid iurus*",\* off he'd trip.)  
 He was a gentle rascal, and a kind;  
 No better fellow could a sinner find.  
 For he'd permit, for half a quart of wine,  
 A healthy man to have his concubine  
 Each year, excusing him without a pinch.  
 He knew, himself, the way to pluck a finch!  
 And any friendly rascal who had paid,  
 He'd teach how little he should be afraid  
 Of any bishop's, priest's or deacon's curse: 640  
 For if a fellow's soul is in his purse,  
 It's in his purse that he should punished be.

“The purse is the archdeacon’s hell,” said he;  
 But yet I knew this man to be a liar:  
 No man can simply pay some priest or friar  
 Or summoner to hide from his damnation,  
 For curses kill: absolving is salvation;  
 So guilty men should fear the church decree:  
 Against *Significavit*\* there’s no plea.  
 This man knew well his power, and he played 650  
 To learn the secrets of each pretty maid,  
 And so became for them lay counsellor.  
 Upon his head a mighty wreath he wore,  
 As big as those upon an alehouse stake,  
 And bore a shield that looked just like a cake.  
 With him there rode a gentle **Pardoner**,\*  
 Of Charing Cross,\* his friend and follower,  
 Who’d just come from the court of Rome, said he.  
 He loudly sang, “Come hither, love, to me!”  
 While the Summoner boomed a stately, solemn bass, 660  
 As noisy as the trumpets in a chase.  
 This Pardoner’s hair was yellower than wax,  
 But hung as smoothly as a hank of flax;  
 It flowed in fine-spun ribbons from his crown  
 And broadly spread across his back and down;  
 But thin it lay, in tendrils, one by one –  
 And hood, for sake of fashion, he had none,  
 Unless he’d rolled and trussed it in his kit.  
 He thought himself a precious exquisite.  
 A voice he had as gentle as a goat, 670  
 And of a beard, no single little mote.  
 His eyes were glaring, like a hunted hare:  
 I swear he was a gelding, or a mare.  
 He’d sewn upon his cap the holy seal  
 Of St Veronica\* and, in a creel  
 That lay before him as he rode, he brought  
 From Rome his batch of pardons, fresh and hot.  
 From Berwick, on the Tweed, all down to Ware,  
 Was never such a pardoner, I swear:  
 He also said he carried in this place 680

A holy relic, like a pillowcase,  
 The which he called “the Holy Mother’s veil”,  
 And said he had a tatter from the sail  
 Of old St Peter’s boat, when Christ and he  
 Went off to fish and walk upon the sea.  
 He had a copper cross, all set with stones  
 And, in a glass, a bunch of mouldy bones.  
 He’d keep these relics by him when he met  
 Some country parson whom he’d then beset;  
 And soon he’d get, by playing out his plays, 690  
 More than the parson earned in sixty days.  
 And thus, with feigning flattery and japes,  
 He’d make the parson and his people apes.  
 Yet if you’d see him working, nothing odd  
 Appeared, but just a pious man of God.  
 Well could he read a lesson or a story,  
 But, best of all, he sang the offertory;  
 For well he knew, whenever that was sung,  
 The time was come to exercise his tongue:  
 So, all the more elated, he’d rejoice 700  
 And win his silver with his warbling voice.  
 Now I have told you briefly, in a clause,  
 The ranks, appearance, number and the cause  
 Why here assembled was our company  
 In Southwark at this pleasant hostelry  
 Known as the Tabard, down beside the Bell.  
 But now the time is come that I should tell  
 You of our gossip in the torch-lit hall,  
 As we became acquainted, one and all;  
 Then I will tell you how our entourage 710  
 Amused itself upon our pilgrimage.  
 But first, I pray you for your courtesy:  
 Forgive me any coarse vulgarity,  
 If in my telling, I should seem ill-bred,  
 By saying plainly what the others said;  
 I must report them truly, low and high.  
 For this you know, as certainly as I:  
 To pass a story on from man to man,

We need to be as faithful as we can –  
 Give word for word – we are behoved, 720  
 However rude or vulgar it has proved,  
 Or else we may not tell the story true,  
 Inventing things, or finding wording new.  
 We must not spare, although it were our brother;  
 We might as well say one word as another.  
 For Christ himself spoke strongly in the Bible,  
 And no one may indict him now for libel;  
 And Plato said, to those who know to read,  
 The word must be the cousin to the deed.  
 And I would add, I pray you pardon me 730  
 If I've not put these folk in their degree  
 Here in this tale, as they should rightly stand:  
 My wit is short, as you must understand.  
 Great welcome made Our **Host** to one and all,  
 And sat us at the tables in his hall.  
 He set a hearty banquet out before us,  
 His wine was strong – we toasted him in chorus.  
 A paragon of hosts, he ought to be  
 A marshal to the aristocracy.  
 A brawny man was he, with sparkling eyes – 740  
 Of all the hosts in Cheapside took the prize –  
 Bold of his speech, and well informed and shrewd,  
 He lacked no force of manly amplitude.  
 He was, as well, a jolly, merry man,  
 And after supper laughingly began  
 To tell us jokes and clever banterings;  
 He teased us as we made our reckonings,  
 And said to us, “Now people, certainly,  
 You are to me right welcome, heartily;  
 For, on my word, I tell you truthfully, 750  
 I never saw such merry company  
 At any time this year as we have now.  
 I'd love to entertain you, knew I how.  
 And of a recreation I have thought  
 That you may like, and it shall cost you naught.

“You plan to travel down to Canterbury?  
 God speed! Protect you all from want and worry!  
 And I am sure, to pass your time and play,  
 You plan to tell some stories on the way;  
 For, sure, your time would stultify and drone 760  
 If you rode mute, as dumb as any stone;  
 Therefore, I've got a plan to give you sport,  
 As I have said, amusing every sort.  
 So, pray you, all agree and give assent;  
 Cooperate; you'll never need repent.  
 Now listen here; I'll speak and have my say:  
 Tomorrow as you ride along the way,  
 I swear by my old father's soul (he's dead),  
 If you're not having fun, I'll eat my head!  
 So, if you're willing, won't you raise your hand?” 770  
 We didn't need to argue his demand  
 Because his fervour carried us before;  
 We called upon our host, who had the floor,  
 To speak his piece however he thought best.  
 “My friends,” he cried, “now here is my behest,  
 Please listen closely and forebear disdain;  
 This is the point, to speak it short and plain:  
 That each of you, to speed us on our way  
 Should tell two tales so we may pass each day  
 With food for thought: two tales, each in your turn 780  
 To Canterbury; two more to return.  
 All stories will be welcome, short or tall.  
 Whoever tells the best tale of them all,  
 That is to say, the story we decree  
 The wisest, most diverting history,  
 Shall have a supper paid for by us all,  
 Right here in this, the Tabard banquet hall,  
 When we return again from Canterbury.  
 And I, to keep you all in spirits merry,  
 Will gladly undertake to join your ride, 790  
 At my own cost, so I may be your guide.  
 Whoever will my judgement then gainsay,  
 Shall pay all costs incurred along the way.

And if you all agree it shall be so,  
 Now tell me quickly; I'll arrange to go,  
 And early in the morning we'll depart."

We took our oaths as one, with all our heart,  
 And begged that he, in turn, would now agree  
 To be our arbiter and referee,  
 And plan a supper at a generous price, 800  
 For gladly we'd be ruled by his advice  
 In all respects. And thus by one assent,  
 We made him then and there our president.  
 We drank a hearty toast to bless our scheme,  
 And took ourselves to bed to sleep and dream:  
 Soon all the nine and twenty had withdrawn.

As early as the day began to dawn,  
 Up rose our Host who roused us like a cock,  
 And gathered us together in a flock  
 As we rode forth. He meant to keep his promise, 810  
 For at the water trough he called St Thomas,  
 He reined his horse and called on us to pause.  
 "My friends," he cried, "according to our laws,  
 If you recall the oaths we did decree,  
 And evening vows with morning light agree,  
 Let's see who'll be the first to tell a tale:  
 I swear I'll never drink a pint of ale,  
 If I let any person mutiny:

A rebel shall soon pay the promised fee!  
 Here, draw for straws to see who will begin. 820  
 Who'll draw the short and so the honour win?  
 Sir Knight," said he, "my master and my lord,  
 Please draw you first, for that is my accord.  
 Come near, my lady Prioress," he said,  
 "And you, sir Clerk, put by your fear and dread:  
 And never pause to study! Every man!"  
 And so to draw our lots we then began.  
 By chance, the cut fell to the worthy Knight,  
 Which seemed to one and all exactly right.

And when this good man saw how it had gone, 830  
 He bowed with grace, acknowledged what he'd drawn;

With courtesy he gave his free assent,  
 And undertook to keep his covenant:  
 "Since it is I who must begin the game,  
 Why, welcome is the cut, in Jesus' name!  
 Now let us ride, and hark to what I say."  
 And with that word, we set out on our way.  
 The Knight, with hearty voice and merry cheer,  
 Began to tell his story as you'll hear.