PENGUIN CLASSICS

GEOFFREY CHAUCER

The Canterbury Tales

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THE CANTERBURY TALES

GEOFFREY CHAUCER was born in London, the son of a vintner, in about 1342. He is known to have been a page to the Countess of Ulster in 1357, and Edward III valued him highly enough to pay a part of his ransom in 1360, after he had been captured fighting in France.

It was probably in France that Chaucer's interest in poetry was first aroused. Certainly he soon began to translate the long allegorical poem of courtly love, the *Roman de la Rose*. His literary experience was further increased by visits to the Italy of Boccaccio on the King's business, and he was well-read in several languages and on many topics, such as astronomy, medicine, physics and alchemy.

Chaucer rose in royal employment, and became a knight of the shire for Kent (1385–6) and a Justice of the Peace. A lapse of favour during the temporary absence of his steady patron, John of Gaunt (to whom he was connected by his marriage), gave him time to begin organizing his unfinished *Canterbury Tales*. Later his fortunes revived, and at his death in 1400 he was buried in Westminster Abbey.

The order of his works is uncertain, but they include *The Book of the Duchess*, *The House of Fame*, *The Parliament of Fowls*, *Troilus and Criseyde* and a translation of Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae*.

PROFESSOR NEVILL COGHILL held many appointments at Oxford University, where he was Merton Professor of English Literature from 1957 to 1966, and later became Emeritus Fellow of Exeter and Merton Colleges. He was born in 1899 and educated at Haileybury and Exeter College, Oxford, and served in the Great War after 1917. He wrote several books on English Literature, and had a keen interest in drama, particularly Shakespearean. For many years he was a strong supporter of the Oxford University Dramatic Society, and produced plays in London and Oxford. The book of the musical play, *Canterbury Tales*, which ran at the Phoenix Theatre, London, from 1968 to 1973 was co-written by Nevill Coghill in collaboration with Martin Starkie who first conceived the idea and presented the original production. His

translation of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* into modern English is also published in the Penguin Classics. Professor Coghill, who died in November 1980, will perhaps be best remembered for this translation which has become an enduring bestseller.

GEOFFREY CHAUCER

The Canterbury Tales

Translated into Modern English by
NEVILL COGHILL

PENGUIN BOOKS

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FOR

Richard Freeman

Brian Ball

Glynne Wickham

Peter Whillans

Graham Binns

. . . I have translated some parts of his works, only that I might perpetuate his memory, or at least refresh it, amongst my countrymen. If I have altered him anywhere for the better, I must at the same time acknowledge, that I could have done nothing without him. . . .

JOHN DRYDEN on translating Chaucer
Preface to the Fables
1700

And such as Chaucer is, shall Dryden be.

ALEXANDER POPE
Essay on Criticism
1711

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INTRODUCTION

I

Chaucer's Life

Geoffrey Chaucer was born about the year 1342; the exact date is not known. His father, John, and his grandfather, Robert, had associations with the wine trade and, more tenuously, with the Court. John was Deputy Butler to the King at Southampton in 1348. Geoffrey Chaucer's mother is believed to have been Agnes de Copton, niece of an official at the Mint. They lived in London in the parish of St Martin's-in-the-Vintry, reasonably well-to-do but in a humbler walk of life than that to be adorned so capably by their brilliant son.

It is thought that Chaucer was sent for his early schooling to St Paul's Almonry. From there he went on to be a page in the household of the Countess of Ulster, later Duchess of Clarence, wife of Lionel the third son of Edward III. The first mention of Geoffrey Chaucer's existence is in her household accounts for 1357. She had bought him a short cloak, a pair of shoes, and some particoloured red and black breeches.

To be a page in a family of such eminence was a coveted position. His duties as a page included making beds, carrying candles, and running errands. He would there have acquired the finest education in good manners, a matter of great importance not only in his career as a courtier but also in his career as a poet. No English poet has so mannerly an approach to his reader.

As a page he would wait on the greatest in the land. One of these was the Duke of Lancaster, John of Gaunt; throughout his life he was Chaucer's most faithful patron and protector.

In 1359 Chaucer was sent abroad, a soldier in the egg, on one of those intermittent forays into France that made up so large a part of the Hundred Years' War. He was taken prisoner near Rheims and ransomed in the following year; the King himself contributed towards his ransom. Well-trained and intelligent pages did not grow on every bush.

It is not known for certain when Chaucer began to write poetry, but it is reasonable to believe that it was on his return from France. The elegance of French poetry and its thrilling doctrines of *Amour Courtois** seem to have gone to his impressionable, amorous, and poetical heart. He set to work to translate the gospel of that kind of love and poetry, the *Roman de la Rose*, a thirteenth-century French poem begun by Guillaume de Lorris and later completed by Jean de Meun.

Meanwhile he was promoted as a courtier. In 1367 he was attending on the King himself and was referred to as *Dilectus Valettus noster* . . . our dearly beloved Valet. It was towards that year that Chaucer married. His bride was Philippa de Roet, a lady in attendance on the Queen, and sister to Catherine Swynford, third wife of John of Gaunt.

Chaucer wrote no poems to her, so far as is known. It was not in fashion to write poems to one's wife. It could even be debated whether love could ever have a place in marriage; the typical situation in which a 'courtly lover' found himself was to be plunged in a secret, an illicit, and even an adulterous passion for some seemingly unattainable and pedestalized lady. Before his mistress a lover was prostrate, wounded to death by her beauty, killed by her disdain, obliged to an illimitable constancy, marked out for her dangerous service. A smile from her was in theory a gracious reward for twenty years of painful adoration. All Chaucer's heroes regard love when it comes upon them as the most beautiful of absolute disasters, an agony as much desired as bemoaned, ever to be pursued, never to be betrayed.

This was not in theory the attitude of a husband to his wife. It was for a husband to command, for a wife to obey. The changes that can be rung on these antitheses are to be seen throughout *The Canterbury Tales*. If we may judge by the *Knight's Tale* and the *Franklin's Tale* Chaucer thought that love and marriage were perhaps compatible after all, provided that the lover remained his wife's 'servant' after marriage, in private at least. If we read the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* we shall see that she thought little of wives

* For a rich account of this strange and fascinating cult I would refer the reader to *The Allegory of Love*, by C. S. Lewis, O.U.P.

that did not master their husbands. What solution to these problems was reached by Geoffrey and Philippa Chaucer he never revealed. He only once alludes to her, or seems to do so, when in *The House of Fame* he compares the timbre of her voice awaking him in the morning to that of an eagle. His maturest work is increasingly ironical about women considered as wives; what the Wife of Bath and the Merchant have to say of them is of this kind. The *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and the *Merchant's Tale* are perhaps his two most astounding performances. By the time he wrote them Philippa had long been dead. It is in any case by no means certain that these two characters utter Chaucer's private convictions; they are speaking for themselves. One can only say that Chaucer was a great enough writer to lend them unanswerable thoughts and language, to think and speak on their behalf.

The King soon began to employ his beloved valet on important missions abroad. The details of most of these are not known, but appear to have been of a civilian and commercial nature, dealing with trade relations. We can infer that Chaucer was trustworthy and efficient.

Meanwhile Chaucer was gratifying and extending his passion for books. He was a prodigious reader and had the art of storing what he read in an almost faultless memory. He learnt in time to read widely in Latin, French, Anglo-Norman, and Italian. He made himself a considerable expert in contemporary sciences, especially in astronomy, medicine, psychology, physics, and alchemy. There is, for instance, in *The House of Fame* a long and amusing account of the nature of sound-waves. The *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* (one of the best) shows an intimate but furiously contemptuous knowledge of alchemical practice. In literary and historical fields his favourites seem to have been Vergil, Ovid, Statius, Seneca, and Cicero among the ancients, and the *Roman de la Rose* with its congeners and the works of Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch among the moderns. He knew the Fathers of the Church and quotes freely and frequently from every book in the Bible and Apocrypha.

Two journeys on the King's business took Chaucer to Italy: the first in 1372 to Genoa, the second in 1378 to Milan. It has always been supposed that these missions were what first brought him in contact with that Renaissance dawn which so glorified his later

poetry. While he never lost or disvalued what he had learnt from French culture, he added some of the depth of Dante and much of the splendour of Boccaccio, from whom came, amongst other things, the stories of *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Knight's Tale*. Chaucer's power to tell a story seems to have emerged at this time and to derive from Italy.

Meanwhile he was rising by steady promotions in what we should now call the Civil Service, that is in his offices as a courtier. In 1374 he became Comptroller of customs and subsidies on wools, skins, and hides at the Port of London: in 1382 Comptroller of petty customs, in 1385 Justice of the Peace for the county of Kent, in 1386 Knight of the Shire. He was now in some affluence.

But in December 1386 he was suddenly deprived of all his offices. John of Gaunt had left England on a military expedition to Spain and was replaced as an influence on young King Richard II by the Duke of Gloucester. Gloucester had never been a patron of the poet, and filled his posts with his own supporters. We may be grateful to him for this, because he set Chaucer at leisure thereby. It is almost certain that the poet then began to set in order and compose *The Canterbury Tales*.

In 1389 John of Gaunt returned and Chaucer was restored to favour and office. He was put in charge of the repair of walls, ditches, sewers, and bridges between Greenwich and Woolwich, and of the fabric of St George's Chapel at Windsor. The office of Sub-Forester of North Petherton (probably a sinecure) was given him. The daily pitcher of wine allowed him by Edward III in 1374 became, under Richard II, an annual tun. Henry Bolingbroke presented him with a scarlet robe trimmed with fur. Once more he had met with that cheerful good luck which is so happily reflected in his poetry.

He felt himself to be growing old, however; he complained that the faculty of rhyming had deserted him. No one knows when he put his last touch to *The Canterbury Tales*. He never finished them.

He died on the twenty-fifth of October 1400 and was buried in Westminster Abbey. A fine tomb, erected by an admirer in the fifteenth century, marks his grave and was the first of those that are

gathered into what we now know as the Poets' Corner. The Father of English Poetry lies in his family vault.*

II

Chaucer's Works

The order in which Chaucer's works were written is not known exactly or for certain. Some have been lost, if we are to believe the lists Chaucer gives of his poems in *The Prologue to the Legend of Good Women* and the 'retraccioun's' appended by him to *The Parson's Tale*. His main surviving poems are:

Before 1372 part at least of his translation of the *Roman de la Rose*, *The Book of the Duchess* (1369/70?) and the *ABC of the Virgin*. Between 1372 and 1382, *The House of Fame*, *The Parliament of Fowls*, and most probably a number of stories – or preliminary versions of stories – that were later included in *The Canterbury Tales*, the idea for which does not seem to have come to him until about 1386. Among these I incline to place *The Second Nun's Tale*, *The Clerk of Oxford's Tale*, *The Man of Law's Tale*, *Chaucer's Tale of Melibee*, and *The Knight's Tale*. These seem to indicate that he passed through a phase of poetic piety (*The Second Nun's Tale*, *The Clerk of Oxford's Tale*, *The Man of Law's Tale*, and the *Tale of Melibee*), qualified by an ever-increasing range of subject-matter, increasingly tinged with irony, and enlivened by passages of that rich naturalistic conversation in rhymed verse which it was one of Chaucer's peculiar powers to invent.

Between 1380 and 1385 appeared the matchless *Troilus and Criseyde* and the translation of Boethius, *De Consolatione Philosophiae*. The latter is the main basis for most of Chaucer's philosophical speculations, especially those on tragedy and predestination, which underlie its twin *Troilus and Criseyde*.

This poem, the most poignant love-story in English narrative

* For a somewhat fuller account of Chaucer's life and poetry than can here be given, reference is offered to my volume in the Home University Library series called *The Poet Chaucer*.

poetry, is also one of the most amusing. It is his first great masterpiece, yet for all its humour can stand comparison with any tragic love-story in the world. Its psychological understanding is so subtle and its narrative line so skilfully ordered that it has been called our first novel. It appears to have given some offence to Queen Anne of Bohemia (Richard's wife) because it seemed to imply that women were more faithless than men in matters of love. Chaucer was bidden to write a retraction and so in the following year (1386) he produced a large instalment of *The Legend of the Saints of Cupid* (all female), which is also known as *The Legend of Good Women*. He never finished it. His disciple Lydgate said later that it encumbered his wits to think of so many good women.

From 1386 or 1387 onwards he was at work on *The Canterbury Tales*. There are some 84 MSS and early printed editions by Caxton, Pynson, Wynkyn de Worde, and Thynne.

These manuscripts show that Chaucer left ten fragments of varying size of this great poem. Modern editors have arranged these in what appears to be the intended sequence, inferred from dates and places mentioned in the 'end-links', as the colloquies of the pilgrims between tales are called. For convenience these manuscript fragments are numbered in Groups from A to I; Group B can be subdivided into two, making ten Groups in all.

If we may trust the *Prologue*, Chaucer intended that each of some thirty pilgrims should tell two tales on the way to Canterbury and two on the way back. He never completed this immense project, and what he wrote was not finally revised even so far as it went. There are also one or two minor inconsistencies which a little revision could have rectified.

In this rendering I have followed the accepted order first worked out by Furnivall (1868) and later confirmed by Skeat (1894). It makes a reasonably continuous and consistent narrative of a pilgrimage that seems to have occupied five days (16 to 20 April) and that led to the outskirts of Canterbury. At that point Chaucer withdrew from his task with an apology for whatever might smack of sin in his work.

The idea of a collection of tales diversified in style to suit their tellers and unified in form by uniting the tellers in a common purpose is Chaucer's own. Collections of stories were common at the time, but only Chaucer hit on this simple device for securing

natural probability, psychological variety, and a wide range of narrative interest.

In all literature there is nothing that touches or resembles the *Prologue*. It is the concise portrait of an entire nation, high and low, old and young, male and female, lay and clerical, learned and ignorant, rogue and righteous, land and sea, town and country, but without extremes. Apart from the stunning clarity, touched with nuance, of the characters presented, the most noticeable thing about them is their normality. They are the perennial progeny of men and women. Sharply individual, together they make a party.

The tales these pilgrims tell come from all over Europe, many of them from the works of Chaucer's near contemporaries. Some come from further afield, from the ancients, from the Orient. They exemplify the whole range of contemporary European imagination, then particularly addicted to stories, especially to stories that had some sharp point and deducible maxim, moral, or idea. Almost every tale ends with a piece of proverbial or other wisdom derived from it and with a general benediction on the company.

One of the few tales believed to be his own invention is that of the Canon's Yeoman; some have imagined it to be a personal revenge taken by him upon some alchemist who had duped him; be that as it may, it is one of the best of the tales. It was not considered the function of a teller of stories in the fourteenth century to invent the stories he told, but to present and embellish them with all the arts of rhetoric for the purposes of entertainment and instruction. Chaucer's choice of story ranges from what he could hear – such as tales of low life in oral circulation, like the *Miller's Tale*, that are known as *fabliaux* – to what he had read in Boccaccio or other classic masters or in the lives of saints. To quote Dryden once more, ''Tis sufficient to say, according to the proverb, that *here is God's plenty*.'

The present version of this master-work is intended for those who feel difficulty in reading the original, yet would like to enjoy as much of that 'plenty' as the translator has been able to convey in a more modern idiom.

NEVILL COGHILL

Exeter College
Oxford

The Canterbury Tales

[GROUP A]

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.
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, honour, 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 honoured for his noble graces.
When we took Alexandria,* he was there.
He often sat at table in the chair
Of honour, 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
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 armour had left mark;
Just home from service, he had joined our ranks
To do his pilgrimage and render thanks.
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.
There was a *Yeoman* with him at his side,
No other servant; so he chose to ride.
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,

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,
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 labour to himself.

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.

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 honour and possessions;
For he was qualified to hear confessions,
Or so he said, with more than priestly scope;
He had a special licence 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
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 mould
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
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 Serjeant 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 defences 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-coloured coat,
Girt with a silken belt of pin-stripe stuff;
Of his appearance I have said enough.

There was a *Franklin** with him, it appeared;
White as a daisy-petal was his beard.
A sanguine man, high-coloured 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.

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 flavouring-powder and a spice for savour.
He could distinguish London ale by flavour,
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 woollen 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 colour brown,
And certainly he was an excellent fellow.
Many a draught 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.

As for his skill in reckoning his tides,
Currents and many another risk besides,
Moons, harbours, 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 favourable 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 humour and condition.
He was a perfect practising 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;
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.
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 behaviour
And draw men thus to Heaven and their Saviour,
Unless indeed a man were obstinate;
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 neighbour 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
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
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.
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
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.
His chin no beard had harboured, nor would harbour,
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.
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,
'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!

'Now as I've drunk a draught of corn-ripe ale,
By God it stands to reason I can strike
On some good story that you all will like'

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