



Middle English (1340 - 1400)

Chaucer, Geoffrey (1343?-1400), one of the greatest English poets, whose masterpiece, *The Canterbury Tales*, was one of the most important influences on the development of English literature. His life is known primarily through records pertaining to his career as a courtier and civil servant under the English kings Edward III and Richard II.

The son of a prosperous London wine merchant, Chaucer may have attended the Latin grammar school of Saint Paul's Cathedral and may have studied law at the Inns of Court. In 1357 he was page to the countess of Ulster, Elizabeth, the wife of Prince Lionel, third son of Edward III; there, he would have learned the ways of the court and the use of arms. By 1367 Chaucer was an esquire to Edward. About 1366 he married Philippa Roet, a lady-in-

waiting to the queen and afterward in the service of John of Gaunt, who was duke of Lancaster and Edward's fourth son. Chaucer served as controller of customs for London from 1374 to 1386 and clerk of the king's works from 1389 to 1391, in which post he was responsible for maintenance of royal buildings and parks. About 1386 Chaucer moved from London to a country residence in Kent (probably Greenwich), where in 1386 he was justice of the peace and representative to Parliament. He traveled on several diplomatic missions to France, one to Spain in 1366, and two to Italy from 1372 to 1373 and in 1378. In the last year of his life, Chaucer leased a house within the precincts of Westminster Abbey. After his death, he was buried in the Abbey (an honor for a commoner), in what has since become the Poets' Corner.

Early Works

Chaucer wrote for and may have read his works aloud to a select audience of fellow courtiers and officials, which doubtless sometimes included members of the royal family. The culture of the English upper class was still predominantly French, and Chaucer's earliest works were influenced by the fashionable French poets Guillaume de Machaut and Jean Froissart and by the great 13th-century dream allegory *Le roman de la rose*, by the French poets Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun. The common theme of these works is courtly love.

Chaucer claimed to have translated *Le roman de la rose*, but if he did, all that survives is a fragment. His first important original work, *The Book of the Duchess*, is an elegy for John of Gaunt's first wife, Blanche, who died in 1369. In a dream the poet encounters a grieving knight in black (Gaunt) who movingly recounts his love and loss of "good fair White" (Blanche). *The House of Fame* and *Parliament of Fowls*, also dream poems, show the influence of Dante and of Giovanni Boccaccio, whose works Chaucer probably encountered on his first journey to Italy. The unfinished *House of Fame* gives a humorous account of the poet's frustrating journey in the claws of a giant golden eagle (the idea is from Dante) to the palace of the goddess Fame. In the *Parliament* he witnesses an inconclusive debate about love among the different classes of birds. All three dream visions, written from about 1373 to about 1385, contain a mixture of comedy and serious speculation about the puzzling nature of love.

In this period, Chaucer also translated and adapted religious, historical, and philosophical



works: a life of Saint Cecilia; a series of medieval "tragedies," brief lives of famous men cast down by adverse fortune; a translation of *De Consolatione Philosophiae* (The Consolation of Philosophy), written by the Roman philosopher Anicius Boethius to proclaim his faith in divine justice and providence. The latter work profoundly influenced Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* (1385?) and *The Knight's Tale*, both adapted from romances by Boccaccio.

Troilus, a poem of more than 8000 lines, is Chaucer's major work besides *The Canterbury Tales*. It is the tragic love story of the Trojan prince Troilus, who wins Criseyde (Cressida), aided by the machinations of his close friend, her uncle Pandarus, and then loses her to the Greek warrior Diomedes. The love story turns into a deeply felt medieval tragedy, the human pursuit of transitory earthly ideals that pale into insignificance beside the eternal love of God. The poem ends with the narrator's solemn advice to young people to flee vain loves and turn their hearts to Christ. Chaucer's characters are psychologically so complex that the work has also been called the first modern novel.

In the Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women* (1386?), another dream vision, the god of love accuses Chaucer of heresy for writing of Criseyde's unfaithfulness and assigns him the penance of writing the lives of Cupid's martyrs—faithful women who died for love. After completing eight of these legends, Chaucer probably abandoned the work and by 1387 was engaged on his masterpiece.

The Canterbury Tales

The *Tales* is a collection of stories set within a framing story of a pilgrimage to Canterbury¹ Cathedral, the shrine of Saint Thomas² à Becket. The poet joins a band of pilgrims, vividly described in the General Prologue, who assemble at the Tabard Inn outside London for the journey to Canterbury. Ranging in status from a Knight to a humble Plowman, they are a microcosm of 14th century English society.

The Host proposes a storytelling contest to pass the time; each of the 30 or so pilgrims (the exact number is unclear) is to tell four tales on the round trip. Chaucer completed less than a quarter of this plan. The work contains 22 verse tales (two unfinished) and two long prose tales; a few are thought to be pieces written earlier by Chaucer. *The Canterbury Tales*, composed of more than 18,000 lines of poetry, is made up of separate blocks of one or more tales with links introducing and joining stories within a block.

The tales represent nearly every variety of medieval story at its best. The special genius of Chaucer's work, however, lies in the dramatic interaction between the tales and the framing story. After the Knight's courtly and philosophical romance about noble love, the Miller interrupts with a deliciously bawdy story of seduction aimed at the Reeve (an officer or steward of a manor); the Reeve takes revenge with a tale about the seduction of a miller's wife and daughter. Thus, the tales develop the personalities, quarrels, and diverse opinions of their tellers. The prologues and tales of the Wife of Bath and the Pardoner are high points of Chaucer's art. The Wife, an outspoken champion of her gender against the traditional antifeminism of the church, initiates a series of tales about sex, marriage, and nobility ("gentillesse"). The Pardoner gives a chilling demonstration of how his eloquence in the pulpit turns the hope of salvation into a vicious confidence game. Although Chaucer in this way satirizes the abuses of the church, he also includes a number of didactic and religious tales, concluding with the good Parson's sermon on penitence; this is followed by a personal confession in which Chaucer "retracts" all his secular writings, including *Troilus*, and those Canterbury tales that "incline toward sin." Like the ending of *Troilus*, the retraction is a reminder that Chaucer's genius was always subject to orthodox piety.

Significance

Chaucer greatly increased the prestige of English as a literary language and extended the range of its poetic vocabulary and meters. He was the first English poet to use *iambic pentameter*, the seven-line stanza called rhyme royal, and the couplet later called heroic. His system of versification, which depends on sounding many e's in final syllables that are silent (or absent) in modern English, ceased to be understood by the 15th century. Nevertheless, Chaucer dominated the works of his 15th-century English followers and the so-called Scottish Chaucerians. For the Renaissance, he was the English Homer. Edmund Spenser paid tribute to him as his master; many of the plays of William Shakespeare show thorough assimilation of Chaucer's comic spirit. John Dryden, who modernized several of the Canterbury tales, called Chaucer the father of English poetry. Since the founding of the Chaucer Society in England in 1868, which led to the first reliable editions of his works, Chaucer's reputation has been securely established as the English poet best loved after Shakespeare for his wisdom, humor, and humanity.

Contributed by: Alfred David

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¹ Canterbury (kàn'ter-bèr'è), city (1986 est. pop. 127,000), Kent, SE England, on the Stour R. The seat of the primate of the Church of England and the spiritual center of the country, it is a major attraction. Following his arrival (597) in England, St. AUGUSTINE founded an abbey there and became the first archbishop of Canterbury. After the murder (1170) of THOMAS À BECKET, the city became the object of pilgrimage, as described in CHAUCER's *Canterbury Tales*. The magnificent cathedral (1070–1180; 1379–1503) embodies the styles of several periods. Although the city was bombed during WORLD WAR II, the cathedral and many other historic buildings survive.

² Thomas à Becket, Saint or Saint Thomas Becket, 1118–70, English martyr, archbishop of Canterbury. Of good family and well educated, he attracted the attention of HENRY II, who made him chancellor (1155). Then, in an attempt to curb the growing power of the church, the king nominated his friend as archbishop of Canterbury. Foreseeing trouble, Thomas was reluctant to accept, but in 1163 he was ordained priest and consecrated archbishop. Henry and Thomas were soon opposed, particularly over the king's efforts to gain jurisdiction over "criminous clerks," clergymen accused of crime. Thomas, refusing to accept the Constitutions of CLARENDON and opposing the growing royal power, fled to the Continent (1164). In 1170 a kind of peace was arranged, and Thomas returned to England. Meanwhile, Henry had his son crowned by the archbishop of York; the bishops who took part in this ceremony were suspended by the pope. Antipathy between the king and archbishop grew strong, and in December 1170 the king issued his fateful plea to be rid of the archbishop. On Dec. 29, 1170, Thomas was murdered in Canterbury cathedral by Henry's partisans. The Christian world was shocked by Thomas's death, and in 1174 the king was forced to do penance at the saint's tomb in Canterbury, which became the greatest of English shrines. Feast: Dec. 29.

PROLOGUE

Here begins the Book of the Tales of Canterbury

When April with his showers sweet with fruit
The drought of March has pierced unto the root
5 And bathed each vein with liquor that has power
To generate therein and sire the flower;
When Zephyr also has, with his sweet breath,
Quickened again, in every holt and heath,
The tender shoots and buds, and the young sun
10 Into the Ram one-half his course has run,
And many little birds make melody
That sleep through all the night with open eye
(So Nature pricks them on to ramp and rage)--
Then do folk long to go on pilgrimage,
15 And palmers to go seeking out strange strands,
To distant shrines well known in sundry lands.
And specially from every shire's end
Of England they to Canterbury wend,
The holy blessed martyr there to seek
20 Who helped them when they lay so ill and weak
Befell that, in that season, on a day
In Southwark, at the Tabard, as I lay
Ready to start upon my pilgrimage
To Canterbury, full of devout homage,
25 There came at nightfall to that hostelry
Some nine and twenty in a company
Of sundry persons who had chanced to fall
In fellowship, and pilgrims were they all
That toward Canterbury town would ride.
30 The rooms and stables spacious were and wide,
And well we there were eased, and of the best.
And briefly, when the sun had gone to rest,
So had I spoken with them, every one,
That I was of their fellowship anon,
35 And made agreement that we'd early rise
To take the road, as you I will apprise.
But none the less, whilst I have time and space,
Before yet farther in this tale I pace,
It seems to me accordant with reason
40 To inform you of the state of every one
Of all of these, as it appeared to me,
And who they were, and what was their degree,
And even how arrayed there at the inn;
And with a knight thus will I first begin.

The Knight

45 A knight there was, and he a worthy man,
Who, from the moment that he first began
To ride about the world, loved chivalry,
Truth, honour, freedom and all courtesy.
50 Full worthy was he in his liege-lord's war,
And therein had he ridden (none more far)
As well in Christendom as heathenesse,
And honoured everywhere for worthiness.
At Alexandria, he, when it was won;
55 Full oft the table's roster he'd begun
Above all nations' knights in Prussia.
In Latvia raided he, and Russia,
No christened man so oft of his degree.
In far Granada at the siege was he
60 Of Algeciras, and in Belmarie.
At Ayas was he and at Satalye
When they were won; and on the Middle Sea
At many a noble meeting chanced to be.
Of mortal battles he had fought fifteen,

65 And he'd fought for our faith at Tramissene
Three times in lists, and each time slain his foe.
This self-same worthy knight had been also
At one time with the lord of Palatye
Against another heathen in Turkey:
70 And always won he sovereign fame for prize.
Though so illustrious, he was very wise
And bore himself as meekly as a maid.
He never yet had any vileness said,
In all his life, to whatsoever wight.
75 He was a truly perfect, gentle knight.
But now, to tell you all of his array,
His steeds were good, but yet he was not gay.
Of simple fustian wore he a jupon
Sadly discoloured by his habergeon;
80 For he had lately come from his voyage
And now was going on this pilgrimage.

The Squire

With him there was his son, a youthful squire,
A lover and a lusty bachelor,
85 With locks well curled, as if they'd laid in press.
Some twenty years of age he was, I guess.
In stature he was of an average length,
Wondrously active, aye, and great of strength.
He'd ridden sometime with the cavalry
90 In Flanders, in Artois, and Picardy,
And borne him well within that little space
In hope to win thereby his lady's grace.
Prinked out he was, as if he were a mead,
All full of fresh-cut flowers white and red.
95 Singing he was, or fluting, all the day;
He was as fresh as is the month of May.
Short was his gown, with sleeves both long and wide.
Well could he sit on horse, and fairly ride.
He could make songs and words thereto indite,
100 Joust, and dance too, as well as sketch and write.
So hot he loved that, while night told her tale,
He slept no more than does a nightingale.
Courteous he, and humble, willing and able,
And carved before his father at the table.

The Yeoman

105 A yeoman had he, nor more servants, no,
At that time, for he chose to travel so;
And he was clad in coat and hood of green.
A sheaf of peacock arrows bright and keen
110 Under his belt he bore right carefully
(Well could he keep his tackle yeomanly:
His arrows had no dragged feathers low),
And in his hand he bore a mighty bow.
A cropped head had he and a sun-browned face.
115 Of woodcraft knew he all the useful ways.
Upon his arm he bore a bracer gay,
And at one side a sword and buckler, yea,
And at the other side a dagger bright,
Well sheathed and sharp as spear point in the light;
120 On breast a Christopher of silver sheen.
He bore a horn in baldric all of green;
A forester he truly was, I guess.

The Prioress

There was also a nun, a prioress,
125 Who, in her smiling, modest was and coy;
Her greatest oath was but "By Saint Eloy!"
And she was known as Madam Eglantine.
Full well she sang the services divine,

Intoning through her nose, becomingly;
 130 And fair she spoke her French, and fluently,
 After the school of Stratford-at-the-Bow,
 For French of Paris was not hers to know.
 At table she had been well taught withal,
 And never from her lips let morsels fall,
 135 Nor dipped her fingers deep in sauce, but ate
 With so much care the food upon her plate
 That never dribble fell upon her breast.
 In courtesy she had delight and zest.
 Her upper lip was always wiped so clean
 140 That in her cup was no iota seen
 Of grease, when she had drunk her draught of wine.
 Becomingly she reached for meat to dine.
 And certainly delighting in good sport,
 She was right pleasant, amiable-- in short.
 145 She was at pains to counterfeit the look
 Of courtliness, and stately manners took,
 And would be held worthy of reverence.
 But, to say something of her moral sense,
 She was so charitable and piteous
 150 That she would weep if she but saw a mouse
 Caught in a trap, though it were dead or bled.
 She had some little dogs, too, that she fed
 On roasted flesh, or milk and fine white bread.
 But sore she'd weep if one of them were dead,
 155 Or if men smote it with a rod to smart:
 For pity ruled her, and her tender heart.
 Right decorous her pleated wimple was;
 Her nose was fine; her eyes were blue as glass;
 Her mouth was small and therewith soft and red;
 160 But certainly she had a fair forehead;
 It was almost a full span broad, I own,
 For, truth to tell, she was not undergrown.
 Neat was her cloak, as I was well aware.
 Of coral small about her arm she'd bear
 165 A string of beads and gauded all with green;
 And therefrom hung a brooch of golden sheen
 Whereon there was first written a crowned "A,"
 And under, Amor vincit omnia.

The Nun

170 Another little nun with her had she,

The Three Priests

Who was her chaplain; and of priests she'd three.

The Monk

A monk there was, one made for mastery,
 175 An outrider, who loved his venery;
 A manly man, to be an abbot able.
 Full many a blooded horse had he in stable:
 And when he rode men might his bridle hear
 A-jingling in the whistling wind as clear,
 180 Aye, and as loud as does the chapel bell
 Where this brave monk was of the cell.
 The rule of Maurus or Saint Benedict,
 By reason it was old and somewhat strict,
 This said monk let such old things slowly pace
 185 And followed new-world manners in their place.
 He cared not for that text a clean-plucked hen
 Which holds that hunters are not holy men;
 Nor that a monk, when he is cloisterless,
 Is like unto a fish that's waterless;
 190 That is to say, a monk out of his cloister.
 But this same text he held not worth an oyster;
 And I said his opinion was right good.
 What? Should he study as a madman would

Upon a book in cloister cell? Or yet
 195 Go labour with his hands and swink and sweat,
 As Austin bids? How shall the world be served?
 Let Austin have his toil to him reserved.
 Therefore he was a rider day and night;
 Greyhounds he had, as swift as bird in flight.
 200 Since riding and the hunting of the hare
 Were all his love, for no cost would he spare.
 I saw his sleeves were purpled at the hand
 With fur of grey, the finest in the land;
 Also, to fasten hood beneath his chin,
 205 He had of good wrought gold a curious pin:
 A love-knot in the larger end there was.
 His head was bald and shone like any glass,
 And smooth as one anointed was his face.
 Fat was this lord, he stood in goodly case.
 210 His bulging eyes he rolled about, and hot
 They gleamed and red, like fire beneath a pot;
 His boots were soft; his horse of great estate.
 Now certainly he was a fine prelate:
 He was not pale as some poor wasted ghost.
 215 A fat swan loved he best of any roast.
 His palfrey was as brown as is a berry.

The Friar

A friar there was, a wanton and a merry,
 A limiter, a very festive man.
 220 In all the Orders Four is none that can
 Equal his gossip and his fair language.
 He had arranged full many a marriage
 Of women young, and this at his own cost.
 Unto his order he was a noble post.
 225 Well liked by all and intimate was he
 With franklins everywhere in his country,
 And with the worthy women of the town:
 For at confessing he'd more power in gown
 (As he himself said) than it good curate,
 230 For of his order he was licentiate.
 He heard confession gently, it was said,
 Gently absolved too, leaving naught of dread.
 He was an easy man to give penance
 When knowing he should gain a good pittance;
 235 For to a begging friar, money given
 Is sign that any man has been well shriven.
 For if one gave (he dared to boast of this),
 He took the man's repentance not amiss.
 For many a man there is so hard of heart
 240 He cannot weep however pains may smart.
 Therefore, instead of weeping and of prayer,
 Men should give silver to poor friars all bare.
 His tippet was stuck always full of knives
 And pins, to give to young and pleasing wives.
 245 And certainly he kept a merry note:
 Well could he sing and play upon the rote.
 At balladry he bore the prize away.
 His throat was white as lily of the May;
 Yet strong he was as ever champion.
 250 In towns he knew the taverns, every one,
 And every good host and each barmaid too-
 Better than begging lepers, these he knew.
 For unto no such solid man as he
 Accorded it, as far as he could see,
 255 To have sick lepers for acquaintances.
 There is no honest advantageousness
 In dealing with such poverty-stricken curs;
 It's with the rich and with big victuallers.

And so, wherever profit might arise,
 260 Courteous he was and humble in men's eyes.
 There was no other man so virtuous.
 He was the finest beggar of his house;
 A certain district being farmed to him,
 None of his brethren dared approach its rim;
 265 For though a widow had no shoes to show,
 So pleasant was his In principio,
 He always got a farthing ere he went.
 He lived by pickings, it is evident.
 And he could romp as well as any whelp.
 270 On love days could he be of mickle help.
 For there he was not like a cloisterer,
 With threadbare cope as is the poor scholar,
 But he was like a lord or like a pope.
 Of double worsted was his semi-cope,
 275 That rounded like a bell, as you may guess.
 He lisped a little, out of wantonness,
 To make his English soft upon his tongue;
 And in his harping, after he had sung,
 His two eyes twinkled in his head as bright
 280 As do the stars within the frosty night.
 This worthy limiter was named Hubert.

The Merchant

There was a merchant with forked beard, and girt
 In motley gown, and high on horse he sat,
 285 Upon his head a Flemish beaver hat;
 His boots were fastened rather elegantly.
 His spoke his notions out right pompously,
 Stressing the times when he had won, not lost.
 He would the sea were held at any cost
 290 Across from Middleburgh to Orwell town.
 At money-changing he could make a crown.
 This worthy man kept all his wits well set;
 There was no one could say he was in debt,
 So well he governed all his trade affairs
 295 With bargains and with borrowings and with shares.
 Indeed, he was a worthy man withal,
 But, sooth to say, his name I can't recall.

The Clerk

A clerk from Oxford was with us also,
 300 Who'd turned to getting knowledge, long ago.
 As meagre was his horse as is a rake,
 Nor he himself too fat, I'll undertake,
 But he looked hollow and went soberly.
 Right threadbare was his overcoat; for he
 305 Had got him yet no churchly benefice,
 Nor was so worldly as to gain office.
 For he would rather have at his bed's head
 Some twenty books, all bound in black and red,
 Of Aristotle and his philosophy
 310 Than rich robes, fiddle, or gay psaltery.
 Yet, and for all he was philosopher,
 He had but little gold within his coffer;
 But all that he might borrow from a friend
 On books and learning he would swiftly spend,
 315 And then he'd pray right busily for the souls
 Of those who gave him wherewithal for schools.
 Of study took he utmost care and heed.
 Not one word spoke he more than was his need;
 And that was said in fullest reverence
 320 And short and quick and full of high good sense.
 Pregnant of moral virtue was his speech;
 And gladly would he learn and gladly teach.

The Lawyer

A sergeant of the law, wary and wise,
 325 Who'd often gone to Paul's walk to advise,
 There was also, compact of excellence.
 Discreet he was, and of great reverence;
 At least he seemed so, his words were so wise.
 Often he sat as justice in assize,
 330 By patent or commission from the crown;
 Because of learning and his high renown,
 He took large fees and many robes could own.
 So great a purchaser was never known.
 All was fee simple to him, in effect,
 335 Wherefore his claims could never be suspect.
 Nowhere a man so busy of his class,
 And yet he seemed much busier than he was.
 All cases and all judgments could he cite
 That from King William's time were apposite.
 340 And he could draw a contract so explicit
 Not any man could fault therefrom elicit;
 And every statute he'd verbatim quote.
 He rode but badly in a medley coat,
 Belted in a silken sash, with little bars,
 345 But of his dress no more particulars.

The Franklin

There was a franklin in his company;
 White was his beard as is the white daisy.
 Of sanguine temperament by every sign,
 350 He loved right well his morning sop in wine.
 Delightful living was the goal he'd won,
 For he was Epicurus' very son,
 That held opinion that a full delight
 Was true felicity, perfect and right.
 355 A householder, and that a great, was he;
 Saint Julian he was in his own country.
 His bread and ale were always right well done;
 A man with better cellars there was none.
 Baked meat was never wanting in his house,
 360 Of fish and flesh, and that so plenteous
 It seemed to snow therein both food and drink
 Of every dainty that a man could think.
 According to the season of the year
 He changed his diet and his means of cheer.
 365 Full many a fattened partridge did he mew,
 And many a bream and pike in fish-pond too.
 Woe to his cook, except the sauces were
 Poignant and sharp, and ready all his gear.
 His table, waiting in his hall alway,
 370 Stood ready covered through the livelong day.
 At county sessions was he lord and sire,
 And often acted as a knight of shire.
 A dagger and a trinket-bag of silk
 Hung from his girdle, white as morning milk.
 375 He had been sheriff and been auditor;
 And nowhere was a worthier vavasor.

The Haberdasher and the Carpenter

A haberdasher and a carpenter,

The Weaver, the Dyer, and the Arras-Maker

380 An arras-maker, dyer, and weaver
 Were with us, clothed in similar livery,
 All of one sober, great fraternity.
 Their gear was new and well adorned it was;
 Their weapons were not cheaply trimmed with brass,
 385 But all with silver; chastely made and well
 Their girdles and their pouches too, I tell.
 Each man of them appeared a proper burges

To sit in guildhall on a high dais.
And each of them, for wisdom he could span,
390 Was fitted to have been an alderman;
For chattels they'd enough, and, too, of rent;
To which their goodwives gave a free assent,
Or else for certain they had been to blame.
It's good to hear "Madam" before one's name,
395 And go to church when all the world may see,
Having one's mantle borne right royally.

The Cook

A cook they had with them, just for the nonce,
To boil the chickens with the marrow-bones,
400 And flavour tartly and with galingale.
Well could he tell a draught of London ale.
And he could roast and seethe and broil and fry,
And make a good thick soup, and bake a pie.
But very ill it was, it seemed to me,
405 That on his shin a deadly sore had he;
For sweet blanc-mange, he made it with the best.

The Sailor

There was a sailor, living far out west;
For aught I know, he was of Dartmouth town.
410 He sadly rode a hackney, in a gown,
Of thick rough cloth falling to the knee.
A dagger hanging on a cord had he
About his neck, and under arm, and down.
The summer's heat had burned his visage brown;
415 And certainly he was a good fellow.
Full many a draught of wine he'd drawn, I trow,
Of Bordeaux vintage, while the trader slept.
Nice conscience was a thing he never kept.
If that he fought and got the upper hand,
420 By water he sent them home to every land.
But as for craft, to reckon well his tides,
His currents and the dangerous watersides,
His harbours, and his moon, his pilotage,
There was none such from Hull to far Carthage.
425 Hardy. and wise in all things undertaken,
By many a tempest had his beard been shaken.
He knew well all the havens, as they were,
From Gottland to the Cape of Finisterre,
And every creek in Brittany and Spain;
430 His vessel had been christened Madeleine.

The Physician

With us there was a doctor of physic;
In all this world was none like him to pick
For talk of medicine and surgery;
435 For he was grounded in astronomy.
He often kept a patient from the pall
By horoscopes and magic natural.
Well could he tell the fortune ascendent
Within the houses for his sick patient.
440 He knew the cause of every malady,
Were it of hot or cold, of moist or dry,
And where engendered, and of what humour;
He was a very good practitioner.
The cause being known, down to the deepest root,
445 Anon he gave to the sick man his boot.
Ready he was, with his apothecaries,
To send him drugs and all electuaries;
By mutual aid much gold they'd always won-
Their friendship was a thing not new begun.
450 Well read was he in Esculapius,
And Deiscorides, and in Rufus,
Hippocrates, and Hali, and Galen,

Serapion, Rhazes, and Avicen,
Averrhoes, Gilbert, and Constantine,
455 Bernard and Gatisden, and John Damascene.
In diet he was measured as could be,
Including naught of superfluity,
But nourishing and easy. It's no libel
To say he read but little in the Bible.
460 In blue and scarlet he went clad, withal,
Lined with a taffeta and with sendal;
And yet he was right chary of expense;
He kept the gold he gained from pestilence.
For gold in physic is a fine cordial,
465 And therefore loved he gold exceeding all.

The Wife of Bath

There was a housewife come from Bath, or near,
Who- sad to say- was deaf in either ear.
At making cloth she had so great a bent
470 She bettered those of Ypres and even of Ghent.
In all the parish there was no goodwife
Should offering make before her, on my life;
And if one did, indeed, so wroth was she
It put her out of all her charity.
475 Her kerchiefs were of finest weave and ground;
I dare swear that they weighed a full ten pound
Which, of a Sunday, she wore on her head.
Her hose were of the choicest scarlet red,
Close gartered, and her shoes were soft and new.
480 Bold was her face, and fair, and red of hue.
She'd been respectable throughout her life,
With five churched husbands bringing joy and strife,
Not counting other company in youth;
But thereof there's no need to speak, in truth.
485 Three times she'd journeyed to Jerusalem;
And many a foreign stream she'd had to stem;
At Rome she'd been, and she'd been in Boulogne,
In Spain at Santiago, and at Cologne.
She could tell much of wandering by the way:
490 Gap-toothed was she, it is no lie to say.
Upon an ambler easily she sat,
Well wimpled, aye, and over all a hat
As broad as is a buckler or a targe;
A rug was tucked around her buttocks large,
495 And on her feet a pair of sharpened spurs.
In company well could she laugh her slurs.
The remedies of love she knew, perchance,
For of that art she'd learned the old, old dance.

The Parson

500 There was a good man of religion, too,
A country parson, poor, I warrant you;
But rich he was in holy thought and work.
He was a learned man also, a clerk,
Who Christ's own gospel truly sought to preach;
505 Devoutly his parishioners would he teach.
Benign he was and wondrous diligent,
Patient in adverse times and well content,
As he was oftentimes proven; always blithe,
He was right loath to curse to get a tithe,
510 But rather would he give, in case of doubt,
Unto those poor parishioners about,
Part of his income, even of his goods.
Enough with little, coloured all his moods.
Wide was his parish, houses far asunder,
515 But never did he fail, for rain or thunder,
In sickness, or in sin, or any state,
To visit to the farthest, small and great,

Going afoot, and in his hand, a stave.
 This fine example to his flock he gave,
 520 That first he wrought and afterwards he taught;
 Out of the gospel then that text he caught,
 And this figure he added thereunto-
 That, if gold rust, what shall poor iron do?
 For if the priest be foul, in whom we trust,
 525 What wonder if a layman yield to lust?
 And shame it is, if priest take thought for keep,
 A shitty shepherd, shepherding clean sheep.
 Well ought a priest example good to give,
 By his own cleanness, how his flock should live.
 530 He never let his benefice for hire,
 Leaving his flock to flounder in the mire,
 And ran to London, up to old Saint Paul's
 To get himself a chantry there for souls,
 Nor in some brotherhood did he withhold;
 535 But dwelt at home and kept so well the fold
 That never wolf could make his plans miscarry;
 He was a shepherd and not mercenary.
 And holy though he was, and virtuous,
 To sinners he was not impiteous,
 540 Nor haughty in his speech, nor too divine,
 But in all teaching prudent and benign.
 To lead folk into Heaven but by stress
 Of good example was his busyness.
 But if some sinful one proved obstinate,
 545 Be who it might, of high or low estate,
 Him he reproved, and sharply, as I know.
 There is nowhere a better priest, I trow.
 He had no thirst for pomp or reverence,
 Nor made himself a special, spiced conscience,
 550 But Christ's own lore, and His apostles' twelve
 He taught, but first he followed it himself.

The Plowman

With him there was a plowman, was his brother,
 That many a load of dung, and many another
 555 Had scattered, for a good true toiler, he,
 Living in peace and perfect charity.
 He loved God most, and that with his whole heart
 At all times, though he played or plied his art,
 And next, his neighbour, even as himself.
 560 He'd thresh and dig, with never thought of pelf,
 For Christ's own sake, for every poor wight,
 All without pay, if it lay in his might.
 He paid his taxes, fully, fairly, well,
 Both by his own toil and by stuff he'd sell.
 565 In a tabard he rode upon a mare.
 There were also a reeve and miller there;
 A summoner, manciple and pardoner,
 And these, beside myself, made all there were.

The Miller

570 The miller was a stout churl, be it known,
 Hardy and big of brawn and big of bone;
 Which was well proved, for when he went on lam
 At wrestling, never failed he of the ram.
 He was a chunky fellow, broad of build;
 575 He'd heave a door from hinges if he willed,
 Or break it through, by running, with his head.
 His beard, as any sow or fox, was red,
 And broad it was as if it were a spade.
 Upon the coping of his nose he had
 580 A wart, and thereon stood a tuft of hairs,
 Red as the bristles in an old sow's ears;
 His nostrils they were black and very wide.

A sword and buckler bore he by his side.
 His mouth was like a furnace door for size.
 585 He was a jester and could poetize,
 But mostly all of sin and ribaldries.
 He could steal corn and full thrice charge his fees;
 And yet he had a thumb of gold, begad.
 A white coat and blue hood he wore, this lad.
 590 A bagpipe he could blow well, be it known,
 And with that same he brought us out of town.

The Manciple

There was a manciple from an inn of court,
 To whom all buyers might quite well resort
 595 To learn the art of buying food and drink;
 For whether he paid cash or not, I think
 That he so knew the markets, when to buy,
 He never found himself left high and dry.
 Now is it not of God a full fair grace
 600 That such a vulgar man has wit to pace
 The wisdom of a crowd of learned men?
 Of masters had he more than three times ten,
 Who were in law expert and curious;
 Whereof there were a dozen in that house
 605 Fit to be stewards of both rent and land
 Of any lord in England who would stand
 Upon his own and live in manner good,
 In honour, debtless (save his head were wood),
 Or live as frugally as he might desire;
 610 These men were able to have helped a shire
 In any case that ever might befall;
 And yet this manciple outguessed them all.

The Reeve

The reeve he was a slender, choleric man
 615 Who shaved his beard as close as razor can.
 His hair was cut round even with his ears;
 His top was tonsured like a pulpiter's.
 Long were his legs, and they were very lean,
 And like a staff, with no calf to be seen.
 620 Well could he manage granary and bin;
 No auditor could ever on him win.
 He could foretell, by drought and by the rain,
 The yielding of his seed and of his grain.
 His lord's sheep and his oxen and his dairy,
 625 His swine and horses, all his stores, his poultry,
 Were wholly in this steward's managing;
 And, by agreement, he'd made reckoning
 Since his young lord of age was twenty years;
 Yet no man ever found him in arrears.
 630 There was no agent, hind, or herd who'd cheat
 But he knew well his cunning and deceit;
 They were afraid of him as of the death.
 His cottage was a good one, on a heath;
 By green trees shaded with this dwelling-place.
 635 Much better than his lord could he purchase.
 Right rich he was in his own private right,
 Seeing he'd pleased his lord, by day or night,
 By giving him, or lending, of his goods,
 And so got thanked- but yet got coats and hoods.
 640 In youth he'd learned a good trade, and had been
 A carpenter, as fine as could be seen.
 This steward sat a horse that well could trot,
 And was all dapple-grey, and was named Scot.
 A long surcoat of blue did he parade,
 645 And at his side he bore a rusty blade.
 Of Norfolk was this reeve of whom I tell,
 From near a town that men call Badeswell.

Bundled he was like friar from chin to croup,
And ever he rode hindmost of our troop.

650

The Summoner

A summoner was with us in that place,
Who had a fiery-red, cherubic face,
For eczema he had; his eyes were narrow
As hot he was, and lecherous, as a sparrow;
655 With black and scabby brows and scanty beard;
He had a face that little children feared.
There was no mercury, sulphur, or litharge,
No borax, ceruse, tartar, could discharge,
Nor ointment that could cleanse enough, or bite,
660 To free him of his boils and pimples white,
Nor of the bosses resting on his cheeks.
Well loved he garlic, onions, aye and leeks,
And drinking of strong wine as red as blood.
Then would he talk and shout as madman would.
665 And when a deal of wine he'd poured within,
Then would he utter no word save Latin.
Some phrases had he learned, say two or three,
Which he had garnered out of some decree;
No wonder, for he'd heard it all the day;
670 And all you know right well that even a jay
Can call out "Wat" as well as can the pope.
But when, for aught else, into him you'd grope,
'Twas found he'd spent his whole philosophy;
Just "Questio quid juris" would he cry.
675 He was a noble rascal, and a kind;
A better comrade 'twould be hard to find.
Why, he would suffer, for a quart of wine,
Some good fellow to have his concubine
A twelve-month, and excuse him to the full
680 (Between ourselves, though, he could pluck a gull).
And if he chanced upon a good fellow,
He would instruct him never to have awe,
In such a case, of the archdeacon's curse,
Except a man's soul lie within his purse;
685 For in his purse the man should punished be.
"The purse is the archdeacon's Hell," said he.
But well I know he lied in what he said;
A curse ought every guilty man to dread
(For curse can kill, as absolution save),
690 And 'ware significavit to the grave.
In his own power had he, and at ease,
The boys and girls of all the diocese,
And knew their secrets, and by counsel led.
A garland had he set upon his head,
695 Large as a tavern's wine-bush on a stake;
A buckler had he made of bread they bake.

The Pardoner

With him there rode a gentle pardoner
Of Rouncival, his friend and his compeer;
700 Straight from the court of Rome had journeyed he.
Loudly he sang "Come hither, love, to me,"
The summoner joining with a burden round;
Was never horn of half so great a sound.
This pardoner had hair as yellow as wax,
705 But lank it hung as does a strike of flax;
In wisps hung down such locks as he'd on head,
And with them he his shoulders overspread;
But thin they dropped, and stringy, one by one.
But as to hood, for sport of it, he'd none,
710 Though it was packed in wallet all the while.
It seemed to him he went in latest style,
Dishevelled, save for cap, his head all bare.

As shiny eyes he had as has a hare.
He had a fine veronica sewed to cap.

715 His wallet lay before him in his lap,
Stuffed full of pardons brought from Rome all hot.
A voice he had that bleated like a goat.
No beard had he, nor ever should he have,
For smooth his face as he'd just had a shave;
720 I think he was a gelding or a mare.
But in his craft, from Berwick unto Ware,
Was no such pardoner in any place.
For in his bag he had a pillowcase
The which, he said, was Our True Lady's veil:
725 He said he had a piece of the very sail
That good Saint Peter had, what time he went
Upon the sea, till Jesus changed his bent.
He had a latten cross set full of stones,
And in a bottle had he some pig's bones.
730 But with these relics, when he came upon
Some simple parson, then this paragon
In that one day more money stood to gain
Than the poor dupe in two months could attain.
And thus, with flattery and suchlike japes,
735 He made the parson and the rest his apes.
But yet, to tell the whole truth at the last,
He was, in church, a fine ecclesiast.
Well could he read a lesson or a story,
But best of all he sang an offertory;
740 For well he knew that when that song was sung,
Then might he preach, and all with polished tongue.
To win some silver, as he right well could;
Therefore he sang so merrily and so loud.

Prologue

745 Now have I told you briefly, in a clause,
The state, the array, the number, and the cause
Of the assembling of this company
In Southwark, at this noble hostelry
Known as the Tabard Inn, hard by the Bell.
750 But now the time is come wherein to tell
How all we bore ourselves that very night
When at the hostelry we did alight.
And afterward the story I engage
To tell you of our common pilgrimage.
755 But first, I pray you, of your courtesy,
You'll not ascribe it to vulgarity
Though I speak plainly of this matter here,
Retailing you their words and means of cheer;
Nor though I use their very terms, nor lie.
760 For this thing do you know as well as I:
When one repeats a tale told by a man,
He must report, as nearly as he can,
Every least word, if he remember it,
However rude it be, or how unfit;
765 Or else he may be telling what's untrue,
Embellishing and fictionizing too.
He may not spare, although it were his brother;
He must as well say one word as another.
Christ spoke right broadly out, in holy writ,
770 And, you know well, there's nothing low in it.
And Plato says, to those able to read:
"The word should be the cousin to the deed."
Also, I pray that you'll forgive it me
If I have not set folk, in their degree
775 Here in this tale, by rank as they should stand.
My wits are not the best, you'll understand.

Great cheer our host gave to us, every one,

And to the supper set us all anon;
 And served us then with victuals of the best.
 780 Strong was the wine and pleasant to each guest.
 A seemly man our good host was, withal,
 Fit to have been a marshal in some hall;
 He was a large man, with protruding eyes,
 As fine a burgher as in Cheapside lies;
 785 Bold in his speech, and wise, and right well taught,
 And as to manhood, lacking there in naught.
 Also, he was a very merry man,
 And after meat, at playing he began,
 Speaking of mirth among some other things,
 790 When all of us had paid our reckonings;
 And saying thus: "Now masters, verily
 You are all welcome here, and heartily:
 For by my truth, and telling you no lie,
 I have not seen, this year, a company
 795 Here in this inn, fitter for sport than now.
 Fain would I make you happy, knew I how.
 And of a game have I this moment thought
 To give you joy, and it shall cost you naught.
 "You go to Canterbury; may God speed
 800 And the blest martyr soon requite your meed.
 And well I know, as you go on your way,
 You'll tell good tales and shape yourselves to play;
 For truly there's no mirth nor comfort, none,
 Riding the roads as dumb as is a stone;
 805 And therefore will I furnish you a sport,
 As I just said, to give you some comfort.
 And if you like it, all, by one assent,
 And will be ruled by me, of my judgment,
 And will so do as I'll proceed to say,
 810 Tomorrow, when you ride upon your way,
 Then, by my father's spirit, who is dead,
 If you're not gay, I'll give you up my head.
 Hold up your hands, nor more about it speak."
 Our full assenting was not far to seek;
 815 We thought there was no reason to think twice,
 And granted him his way without advice,
 And bade him tell his verdict just and wise,
 "Masters," quoth he, "here now is my advice;
 But take it not, I pray you, in disdain;
 820 This is the point, to put it short and plain,
 That each of you, beguiling the long day,
 Shall tell two stories as you wend your way
 To Canterbury town; and each of you
 On coming home, shall tell another two,
 825 All of adventures he has known befall.
 And he who plays his part the best of all,
 That is to say, who tells upon the road
 Tales of best sense, in most amusing mode,
 Shall have a supper at the others' cost
 830 Here in this room and sitting by this post,
 When we come back again from Canterbury.
 And now, the more to warrant you'll be merry,
 I will myself, and gladly, with you ride
 At my own cost, and I will be your guide.

835 But whosoever shall my rule gainsay
 Shall pay for all that's bought along the way.
 And if you are agreed that it be so,
 Tell me at once, or if not, tell me no,
 And I will act accordingly. No more."
 840 This thing was granted, and our oaths we swore,
 With right glad hearts, and prayed of him, also,
 That he would take the office, nor forgo
 The place of governor of all of us,
 Judging our tales; and by his wisdom thus
 845 Arrange that supper at a certain price,
 We to be ruled, each one, by his advice
 In things both great and small; by one assent,
 We stood committed to his government.
 And thereupon, the wine was fetched anon;
 850 We drank, and then to rest went every one,
 And that without a longer tarrying.
 Next morning, when the day began to spring,
 Up rose our host, and acting as our cock,
 He gathered us together in a flock,
 855 And forth we rode, a jog-trot being the pace,
 Until we reached Saint Thomas' watering-place.
 And there our host pulled horse up to a walk,
 And said: "Now, masters, listen while I talk.
 You know what you agreed at set of sun.
 860 If even-song and morning-song are one,
 Let's here decide who first shall tell a tale.
 And as I hope to drink more wine and ale,
 Whoso proves rebel to my government
 Shall pay for all that by the way is spent.
 865 Come now, draw cuts, before we farther win,
 And he that draws the shortest shall begin.
 Sir knight," said he, "my master and my lord,
 You shall draw first as you have pledged your word.
 Come near," quoth he, "my lady prioress:
 870 And you, sir clerk, put by your bashfulness,
 Nor ponder more; out hands, flow, every man!"
 At once to draw a cut each one began,
 And, to make short the matter, as it was,
 Whether by chance or whatsoever cause,
 875 The truth is, that the cut fell to the knight,
 At which right happy then was every wight.
 Thus that his story first of all he'd tell,
 According to the compact, it befell,
 As you have heard. Why argue to and fro?
 880 And when this good man saw that it was so,
 Being a wise man and obedient
 To plighted word, given by free assent,
 He slid: "Since I must then begin the game,
 Why, welcome be the cut, and in God's name!
 885 Now let us ride, and hearken what I say."
 And at that word we rode forth on our way;
 And he began to speak, with right good cheer,
 His tale anon, as it is written here.

Here ends the Prologue of this book and here begins
 890 the First Tale, which is the Knight's Tale

DISCUSSION:

1. What evidence is there that Chaucer's characters are individuals as well as types?
2. What evidence is there of Chaucer's own attitudes? What tone of writing does he adopt with certain characters?
3. What attitude does Chaucer hold towards the Church? How is this expressed?
4. Pick out examples of detailed observation and descriptive language.
5. How does Chaucer's Prologue to the Canterbury Tales reflect the society and times in which it was written?