

“The General Prologue”

Translation by A. S. Kline¹

- When that April with his showers sweet
 The drought of March has pierced root deep,
 And bathed each vein with liquor of such power
 That engendered from it is the flower,
 When Zephyrus too with his gentle strife,
 (5) To every field and wood, has brought new life
 In tender shoots, and the youthful sun
 Half his course through the Ram has run,
 And little birds are making melody,
 Who all the night with open eye do sleep –
 (10) Nature their hearts in every way so pricks –
 Then people long to go on pilgrimage,
 And palmers who seek out foreign strands,
 To far-off shrines, renowned in sundry lands;
 And specially, from every shire's end
 (15) Of England, down to Canterbury they wend,
 The holy blissful martyr there to seek,
 Who had aided them when they were sick.
 It befell that in that season on a day,
 In Southwark at The Tabard as I lay,
 (20) Ready to set out on my pilgrimage
 To Canterbury with pious courage,
 There came at night to that hostelry
 Quite nine and twenty in a company
 Of sundry folk who had chanced to fall
 (25) Into a fellowship, and pilgrims all,
 That towards Canterbury meant to ride.
 The chambers and the stables were full wide,
 And we housed at our ease, and of the best;
 And shortly, when the sun had gone to rest,
 (30) I had such speech with each and everyone,
 That of their fellowship I soon made one,
 Agreeing I would make an early rise,
 To take our way there, as I now advise.
 Nonetheless while I have time and space,
 (35) Before a step more of my tale I pace,
 It seems to me in full accord with reason,
 To tell you everything of their condition,
 Of each of them, as they appeared to me,
 And who they were, and of what degree,
 (40) And what apparel they were travelling in;
 And with a knight then I will first begin.
 There was a KNIGHT and he a worthy man,
 That from the day on which he first began,
 To ride abroad, had followed chivalry,
 (45) Truth, honour, courtesy and charity.
 He had fought nobly in his lord's war,
 And ridden to the fray, and no man more,
 As much in Christendom as heathen place,
 And ever honoured for his worth and grace.
 (50) When we took Alexandria was there;
 Often at table held the place of honour,
 Above all other nations too in Prussia;
 Campaigned in Lithuania and Russia,
 (55) No Christian man of his rank more often,
 At the siege of Algeciras had he been,
 In Granada, and on Moroccan shore;
 He was at Ayash and Antalya
 When taken, and many times had been
 In action on the Mediterranean Sea.
 (60) Of mortal battles he had seen fifteen,
 And fought for the faith at Tramisene
 Thrice in the lists and always slain his foe.
 This same worthy knight had been also
 With the Emir of Balat once, at work
 (65) With him against some other heathen Turk;
 Won him a reputation highly prized,
 And though he was valiant, he was wise,
 And in his manner modest as a maid.
 And never a discourtesy he said
 (70) In all his life to those who met his sight;
 He was a very perfect gentle knight.
 But to tell of his equipment, his array,
 His horses fine, he wore no colours gay
 Sported a tunic, padded fustian
 (75) On which his coat of mail left many a stain;
 For he was scarcely back from his voyage,
 And going now to make his pilgrimage.
 With him there was his son, a young SQUIRE,
 Lover and lively bachelor entire
 (80) With locks as crisp as from a curling-press;
 Of twenty years of age he was, I guess.
 Of his stature, he was of middle height,
 Wonderfully agile, powerful in a fight.
 And had served a while in the cavalry,
 (85) In Flanders, in Artois and Picardy,
 And done so well, and in so short a space,
 He hoped for favour from his lady's grace.
 Like to a meadow he was embroidered,
 One full of fresh flowers white and red.
 (90) Singing he was, or playing flute all day;
 He was as fresh as is the month of May.
 Short was his gown, with sleeves both long and
 wide;
 He knew how to sit a horse, and could ride.
 He could make songs, and compose aright,
 (95) Joust and dance, and draw things well and write.
 He loved so hotly night through without fail
 He slept no more than does the nightingale.
 Courteous he was, humble, attentive, able,
 And carved for his father at the table.
 (100) A YEOMAN had he (servants did forgo
 Other than this, and chose to travel so),
 One who was clad in coat and hood of green.
 A sheaf of peacock arrows, bright and keen
 Sheathed in his belt he bore right properly –
 (105) Well could he dress his gear, yeomanly;
 His arrows never drooped with feathers low –
 And in his hand he bore a mighty bow.
 Cropped hair he had, and a nut-brown visage;
 Of woodcraft he well knew all the usage.
 (110) On his arm an archer's brace he wore,
 And by his side a buckler and a sword,
 And at the other side a jaunty dagger
 Ornamented, and sharp as any spear;

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- (115) On his breast St Christopher did gleam.
 He bore a horn, the baldric was of green.
 He truly was a forester, I guess.
- (120) There was also a nun, a **PRIORESS**,
 Her smile itself ingenuous and coy.
 Her greatest oath was only 'by Saint Loy',
 And she was called Madame Eglentine.
 Full well she sung the service, divine,
 Intoning through her nose, all seemly,
 And fair French she spoke, all elegantly,
 After the school of Stratford-atte-Bowe;
- (125) For French of Paris was not hers to know.
 At meals she had been taught well withal;
 And from her lips she let no morsel fall,
 Nor dipped her fingers in the sauce too deep;
- (130) Well could she take a morsel and then keep
 The slightest drop from falling on her breast;
 Courtesy it was that pleased her best.
 Her upper lip she would wipe so clean
 That in her cup no trace of grease was seen
- (135) When she had drunk her draught; and to eat,
 In a most seemly manner took her meat.
 And certainly she had a cheerful manner,
 Pleasant and amiable in her behaviour,
 Took pains to imitate the ways of court,
 Display a stately bearing as she ought,
- (140) And be considered worthy of reverence.
 As for consideration of her conscience,
 She was so charitable, tender, anxious,
 She would weep if she but saw a mouse
 Caught in a trap, if it were dead or bled.
- (145) Of slender hounds she had, that she fed
 With roasted flesh, or milk, and fine white bread;
 But wept sorely when one of them was dead
 Or if men struck it with a stick too hard,
 And all was sentiment and tender heart.
- (150) Her wimple was pleated in a seemly way,
 Her nose was elegant, her eyes blue-grey;
 Her lips quite fine, and also soft and red,
 But certainly she had a fair forehead,
 It was almost a span broad, I deem,
- (155) For she was not small of build, I mean.
 Her cloak was very elegant, I saw;
 Fine coral round her arm she wore
 A rosary, the larger beads were green,
 And from it hung a brooch of golden sheen,
- (160) On which there first was writ a crowned A,
 And after: 'Amor vincit omnia'.
 Another **NUN** she had with her, and she
 Was her chaplain, and with them priests three.
- (165) A **MONK** there was, of the highest degree,
 Who loved to hunt, agent of a monastery,
 A manly man, for an Abbot's role quite able.
 Full many a fine horse had he in his stable,
 His bridle, when he rode, men might hear
 Jingling in a whistling wind as clear,
- (170) And quite as loud as does the chapel bell.
 Now as this lord was prior of his cell,
 The rule of Saint Benedict and Saint Mawr,
 As old and somewhat strict he would ignore,
 This same monk scorned the old world's pace,
- (175) And spurred after the new world, apace.
- He gave not for that text a plucked hen
 That says that hunters are not holy men,
 And that a monk when he grows heedless
 Is like a fish that's all waterless –
 That is to say a monk out of his cloister –
 But he held that text not worth an oyster.
 And I agreed his views were scarcely bad:
 What! Should he study, drive himself quite mad,
 In his cloister over a book must pore,
 Or labour with his hands, and toil the more
 As Augustine bids? How would the world run?
 Let Augustine keep his labour for his own!
 Therefore he was a hunting man outright.
 Greyhounds he had, as swift as birds in flight;
 Tracking with dogs and hunting the hare
 Was all his pleasure, no cost did he spare.
 I saw his sleeves were trimmed at the wrist
 With grey fur, and of the country's finest;
 And to fasten his hood beneath his chin,
 He had a wrought-gold elaborate pin;
 A love-knot in the larger end there was.
 His head was bald, and shone like any glass,
 And his face, as if he had been anointed;
 He was a lord full fat, and well appointed.
 His bulging eyeballs, rolling in his head,
 Glowing like a cauldron-fire well-fed;
 Supple his boots, his horse in perfect state.
 Now certainly he was a fair prelate;
 He was not pale like some tormented ghost.
 A fat swan he loved best of any roast;
 His palfrey was as brown as is a berry.
 A **FRIAR** there was, a wanton one and merry,
 A Limiter, a very jovial man.
 In all the friars' four orders none that can
 Lead a discussion in fairer language.
 And he had arranged many a marriage
 Of young women, granting each a dower.
 He was a noble pillar of his Order.
 Well-beloved and intimate was he
 With Franklins within his boundary,
 And also worthy women of the town;
 Had power to confess coat and gown –
 As he said himself – more than a curate,
 Having licence from his bishop to do it.
 Full sweetly he would hear confessions,
 And very pleasant were his absolutions.
 He was an easy man at granting penance
 From which he made more than a pittance.
 When to a poor Order alms are given
 It is a token that a man's well-shriven;
 Since he dared claim that from the intent,
 Of giving, then the man was penitent.
 For many a man is so hard of heart
 He cannot weep, though he feels the smart.
 Therefore instead of weeping and prayer,
 Better to give the poor friars silverware.
 His sleeve's end was stuffed with pocket-knives
 And gilded pins, to give to pretty wives.
 He could hold a note for sure; could sing
 And play quite sweetly on the tuneful string.
 Such competitions he won easily.
 His neck was white as the fleur-de-lis;

- And he was as strong as any champion.
 He knew the taverns well in every town,
 (240) And all the barmaids and innkeepers,
 Rather than the lepers and the beggars
 Since such a worthy man as he
 It suited not his calling or degree,
 (245) With such lepers to maintain acquaintance.
 It is not seemly – helps no man advance –
 To have dealings with such poor people,
 Only with the rich, sellers of victuals.
 An everywhere a profit might arise,
 He wore a courteous and humble guise;
 (250) There was no man half so virtuous.
 He was the finest beggar of his house
 – and paid a fixed fee for the right;
 None of his brethren poached in his sight.
 For though a widow lacked a shoe
 (255) So pleasant was his 'In principio',
 He yet would gain a farthing as he went.
 His income was far greater than his rent,
 And he romped around, like any whelp.
 In settling disputes he could help,
 (260) Not like a friar from a cloister,
 With threadbare cloak, like needy scholar,
 But he was like a doctor or a pope;
 Of double worsted was his demi-cloak,
 A bell shaped from the mould, its fashion.
 (265) He lisped a little out of affectation,
 To sound his English sweet upon the tongue;
 And in his harping, whenever he had sung,
 His eyes would twinkle in his head aright
 As do the stars on high in frosty night.
 (270) Hubert his name, this worthy Limiter.
 A MERCHANT was there, with a forked beard,
 Dressed in motley, high on horse he sat.
 Upon his head a Flemish beaver hat,
 Buckled his boots were, fair and neatly.
 (275) He made his comments solemnly, fully,
 Boasting of profits ever increasing,
 Wishing sea-trade secure, more than anything,
 Twixt Middleburgh and the River Orwell.
 He could exchange monies, buy and sell.
 (280) This worthy man made such use of his wits;
 No one knew he was beset by debts,
 So stately his manner of behaving,
 In his bargaining, and money-lending.
 (285) Truly a worthy man then, all in all,
 But truth to tell, I know not what he's called.
 A CLERK there was of Oxford town also,
 Who had set himself to logic long ago.
 Thinner was his horse than many a rake,
 (290) And he was none too fat, I'll undertake,
 But gazed quite hollowly, and soberly.
 His jacket threadbare, where the eye could see;
 For he had not yet found a benefice,
 Far too unworldly ever to seek office.
 (295) He would rather have at his bed-head
 Twenty books, clad in black or red,
 Of Aristotle and his philosophy,
 Than rich robes, fiddle, and sweet psaltery.
 But though he was a true philosopher
 (300) No stone for making gold lay in his coffer!
 But every single penny his friends lent,
 On books and on learning it was spent,
 And for the souls he offered up a prayer,
 Of those who funded him to be a scholar.
 Of study he took most care, and most heed.
 (305) He spoke not one word more than he need,
 And that was formal, said with reverence,
 Short, and quick, and in a noble sentence.
 Agreeing with moral virtue all his speech,
 And gladly would he learn, and gladly teach.
 (310) A SERGEANT AT LAW, wise and cautious,
 Often consulted at St Paul's porch and such,
 Was also there, rich in excellence.
 Discreet he was, a man for reverence –
 Or so he seemed, his words being so wise.
 (315) He had often been a Justice at assize,
 By letters patent and by full commission.
 By his science and his high renown
 Of fees and robes he garnered many a one.
 So great a buyer of land was never known;
 (320) All was his in fee-simple, in effect.
 His purchases were not the least suspect.
 More business than he had, no man has,
 And yet he seemed busier than he was.
 He had correctly cases, judgements, all
 (325) From King William's time in men's recall.
 Moreover he could draw up anything,
 That no man might find fault with its drafting;
 And every statute he could cite by rote,
 He rode along in a simple striped coat,
 (330) Tied with a silken belt, its clasps of metal;
 Of his array I will no further tell.
 A FRANKLIN was in his company;
 White was his beard as is the daisy.
 Of his complexion he was sanguine;
 (335) He loved a sop in wine each morning.
 To live in delight was ever his wont,
 For he was Epicurus' very son,
 Who held the view that perfect delight
 Was the true felicity outright.
 (340) A hospitable householder was he
 Saint Julian he was to his county.
 His bread and ale always second to none;
 And no better wine than his was known.
 His house was never short of fish and flesh,
 (345) Of pastry dishes, and all so plenteous
 It snowed in his house with meat and drink,
 And all the dainties of which men might think.
 In accordance with the seasons of the year,
 So he changed his dinner and his supper.
 (350) Full many a fat partridge had he in coop,
 And many a bream and pike in the pool.
 Woe to his cook unless his sauces were
 Pungent and tasty, and every dish prepared!
 His table fixed in his hall stood always
 (355) Ready set with covers, every day.
 At court-sessions he was lord and sire;
 And oftentimes was Member for the Shire.
 A two-edged dagger and a purse of silk
 Hung at his girdle, white as morning milk.
 (360) A Sheriff had he been, and a lawyer;
 Nowhere lived so worthy a landowner.

- A HABERDASHER, CARPENTER, a WEAVER
A DYER too, and TAPESTRY-MAKER, (425)
Were there all clothed in the livery
(365) Of their imposing guild fraternity.
Full fresh and new their costume was;
Their knives were mounted not with brass
But all with silver, wrought clean and well, (430)
Their girdles and their pouches as befell.
(370) Each of them seemed a splendid burgess
Fit to grace a guildhall on a dais.
Each owning as much wisdom as man can,
Was suitable to be an alderman, (435)
For they had property enough and rent,
(375) And wives too who would give their assent.
They would be blamed for sure were it not done;
It is a fine thing to be called 'Madame',
And go to vigil before the celebration, (440)
With mantle royally carried, on occasion.
(380) A COOK they had with them I own
To boil the chickens with the marrow-bones,
And pungent flavouring, spices without fail. (445)
Well could he distinguish London ale;
He could roast and seethe and boil and fry,
(385) Make thick soup and bake a tasty pie.
But a mortal pity, it seemed to me,
That on his shin an ulcerous sore had he. (450)
Yet a fricassee, he made it with the best.
A SHIPMAN was there, from out the west;
(390) A Dartmouth man for all I understood.
He rode a hired hack, as best he could,
In a woollen gown that reached his knee, (455)
A dagger hanging on a cord had he,
About his neck, under his arm, and down.
(395) The summer heat had tanned his visage brown.
And certainly he was a splendid fellow;
Full many a draught of wine he made flow (460)
From Bordeaux, the merchant fast asleep,
The nicer rules of conscience did not keep:
(400) If he fought, and gained the upper hand,
He sent men home by water to every land.
As for his skill in calculating tides, (465)
Currents, and every other risk besides,
Harbours and moons, on every voyage,
(405) There was none such from Hull to Carthage.
Hardy he was, wise in his undertakings,
In many a tempest had his beard been shaken. (470)
He knew all the havens that there were
From Gotland's Isle to Cape Finisterre,
(410) And every creek in Brittany and Spain;
The barque he owned was called the Magdalene.
With us there was a DOCTOR OF PHYSIC. (475)
In all this world none ever saw his like
On points of physic and of surgery,
(415) For he was grounded in astronomy.
He knew the best hours for the sick,
By the power of his natural magic. (480)
And could select the right ascendant
For making talismans for his patient.
(420) He knew the cause of every malady,
Whether of hot or cold, or moist and dry,
And where engendered, of what humour; (485)
He was a truly perfect practitioner.
- The cause known, and of the ill its root,
He gave the sick man remedy to suit.
To send him medicines, his apothecaries
And potions too, they were ever ready,
For each enhanced the other's profiting –
There needed no new friendship there to win.
He was well-versed in Aesculapius,
And Dioscorides and likewise Rufus,
Old Hippocrates, Hali and Galen,
Serapion, Rhazes and Avicen,
Averroes, Damascenus, Constantinus,
Bernard, and Gaddesden, and Gilbertus.
In his diet quite moderate was he,
For it avoided superfluity,
But nourishing it was, digestible.
He made little study of the Bible.
In red and blue, and colours of that ilk,
Lined with taffeta, was clad, and silk.
And yet he was most careful of expense;
He kept the money won from pestilence.
For gold in physic is a cordial;
Therefore he loved gold above all.
A good WIFE was there from next to BATH,
But pity was that she was somewhat deaf.
In cloth-making she was excellent,
Surpassing those of Ypres and of Ghent.
In all the parish there was no wife, so
Before her to the Offertory might go –
And if they did, indeed, so angry she
That she was quite put out of charity.
Her kerchiefs were finely wove I found;
I dare to swear those weighed a good ten pounds,
That on a Sunday she wore on her head.
Here hose were of a fine scarlet red,
And tightly tied: her shoes full soft and new.
Bold was her face, and fair and red of hue.
Had been a worthy woman all her life;
Husbands at the church-door she had five,
Besides other company in her youth –
No need to speak of that just now, in truth.
And thrice had she been to Jerusalem;
She had crossed many a foreign stream.
At Boulogne she had been, and Rome,
St James of Compostella, and Cologne,
And she knew much of wandering by the way,
Gap toothed was she, truthfully to say.
At ease upon a saddle-horse she sat,
Well wimpled, and on her head a hat
As wide as a small buckler or large shield,
Her large hips an over-skirt concealed,
And on her feet a pair of sharp spurs sat.
In fellowship she loved to laugh and chat;
And remedies for love she had, by chance,
For in that art she knew the oldest dance.
A holy man there was of good renown,
Who was a poor PARSON to a town,
But rich he was in holy thought and works.
He also was a learned man, a clerk,
That Christ's gospel earnestly would preach;
His parishioners devoutly he would teach.
Benign he was and wondrous diligent,
And in adversity extremely patient,

- And proven to be such as many times.
 He was loth to curse men over tithes,
 But preferred to give, without a doubt, (550)
 To the poor parishioners round about,
 From his own goods and the offerings,
 He found sufficiency in little things.
 Wide was his parish, and houses far asunder,
 But he neglected naught, in rain or thunder, (555)
 In sickness or affliction went to all
 The farthest in his parish, great or small,
 Upon his feet, and in his hand a stave.
 This fine example to his flock he gave,
 That first he wrought, and afterward he taught. (560)
 Out of the gospel he those words had caught;
 And this maxim he would add thereto,
 That if gold rust, what should iron do?
 For if the priest be foul in whom we trust,
 No wonder if the layman turn to rust! (565)
 And shame it is, and let priests note, to see
 The shepherd doused in shit, the sheep still clean.
 The true example the priest ought to give
 Is by his cleanness how the sheep should live.
 He did not set his benefice to hire (570)
 And leave his sheep encumbered in the mire,
 Running off to London to Saint Paul's,
 To work a wealthy chantry for dead souls,
 Or in guild brotherhood remain enrolled (575)
 But dwelt at home and cared well for his fold,
 So that no wolf should make his task miscarry.
 He was a shepherd not a mercenary.
 And though he was holy and virtuous,
 He did not scorn the sinful, nor because (580)
 Of it in speech was proud or over-fine,
 But in his teaching was discreet, benign;
 To draw folk towards heaven by gentleness,
 By good example – such was his business.
 But if anyone proved obstinate, (585)
 Whoever he was, of high or low estate,
 He would rebuke him sharply, him to punish.
 A better priest I think there nowhere none is.
 He never looked for pomp or reverence,
 Nor showed a too fastidious conscience,
 But Christ's lore, and his Apostles' twelve, (590)
 He taught, but first he followed it himself.
 With him there was a PLOUGHMAN, was his
 brother,
 Many a load of dung, one time or other,
 He had carted, a good true worker he, (595)
 Living in peace and perfect charity.
 God loved he best with all his whole heart
 At all times, whether with delight or smart,
 Then his neighbour loved he as himself.
 He would thresh the corn, and dig and delve, (600)
 For Christ's sake, grant the poor their hour,
 Without reward, if it lay in his power.
 His tithes he paid in full, fair and well,
 Both of his labour and his capital. (605)
 In a loose tunic he rode on a mare.
 There was a REEVE also and a MILLER,
 A SUMMONER and a PARDONER as well, (545)
 A college MANCIPILE, and then myself.
 The MILLER was a strong man I own;
- A stout fellow, big in brawn and bone.
 It served him well, for, everywhere, the man,
 At wrestling, always looked to win the ram.
 Broad, thick-set, short in the upper arm,
 Off its hinges, he lifted any door,
 Or ran at it and broke it with his head.
 His beard, as any sow or fox, was red,
 And broad as well, as if it were a spade.
 On the tip of his nose he displayed
 A wart, and on it stood a tuft of hair,
 Red as the bristles in a sow's ear.
 His nostrils were as black as they were wide;
 A sword and buckler he wore at his side.
 His mouth as great was as a great furnace.
 He was a loudmouth and to his disgrace
 Told stories most of sin and harlotry.
 He stole corn, and made one toll pay three;
 Yet had the golden thumb, a mystery!
 A white coat and a blue hood wore he;
 The bagpipes he could blow well and sound,
 And that was how he piped us out of town.
 The MANCIPILE was of the Inner Temple,
 All purchasers might follow his example
 Of wisdom in the buying of victuals;
 For whether he paid cash or owed it all
 He was so careful always in his purchase,
 That he was all prepared and acted first. (575)
 Now is it not a wonder of God's grace
 That a man so illiterate can outpace
 The wisdom of a host of learned men?
 Of masters he had more than thrice ten,
 Expert in the law and meritorious,
 Of whom there were a dozen in that house
 Worthy to be stewards of rent and land
 For any lord who lives in England,
 And show him the income to be had
 Debt-free, from his estates, less he were mad,
 Or be as frugal as he should desire;
 And they were able to assist a shire
 In any case that chanced to arise –
 And yet this Manciple outdid the wise.
 The REEVE was a slender, choleric man.
 His beard was shaved as close as any can;
 His hair by his ears was fully shorn;
 The top was cropped like a priest before.
 His legs were long, and very lean,
 Like sticks they were – no calves to be seen.
 He kept a tidy granary and bin;
 No auditor could get the best of him.
 Well could he judge from drought or rain
 The yield of his seed and of his grain.
 His lord's sheep, beef-cattle, and his dairy,
 His swine, his horses, stock and poultry,
 Was wholly in this Reeve's governance
 And he made reckoning by covenant,
 Since his lord had only twenty years;
 No man could find him ever in arrears.
 No bailiff, cowherd, servant of any kind
 But their deceits and tricks were in his mind;
 They feared him like the plague, is my belief.
 He had a pleasant dwelling on a heath,
 With green trees shadowed was the sward.

- (610) He could purchase better than his lord;
He had riches of his own privately.
He could please his lord subtly,
Giving and lending of his own goods,
And earn his thank you and a coat and hood.
- (615) In youth he had a good and learned master;
He was a fine craftsman, a carpenter.
This Reeve sat on a farm-horse that was
All dappled grey and bore the name of Scot.
A long bluish top-coat he displayed,
(620) And by his side he bore a rusty blade.
Of Norfolk was this Reeve of whom I tell,
Near a town that men call Bawdeswell.
His gown was tucked up like a friar's about,
And he always rode the hindmost on the route.
- (625) A SUMMONER was with us in that place,
Who had a fiery-red cherubim's face,
Carbuncled so, and his eyes were narrow.
He was hot and lecherous as a sparrow,
With scabby black brows and scrubby beard;
(630) Of his visage children were a-feared.
No quicksilver, lead salve, or brimstone,
Borax, ceruse, or oil of tartar known,
No ointment that would cleanse and bite,
(635) Could cure him of his pimples white,
Or of the lumps rising from his cheeks.
Well loved he garlic, onions, and leeks,
And to drink strong wine, as red as blood;
Making him speak, and cry, as madman would.
(640) And when he had drunk, and the wine was in,
Then he would speak no word but Latin.
A few tags he had, some two or three,
That he had learned out of some decree –
No wonder, since he heard them every day.
And you well know moreover how a jay
(645) Can say 'Walter' better than the Pope –
But try any other matter's scope,
Then had he spent all his philosophy;
Ay 'Questio quid iuris' was his plea.
He was a noble rogue and a kind;
(650) A better fellow no man could find.
He would allow, for a quart of wine,
A good friend to keep a concubine
A twelvemonth and excuse him fully;
And he could pluck a fool privately.
(655) And if he made a good friend anywhere,
He would teach him not to have a care
In such a case of the Archdeacon's curse,
Unless a man's soul lay in his purse,
For in his purse he should punished be.
(660) 'The purse is the Archdeacon's hell,' said he.
But well I know he lied in what he said;
For his curse each guilty man should dread,
Since absolution saves, but slays that writ,
(665) And so ware of that word Significavit.
He had in his power as he pleased
All the young folk of the diocese,
Knew their secrets, they by him were led.
A garland had he set upon his head,
(670) Big as an inn-sign's holly on a stake;
A buckler he had made him of a cake.
With him there rode a noble PARDONER
- Of Charing Cross, his friend and his peer,
Returned directly from the Court of Rome.
He sang out loud: 'Come hither, love, to me!'
(675) The Summoner sang a powerful bass around;
Never a trumpet of half so great a sound.
The Pardoner had hair as yellow as wax,
But smooth it hung like a hank of flax.
In clusters hung the locks he possessed,
(680) With which his shoulders he overspread;
But thin they fell, in strands, one by one.
But hood, to adorn them, he wore none,
For it was trussed up in his wallet –
He thought he rode fashionably set;
(685) Dishevelled, save his cap, he rode all bare.
Such bulging eyeballs had he as a hare.
A pilgrim badge had he sewn on his cap;
His wallet lay before him in his lap,
Brimful of pardons, come from Rome hotfoot.
(690) A voice he had as small as has a goat;
No beard had he, nor ever looked to have;
As smooth it were as it were lately shaved –
I judge he was a gelding or a mare.
(695) But of his craft, from Berwick unto Ware,
Never was such another Pardoner.
And in his bag a pillow-case was there,
Which he claimed was Our Lady's veil;
He said he had a fragment of the sail
That Saint Peter used, when he skimmed
(700) Upon the sea till Jesus summoned him.
He had a cross of brass set with stones,
And in a glass, he had pigs' bones.
And with these relics, when he had to hand
Some poor parson living on the land,
(705) In one day he gathered in more money
Than the parson in a month of Sundays.
And thus with feigned flattery, his japes
Made people and the parson his apes.
But to tell true from first to last,
(710) He was in church a noble ecclesiast.
He read a lesson well or a story,
But best of all he sang an Offertory.
For well he knew, when that song was sung,
He must preach and well tune his tongue
(715) To win silver, as he well knew how;
Therefore he sang more sweetly and loud.
Now I have told you in a brief clause,
The array, condition, number and the cause
Whereby assembled was this company,
(720) In Southwark at that noble hostelry
Called The Tabard, fast by The Bell.
But now the time has come for me to tell
How we behaved on that same night,
At that hostelry where we did alight;
(725) And after will I tell, at every stage,
All the remainder of our pilgrimage.
But first I pray you of your courtesy,
Not to consider me unmannerly
If I speak plainly in this matter,
(730) In telling you their words hereafter,
Though I speak their words literally;
For this you know as well as me,
Whoso tells the tale of another man

- (735) Must repeat as closely as he can
Every word, if it be in his power,
However coarse or broad his dower
Of words, or else his tale will be untrue,
Or feign things, inventing words anew.
- (740) He may spare none, though it were his brother,
Must say the one word if he says the other.
Christ himself spoke plain in Holy Writ,
And you well know no coarseness is in it.
As Plato says, to any who can read,
- (745) The words must be cousin to the deed.
Also I beg you, if you will, forgive me
If I have not placed folk in due degree
Here in this tale, as they indeed should stand;
I lack the wit, you may well understand.
- (750) Our HOST made great cheer for everyone,
And down to supper set us all anon.
He served us with victuals of the best:
Strong was the wine, we drank with zest.
A handsome man our Host was withal,
- (755) And fit to be a marshal in a hall.
A large man he was with striking eyes;
No fairer burgess was there in Cheapside.
Bold in his speech, and wise, and well taught,
And of honest manhood he lacked naught.
- (760) Add that he was a truly merry man;
And after supper jokingly began
To speak of entertainment and other things,
After we had paid our reckonings,
Saying to us: 'Now lordings, truly
- (765) To me you are right welcome, heartily!
For by my troth and telling you no lie,
I have not seen this year such folk go by
As gathered together in this tavern now.
And I would entertain, if I knew how,
- (770) Yet there is an entertainment, in my thoughts,
To amuse you and it will cost you naught.
You go to Canterbury – God you speed!
May the blissful martyr bless you indeed! –
And well I know, as you go on your way
- (775) You intend to chatter and make hay.
For truly, comfort and delight is none
In riding on the way dumb as a stone.
And therefore I offer you some sport,
As I first said, to give you some comfort.
- (780) And if you agree as one and consent
Each of you to accept my judgement,
And to work it as I to you will say,
Tomorrow when you ride on your way,
Now, by my father's soul, he being dead,
- (785) If you lack merriment, be it on my head!
Hold up your hands, without longer speech.'
Our decision was not long to seek:
We thought it not worth serious debating,
And gave him leave, without deliberating,
- (790) And bade him give his orders as he wished,
'Lordings,' quoth he, 'now listen to the rest –
But hear me out, I pray, without disdain –
Here is the point, to tell you short and plain:
That each of you, to speed you on your way,
- (795) On the journey there, shall tell two tales,
Till Canterbury, I mean it so,
- And on the homeward way another two,
Of adventures that did once befall.
And which of you that bears them best of all –
That is to say, who tells in this case
Tales the most serious that most solace –
- (800) Shall have a supper and we pay the cost,
Here in this place, sitting by this post,
When that we come again from Canterbury.
And to make you all the more merry,
I will myself gladly with you ride,
- (805) All at my own cost, and be your guide.
And whoever my judgement does gainsay
Shall pay all that we spend by the way.
And if you will agree it shall be so,
Tell me now, without more ado,
- (810) And I will get me ready for the dawn.'
The thing was agreed, and our oath sworn
With right good heart, and we begged also
That he accordingly would do so,
And that he act then as our governor,
- (815) And of our tales be judge and recorder,
And fix the supper at a certain price,
And we would be ruled by his device,
In high and low, and thus by one assent
We all agreed to his true judgement.
- (820) And the wine was brought, thereupon
We drank, and to rest went everyone,
Without our any longer tarrying.
Next morning, when the day began to spring,
Up rose our Host and roused us like the cock,
- (825) And gathered us together in a flock;
And forth we rode, at barely walking-pace
To Saint Thomas, and his watering place.
And there our Host held the reins still,
And said: 'Lordings, hearken if you will!
- (830) You know what you agreed, as I record.
If even-song and morning-song accord,
Let us see who shall tell the first tale.
As ever I hope to drink wine and ale,
Whoever is a rebel to my judgement
- (835) Shall pay for all that on the way is spent.
Now draw a straw before our journeying;
And he that has the shortest shall begin.
'Sir Knight,' quoth he, 'my master and my lord,
Now make the draw for that is our accord.
- (840) Come near,' quoth he, 'my lady Prioress,
And you, Sir Cleric, hide your bashfulness,
No pondering now – a hand from everyone!'
At once by each the draw was begun;
And to tell you how it was, as I relate,
- (845) Whether by happenstance or chance or fate,
The truth is this: the lot fell to the Knight,
Which filled us all with joy and delight.
And tell his tale he must, in due season,
According to our pact and our decision,
- (850) As you have heard – what needs more ado?
And when this good man saw that it was so,
As he was wise and given to obedience
And keeping promises with free assent,
He said: 'Since I shall begin the game,
- (855) Why, welcome is the outcome, in God's name!
Now let us ride, and hark at what I say.'

And with that word we rode forth on our way,
And he began, all merry and full of cheer
(860) His tale anon, and spoke as you may hear.